Generally in this space I tend to focus my energy on current events in sports that I have been watching for a long time. This week I wanted to talk about something a little different, and while it’s not one of the four major sports in the States it is the most popular sport in the rest of the world. I am of course referring to the sport that everyone else calls football, however we Americans call soccer.

The reason for this deviation from the norm is a simple one. While the US Women's National Team is in line for the Women’s World Cup Final on Sunday against either the Netherlands or Sweden, the Men’s team is riddled with problems as they face Jamaica in the CONCACAF Gold Cup Semifinals later tonight with the winner to take on powerhouse Mexico in the Final on Sunday night. The biggest problem is while the Women’s team is a perennial powerhouse, the Men’s team continues to flounder in international play.

Now there are a number of reasons for this, the most obvious of which being a total team failure. The most notable one being a horrible loss to Trinidad and Tobago back in 2017 to cost them a spot in the 2018 FIFA World Cup. All the Americans needed was at least a draw to make it to the world stage, instead they come out flatter than day old beer and miss their first World Cup since 1986. Most of that failure has been pinned on the manager at the time, Bruce Arena, who took the competition lightly and put together a shoddy formation that ultimately led to Team USA’s demise. Arena has since resigned.

But, as most of these cases often are, the failure goes way beyond the product on the pitch. It goes into soccer all throughout the country and how players develop. In other countries they start the development process in the teenage years and these kids from all over the world make their way through the ranks into some of the best leagues in the world playing in these club’s systems for free whether it's the Premier League in the UK, La Liga in Spain, Ligue 1 in France, Bundesliga in Germany or Serie A in Italy. Conversely, in the US the best leagues are pay to play. The free leagues in the schools are woefully underfunded due to lack of interest, which makes you find other leagues to play for where you need to front money, something that wouldn’t have boded well for someone like Christiano Ronaldo who grew up in poverty.

Another big factor, the US’s most notable league, Major League Soccer (MLS). If anything, they seem loath to let the American players who come into the league go overseas to seek better competition and hone their skills for international competition. Conversely, they have a hard time talking international stars into coming over here, unless they are like Zlatan Ibrahimovic of the Los Angeles Galaxy who is well passed his prime.

If the MLS wants to at least attempt to be a top league it has to look like one. One of the ways to do it is to become a relegation league. What that means is that the three teams in the basement are sent to play in a lower tiered league and they are replaced by the top three teams from the lower league. It seems like a good enough idea, except for the fact that owners don’t want to pay all the expansion fees if they think their new franchise is going to get demoted in year one. Thus, bringing us back to where we started with the MLS and their issues with drawing, identifying and developing top end talent.

One question I get a lot at work is why soccer is an afterthought in the US. My answer usually has to do with a lack of history of big time powerful teams. But I also say that if the MLS was even within a few miles of where the top leagues in the world are instead of waking up at an impossible hour on a weekend to watch the best in the world. In addition, it’s not a sport I grew up watching the way I watched American Football, Baseball or Hockey. The road to redemption is a long one for the US Men’s National Team, until then they can watch the Women’s team tear up the world stage.