

COMMENTARY

# USMNT won a World Cup brawl and put entire globe on notice

BY DIETER KURTENBACH  
Bay Area News Group

SANTA CLARA, CALIF.

The world's best soccer teams don't just play the beautiful game.

They know how to drag you into the mud, hold your head down and check their watches while you drown.

On Wednesday in Santa Clara, the U.S. Men's National Team proved they can do both.

They didn't just flash class. They flashed brass knuckles, too.

And in doing so, they beamed a terrifying message to the rest of the globe: The Americans aren't just brash tourists to the world's game anymore.

No, they're here to usurp the established order.

They're planning to keep that fancy little gold trophy stateside.

Because whatever deficiencies this squad might have, they're backed by a massive, raucous army.

Surviving a round of 32 World Cup bloodbath takes a special kind of grit. Doing it against a team hellbent on drawing blood takes something downright deranged.

In their knockout-round street fight against Bosnia and Herzegovina, the USMNT proved delightfully grotesque.

They didn't just run around Bosnia. They ran straight through them.

And in the fleeting moments this match called for class, they had that in spades, too.

Against an overmatched Bosnian side looking to [blank]-house its way to a draw and a penalty-kick shootout, the U.S. played the undeniable heavy-weight.

Even when they tripped over their own feet, they invented a new way to win.

Striker Folarin Balogun opened the scoring just before halftime.

It was a garbage-pail goal, deeply American and yet utterly foreign to anyone ignoring this country's ruthless soccer ascent.

A chaotic mess at the penalty box edge miraculously found his boots.

The creation was pinballing. The finish was pinpoint.

The early tension broke. Victory was going to be a breeze, right?

Wrong. This is American soccer. This is the World Cup.

Easy isn't part of the equation.

Balogun wasn't done manufacturing exhausting melodrama. With roughly 30 minutes to play, he made the catastrophic decision to stamp an opponent.

Referee Raphael Claus missed the sporting crime in real-time. But the omniscient, unblinking eye of VAR never sleeps.

Claus trudged to the monitor, watched the foul on an agonizing loop, and promptly handed Balogun a red card.

Suddenly, the U.S. was down a man, clinging to life, and staring directly into the abyss.

It guaranteed 30-plus minutes of pure, unadulterated agony. The kind of stress only the world's biggest tournament can provide.

Was all this hope around this team about to come crashing down?

Not if the 11th man had anything to say about it.

There were 68,827-plus souls - a fire hazard of a sellout - stuffed into the concrete oven temporarily known as Levi's Stadium. Barely a handful cared

about the Balkans. There were only a handful of green Mexican jerseys to be found.

And when the U.S. went down a man, that suffocating sea of American fans didn't panic. They simply got louder.

They became the extra lungs this tired, sunburned roster desperately required.

The crowd didn't just watch. They grabbed the 10 remaining Americans by the scruff of the neck and hurled them across the finish line.

This wasn't quiet European cosplay. There were no cutesy, childish chants.

This was a rabid, partisan, home-soil advantage that flat-out bullied a squad into surviving.

And survive they did.

It's a testament, as well, to decades of miserable conditioning in the CONCACAF abyss.

Years of enduring pot-hole-filled pitches in Central America and Caribbean soccer nonsense trained them for this exact nightmare.

They know exactly how to win a knife fight in a phone booth. The dark arts aren't foreign; they're standard operating procedure if you play over here.

So even short-handed, the U.S. controlled the chaos. Christian Pulisic even had a goal cruelly wiped out by the offside flag.

Then came the ultimate exhalation.

In the 82nd minute, Malik Tillman stepped up to a free kick on the edge of the penalty area and unleashed an absolute wonderstrike.

Tension, meet release. Agony, meet advancement.

It was a singular moment more than 32 years in the making.

It's the byproduct of an audacious new standard. This golden generation has zero interest in accepting the bare minimum.

Of course, this isn't the first time the U.S. reached the round of 16. They've hit this stage in four straight World Cups.

Hell, they even did it in 1994, right up the road at Stanford against the mighty Brazilians.

They've won knockout games before, too. Who could forget the legendary "Dos a Cero" over Mexico in 2002?

(Yours truly stayed up until 1:30 a.m. as a teenager, watching on a smuggled TV with rabbit-ear antennas.)

But this knockout win feels violently different.

As a banner in the upper deck asked Wednesday: "Why not US?"

After watching world-class creation and elite play across all four levels - U.S. goalie Matt Freese proved his worth Wednesday - I have no retort.

Why not US, indeed.

Sure, the path only gets steeper from here.

Balogun's stamp means the most clinical American striker since Brian McBride is suspended for Monday's clash against Belgium in Seattle.

The U.S. will have to invent a completely new way to win.

But if this absurd, beautiful win proved anything, it's that these Americans - at this tournament, this summer - are up for the task.

They have the world-class talent, and they have the American tradition of grit still ingrained in them.

With a rabid home crowd acting as their ultimate equalizer, they just might have everything needed to shock the world.



Imagn Images

U.S. striker Folarin Balogun is consoled by teammates Giovanni Reyna and Timothy Weah after receiving a red card in Wednesday's round of 32 victory over Bosnia and Herzegovina.

ANALYSIS

## Maturing US look capable of surviving without Balogun

BY CRAIG MERZ  
Field Level Media

As the U.S. go deeper into the World Cup, they are confronting rising levels of adversity.

After the United States breezed through Paraguay and Australia by a combined 6-1 score, the critics wondered how the players would respond when the pressure mounted.

The team got its first challenge in the group-stage finale when a make-shift lineup devoid of most of the starters fell behind 2-1 to Turkey, the first time

the U.S. trailed. The Americans responded by scoring the equalizer, only to lose in the eighth minute of second-half stoppage time.

That was nothing compared to what happened Wednesday in the round of 32 at Santa Clara, Calif.

The U.S. went down a player, more specifically leading scorer Folarin Balogun, who was sent off in the 64th minute for his challenge gone awry that resulted in his right foot landing on the right ankle of Bosnian defender Tarik Muharemovic.

The hosts were ahead at the time on Balogun's goal,

but the way they finished the 2-0 victory bodes well before they face Belgium in the round of 16 on Monday in Seattle - even though Balogun will be suspended for that match.

When given opportunities to attack, the 10-man U.S. didn't go conservative, and they were able to turn a negative into a positive when Malik Tillman iced the match with a free kick in the 82nd minute.

It was a riveting moment, but it doesn't hide the fact that the best U.S. threat won't be in uniform Monday against a Belgium side that overcame their own hardship to rally for a 3-2 extra-time win against Senegal on Wednesday.

Balogun not only has three goals, but he has had two more called back for being offside, an indication that he finds the pockets of space and can score from anywhere at any time. In other words, there is no one else like him on the U.S. squad.

So, how does coach Mauricio Pochettino try to replace him? He could simply insert Ricardo Pepi or Haji Wright and keep the same formation and approach or maybe tinker with pushing midfielder Weston McKennie higher and bringing in an offensive-minded midfielder such as Gio Reyna.

Whatever he does, Pochettino can take comfort in the fact that Christian Pulisic went 87 minutes and is fully recovered (?) from a left calf injury that limited him to 77 minutes in the group stage.

Pulisic's freedom to roam the left flank is due in part to Balogun attracting attention with his runs through the center of the

pitch. Without Balogun's presence, the U.S. will need to be creative in getting touches for Pulisic.

That aside, the match could come down to a battle of wills. Belgium pulled off a miraculous comeback after trailing by two in the 86th minute.

"We respect every opponent we come up against, but we all have full belief in what each of us is capable of and the fight that we can show and talent we have, the work we put in and that we're prepared for the situation," U.S. defender Antonee Robinson said. "So hopefully everyone else has that belief in us, and we can keep going and make it a special summer."

Belgium will not wilt, so it's up to the U.S. to exceed their willpower. Fortunately, Pochettino has created a culture of belief, and the motto "Why not us?" may be stamped on the head of every 8-year-old soccer player if the team keeps on winning.

It won't be easy, and sure, Balogun's absence may be the difference that gives Belgium the edge, but the players are confident that they can do wondrous things as a group. It's the Pochettino way.

"I think that's been the message from the start, really, is, 'Why not us?'" Robinson said. "I mean, we've seen time and time again in this tournament now that there's big upsets out there. There's teams who people thought would still be in who have gone home already, and we don't take anything for granted."

Insightful words exemplifying a maturing team.

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