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Klinsmann Will Find There Are No Points for Style

By ROGER PIELKE Jr.

When Jurgen Klinsmann makes his debut as [the coach of the United States men's soccer team](#) in a friendly game against Mexico on Wednesday in Philadelphia, he will be closely watched by American fans with high expectations based on his impressive résumé.

Klinsmann, who replaced Bob Bradley late last month, was a [top-level player](#) for Germany's national team as well as for top clubs in England, Italy and Germany. As a coach, he led Germany to third place in the 2006 World Cup. But some of his remarks as he assumed his new position gave some reason for concern.

"One of my challenges will be to find a way to define how the U.S. represents its country and its style of play," he said. "I've played in different countries, and they all have their own identities and style. I believe that soccer has to reflect the culture of the country. I've studied the U.S. the last 13 years, and it's going to be quite a challenge."

He is not kidding. "American culture" is a concept that defies easy explanation or understanding. Sometimes called a melting pot or a salad bowl, the United States is multicultural. With 310 million people who have roots from around the world, leading social scientists would be hard-pressed to identify one American culture, much less apply it to a soccer team.

As a nation of immigrants, the origins and identity of one's ancestors are a key part of American culture, which sets up a sort of impossible loop for Klinsmann to try to navigate. [Consider that the squad Klinsmann named](#) to face Mexico features players whose families are from Germany, Mexico, Nigeria, Ghana, Colombia and Jamaica, as well as from Texas, California and New York.

Rather than look to culture, Klinsmann should pay more attention to philosophy.

One homegrown tradition from the United States is pragmatism, which is focused on what works. Klinsmann, who has lived here for 13 years, apparently understands American pragmatism. Like generations of immigrants, Klinsmann has changed the spelling of his name, dropping the umlaut that appears over the u in his given name and eschewing the use of “ue” as a replacement. Why?

“It’s just easier that way,” he said.

Pragmatism was aptly summarized in the context of American football by the motto of Al Davis, the owner of the Oakland Raiders, “Just win, baby.” When the United States hockey team knocked off the mighty Soviets in the 1980 Winter Olympics, that victory immediately became a part of the hard-to-define American culture. The previous Olympic hockey team had the same ragtag characteristics as the 1980 squad, but it failed to land a place in American culture because it finished fifth out of six teams in the 1976 Games.

The United States soccer team will never be a squad of joga bonito or total football and will never exemplify the Barça style, each of which is readily associated with a specific national culture. Americans celebrate substance, not styles. We celebrate the 46 defense of the Chicago Bears, the four-corners and triangle offenses in basketball, and “moneyball” in baseball, not because these tactics are examples of American culture but because they worked. Or perhaps more accurately, they became a part of American culture because they led to success.

So Jurgen Klinsmann should spend little time worrying about how to shape American soccer to American culture. Just win, baby, and you’ll become a part of it in no time.

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