

This 18-year-old may be the key to America's World Cup hopes

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Ricardo Pepi is young. He is unproven, unseasoned and unfinished. He could use a few more lines on his résumé and possibly a couple of more pounds on his lanky frame.

But because it has become equally evident in the early days of his career that Pepi possesses in abundant quantity the intangible, invaluable and often ephemeral magic needed to do the one thing valued above all else in soccer — because, in other words, he scores goals — none of the aforementioned stuff particularly matters.

Pepi, 18, may or may not become the striker of the future for the United States men's soccer team. Many have tried to make the position — the No. 9, in soccer parlance — their own, and most have failed. But questions about Pepi's long-term viability, his ceiling as a player, can wait. At the moment, there is a World Cup to qualify for. And there is no question that Pepi is the American striker of right now.

"Pressure is nothing to him — I think he relishes it, more so than his age should allow," said Eric Quill, who coached Pepi at North Texas S.C. in 2019 and 2020. "No. 9s, when they're in great form, it's like, 'Look out.' And I think he's as confident as they come right now."

Ready or not, Pepi is being asked to carry a heavy responsibility on his teenage shoulders. After making his debut



with the United States senior national team just two months ago, he was the only pure striker that Gregg Berhalter, the team's coach, summoned for the team's two World Cup qualifiers this month. The first of these was a marquee match on Friday night against Mexico in Cincinnati, where the U.S. won, 2-0.

The show of faith, if risky, made sense: Pepi, who plays professionally for F.C. Dallas in Major League Soccer, had collected three goals and two assists in his first four appearances with the United States. He has also been one of the most consistent bright spots in the team's somewhat shaky start to the qualifying tournament.

Pepi is the youngest player on a notably young team. ("Lose Yourself" by Eminem was the top song in the country

when he was born in January 2003, and Tom Brady had only one Super Bowl ring back then.) The youth of the American squad has been at once a point of pride (when things go well) and an excuse (when things don't go as well). But the team's disastrous failure to qualify for the 2018 World Cup has helped coaches justify turning over a new leaf — track records be damned. Pepi embodies that desire to start fresh more than anyone. He is all potential, a blank slate personified.

Yet his emergence could not be more timely. In recent years, the United States' program has seen promising players sprout up all over the field. (American attacking midfielders, for instance, seem to be multiplying like jack rabbits.) But the center forward position has long been something

of a barren patch.

Brian McBride, who played from 1993 to 2006, remains the gold standard for American strikers, according to Herculez Gomez, a former national team striker. Jozy Altidore came closest to filling McBride's shoes, Gomez said. Countless others have been hyped, but few have followed through.

"We could start spouting off a lot of names," Gomez, now an analyst for ESPN, said about the revolving door of strikers. "A lot of players have been put in the role, but not a lot of guys have taken the reins." He added with a laugh: "I was one of them."

Gomez said Pepi was raw, but undoubtedly promising, showing a sharp trajectory of improvement in the last year alone. "I think his mentality is the strongest trait he has," Gomez said. "He's just so hungry. He's got this arrogance about him. Borderline cocky. A swagger to him."

That may be the case in the penalty area, but in most other circumstances Pepi is known as an introvert. In conversations with the news media, for example, he has a tendency to meander cautiously through the early beats of a response before settling on phrasing he has used before. (The problem with playing well, for some athletes, is that people want to speak with you.) This type of shyness might be concerning for a coach, were it not so easily, and so ferociously, shed on

the field.

"In the dressing room he was always kind of in the corner by himself," said Francisco Molina, the former scouting director for F.C. Dallas, who met Pepi when he was playing in the team's youth system. "On the field, he was a loud, screaming, rebellious kid."

The first thing Molina noticed about Pepi was his spindly frame. ("Like a baby deer, he said.") The second was his steady stream of goals: He could score them with his right foot or his left, with his head, with his knees and shoulders and shins. He can find almost any way to nudge the ball into the net.

"He has that instinct," Molina said. "He's a pure 9."

These skills have drawn interest from the top clubs in Europe. Among those tracking Pepi's development, there seems to be agreement that his next step should be a careful, conscientious one — a spot on a good team in a medium-profile league, perhaps, or one on a medium-profile team in a top league. "You have to go somewhere where you play right away," his U.S. teammate Chris Richards, who made a similar move to Europe from F.C. Dallas at age 18, said in an interview with the website Transfermarkt last week. "Sometimes you get caught up in the big names, but it might not be the perfect situation."

There appears to be consensus, too, on the one area where

he could improve the most: playing with his back to the goal. In those situations, Pepi prefers laying the ball off quickly to a teammate to get himself moving again. He does not yet look as comfortable holding the ball and withstanding a physical challenge from a defender, the kind of pause that top strikers must master in order to give their teammates time to build an attack around them.

For Pepi, the key may be as simple as putting on some muscle. "At the higher levels, the center backs, most of them are athletic beasts," said Quill, Pepi's former youth coach. "He's got a slim frame. He's going to have to do a lot of work in the gym." Molina concurred. "His body hasn't caught up to his brain yet," he said.

Pepi's soccer brain and body will continue to develop, but his heart was already put to the test this past summer when he was forced to choose between representing the United States, where he was born, or Mexico, the home of his parents. Pepi grew up in San Elizario, Texas, a working-class town just outside El Paso. He spoke Spanish at home, followed Club América of the Mexican league, rooted for Mexico's national team and idolized its stars. Moving seamlessly between cultures was natural for him, the way it can be for countless children of immigrants around the world.

France, Belgium win to reach World Cup; Dutch slip to draw

While Kylian Mbappe's four goals in an 8-0 rout of Kazakhstan ensured defending champion France reached next year's World Cup along with victorious Belgium, the Netherlands failed to join them Saturday after conceding two late goals. Belgium was less spectacular beating Estonia 3-1 at home but has an unassailable five point-lead over second-place Wales, which beat Belarus 5-1 in Cardiff and has a three-point lead over the Czech Republic for a playoff spot.

After missing out on the last World Cup, the Dutch looked set to go through after leading 2-0 at Montenegro with goals from Memphis Depay. Yet Montenegro struck twice in the last eight minutes to make it 2-2, and that gives Turkey and Norway a chance for top spot since they are two points behind with one game left.

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GROUP D
France was playing away from its usual home venue Stade de France and took the field at Parc des Princes, where Mbappe stars for Paris Saint-Germain. He became the first France player since Just Fontaine at the 1958 World Cup to score four times in one game.

"The most important thing was qualifying, and we have players in our squad who have never played in the World Cup," said Mbappe, who starred in the last one. "It's a dream to play in it for your country." After 32 minutes he had his first international hat trick. Karim Benzema combined with Theo Hernandez to set up his first goal and then Kingsley Coman picked him out twice, the second with a cross from the right met by a rare header.

Mbappe has bounced back from a disappointing Euro 2020, where he failed to score, and his late goal helped France win the Nations League final last month. Benzema also scored in that game. The irrepressible Hernandez whipped over another cross from the left for another assist as Benzema met it at the near post for 4-0 in the 55th.

Four minutes later, Benzema played a slick one-two with Mbappe for his second goal and 35th for France. His partnership with Mbappe is blossoming fast.

"We showed we have a good understanding and combine well together," Benzema said. "Personally, I'm delighted to play in another World Cup (after 2014)." Adrien Rabiot and Antoine Griezmann also scored late before Mbappe emulated the great Fontaine — the all-time leading scorer in a single World Cup with 13 goals in '58.

The second-place finisher enters the playoffs and Finland has a chance, although it next hosts rampant France.

Shooting: ISSF increases Asia's Olympic quota places from 38 to 48



In a highly beneficial move for Asian countries, the International Shooting Federation (ISSF) has increased the number of Olympic quota places for the continent from 38 to 48.

This is expected to come into effect from the 2024 Paris Olympic Games, the qualifications for which will begin next year. The 2020 Tokyo Games had 38 quota places on offer.

"The Asian Shooting Confederation received a letter from ISSF confirming that the Olympic Quota Places for Asia is increased from 38 to 48 Quota Places," the sport's continental body (ASC) said in a

statement on Twitter and Facebook.

"The Asian Shooting Confederation expresses its gratitude to the ISSF and all members who contributed to this achievement," the ASC added.

India were represented by a record 15 shooters at the Tokyo Olympics but the country returned empty-handed after a disastrous outing in the Japanese capital.

Before that, in Rio 2016 Games, India sent 12 shooters, but there too, the country's marksmen and markswomen failed to finish on the podium.

At a special ceremony in the Olympic Museum

recently, the International Olympic Committee (IOC) President Thomas Bach handed over the Tokyo 2020 Olympic Torch to the ISSF President Vladimir Lisin "in recognition of the continues support before and during the Olympic Games Tokyo 2020".

During his visit to Lausanne, Lisin also took part in meetings dedicated to the next Olympic Games in Paris.

Meanwhile, during a recent meeting of the ISSF council, its members were "updated on the main approaches to the Qualification system for the Paris 2024 Olympic Games, the structure of the shooting sport events' formats for 2022-2024 and the development fund activity."

They also were informed about the approved calendar of 2022 ISSF Championships.

Besides, the presidents of the continental confederations of Asia, America, Africa, Australia, Oceania and Europe reported on the work done in 2021, as did the chairman of the ISSF Committees, the sport's global body said in a statement.

Virat Kohli congratulates National Sports awardees: Your excellence will inspire many



India's Test and ODI captain Virat Kohli on Sunday congratulated the athletes and coaches who were awarded during the National Sports Awards on November 13.

The President of India, Ram Nath Kovind, presented the Sports and Adventure Awards (Major Dhyan Chand Khel Ratna Awards-2021, Dronacharya Awards-2021, Arjuna Awards-2021, Dhyan Chand Awards-2021, Rashtriya Khel Protsahan Puruskar-2021, Maulana Abul Kalam Azad Trophy-2021 and Tenzing Norgay National Adventure Awards-2020) at a function held at Rashtrapati Bhavan on Saturday.

Kohli, who was conferred with Khel Ratna award in 2018, said the awardees' excellence will inspire many people to pursue their sporting passion.

"A great moment of pride and congratulations to all the Khel Ratna, Arjuna, Dronacharya and Adventure award winners. Your excellence will inspire so many people to pursue their sport-

ing passion," Kohli tweeted.

Neeraj Chopra, the javelin thrower who became the only second Indian to win an Olympic gold medal (individual sport), was presented with the Major Dhyan Chand Khel Ratna Award, alongside wrestler Ravi Kumar, para shooter Avani Lekhara, Indian football team skipper Sunil Chhetri and India women's cricket stalwart Mithali Raj.

Indian opening batter and Kohli's long-time teammate Shikhar Dhawan, Tokyo 2020 Paralympics silver medalist Bhavina Patel, and Para shuttler and Noida DM Suhas Yathiraj were among the 35 athletes who received the prestigious Arjuna Award. Indian athletics coach TP Ouseph and former Indian women's hockey captain Pritam Siwach were among the 10 coaches who received the Dronacharya Award. The specially organised award function is being held at the Rashtrapati Bhavan. National Sports Awards are given every year to recognise and reward excellence in sports.

Sports ensures physical and mental fitness, keeping youth away from drugs menace: Sham Sharma

Inaugurates Kabaddi match at Baba Kailakh Devsthan

JAMMU: J & K Bharatiya Janata Party (BJP) Sports Cell organised a Kabaddi Match at Baba Kailakh Devsthan, Upper Thathar here today. The former minister and J&K BJP Vice President, Sham Lal Sharma who was the Chief Guest on the occasion inaugurated the match.

It is pertinent to mention here that today's match was organised by Bharatiya Janata Party Sports Cell as part of 133rd birth anniversary of Pt Prem Nath Dogra which is being celebrated as Sports Day across Jammu and Kashmir. During this extensive sports event 135 matches will be organised till the final conclusion of the programme on 25th December 2021, the birth anniversary of the former Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee.

In his address on the occasion, the BJP leader, Sham Lal Sharma said that sports not only makes youth physically and mentally fit but also helps in keeping them away from drug menace that has become a great threat to the society today. He asserted that the government is fully sensitive to the issue and realizes the significance of sports in ensuring a healthy



citizenry.

He said that in its priority agenda of overall development the BJP government has ensured ample focus on sports sector also not only in urban areas but also in the remote and far flung areas. He said while the Union Govt is funding crores of rupees to enhance the sports infrastructure in Jammu and Kashmir aiming to make it par excellence as per the optimum standards, at the same time the Union Territory administration is leaving no stone unturned in this direction ensuring the proper rather

equitable use of the funds provided for the purpose.

Meanwhile, today's matches were played between Khour Border Team v/s Raipura Domana and the Baba Jitto Club Pouni Chak v/s Shield Club. Baba Jitto Club Pouni Chak had won the Kabaddi match when the report last poured in.

Prominent among others present on the occasion were Rajinder Singh Chib (BJP District President Rural), Sunil Dogra (Convener BJP Sports Cell) and Co Convener Vishal Gupta, Baba Chanchal.

Taylor guides WI women to six-wicket win over Pakistan



Riding on an unbeaten 102 from skipper Stefanie Taylor, the West Indies women's team beat Pakistan by six wickets to complete a white-wash in the three-match ODI series at the National Stadium here on Sunday.

Set 226 to win, the visitors recovered from 15 for 3 in the fifth over to reach the target for the loss of four wickets in 44 overs.

Taylor then shared a fifth wicket stand of 128 runs with Chedian Nation 51 not out to set up a comfortable win.

West Indies had also won the first two ODIs at the same venue in comfortable fashion with Deandra Dottin scoring a hundred in the first match.

Pakistan batting first could manage just 225 runs after skipper Javaria Khan was run out for the second time in the series.

Javaria, the team's most experienced batter, could manage only 13 but opener,

Muneeba Ali made a solid 58 from 88 balls with eight fours.

Once she was dismissed only Aliya Riaz (44 from 57 balls) and Omaima Sohail (27) and Erum Javed (26) were able to make worthwhile contributions.

For the visitors, Shakera Selman and Aaliyah Alleyne took two wickets apiece.

Left arm spinner, Anam Amin and pacer Diana Baig sent back the first three visiting batsmen cheaply but then Stefanie Taylor batted beautifully in her 117 balls innings, hitting 12 fours while Chedian stroked seven fours in her quick innings.

Allrounder Hayley Matthews also made an important 49 runs.

The ODI series is part of preparations for the ICC qualifiers being held in Zimbabwe from where both teams need to qualify for next year's World Cup.

Both teams depart tonight for Harare.

Mbappe nets four as France hammer Kazakhstan 8-0, Belgium reach World Cup

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The Finns won 3-1 at Bosnia and Herzegovina despite playing more than 50 minutes with a player less to move above Ukraine and into second place.

The home side was missing all-time 60-goal top scorer Edin Dzeko through injury and lacked a cutting edge.

GROUP E
There was no Romelu Lukaku up front for Belgium as he recovers from a minor injury, so Christian Benteke stepped in and put his side ahead against Estonia after 11 minutes.

Aaron Ramsey was even quicker, taking three minutes to put Wales 1-0 up and Liverpool defender Neco Williams doubled the lead in the 20th.

I am lucky to be alive, don't know what will happen next: Chris Cairns

Wheelchair-bound former New Zealand all-rounder Chris Cairns says he is "very lucky to be alive", three months after a medical emergency left him on life support.

The 51-year-old is currently recovering from a spinal stroke that left him paralysed waist down, following several complicated surgeries.

"We don't know what happens going forward. I don't know if I'll walk, I don't know if I'll stand. But I may stand. I may walk. The only option is to keep going. The thing is I'm not even just lucky to be (alive). I'm very lucky," Cairns was quoted as saying by Canberra Times.

As he opened up on his life post the scare, Cairns was flanked by his wife Melanie.

Son of Lance Cairns, who was also an all-rounder for the New Zealand team in the 1970s and 80s, Cairns junior had suffered a major medical emergency — an aortic dissection — in August and was transferred to a specialist hospital in Sydney, where he had undergone a life-saving emergency heart surgery before facing more complications in the wake of the spinal stroke. Aortic dissection is a serious medical condition in which a tear happens in the inner layer of the body's main artery (aorta). He has been cleared to start "using his chest and arms for the first time in three months as he continues his recovery".



"The amazing thing going through this is just the perseverance to keep going in case it comes back. You've got to be prepared," Cairns said.

One of the best all-rounders of his time, Cairns played 62 Tests, 215 ODIs and two T20Is for New Zealand between 1989 and 2006. His wife Melanie said, "Chris didn't just have a stroke one day and (was gone), he had two weeks of being so close to (death). So we start from a place of gratefulness, and every bit we get back after that is just an extra.