

HOW A SMALL NATION CAN QUALIFY FOR A MAJOR TOURNAMENT



How A Small Nation Can Qualify For A Major Tournament

Prepared by: Anthony Savage BSc, Head Coach

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Phone number: UK 447708151516

Email: nycsavage@gmail.com

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Background information

Major obstacles to progression in the world game include finance, deference and infrastructure. A technical directors (TD) role is to strip back everything, throw away the rule book and take a new look at the future of the game. This is my ten year plan.

My project

From the outset I have to explain that I know this might go against the instant results culture that we have in football. This isn't an overnight success plan. But these are the steps required by small nation federations/associations if they want to develop the game that they run. Throughout this report, when I talk about federations, I use the word federation but could mean a federation or association.

Firstly, over the next four to six years you have to prioritise on the youth teams. That's a major statement to make but please let me explain. I'm not saying don't bother turning up for senior games during these years. I am saying use these years to build experience for some of the younger players. Focus development on 14-16 year olds, by the time they are 20, the federation in question will have a good nucleus of youth to help achieve their goals. They will also share this experience with ages below them and this will continue into the future. This youth will be the future for the federation. Get the squads together as often as possible, use a combination of youth and experience. I would select two players for every position and as we are allowed to call up 25 players, I would use this opportunity to call up an underage youth player who has strong potential to give him exposure to the level we would require. We need to have an average squad age of around 25. Although I'm not saying select players based just on their age. You need to also look at ability, confidence and potential as well as skill, attitude and experience. FIFA has six international windows, that gives each federation approximately twelve opportunities to get some experience. Each federation HAS to use these international windows to develop these players. I know it costs money but every year, FIFA gave every member nation a lot of money to help with operating costs and to help develop the game, you cannot put a price on what the players and coaching team get from playing international matches. FIFA also give grants to federations that use that money in youth and female football. Use this money, use it wisely.

Speaking from my experience and knowledge, a number of larger, successful football federations have worked hard to remove competitive football in youth age groups. The results don't matter, they want the players to enjoy playing, skills develop faster when it comes with enjoyment. In these friendly games, if the youth squad gets beat 4-0 then as long as the players gave everything that they possibly could and show signs of development then the federation should not judge results during these games. Remember, its progression that is the key point, not results, not yet anyway. Once the players and coaching staff understand the new style of coaching, then the results will come. It just needs a bit of patience from everyone (including the players, media and fans). But everybody has to get on board with this new way of thinking.

Also, there has to be continuity and belief. It is counter-productive to change a manager/ TD/head coach after a few defeats. Getting a new manager in means teaching players a new system and techniques without any guarantee of success. It can actually be regression instead of progression. Look at Trinidad and Tobago, I heard a reporter say that they have had approximately 17 head coaches in 17 years. I recently researched this and discovered that including Bertille St. Clair who left in 2000, T&T have had 20 coaches since the turn of the millennium! I remember that they had a strong squad and even qualified for the World Cup, they are still the smallest nation to ever qualify.....for now at least. Now they are struggling in local competitions. In the English Premier League, the manager only has an average tenure of just over two years. How can any team create a future if they keep changing staff? Imagine it takes a year to get the team playing exactly as you want, just as it starts working you get another coach in who has a different philosophy and you are back to the beginning once again. You need to keep confidence in your coaches and let the Technical Director do his job, as I said in my first paragraph, it's not going to be an overnight success.

Now we need to talk about training.

The players have to have fun, every winning team has one thing in common, they all enjoy their football. Every time my team has won a trophy or a tournament, they did so playing with a smile on their face. Not all players enjoy training but look at the greats and you will see them laughing and joking on the training pitch, they are nearly always the first to turn up to training and the last to leave. You can work hard and still enjoy training. This is what I expect from all my players, have a laugh, but train hard. I think it was Pep Guardiola that coined the term "Train like a beast, play

like a beast, train like an idiot, play like an idiot.” My players hear that a lot from me on the training pitch. Work hard, get your muscle memory right, train like you want to play, play like you want to train. The players will develop under this philosophy. All national squads from senior down to under 16’s must have a similar game plan whenever possible. The players must be comfortable with the formation/style of play regardless of the team they are in. They also have to show respect to everyone, everybody gets a handshake after the game regardless of the result. The manager/Technical Director (TD)/head coach must be given a title, this could be “Coach”, “Boss”, “Mister”, “Sir”, etc. The coaches have worked hard to get badges and experience, and at a huge financial cost, they deserve recognition for this.

The TD must watch as much football as possible, this will achieve a number of goals. Firstly, the TD’s knowledge of eligible players will be improved, the TD will know of any future hot prospects by watching them first hand. The TD must also attend youth football tournaments whenever possible, once again this will give the TD a greater knowledge of the national pool of young players. Now look at it from a young players perspective. If they know that the TD is taking time to come and watch the players personally, then I believe they will raise their game. If other players see this then I strongly believe that they will also raise their game to try and impress the TD.

A TD must also split his time when it comes to visiting high schools. He has a team of coaches, and a team of international players. Have these players and coaches visit local schools and run a few sessions or watch a few games. National pride will increase, and players will feel like what they are doing will have a meaning. And the students at these schools will have idols that they recognise and hope to one day emulate and even better in their own careers. The more support a nation has, the better the results. Players will also feel like they are giving something back to the community. Obviously, the players would require payment for these sessions but if you can arrange sponsorship then the costs will be eliminated for the federation.

So now we have the future setup what’s next? We need to look at coaching for all youth groups. There is only so much a technical director can do, he has to rely on a team of coaches. The youth leagues need to be modernised. Gone are the days when somebody’s father or uncle should be coaching a team. Get them organised, advertise on social media and local tv and get new youth players in. In time, have a new organised national youth league. Make it fun, remove the league format and

have them play fixtures without results. Then when they turn 14, bring in a results culture. But you still need to make it fun. This will help them enjoy it more, to increase membership in players participating in football, you have to make it fun and enjoyable, especially when football isn't the national sport.

But how does an international coach help develop kids from small regions governed by the federation? A new coaching pathway (CP) needs to be created, and more importantly, the qualifications need to have importance. What's the point getting more coaches qualified if they can't do anything with their qualifications? Make it a requirement that all professional coaches must have a coaching badge of some level, I would even make it compulsory for any amateur manager to have a coaching badge along with first aid training and child safety awareness training. I know times are hard in some regions and people don't have money to spend on a hobby, so help with the costs for the first level of coaching. If the coach is affiliated with a club, let them do the course for a discount. Give teams who have a fully qualified coaching staff discount on league fees. Apply for a FIFA grant that will help subsidise any losses incurred by the federation. To bring in more funding, we would also need to make these qualifications attractive to overseas coaches. Open up the course to world football. To make foreign coaches interested, they need to be a high standard but affordable. To achieve a unique feature, you could possibly team up with local hotels and airlines to help subsidise the cost and make it more affordable for everyone. Introduce a basic level training course that is internet based. It will cost a couple of dollars but coaches can be proud to say that they have a nationally recognised qualification. I recently completed my USSF National Licence whilst living in the UK. I did it online, it cost me \$25 and I really enjoyed it.

The CP needs to have one end result. A team of qualified coaches responsible for training the next generation of young players. With proper training, and with fun and hard work, I believe any small federation will have a golden generation within 10-15 years. The timing is perfect. FIFA have announced that the World Cup 2026 will be expanded to 48 federations. This gives each federation an opportunity to qualify, especially if they have the foresight to act now. The 14-16 year olds today will be 23-25, they will be fit, they will be stronger and technically superior to the 23-25 year old today. A loyal TD will want to see out this progress, a great coach will have every plan in place in preparation for 2026 qualifying and will want to see the end result.

That's a lot of planning to undertake, imagine having to do all that is mentioned above every year after changing your TD? Yet we still haven't finished. We need to talk about off-the field growth now.

We need to wage a war on social media. We need to fight to get as many followers as possible. We need to have an easy accessible social media team, they need to be interactive, talk to the fans, bring some humour to any status updates, have a little banter with the opposition media team. Imagine saying something funny, then a few fans retweet it, then a few federations see it and retweet it, then a few of their fans see it and retweet it, we would soon be everybody's favourite second nation! Shirt sales would increase, media exposure would increase, marketing would be easier and bring in more money from the worldwide exposure, and all from one little comment! We would also use social media to show fans training sessions, interviews with players and score updates for those who can't watch the game or listen to it on radio.

Each small nation has a diaspora of expats living elsewhere, we could try and make a small partnership with retailers to sell shirts overseas which will help income. You never really see football matches where fans are wearing the most recent small nation football shirts. The shirts need to be affordable, why pay full price when you could buy a shirt for the same price from Barcelona, Real Madrid or Man Utd? We can't compete with those clubs for sales so we have to think outside the box. Not to mention that when relative success starts, players will have opportunities to move to clubs around Europe that have a good income from shirt sales. We could ask the clubs to stock our shirts in return for a percentage of sales.

Staying focussed on the diaspora, and I am now talking from experience, trying to watch an international match between two small nations is almost impossible if you are not in one of those countries. We need to find an agreement to work with large broadcasting networks.

Imagine this scenario:

You are a nation in the Caribbean, when a match is on, with time difference to the UK, a match will be played well past midnight in the UK. In the UK, Sky TV and BT Sport usually play repeated network shows during these hours. Imagine their subscription rates if they managed to secure live football for the diaspora in the UK. As we are a small nation, the outlay for these networks will be kept to a minimum but the rewards would be self-explanatory. Now

also imagine they expanded that to show a live game a week. They could pay 4 figures per game and still make a profit from increased membership, that money could be split 45% for each team and 10% for the federation. Using that money to expand the game locally. Now this is where it gets interesting. Sky/BT Sport could advertise a weekly competition where people could vote for the game they want to watch. We could replicate this in other markets like France, Spain, USA and Australia. This would be the TD's job to pitch this to the TV networks and I believe that we could be onto a winner.

Sponsorship isn't a nice word for some companies, but it is a necessity. Look at England, they have sponsors for everything. Even things that aren't associated with playing football. They have official national partners for beer, travel, hair care, and even supermarkets. Even players have similar agreements. They do have a larger media presence so companies are more inclined to sponsor them but we could have official partnerships within our nation. What is the most popular beer in your country? I am sure they would be interested in a small sponsorship deal. Once again, as a strong salesman and marketing expert, I could really use my sales and marketing skills to bring extra money into the federation to help fund the changes required. And once the nation starts getting some good results, the partnership deals would obviously be more lucrative. Personally, I have managed to source endorsements from Umbro, Aquapac and AEE Drones despite being an amateur manager at the time which continued once I became a professional manager. My experience will no doubt grow the media presence for the federation which will in turn result in larger financial packages on offer for the federation.

Goals and Objectives

Goal 1:

To improve the FIFA standing and bring them into top 100 FIFA rankings

Objective 1.

To provide a football association/federation with relevant information about changes required to help grow football in their nation.

Objective 2.

To assist a small nation in learning how to effectively apply small changes in helping to qualify for a major FIFA tournament in the future.

Goal 2:

To effectively use local coaches as a major factor in helping players to learn Objective 1.

To recruit a number of local coaches to help educate others

Objective 2.

To create a coaching pathway that covers changes needed to push team forward

Objective 3.

To use these coaches to visit local schools

Goal 3:

To raise awareness of the local game

Objective 1.

To use social media to increase awareness of the association/ federation

Objective 2.

To raise awareness and improve youth intake in football for locals

Objective 3.

Use the presence to increase income from marketing

Goal 4:

To have a better infrastructure

Objective 1.

To use social media to increase awareness of the association/ federation

Conclusion

If a federation is serious about developing the game then they need to rip up everything that they know and start to plan for the next ten years. They need a coach/manager/TD who is ambitious but someone who wants to stick around and see the results of all his/her hard work.

A federation needs to invest in youth football and needs to be fully behind whoever is in charge despite the early results. In time, players will be recognised for their abilities and be offered the opportunity to move to a larger nation and earn more money. This will result in better players and a more competitive national team.

Iceland followed a similar plan, they wrote off trying to qualify for a World Cup whilst they invested heavily in youth football and coaches. In qualifying for the World Cup

2014 they missed out on qualification by 1 point, they refocussed their energy onto the European Qualifiers for the Euro Championships 2016. They unleashed Iceland 2.0 into the world of European football, European football wasn't ready for them and they managed to achieve an amazing quarter final appearance and even beat giants such as England and the Netherlands. It just shows what a committed federation can achieve.

A federation can be small but successful. They just need the right person in charge.

★★★ Coach Anthony Savage BSc ★★★

★★★ Experienced professional manager looking to take the next step ★★★