The Beautiful Game Rises in the United States: Interview With Roger Bennett, Cohost of Men in Blazers

Matthew Zimmerman
Mississippi State University, USA

Lauren Burch
Indiana University Purdue University Columbus, USA

Roger Bennett and Michael Davies met at a wedding during the 2006 World Cup final, bonding over the fact they were unfortunate enough to be doing anything other than sitting glued to the television enjoying the world’s biggest sporting event. By the 2010 World Cup, the pair cohosted a blog and podcast called Off the Ball. A year later, their show, now called Men in Blazers and stated on the pair’s official site to be “driven by the belief that Soccer is America’s Sport of the Future. As it has been since 1972,” was picked up by ESPN’s Grantland. The pair’s popularity increased to the point where their pretournament team-breakdown videos and on-set presence at the end of each match day were staples for ESPN’s World Cup 2014 coverage. Their multimedia exposure also featured Bennett writing stories for ESPN.com on the 2012 European Championship and the 2014 World Cup, as well as the duo’s appearance as between-matches commentators in EA Sports’ popular FIFA World Cup 2014 video game. After the 2014 tournament, they signed with NBC Sports Network, where they host a weekly television show focusing mostly on Premier League soccer and have also covered events including the Running of the Bulls in Pamplona.

In summer 2018, the hosts of Men in Blazers expanded on their annual Golden Blazer Award event to include a tour of 11 cities in the United States, with Bennett following up his 1994 U.S. World Cup oral history from 4 years prior with a 10-part podcast on the 1998 U.S. men’s World Cup team, titled “American Fiasco.” In addition, Men in Blazers released its first book, Encyclopedia Blazertannica.

Zimmerman and Burch: You rose to popularity in the United States while talking about a global sport with an eye to the U.S. market. You had both been working

Zimmerman is with Mississippi State University, Mississippi State, MS. Burch is with Indiana University Purdue University Columbus, Columbus, IN. Burch (lmburch@indiana.edu) is corresponding author.
stateside as writers, Michael (Davies), with television, you had been here since the mid-1990s. How much of your success here would you say is attributable to an understanding and appreciation of the American market?

**Bennett:** I believe that part of it is timing. We (Davies and Bennett) started at the right time, just when the sport, which has always had a deep and passionate following in the United States, but it really went next level after the 2010 World Cup. So we’re really beneficiaries of (a) great timing; (b) the accessibility on television of elite football in a widespread accessible fashion across America, which was not always a given; and (c) the explosion of EA Sports’ FIFA World Cup, which sensitized an entire generation to the players, the teams, the different playing styles, and a deep appreciation of soccer in a way that many of them had not had before. They’d just regarded it as a game they played when they were kids, and then stopped playing.

We had both an appreciation and an understanding of European football and culture. We lived it, gone to English and European football in the days when you had to step over broken bodies routinely on the way to Goodison Park or Highbury. And we understood the footballing culture, the fan culture, the histories, the traditions. But we also—as did a number of broadcasters—I think we had that deep appreciation of America, of all things American. Of American sport, of American culture.

And when we started there were a number of Europeans who were broadcasting the sport in America. When it got to talking about America, be it the NFL, be it women’s soccer, be it MLS, they disregarded it and talked down to it. They saw a hierarchy, and European soccer was great. American soccer, and American sport in general, they had no interest, no time for it.

It was a combination of our love for European football, and English football in particular, and our deep respect and appreciation of American culture, American history, American sports. The NFL [National Football League], NBA [National Basketball Association], the NHL [National Hockey League], we loved them all. And also MLS [Major League Soccer] and U.S. men’s and women’s football.

**Zimmerman and Burch:** It’s ironic that there are so many American fans who completely dismiss MLS and want to follow Premier League teams, because obviously that has the reputation as the top league in the world. And yet, part of *Men in Blazers* is to talk about MLS, to talk about the American game. Has that also been a factor, the fact you’re not just talking about the Premier League, but there are MLS fans who can say they gain value, as well?

**Bennett:** I moved here just before the 1994 World Cup. I’ve seen the game come so far, so fast in the United States. And MLS has been a core driver. I went to almost every D.C. United game in that first season. And I’ve watched with wonder as the league has tenaciously, to begin with, survived. And then thrived, if you look at Atlanta, and LAFC, and Portland and Seattle. So we’ve always been very bullish