

# The #BerhalterOut Movement: Why American Soccer Fans are so Mad

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If you aren't aware of the #BerhalterOut movement, I don't blame you. Only a select portion of the population is. That group is made up of American soccer fans; more specifically, fans of the United States Men's National Team (USMNT). The movement has been around on Twitter for months going back to the CONCACAF Gold Cup roster this past summer, and maybe even earlier than that. It began as a call for the United States Soccer Federation (USSF) to remove newly appointed (Dec. 2, 2018) USMNT head coach Gregg Berhalter. Following the USMNT's (FIFA Ranking: 21<sup>st</sup>)<sup>1</sup> defeat to Canada (FIFA Ranking: 75<sup>th</sup>) for the first time in 34 years on October 15, 2019, the movement reached new heights. It was after that lackluster and embarrassing performance that many fans, myself included, decided to join in.

In the weeks since, the movement has grown considerably. What began as a simple call for a head coaching change, has since turned into a call for change at every level of US Soccer. #BerhalterOut no longer just refers to Gregg Berhalter, but also to his brother, US Soccer COO Jay Berhalter. Another man the fans are calling for the removal of, is US Soccer Sporting Director and former General Manager, Earnie Stewart; the man responsible for hiring Gregg Berhalter. The Board of Directors and newly elected (Feb 10, 2018) US Soccer President Carlos Cordeiro have also faced backlash from an angry fan base desperate for positive change.

So why are the fans so angry? It was just one game, right?

The truth is, the Canada game was simply a catalyst for the anger and frustration that has been mounting amongst the fan base for over two years. It was the final straw, so to speak. The fan base has been frustrated and disheartened with the USMNT since October 10<sup>th</sup>, 2017, when the team failed to qualify for the 2018 FIFA World Cup, after losing to Trinidad and Tobago away in Couva. With the Canada loss last month and memories of the Couva disaster still raw, myself and many others, have decided that enough is enough. Things have to change. The problems within the USMNT and USSF must be exposed and discussed, openly and transparently.

What are the problems with the USMNT and head coach Gregg Berhalter?

One of the first red flags noticed by the fan base about Gregg Berhalter, was and remains, his player selection. For every national team camp, anywhere between 20 and 30 American players are brought in. These camps usually last for a week and a half, unless it is during the summer

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.fifa.com/fifa-world-ranking/ranking-table/men/rank/id12679/#CONCACAF> NOTE: FIFA Ranking at time of October 15<sup>th</sup> match

tournament season. Following camp, the players then return to their clubs where they spend most of their playing time. The American player pool features players in many different leagues from around the world including the German Bundesliga and 2. Bundesliga, English Premier League and Championship, and the American/Canadian Major League Soccer (MLS).

Ever since Gregg has taken over as head coach, the majority of the players he is bringing into camp, are coming from MLS. On the 2019 CONCACAF Gold Cup roster, Gregg Berhalter named only five players from leagues other than MLS, out of a total of 23 players<sup>2</sup>. Originally this number was seven, however injuries prevented two players from joining camp. Both spots were filled with MLS players. For the October camp, G. Berhalter called in eight players based in Europe out of a total of 26 players<sup>3</sup>. In this current window, a total of 10 so called “European based players” were to be called into camp, however that number has now dropped to eight after two players withdrew with injury and were replaced with MLS based players<sup>4</sup>. With this November roster, Gregg Berhalter has now released a full year’s worth of USMNT rosters. In that year, no full roster has contained more than nine European based players. The only exception, being the 40-man pre-Gold Cup roster, submitted to CONCACAF for player eligibility in the competition. There are two major issues with G. Berhalter’s repeated heavy reliance on MLS players.

The MLS is not as competitive of a league as even the English Championship, despite the latter being the second division. In fact, Transfermarkt (a site that tracks player values), has the value of the Championship at \$1.53 billion<sup>5</sup>, while MLS is at \$676.70 million<sup>6</sup>. Despite this, Gregg Berhalter has continued to rely on a core roster of MLS players, in the process neglecting American players in both the English Championship and 2. Bundesliga. Some of these neglected players have been putting in Man of the Match and Team of the Week performances for their clubs. When the USMNT is failing to get results, these players should be brought into camp and given a chance to prove themselves, yet this has not happened.

Given the less competitive nature of MLS, it is also surprising that players that are struggling to perform even within the league are being called into national team camp. Then when these players feature for the USMNT, they are subpar and fail to perform. Ultimately, some of these MLS players are simply not good enough for international competition. And yet, they have continually been brought into camp and played by Gregg Berhalter.

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<sup>2</sup> <https://www.ussoccer.com/stories/2019/06/berhalter-names-2019-gold-cup-roster>

<sup>3</sup> <https://www.ussoccer.com/stories/2019/10/berhalter-calls-26-players-for-usas-inaugural-concacaf-nations-league-matches>

<sup>4</sup> <https://www.ussoccer.com/stories/2019/11/gregg-berhalter-names-23-players-to-final-usmnt-roster-for-nations-league-matches>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.transfermarkt.us/championship/startseite/wettbewerb/GB2> NOTE: value as of Nov. 17<sup>th</sup>, 2019

<sup>6</sup> <https://www.transfermarkt.us/major-league-soccer/startseite/wettbewerb/MLS1> NOTE: value as of Nov. 17<sup>th</sup>, 2019

These players are now taking roster spots from players deserving of a chance to make an impact on the USMNT, by working hard and performing for their clubs in more difficult environments. Writing for *The Players' Tribune* in Feb. 2018, former USMNT player Geoff Cameron wrote, "It's not just the level of 'quality' that's elevated overseas. It's more than that. It's a whole mentality. In the top leagues in Europe, it's just...ruthless. And not just in training camp. Not just when you're trying to impress a new manager. Every. Single. Day<sup>7</sup>." Despite the difficulty of making it in Europe and the fact the United States has numerous players in Europe fighting it out every day, and performing well, Gregg Berhalter has continued to rely of his MLS core. From the fans' perspective, this is punishing young USMNT players pushing themselves in Europe.

The fan base is also frustrated with the tactical approach taken by Gregg Berhalter. At the end of the day, the USMNT should not be losing matches to Canada, and most definitely should not be outplayed by a team like Canada. Yet this is what happened in October. Part of the loss was player selection, but the tactics G. Berhalter used were just as instrumental.

The style of play Gregg Berhalter wants to implement into the USMNT is based in maintaining possession and playing out of the back, often referred to at the Dutch style. The problem with this style of play, is that the players in the US pool are not suited to play in this manner. The best American players play in systems with their clubs that emphasize a high press and direct long balls. G. Berhalter's goal, however, is to "disorganize the opponent" by "moving the ball side to side." In reality, the USMNT is passing the ball among the defenders and midfielders, while opposition teams wait for a mistake. Since the USMNT features players that are not international caliber and players that are not familiar with playing out of the back, more often than not mistakes are being made. Some of these mistakes are being made by players that are far better than what their USMNT performances indicate.

When these mistakes are made, the USMNT either concedes a goal or gets very lucky not to concede. The troubling thing is that G. Berhalter has refused to adjust his style of play despite numerous concerning performances. Even in matches the USMNT have ultimately won, issues with the style of play have become apparent. It seems whenever an opposition team plays the USMNT confidently, the national team struggles to create scoring chances, while simultaneously conceded many chances for the opposition.

Additionally, the best chances the USMNT have created to score goals, tends to come from direct long balls. This is the opposite of the style of play Gregg Berhalter is insisting on implementing. In the October 2019, game against Canada for example, the best chance the USMNT had to score came from a long goal kick. When Sporting Director Earnie Stewart spoke to the media on November 12<sup>th</sup>, he referenced the first 25 minutes of the 2019 Gold Cup Final against Mexico, as a sign of progress in implementing G. Berhalter's playing style<sup>8</sup>. However, during this period of

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<sup>7</sup> <https://www.theplayerstribune.com/en-us/articles/geoff-cameron-what-must-change-in-u-s-soccer>

<sup>8</sup> <https://www.si.com/soccer/2019/11/12/earnie-stewart-gregg-berhalter-usmnt-usa-vote-confidence-canada-nations-league>

the final, the USMNT played direct long balls and pressed Mexico's defense. Not the "play out of the back" style Gregg Berhalter wants.

The USMNT under Gregg Berhalter is also failing to effectively press opposition teams. What this means, is that the team spends too much time sitting back in their own half, rather than attacking in the opposition half and trying to score goals. This also allows for opposition teams to press the USMNT, which forces turnovers and causes goals to be conceded. When the USMNT has pressed opposition teams, it has typically been one or two players on their own, making little progress, and often ending in a back pass or the player being de-possessed. However, the best players available in the US pool, are best when in a high press. Many of their club teams play in this manner, and they are familiar and comfortable with this style of play. Despite this fact, G. Berhalter has insisted on his "play out of the back" style, and the US has created very few goal scoring chances, while conceding many.

Within any team, having a strong ball winning midfield is important, a necessity in fact. Yet the midfield of the USMNT is more accurately described as weak, soft, and slow. Part of this is down to player selection, but part of it is tactical. Gregg Berhalter has not set up a midfield capable of performing the functions necessary to win midfield battles. In just about every match in the past few months, the USMNT has failed to win balls in midfield, failed to press from midfield, and failed to defend from midfield. More often than not, the USMNT midfield does not seem to show up at all, in large part because the players do not seem to understand their role and instructions. The players look confused and lost and their on-field play reflects it. This is on Gregg Berhalter. He has not changed his system nor his player selection, and the USMNT has been continually runover in midfield. The players have done the best they can within the context of his system, but Gregg Berhalter and his system have set them up to fail. For the fans, this is completely unacceptable.

With the November 15<sup>th</sup> victory over Canada in Orlando, some may believe the crisis is over. This is not the case. The USMNT has never struggled to win matches at home against far inferior opposition. The victory against Canada is not a sign of progress, growth, or that the worst is over. It is the bare minimum expectation of this team. A team that used to command the respect of everyone in CONCACAF. A team that could travel away to Mexico, historically and currently the best team in CONCACAF, and win convincingly. Expectations for the USMNT team are at an all-time low, but even still beating Canada at home is nothing less than mandatory.

How does the United States Soccer Federation play into the fan's anger?

The general source of anger and frustration with USSF come as a result of the lack of transparency. The Federation has operated largely in the dark about the innerworkings and decisions being made at the executive level. The fans have gotten angry about this, because there is no way to hold anyone accountable. Given the current state of things with the USMNT, the fan base wants answers, instead we are left in the dark.

Before the hiring of Gregg Berhalter, the fans were told there was an exhaustive search occurring. The Federation wanted to find the right person for the job. Someone who could rebuild the team and restore faith after the failure to qualify for the World Cup. It took a year for the announcement of Gregg Berhalter. That year offered plenty of time for the Federation to conduct an extremely thorough search and interview all the interested candidates. Instead it has been widely reported that only two people were interviewed<sup>9</sup>. In the end, of the two managers that were interviewed, USSF chose to hire COO Jay Berhalter's brother. The Federation has not explained the hiring process nor what specific qualities made them chose Gregg Berhalter over other candidates. This lack of information and communication with the fan base, has led to mass speculation that Gregg Berhalter was hired because his brother is the COO. Even with the widespread speculation, USSF has remained quiet on the issue and still has not explained their choice of coach.

Earnie Stewart's job is another case of a lack of transparency on behalf of the Federation. Earnie Stewart's original job title was General Manager. From the understanding of the fan base, his primary job was to hire the next manager for the USMNT. There were also reports that the General Manger would have influence over the style of play of the USMNT and the youth programs. In August of 2019 it was announced that Stewart was promoted to Sporting Director. The primary reason indicated for his promotion, was his hiring of Gregg Berhalter. This came after the USMNT lost in the Gold Cup final to Mexico and other results that were less than impressive. This has led the fan base to speculate the true meaning behind his promotion, since the manager he hired has done nothing substantial nor has he even met expectations. What Earnie Stewart's new role as Sporting Director entails has never been made clear to the fan base. As of right now, the vast majority of fans have no idea what Stewart's job is, how much influence he has over the USMNT and Gregg Berhalter, nor his direct working connection to COO Jay Berhalter and President Carlos Cordeiro.

The United States Soccer Federation has created a fan counsel in recent years. The counsel was supposed to act as a way for the fans to express their beliefs, opinions, fears, concerns, and feelings related to USSF and all the United States National Teams. In reality USSF has used the fan counsel to cover themselves from criticism and discussion with the wider fan base. While the fan counsel was a good idea, in practice the Federation has turned it into a mechanism to protect the executives and ensure the status quo remains the same. In the current state of the federation and the USMNT, drastic changes are required. The current fan counsel is not enough from USSF. The Federation must stop using it as an accurate representation of the fan base and must begin to engage with the fan community at large.

This summer concerning reports were released about the workplace conditions at the United States Soccer Federation. *The New York Times* published an article entitled, "Far From World Cup, Hints of Rebellion Inside U.S. Soccer"<sup>10</sup>. The article describes a toxic workplace environment,

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<sup>9</sup> <https://www.si.com/soccer/2018/12/02/gregg-berhalter-usmnt-manager-us-soccer-earnie-stewart-jay>

<sup>10</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/25/sports/us-soccer-berhalter.html>

including reports that employees were leaving anonymous negative reviews about the workplace conditions on popular employment website, Glassdoor. The reviews were primarily aimed at the now retired Dan Flynn and current COO Jay Berhalter. According to the article, the reviews indicate the issues tend to come from the long-serving executives that oversee the organization. The article also mentions that there is a lack of trust amongst the executives and the employees. It also mentions, as has been commonly believed, that Jay Berhalter is the likely replacement for Dan Flynn as CEO.

Additionally, the reviews confirm fan fears and speculation that USSF is more interested in making money than promoting the sport of soccer, investing in American youth, and improving the quality of the national teams. With some reviews specifically calling out the nepotism within the organization, the fan concerns regarding Gregg Berhalter's appointment as USMNT head coach gain some credibility. With the likelihood that Jay Berhalter will become the next CEO, the issues for the employees of USSF and the United States National Teams, will likely remain. What is also concerning to the fan base, is that no USSF executives have spoken out on the reports of a toxic workplace, the nepotism, or the CEO hiring process. Like every other executive decision and concern, the fans have been left completely in the dark and ignored.

On top of all the internal struggles within USSF, another group has come under fire for their involvement in the United States Soccer Federation. That group is Soccer United Marketing (SUM). SUM is basically an advertising and broadcasting union between Major League Soccer and the United States Soccer Federation. In short television rights and advertising rights are shared between the League and the Federation. The concern for fans begins with the fact that MLS Commissioner Don Garber sits on the board of all three groups<sup>11</sup>. The current seeming favoritism of MLS players on USMNT rosters and in starting lineups, has led to speculation among the fan base that SUM is influencing roster choices. In the more extreme groups, speculation has emerged that there are bonuses written into Gregg Berhalter's contract for having a certain percentage of MLS players on every roster and in every starting lineup. Additionally, there is concern that SUM's connection to USSF was another influence in hiring Gregg Berhalter, as he previously managed Columbus Crew SC, an MLS club. Despite fan requests for information and proof that SUM does not influence the USMNT, Don Garber, Jay Berhalter, Carlos Cordeiro, and Gregg Berhalter have all ignored the inquiries and offered no clarification of the partnership.

Given the state of the United States Soccer Federation, it is not surprising the issues that have plagued the Federation and the United States Men's National Team, have begun to flitter down to the United States Youth National Teams. The first issue is the lack of full-time youth coaches. Following the USMNT's failure to qualify for the 2018 World Cup, there was a mass departure of youth national team personnel. Despite the fact it has been two years since, the Federation has only one full time youth national team coach, with no indication from the Federation of hiring replacements in the near future.

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<sup>11</sup> <https://www.ussoccer.com/governance/board-of-directors> ; <https://www.mlssoccer.com/league/executives> ; <https://www.bloomberg.com/profile/company/0633826D:US>

In the past month the situation worsened, with the departure of Youth Technical Director and Under 20 Men's National Team coach, Tab Ramos. Ramos was one of the most successful youth coaches in Federation history, taking the Under 20 team the quarterfinals of the Under 20 FIFA World Cup for three consecutive cycles. As Youth Technical Director, Ramos was also responsible for creating and organizing a Youth Summit in 2018. It featured young players from all over the country and was a massive success. Despite the success of last year's summit, USSF has decided not to continue the event. As is common practice in USSF, no explanation for the cancellation of the summit was provided.

The United States Soccer Federation has also caused a rift within the fan base by neglecting the massive Hispanic population of the United States. Currently the Federation is using match day advertising graphics with phrases in English and Spanish, but that is the extent of the concern for the Spanish speaking fan base. The Federation has a Spanish language Twitter account, but it has now been over a year since the last Spanish language Tweet was sent. From the fans' perspective there is no excuse for excluding this market. Fan concern also extends beyond the simple use of a Twitter account, with the fear that the lack of acknowledgement of the Hispanic population being far more wide-reaching. For instance, the Youth Taskforce was created with the goal of promoting inclusivity and diversity. However, of the 59 individuals named to the taskforce, only two were Hispanic with one being USSF President Carlos Cordeiro. In the press conference on Nov. 12, Earnie Stewart largely dismissed concerns about Hispanic involvement and outreach but offered no examples or proof of genuine Hispanic involvement within USSF<sup>12</sup>. Additionally, as of the writing of this article, the Spanish Twitter account remains inactive<sup>13</sup>.

In terms of the fan base, the Federation has been slowly losing support for quite a while. With the repeated failure to listen to the concerns of the fans, and Earnie Stewart's dismissal of several major concerns on Nov. 12<sup>th</sup>, including fear that the USMNT could fail to qualify for the 2022 FIFA World Cup in Qatar<sup>14</sup>. As a result of the Federation's behavior, the relationship between USSF and the fans, is rapidly deteriorating. Many fans have called for boycotts of the USMNT and everything associated with USSF. This includes going to matches, purchasing official team items from US Soccer Shop and all affiliated organizations, as well as sponsor products. The failure of the fan counsel has only added to the belief that USSF does not care about the fan base, and only works to make money. Additionally, with a fan base that is already frustrated, the Federation has continued to raise ticket prices. With stadiums half empty already, the increase in prices is further limiting attendance. All in all, the general feelings towards USSF from the fan base are extremely negative.

Why does all of this matter?

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<sup>12</sup> <https://www.espn.com/soccer/united-states-usa/story/3988478/earnie-stewart-usmnt-has-made-progress-under-gregg-berhalter>

<sup>13</sup> [https://twitter.com/ussoccer\\_esp](https://twitter.com/ussoccer_esp)

<sup>14</sup> <https://www.espn.com/soccer/united-states-usa/story/3988478/earnie-stewart-usmnt-has-made-progress-under-gregg-berhalter>

Different people will give different answers to this question. It really depends on the individual and their personal history and feelings towards the game, the teams, and the business. The one thing the vast majority of the fan base agrees on, is that there must be change in the running of the United States Soccer Federation and the United States Men's National Team.

For some fans, the reason this is so important is because the business dealings of the USSF are less than ethical, or at least that certainly appears to be the case. For these fans, the poor management at the executive level is an embarrassment that reflects not only on the state of USSF, but business dealings as a whole in the US. These fans also believe the mismanagement at the executive level is what is causing the problems at the lower levels, like the USMNT and the youth teams. The idea is that by cleaning up the executives of USSF and appointing competent people, the problems will eventually fix themselves. Major motivators to action for these fans are the likely promotion of Jay Berhalter to CEO, the lack of information and transparency from the federation, and the speculation of SUM's involvement within USSF.

Other fans believe the state of USSF is hurting the growth of the sport we all love in our country. One job of the Federation is to promote the sport throughout the country and encourage kids to get involved with their local teams. With the Federation currently seeming to care more about making money than investing in the youth, it has generated a demand for change. Without investing in the youth of today, our Men's National Team of tomorrow will pay the price. For these fans, a major motivator for action is the lack of Youth National Team coaches, the departure of Tab Ramos, and the cancelation of the Youth Summit.

Personally, my motivator to action is the players that represent my country. These men go out and put on the crest of the United States National Team and play their hearts out for our country. It pains me to know the Federation they represent does not have their best interests in mind. When I watch them play for the USA, and I see their heartbreak, frustration, and tears, like after the October Canada match, I feel I must do whatever I can ensure they are never put in that position again. Everything I do to raise awareness of the problems and to demand change within the USMNT, USYNT, and USSF, I do for them, our players. The USMNT is on the verge of having a golden generation of players, the likes of which we have never had before. For me, I want these players to be given the best possible federation so that they can achieve the great things their potential indicates they are capable of.

In the end, it doesn't matter what specific reason each fan has for demanding change within US Soccer. The truth is that all of us want to see our National Teams succeed because we love them. Even with everything that is going wrong from within, we as fans, still love our National Teams with all our hearts. That is why we are raising awareness of the state of the USSF and the USMNT, and ultimately demanding change. We love this sport and our National Teams far too much to sit by and allow the mismanagement, nepotism, and corruption of the United States Soccer Federation to ruin the teams and sport we love with all our heart.