



USA 94

THE WORLD CUP
THAT CHANGED
THE GAME

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Chapter One

How the West Won

‘ANYONE WHO thinks that football isn’t part of the fabric of American life is either an idiot or not paying attention,’ said an exasperated Thom Meredith, a former director of communications for US Soccer. This was news to the European footballing fraternity who had traditionally looked down their noses at their counterparts over the pond when the suggestion arose that the USA would like to host the 1994 World Cup.

This wasn’t the United States Soccer Federation’s (USF) first World Cup rodeo. Back in 1983 they launched a rushed and unprofessional attempt to replace Colombia, who had lost the rights to host the 1986 tournament. A lightweight 92-page brochure, complete with bird’s-eye view photographs of pitches with gridiron markings, did little to impress the top brass at FIFA.

The head of international football was already less than enamoured with the way that the USA’s premier football competition, the North American Soccer League (NASL), had adapted and changed the laws of the game to suit themselves. The bid was shot down with disdain by FIFA president João Havelange who declared that the USA ‘wasn’t

ready for such a competition'. The Brazilian later bestowed the honour on Mexico, who hosted their second World Cup in 16 years.

Perhaps Havelange had a point; by the beginning of the 1980s the bloated NASL's heyday was over. The glamour years of Pelé strutting his stuff for the New York Cosmos at Giants Stadium was a faded memory and the league desperately floundered in a sea of high costs and dwindling interest. Its 16-year run came to an end in 1984; football had enjoyed its season in the sun but now it was expected to be filed away whilst the USA got on with their 'own' sports.

The fact that it did not can be attributed to one man, the late Werner Fricker, backed by his passionate team of football-loving volunteers who refused to give up on a sport they came to love during their college days. 'Soccer was a participatory sport,' explained the then-USSF chief media officer Jim Trecker. 'Especially at the youth level, kids loved playing soccer. It was not an unknown entity, just not front-page news,' he continued. 'We knew these people would be intrigued enough to buy tickets, although it was a hard sell until they actually did.'

Twelve months after Mexico 86, where Argentina triumphed in a close-fought final with West Germany at the Estadio Azteca, bids were welcomed for the 1994 World Cup. As was the tradition then, the host nation would be from the Americas since Italy would represent Europe in 1990 and FIFA alternated between continents. Four bids were received: Brazil, Morocco, Chile and the USA. Brazil, the South American footballing superpower, were rapidly installed as favourites. Chile soon dropped out due to financial issues whilst FIFA had yet to risk handing their most precious possession over to an African or North American nation.

A key moment arrived in 1984 when Los Angeles played host to the 20th Summer Olympic Games. With FIFA looking on, football became the most-watched discipline out of the 29 on display with 101,799 fans crowded into Pasadena's Rose Bowl for the gold-medal game between France and Brazil. This wasn't an anomaly; the semi-finals and bronze-medal match had also seen attendances north of 100,000. Tickets resembled gold dust and FIFA was impressed; general secretary Joseph 'Sepp' Blatter was a keen observer. Perhaps the general public in America was finally getting to grips with the beautiful game. TV network ABC had paid an astronomical \$225m for the rights to show the Olympics, which dwarfed the \$5m that rival network NBC would pay two years later for Mexico 86. The seed was planted, the USA was back in favour with FIFA, and this time there would be nothing left to chance.

Up stepped Werner Fricker. By day he was a real-estate developer who had worked his way up to the USSF's top position in 1984. Fricker was born in Southern Banat, Yugoslavia, on 24 January 1936 to a German-speaking family. By the time he was eight, the Fricker family had fled to Austria to escape the horrors of World War II. The majority of them found work in a shoe factory where 70-hour working weeks were the norm.

By the early 1950s, the Frickers had emigrated to the USA and settled down in the Philadelphia area. Fricker learnt carpentry and joined a local football side, the United German Hungarians, where he patrolled the midfield. He started his own construction company in 1963 and was part of the US Olympic team a year later. Football remained an integral part of his life and soon Fricker joined the administration at the USSF.

In April 1987, Fricker formed World Cup USA 1994 Inc., a non-profit organisation created purely for constructing and presenting a bid. The USSF had five full-time employees and operated with an \$800,000 budget. Having the volunteer force on board would be invaluable especially when it came to bridging the huge financial gap. Some \$1.5m alone would be needed just to get the bid in front of FIFA.

Within this new set-up, Fricker utilised the likes of Meredith; Trecker, who benefitted from his earlier experiences with the Cosmos during the Pelé era as well as the NFL's New York Jets; California-based attorney Scott LeTellier and Rey Post. The last of these was a chief consultant for Eddie Mahe Jnr and Associates, a political consulting firm in Washington. Having been left some \$1m in the hole after the botched attempt at hosting Mexico 86, Fricker was all too aware that this was as much of a political challenge than a sporting one.

Buoyed by the volunteers working around the clock, Fricker concentrated on getting the additional funds required having managed to haul the federation back to liquidity. Fricker had secured some credit lines to keep the bid on track yet there was still a significant shortfall in ensuring the well didn't run dry. In a gesture made in faith and desperation, Fricker re-mortgaged his own home to raise the remaining half of the money the USSF would need to see them over the line.

By September 1987, the bid was complete. Trecker, who had initially been brought in to cover the media side of things, had played a much bigger part than he originally envisaged. 'It was a lot simpler process than it is now, it was basically producing terms of reference. FIFA asked questions and we answered them,' he explained. 'I ended

up writing, editing, proofreading and finalising the contents before it went to the printers.’ One stipulation was FIFA’s desire to see a new professional league in the USA and they stressed there had to be a legacy to the tournament. Post had used his political links to open the doors to government. Along with former US secretary of state and veteran of the failed Mexico 86 bid Henry Kissinger, he had arranged a meeting between Havelange and White House incumbent Ronald Reagan. Two months later 381 pages of leather-bound documentation were signed off and carried aboard a flight headed for Zürich.

By this time, speculation was beginning to grow across Europe and South America that the bid was the USA’s to lose. The apparent seriousness of the bid, combined with Chile’s withdrawal and a growing financial crisis in Brazil, appeared to be tipping the balance in the USA’s favour. Rumours circulated that Brazil’s presentation had left a lot to be desired too, even containing some handwritten sections. When their delegation was late for FIFA’s Italia 90 qualifying draw, their fate appeared to be sealed by the governing body’s hard-line approach to pomp and circumstance.

Stadium presentation was a specific area where the USA had upped their game when it came to the second bid. Gone were the pitches with gridiron markings and, in their place, a study of how it would be possible to replace the artificial surfaces with natural grass in line with FIFA protocol. The minimum requirement to host group matches was a stadium capacity of at least 40,000, with this figure rising to a minimum of 60,000 for the semi-finals in a city that was capable of hosting both games. Brazil’s bid was in tatters; the economy was crashing with billions owed to US banks whilst their stadiums sat in disrepair. As part of the bid process FIFA sent two teams to inspect potential World

Cup stadiums which seemed to seal the deal for Fricker's bid team as the last remaining rival, Morocco, had only one stadium up to the required semi-final standard and two that could hold more than 40,000 fans.

With the bid documents submitted and the stadium inspections complete, there was little else Fricker and his fervid force of volunteers could do but wait. As the announcement approached one remaining concern was overcome when Havelange removed himself from the vote, stating a potential conflict of interest. Despite the vote being performed via a secret ballot, speculation had mounted that any votes from European federations were likely to be in the USA's favour. All earlier Latin America-based tournaments had yet to provide a European victor, so suddenly the USA was viewed as something of a neutral venue by these nations.

Still, Fricker refused to get carried away by whispers from the rumour mill. The advantages of hosting the tournament in the USA were clear: they had the infrastructure, stadiums and the Olympics displayed there was an audience for a big footballing event. Cynics and naysayers questioned whether the Olympics was a one-off and noted there was still no sign of a professional league happening anytime soon. It had been two decades since football in the USA had been branded 'the game of the future', plus the national team hadn't qualified for a tournament since 1950 where they secured their famous 1-0 win over England. For the USSF, the future was here. It was now or never if they were to ever host the World Cup.

With Havelange and fellow Brazilian Abilio D'Almedia declining to vote, only one obstacle remained. Would the other committee members vote in favour of Brazil in a sign of solidarity to their president? When FIFA announced a slight change to the date when

they would announce their decision, those reading between the lines could have been forgiven for reaching the obvious conclusion. The venue remained the same, Zürich's Mövenpick hotel, but it would no longer be taking place on 30 June. Tellingly, the date had been moved to 4 July 1988, the 212th anniversary of America's Declaration of Independence.

A team of around a dozen made the trip from the USA to Zürich, amongst them Fricker, Meredith, Stiehl, Trecker, Post and future head of US Soccer, Sunil Gulati. All three delegations were invited to make a 30-minute presentation to FIFA. Brazil went first and voiced their concerns at the USA hosting the World Cup, likening it to taking the baseball World Series to the Samba Nation. Morocco was up next, they too spoke out against the USA being potential hosts, claiming that they already have many huge events and didn't need any more. Finally, the USSF made their pitch. Concentrating on themselves, they rolled out the big guns as President Reagan spoke on video in favour of the bid and promised the government's unilateral support and backing.

By noon the presentations were complete and the delegations retired awaiting FIFA's verdict. A little over an hour later the heads of each bid team were called back to receive the results of the secret ballot. Fricker left the room as Trecker, Meredith and Gulati knew that 15 months of hard work rested on FIFA's decision.

'We were waiting in a small holding room at the Mövenpick,' said Meredith. 'The door opened and Werner was stood there, stony-faced. He said, "the vote was 10, 7 and 2." That was all he said! We looked at him. "Well who got the 10?" Werner's response was so typical of him. "The United States of America." Not "the USA", not "us", but "the United States of America"!'

The result was ten to the USA, seven to Morocco and two for Brazil, who had fallen from early favourites to dead last.

As the celebrations began, a knock came on the door. A FIFA official was there, asking why the delegation wasn't at the news conference. 'No one had told us what we needed to do next, we were just so happy and congratulating each other,' Meredith recalled. 'We all left the room and ran down to the conference hall, entering breathless as FIFA's Henry Cavan announced to the world that we had won the bid,' he added.

FIFA spoke of their desire to promote the game and take the World Cup to uncharted territories. The European football press scoffed at what they saw as a potential disaster whilst the cynical amongst them spoke more of the huge commercial opportunities that the host country offered. The delegation arrived home to little fanfare from the press or public. Either way, the USA would be hosting the 1994 World Cup. Fricker, though, tempered expectations at the news conference: 'We still have a long way to go, but now we have a target.'

As the calendar turned to 1989, Fricker and the USSF devised a blueprint which they hoped would help them reach this target. They received a boost when the national team qualified for Italia 90, but their performance left more questions than answers. FIFA looked on, unimpressed with the sluggish state in which progress was being made. In Fricker, they found someone ill at ease when it came to jumping through their hoops. Finances were still an issue. Fricker had to secure more credit lines just to pay for the national team to go to the 1990 World Cup.

Fricker was adamant that the most important part of the World Cup was what it would do for the growth of football

in the USA. He fought FIFA to ensure the USSF received their fair share of sponsorship money from the tournament, much to the chagrin of world football's governing body. After all, they were the ones taking the risk of handing the keys to the World Cup over to them. There was much at stake. Pull this off and there would be riches galore for all parties, on top of growth for the game stateside; fail and it would be a death knell for many involved on both sides. Both organisations seemed to be on a collision course and, as the dust settled on the USA's dire display at the 1990 World Cup, FIFA made their move.