

USA's stay in Italy provides valuable lessons for future

FLORENCE, Italy — Even though we were winless in our three matches, our presence in the World Cup wasn't useless.

Each match was a learning experience:

► The first game (a 5-1 loss to Czechoslovakia) taught us what happens when you're in with the big boys.

► The second game (a 1-0 loss to Italy) taught us we could frustrate a major power and take it off its game.

► The third game (a 2-1 loss to Austria despite having a man advantage for 57 minutes) taught us we have to seize the moment ... put everything forward with more conviction.

We did sufficiently well in terms of expectations. The results weren't to everyone's liking, but we proved we're a step away from contending.

We're a fickle team in terms of performance. We tend to fluctuate. We look brilliant one moment and bad the next. ... Now it's important for us to gear toward more consistency in our performance.

When I played in the Major Indoor Soccer League, I had a tough rookie year. After that, I could handle anything.

Being in the World Cup is our rookie experience. If these

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players don't have the opportunity to go to Europe and play at this level day-to-day, you could see the same thing in 1994.

We can play "friendlies" the rest of our lives. All it would mean is that in '94 we're four years older, but not any more experienced.

Peter Vermes and Christopher Sullivan already play in Europe, and you might see two or three more go — Tab Ramos, Paul Caligiuri and Tony Meola; the possibilities are there.

An Austrian coach said he'd take everyone who was on the field against them.

This team has a bright future. But there is not just one answer to what needs to be done. That's the problem in the USA: Everyone thinks there's one solution.

We're inexperienced. The oldest players are only 27. One

key is keeping the nucleus of this team together. We have to have professional teams in the USA with some foreign players to raise the level of play.

Players need somewhere to go. They can't just go and look to play in the MISL.

We had the North American Soccer League to work toward. That's what inspired us. We had Pele and Johan Cruyff as role models. If kids don't have something to aspire to, they'll taper off. They'll go to college, get an education and that's it.

Soccer can be up there with hockey, a fourth sport, in terms of fan appeal. But we need TV. It needs exposure so it will grow, and it needs sponsors.

Adidas, Budweiser and Chiquita have done a tremendous job. They paid our families' expenses to the World Cup. But they can't do it alone.

We've never proved we can be winners. Americans like winners, and sponsors like to be connected with winners.

If they look at our World Cup performance, even though we lost all three games, they'll realize we can be a power.

It's realistic to expect the USA to advance in '94. We have the talent and four years to work at it.

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