

**Editor's note:** In 2013, [@drdefense](#) wrote a very long email to a friend about the career of Stuart Holden. This is it, in its entirety.

## 1. MY GUYS

As you know I'm a big Stuart Holden fan. You know my excel-sheet-keeping ways, and you know that I've gone so far as to create a Bolton Wanderers spreadsheet, even following their relegation to the Football League Championship (while Holden wasn't even playing) just to keep the Holden-tracking mechanism in place. So, with Stu's recent re-emergence as a viable MNT candidate, I offer a few thoughts.

A key component of my version of MNT fanhood involves tracking a wide variety of US players, manually counting their appearances, updating a personal depth chart, and otherwise keeping track of relatively meaningless data points associated with a long list of MNT and MNT-eligible names, past, present, and future. So, from that sea of names, certain players emerge that become My Guys: players that I think should be rated higher than they appear to be in the MNT press, players that I think should be called in more / at all, etc.

As we've discussed, Geoff Cameron is a My Guy, for example. A Mass-native, unheralded before coming to MLS (i.e. not a US youth NT player), multi-talented. My Guy. Jimmy Conrad and Jay Demerit were My Guys. Going way back, Brian Maisonnueve was my guy. Corey Gibbs was my guy. Jack Jewsbury was a My Guy that never really broke through (invited to one camp, never capped). John Thorrrington was my guy; Dax McCarty is my guy. Joe Cannon was my guy; Dan Kennedy is my guy. You get it.

Somehow I feel believably invested in my guys. I feel that if I bump them up in my depth chart, this should help their real world career. Madness.

The point is, Stu Holden is the my guy of my guys.

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## 2. RISE AND FALL, TAKE ONE

Getting wiki for a minute: Holden was born in Scotland, but moved to Texas at age 10, as his dad worked for big oil. He and his brother, Euan, both excelled at soccer growing up. Per the internet, turns out Stu was also a serious gamer as a teen and played "Counter Strike" (some first-person shooter game I've never heard of) competitively. He went to Clemson, and played soccer there, with an eye on returning back to the UK for a professional career.

After two years of college ball, Stu was ready to give the pro game a go, and got himself a six-month trial with Premier League side Sunderland (current club of Jozy) in 2005. At the same time, he was called into the US U-20 team by then-coach (former NE Revs manager, and

overall weirdo Dutchman that I once saw in a coffee shop in Long Beach, CA), Thomas Rongen. Holden made several appearances with the U20s but could not be included on the roster for the U20 World Cup as he US Citizenship was not yet final. Rongen and US team enjoyed a decent run, getting out of their group before being knocked out by the Italians. That team was led by Freddy Adu (allegedly only 16 at the time), Benny Feilhaber, and Manchester United prospect Jonathan Spector.

Meanwhile, Holden was on the US youth radar and began professional training with Sunderland. Living the dream.

Horribly, though, shortly after launching his pro career in England he was randomly attacked in a taxi line outside a bar in Newcastle; his eye socket was fractured and he was out of action. He was eventually cleared to play again, only to suffer an ankle injury in practice. After six months in the UK, Holden was released by Sunderland having made zero appearances for the team.

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### **3. REV KILLAHS, 2006 EDITION**

In the first of what would become a string of post-injury comebacks, Holden returned home to Texas, signed with MLS (\$30,000/year salary; four year contract) joining the Houston Dynamo for 2006 season under coach Dom Kinnear, a fellow Scot-Yank.

Kinnear had found success coaching the first MLS incarnation of the San Jose Earthquakes (assistant to Frank Yallop on Quakes' cup-winning teams of '01 and 03; head coach on shield-winning side in 2003), and moved with the team when they became the Dynamo. The team was built around Dwayne DeRosario, who was Kinnear's best player in San Jose (sorry Donovan) and remained so in Houston. (Tangent: DeRo is arguably the best player in the history of MLS).

The typical line-up for the 2006 Dynamo was something like:

Alejandro Moreno -- Brian Ching  
Dwayne DeRosario  
Brad Davis -- Rico Clark -- Brian Mullan  
Wade Barrett -- Eddie Robinson -- Ryan Cochrane -- Craig Waibel  
Pat Onstad

Led by the DeRo-Ching-Davis attack, the Dynamo finished second in West, 5th overall, in the regular season and went on a run in the playoffs. Holden was one of 5-6 bench players seeing occasional minutes. (Fun fact: one of Holden's fellow bench-mates that year was an unheard-of Chris Wondolowski.) Holden did enough to earn 3 starts in the regular season,

putting him 16th in minutes played for the team. He scored one goal -- against the Revs (a preview of things to come...).

Holden didn't start any of the post-season games, but did come on as a sub in the final when the Dynamo beat the Revs (gasp!) on PKs. The game had been scoreless through 90 minutes. The Revs' Clint Dempsey was limited due to injury and came on as a late sub. On to extra time. At last, to my delight, beloved goal machine Taylor Twellman put the Revs in front in the 113th minute. Before there was even time to celebrate, Houston equalized through Brian Ching (Kamehameha alumnus) immediately off the ensuing kickoff, catching the Revs napping. Holden was a 114th-minute sub and it was never clear on the broadcast if he was subbed in right after the Revs goal or right after the Dynamo goal. You can see him in the celebration with Ching, so my hunch is that he was in the game when Houston scored. Of course, it was all Stu!

Either way, Holden was on the field when the match went to PKs. Kinnear tipped Holden to shoot second, and he scored on a flawless, powerful, unstoppable blast to the upper right corner. Color commentators Eric Wynalda and Bruce Arena (two hate-love-hate guys) were duly impressed. Revs' keeper Matt Reis was selected to be a shooter, and converted, but Houston keeper Pat Onstad was the hero when he saved the Revs' final shot (Jay Fucking Heaps, who was basically jinxed on the live broadcast by Arena) to give Houston a 4-3 PK win.

Of course, as a Revs fans, I was gutted. But the kid made an impression with that PK.

The Dynamo were the champs and Holden had a few clutch moments and established himself as a valuable contributor. Not the Premier League, for sure, but to Holden's credit, he was in a winning situation.

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#### **4. REV KILLAHS, 2007 EDITION**

Holden was back with the Dynamo for 2007 season, and his role increased to basically the first guy off the bench. He finished 13th in minutes played and filled in to critical acclaim on the left when Brad Davis was injured. The first XI was largely unchanged:

Joseph Ngwenya -- Brian Ching  
Dwayne DeRosario  
Brad Davis -- Richard Mulrooney -- Brian Mullan  
Wade Barrett -- Eddie Robinson -- Ryan Cochrane -- Craig Waibel  
Pat Onstad

The primary subs were: Rico Clark, Holden, Nate Jaqua, and Pat Ianni.

Holden was a key part of a balanced attack that year, chipping in with 5 goals and 5 assists (tied for a team high). It was another great year for the Dynamo. They finished second in the West again, but were up to 3rd overall. They made another strong post-season run, ending with a re-match against the Revolution for MLS Cup.

Again, Twellman put the Revs in front (20'), on a beaut of cross from Steve Ralston (My Guy!). However, goals from Ngwenya (61') and Man-of-the-Match DeRosario (74') gave the Dynamo their second MLS Cup in their brief 2-year life, while the Revs suffered a Buffalo Bills-esque fourth MLS Cup defeat. Holden again came off the bench, this time to help preserve the lead in the 80th minute.

After the season, in December 2007, Holden (now a citizen) was named to a USA U-23 roster chosen by Peter Nowak (then considered a bad-ass, not yet known to be a horrible human being) for a tour of China to kickoff the process of identifying the USA Olympic squad for the 2008 Summer Games. Holden started both matches in China and 4 of the 5 games in the qualifying tournament for a U-23 squad that looked something like:

Freddy Adu -- Jozy Altidore -- Eddie Gaven  
Stu Holden -- Dax McCarty -- Sacha Kljestan  
Nathan Sturgis -- Michael Orozco -- Pat Ianni -- Hunter Freeman  
Chris Seitz

Shortly thereafter, Holden was drawn into the outer orbit of the full MNT. But this requires some background MNT context.

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## 5. A BRIEF HISTORY OF TIME

The senior side was in transition from Bruce Arena to Bob Bradley. Arena had led the team to unexpected glory in 2002, with the shocking 3--2 defeat of Portugal serving as just enough to get the team out of group play, and a deeply satisfying 2-0 defeat of Mexico in the round of 16, before bowing out to Germany despite a valiant effort in the quarterfinals (that Torsten Frings non-call handball could have been huge!).

Arena's 2002 cycle core featured:

GK: Kasey Keller / Brad Friedel split (Friedel amazing at WC)  
DEF: Tony Sanneh, Carlos Llamasa (working as a janitor before latching on in MLS), Eddie Pope, and Jeff Agoos; with a sprinkling of Dolo and Hejduk  
MF: John O'Brien (legend), Claudio Reyna (legend), Chris Armas (whose late injury opened the door for Pablo Mastroeni), Earnie Stewart, Cobi Jones, Eddie Lewis; plus emerging Donovan and Beasley

F: Clint Mathis (rockstar), Brian McBride, Joe-Max Moore

The 2002 team's performance was a huge upswing from finishing dead last in 98 (Nantes 4eva!) and remains the best-ever US finish.

Bruce got a second term for the 2006 cycle, and gave bigger roles to some guys from the 02 cycle, such as Mastroeni, Bocanegra, Cherundolo, while also introducing some new blood, including Oguchi Onyewu, Jimmy Conrad, Clint Dempsey, Eddie Johnson, and Brian Ching. The typical XI for that 2006 cycle became something like:

Donovan -- McBride  
Beasley -- Mastroeni -- Reyna -- Dempsey  
Boca -- Pope -- Gooch -- Dolo  
Keller

Hopes were high for the 2006 World Cup, but this time the team fell flat. Despite a good showing in an opening draw against eventual champion Italy (Man of the Match: Kasey Keller), the team failed to advance out of its group. Making matters more embarrassing, Mexico did advance from its group, before losing in the round of 16 (as always), this time to Argentina.

In 2007 Bruce was out, and steely-eyed baldy Bob Bradley was in.

Personnel-wise, it was time for some changes in the 2010 cycle. Bradley started bringing in new blood. In January 2007 he gave first-time call-ups to Matt Pickens, Troy Perkins, Clarence Goodson, Michael Parkhurst (my guy!), Jonathan Bornstein, Dasan Robinson, Bryan Namoff, Kyle Beckerman, Sacha Kljestan, Josh Gros, and Kenny Cooper. By my count, 124 players got a look under Bradley in the 2010 cycle (including players called into camp but not capped), with 62 of those (exactly half, cool) being guys never called up before.

Beyond the churning of the player pool, the three biggest individual developments underway during the early Bradley years were: (1) the transition to Tim Howard as number one goalkeeper, (2) the growth of Dempsey as a key offensive cog, and (3) the emergence of the coach's own son, Michael (who had been given a token sniff by Bruce, but was too young to be taken seriously at the time).

Early in his tenure, Bob guided the US to the 2007 Gold Cup title, which earned the team a coveted spot in the 2009 Confederations Cup (a key opportunity to play top nations in a competitive environment and to get a first-hand preview of the playing conditions in South Africa). The Gold Cup title was won 2-1 over Mexico on a thunderbolt volley by Benny Feilhaber (peak of his career, sadly) at Soldier's Field.

Bob's XI for the 2007 Gold Cup was basically:

Dempsey -- Ching  
Beasley -- Bradley -- Mastroeni -- Donovan  
Bornstein -- Boca -- Gooch -- Jon Spector  
Howard

Bob then immediately turned around and fielded an experimental B-team for the Copa America that summer. Holden's Dynamo teammate Rico Clark was on the squad, but Holden wasn't on Bradley's list yet. The team was completely outclassed by the A-sides of the South American nations, and lost all three games, but it was a learning opportunity for some fringe MNTers. The Copa XI was basically:

Twellman -- E. Johnson  
Justin Mapp -- R. Clark -- Kljestan -- Feilhaber  
Bornstein -- Demerit -- Conrad -- Wynne  
Keller/Guzan

Six months later, Bradley took a brief look at Holden. It was late January/early February 2008, and Bob was prepping for a one-off friendly against Mexico to be played in right in Houston (huge money-making opportunity for the Mexican federation) -- one of six scattered friendlies in the run-up to the first round of WC qualifying, which would begin that June. The location made it convenient for Bob to bring in some Dynamo guys, and Holden was called in to the pre-match camp, along with Houston teammates Brad Davis, Rico Clark, and Eddie Robinson. Holden was named to the initial 22-man roster for the match, but did not make the 18-man active roster.

So began his involvement with the senior team. However, it would still be some time before he became anything other than a outer-fringe MNT player.

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## **6. BOSSING THE CENTER ON TWO FRONTS, 2008**

Meanwhile, Holden returned to Dynamo to begin the 2008 MLS season, which would be a breakthrough year for him. The club went into the season with some changes in the center of midfield: DeRo was pushed up top, and Mulrooney was rotated to right back, leaving the younger tandem of Clark and Holden to run the middle of the park.

Kinnear's typical XI was approx.:

Dwayne DeRosario-- Brian Ching  
Brad Davis -- Stu Holden -- Rico Clark -- Brian Mullan  
Wade Barrett -- Eddie Robinson -- Bobby Boswell -- Richard Mulrooney  
Pat Onstad

Key subs included: Craig Waibel, Corey Ashe, and (NS favorite) rookie Geoff Cameron (!!).

In the middle of the 2008 season, Holden was away from the Dynamo and featuring for the Olympic team in China. Nowak's 3 overage selections added to the squad were Brad Guzan, Michael Parkhurst, and Brian McBride, leading to a typical XI of:

Adu -- McBride -- Robbie Rogers  
Holden -- Michael Bradley -- Kljestan  
Orozco -- Parkhurst -- Mo Edu -- Marvell Wynne  
Guzan

Hopes were high for Olympic glory after the team beat Japan 1-0 in the opener, with none other than our protagonist, Stu Holden, supplying the goal. The team managed a very respectable 2-2 draw against the Netherlands in the second group game, with goals from Kljestan and sub Jozy Altidore. However, they were eliminated after a disappointing 1-2 result to Nigeria in the final group game, with Klejstan providing the lone goal. Bradley and Adu were both suspended for the Nigeria match due to yellow card accumulation, and Orozco became the black sheep for an unfortunate red card. Nevertheless, the tournament served to confirm Holden's place in the elite MF ranks for his cohort, and the Holden-Bradley-Klejstan trio was expected to be a force for the senior team.

Holden returned to the Dynamo to finish out the 2008 season. Houston excelled again and won the West, losing out in the Supporters' Shield race to Columbus. The team was knocked out of the playoffs by a Cinderella New York Red Bulls squad, who, in turn, lost in the final to the double-winning Crew.

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## **7. BEING THE MAN FOR HOUSTON, 2009**

During that same period (late 2008), the MNT cruised through the pre-Hex qualifiers, and Holden was not involved.

In the MLS offseason, Holden was called in Bradley's January 2009 Camp Cupcake with a bunch of other MLS-based fringe MNTers. He did not participate in the subsequent friendly match against Sweden due to injury. Holden's olympic co-star, Kljestan, was in the same camp, and had a break-out game against Sweden, scoring all three US goals.

Holden remained in the mid-fringe for the MNT and was not a part of Bradley's squad for the first half of the Hex in 2009. Instead, the midfield of choice remained Dempsey - Bradley - Mastroeni - Donovan, with Altidore- Ching up top. Kljestan and Jose Torres were key subs,

while Beasley was tried as a left back (with famous failure in this role in the 1-3 loss away to Costa Rica).

However, Holden remained absolutely key to Kinnear's system as the 2009 season began for Dynamo. Stu again featured in the center of the field, but this time with significantly increased expectations to generate offense, as Houston had traded Dwayne DeRosario to fledging MLS outfit, Toronto FC, per DeRo's request to help lead the new franchise in his native Canada (the move turned out to be a disaster for DeRo). Kinnear's typical XI was:

Ching - Kei Kamara  
Davis - Holden - Clark - Mullan  
Andrew Hainault - Boswell - Cameron - Mulrooney  
Onstad

Holden stepped up into the role, and his 6 goals ended up second on the team behind Ching's 8.

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## **8. TANGENT: HOLY FUCKING CONFED CUP**

Meanwhile, on a parallel track, Holden was also given a chance to step into a bigger role for the MNT in 2009. That summer, Bradley was again dealing with back-to-back tournaments, just as in 2007. And like before, he sent the A-team to the greater event and a B-team to the lesser. In this case, the greater was the Confederations Cup. Holden was not involved, but we can't skip over this one, right?

Now, the US play in this tournament has come to be cast in golden light in the annals of MNT history, but the fact is that the team started off poorly. Granted, expectations were relatively low coming in: play some games, experience what South Africa is like, then get back to the Hex. However, opening losses to Italy (1-3) and Brazil (0-3) were kind of a bummer.

Despite the poor results, the US was not not actually mathematically eliminated yet. However, they would need a 3-goal victory over Egypt in the final group game to have a shot of advancing. This is where things started getting wacky. They got the 3-0 win. Goal scorers were Dempsey (money!), Bradley (money!), and young Charlie Davies (pour one out), making his first competitive-match start for the full MNT.

For their gutsy performance, the US were rewarded with a semi-final match up with 2008 European champions (and soon to be world dominators), Spain, #1 team in the world on a 35-game unbeaten streak. This is when things got super wacky. We fucking beat Spain. 2-0, no less. Goals by Altidore (after which commentator John Harkes let out an audible

"woo-hoo-hoo!") and Dempsey (money!) (Harkes this time: "woo-hoo-hoo-hoo"). Tiki taka that, muthafuckas! USA! We shocked the world! The line-up that day was:

Altidore - Davies  
Dempsey - Bradley - Clark - Donovan  
Boca - Gooch - Demerit - Spector  
Howard

Then the final: an absolutely stacked Brazil team that had already beaten the US easily 3-0 in group play. Michael Bradley was out with a red card, so Feilhaber got the start alongside Clark. In the 10th minute Dempsey (holy fucking shit -- money!!) scores off a long, looping lob from Spector. Surely Brazil will answer? Howard with a huge save on Robinho! Donovan and Davies execute a great 2-man counterattack, Donovan scores, how is this happening?!? We are fucking beating Brazil 2-0 at halftime in a tournament final! That moment was certainly the apex of the Bob Bradley era, Algeria game be damned.

Well, Brazil scored three in the second half, and the order of the universe was restored. The tournament ended.

This has nothing to do with Stuart Holden. Ahem.

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## 9. BEING THE MAN FOR THE B-TEAM

Bradley now had to field a B-team for the 2009 Gold Cup 2 weeks later (similar to Klinsmann's current situation). And that's where he turned to Holden. Bradley planned to rest the A-team guys from the Confed Cup in July, try out some B team guys at the Gold Cup in August (since the winner did not earn a Confed Cup spot), and then resume the second half of the Hex in September. The Gold Cup squad was mostly US-based fringe guys. Bradley also pulled some weird shit with calling in some Euro-based players but then letting them leave the team before the tournament was over (Feilhaber, Parkhurst Adu, Davies, Cherundolo). Not cool, Bob.

The roster included names such as Jon Busch (your guy?), Luis Robles, Clarence Goodson, Chad Marshall, Heath Pearce, Jay Heaps, Brad Evans, Robbie Rogers, Sam Cronin, Logan Pause, Santino Quaranta, Kenny Cooper, and Davy Arnaud. In this crowd, Holden was expected to be a key player.

Holden was basically handed the keys to the car and given a starting midfield spot. (He actually wore the "10" shirt.) The opening match against Grenada was Holden's first ever US MNT cap (Cap-tied -- sorry, Scotland). Of course, he scored a goal. Truth be told, it was a relatively unremarkable header, but still, money, right? Robbie Rogers had a goal and two

assists. The US won 4-0. Holden rested for the second match, when the US beat Honduras 2-0 with goals from Brian Ching and Santino Quaranta. Holden started the next match, in Foxboro Mass. (woohoo!), against Haiti. The US was actually trailing 1-2 (Holden with the assist on the US goal, yup!) into second half injury time until Holden (Money!) unleashed a screaming 25-yard shot into the top corner to knot the match at 2-2.

Holden got the start again in the quarterfinal, where the US knocked out Panama 2-1, with goals from Kyle Beckerman and Kenny Cooper. Holden started again in the semi-final, helping the US knock out Honduras 2--0. Stu assisted on both goals, setting up Clarence Goodson and Kenny Cooper. In the final, the US met Mexico at Giants Stadium (GNTSLFR). Bradley went with:

Arnaud - Ching  
Rogers - Beckerman - Holden - Pause  
Pearce - Goodson - Marshall - Heaps  
Troy Perkins

Unfortunately, Mexico, who had squeaked by Costa Rica in the other semifinal on PKs, got down to business and kicked our ass. Big time. They got their revenge for the loss in 2007 (the Feilhaber game) and for the Hex loss in Columbus earlier that year by running all over us, to the tune of 5-0. Mexico's starlet (and Player of the Tournament), Giovanni dos Santos (Barca, Tottenham, etc.) made it look easy for El Tri. He and fellow young star, Carlos Vela, could not be contained.

The loss was certainly a black eye for Bob Bradley and the MNT (crash to earth after the Spain-win glory), but Holden's play in the tournament as a whole (rightly named to the tournament best XI) demonstrated that he deserved to join the A-team.

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## **10. WELCOME TO THE A-TEAM, LATE 2009**

With the summer tournaments over, Bradley next assembled his team for the home-stretch of the 2009 Hex. He had 5 games left to play, starting with a re-match with Mexico, this time with his A-team, but at the Azteca.

For the Mexico game, and all of the remaining Hex matches, Holden was named to the team. In Mexico (a game famously attended and written about by Bill Simmons), the US took the lead on a goal from Charlie Davies, only to eventually wear down and lose 1-2. Holden came on as a sub, his first cap in a World Cup qualifier.

Holden was a sub again as the US bested El Salvador 2-1 in Salt Lake behind goals from Dempsey and Altidore. Holden again subbed in the next match, as the US managed a 1-0 win away to Trinidad & Tobago on a goal by Rico Clark.

The US then faced Honduras away at the San Pedro Sula with a chance to clinch their spot in South Africa if they could manage a win. With Clint Dempsey injured, Bradley decided to give Holden his first qualifier start:

Davies - Conor Casey(!)  
Donovan - Bradley - Clark - Holden  
Bornstein - Boca - Gooch - Spector  
Howard

This game, a real thriller, was The Conor Casey Game. Casey, who still plies his trade in MLS, was a stocky and powerful target man who had gotten a few caps in 2006 cycle under Arena. Always an above-average MLS forward, Casey had never scored for the MNT and had never looked like he belonged on the international level. For some reason, Bradley had included him on the magical trip to South Africa for the Confederations Cup, where he was a late game sub who banged bodies (kinda like Klinsi now with Gordon), but Casey didn't do much and seemed to be past his prime. Nonetheless, Bradley liked him. Out of the blue, Casey got the start in Honduras over Altidore/Ching/Cooper. And he was awesome. That was also his one and only important contribution for the MNT, ever. His stellar performance that day still serves as a frequent reference point for the idea that a player who might not be good enough for the World Cup can still step up and help in the Hex.

Oh, what the heck -- the game: San Pedro Sula was its usual deafening and intimidating self. Honduras took a 1-0 lead off a sweet free kick. Casey equalized for the US, using his bulk to win an aerial challenge against the Honduran GK and knock in a backwards header, making Bob look like a genius. The Hondurans brought on Inter Milan star David Suazo to push for the win, but it was Casey's day. Donovan played him through and he looked cool as Platini deke-ing the keeper and tapping home to make it 2-1 for the US. The US had a dominant stretch and came close a few more time, including once through Holden. The US eventually made it 3-1 on a Donovan free kick. Then the pendulum swung and Honduras poured forward. Suazo to Carlos Pavon - goal. No! Called back, offside. Suazo creating again, to Julio de Leon - goal, his second of the match, 3-2. Next, a Honduras free kick pinged around the box and hit Holden's arm -- PK, 87th minute. Pavon, for the equalizer -- no! -- over the bar! USA wins. USA wins. USA is in the World Cup. Bob Bradley is a genius. The Conor Casey Game.

In the final match of the Hex, the US hosted Costa Rica at RFK. The team was already into the World Cup, but was under the dark cloud of Charlie Davies's near-fatal car accident. Holden was given another start on the right side of midfield. The ended 2-2. The US had actually been trailing until a late goal from teacher's pet Jonathan Bornstein stole points from the Ticos,

with the ultimate result being that Costa Rica lost the final qualifying spot to Honduras.  
Johnny Bornstein: legend in Honduras.

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## **11. PREM AGAIN**

2009 ended, and the year marked several break-throughs for Holden. He had been the main offensive engine for his club after the departure of DeRosario; he had excelled in running the USA B-team at the Gold Cup; and he broken through into the USA A-team in the second half of the Hex and helped the team to a first-place Hex finish. On the national team front his was now poised to be a part of the 2010 World Cup squad and was viewed by some excel-sheet-depth-charters as a likely starter. On the club front, Holden's MLS contract was over. He had turned down offers from the Dynamo to extend his original 4-year MLS contract, passing on the opportunity to raise his \$35,000 salary, so that he wouldn't be tied down beyond 2009 (Per Grant Wahl's recent article, Stu earning some extra scratch during these lean years through his success at online poker). This made him a good candidate to jump back to Europe, as he could join a new team without a transfer fee.

At the end of the 2009 season, Holden travelled to England to try out for teams looking to add a player in the January window. Owen Coyle (sort of a Scottish Pete Carroll) liked him and wanted to sign him for Burnely. However, Coyle then decided to ditch Burnley midseason to accept the open manager's spot at Bolton. No problem, as he just signed Stu for Bolton instead, for a six-month contract through the end of the season.

Holden was back in Premiership!

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## **12. COYW**

Bolton is a boring city in the North of England, sort of between Manchester and Liverpool, a bit north of both, and adjacent to Wigan. Bolton Wanderers Football Club, aka the Wanderers, the Trotters, or the Whites (common refrain among supporters: Come on, you Whites! -- awwwkward) are a boring team. I think they hold the record for most seasons of to-flight football without ever winning the title. Allegedly they were good once, like in the 20s. I didn't know shit about them pre-Holden. Apparently they were good enough to play in the UEFA Cup in 05-06 and 07-08, but were sick of the manager by Jan 2010, leading to the arrival of Owen Coyle, and, in turn, to Stuart Holden.

One of Coyle's strategies was to make Bolton an attractive place for top teams to loan out excess talent. His biggest signing in that first January window was getting Jack Wilshire on loan from Arsenal. Holden was not a big name and was not necessarily expected to contribute

right away. In February, Bolton learned that star center back Gary Cahill would be out for the rest of the season. The threat of relegation loomed large. The club was in some turmoil and needed to focus on staying up. Coyle would have to channel his power-of-positivity approach to try to boost the club up to safety.

Coyle gave Holden his first run-out for Bolton with a start against Spurs in an FA Cup match in February 2010. Bolton were crushed 0-4 by Spurs, but Holden went the full 90 and stood out. Coyle gave Holden his first Premier League action 3 days later against Wolves, as Stu went the full 90 in midfield alongside Jack Wilshire, Chonng-Young Lee, and Fabrice Muamba. Bolton beat Wolves 1-0 (despite the best efforts of Wolverhampton's American GK, Marcus Hahnemann), which was only Coyle's 2nd league win 9 tries since assuming the helm. The win edged Bolton out of the relegation zone. The home fans loved Holden's play and he was recognized as Man of the Match.

Just like that, Holden was in the starting lineup and looked like he belonged. His arrival was part of the club-wide hope for improvement and he was looking like a key piece of Coyle's plan to transform the squad from defend-and-long-ball (Stoke City type rep) to a more flowing and attractive attacking side.

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### **13. DE JONG FUCKING PLACE, DE JONG FUCKING TIME**

So, naturally, when Bob Bradley assembled a US squad for a March 2010 friendly in the Netherlands as part of his World Cup run-up, Holden was in the team. Bradley wanted to use to match to check in with his European-based players. He also invited Jermaine Jones (whose one-time eligibility switch form Germany to the US had not yet been approved by FIFA) to come hang out with the guys.

With Dempsey again unavailable due to injury, Bradley started Holden in that match:

Altidore - R. Findley (WTF)  
Donovan - Bradley - J. Torres - Holden  
Bornstein - Boca - Demerit - Spector  
Howard

That's when Nigel Fucking De Jong fucking broke Stu's fucking leg. Nigel, the dirty hack, showed no remorse afterwards.

Fuck.

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### **14. VUVUZELA**

Despite the break, Holden was able to rehab quickly enough to remain in consideration for that summer's World Cup. He returned to action for Bolton in their final league match May 9, 2010, coming on as a sub. The team finished in 14th place, clear of relegation, and optimistic of the transformation project underway with Coyle. Although Holden's contract was up, Coyle seemed inclined to keep him around. To Coyle's credit, he club ended up offering Holden a new three-year contract, based on the positive play he showed pre-injury, as well as his dedicated rehab. This time, unlike his Sunderland experience, Holden's injury and lack of playing time had not prevented him from showing that he deserved to stay around.

On May 11, 2010, Holden was included in the 30-man provisional roster from which Bradley would ultimately chose his 23 for the World Cup. Holden flew over to the States for the MNT's pre-World Cup friendly match against the Czech Republic, and was given another start. Bradley wanted to see if he was fully fit. Bradley rested some of his core players, and the team looked flat, losing 2-4. The next day, Bradley announced his 23-man roster, and Holden was included. However, he had not yet fully recovered from the injury and ended up seeing only 6 minutes of action at World Cup, despite his first-team place in the color-coded depth charts of some (ahem) MNT fans.

The US did OK in the 2010 World Cup, but I think they really missed Holden.

Personally, I think he should have continued in a central midfield role if healthy, but Bradley had apparently been gravitating towards using him out wide right. Bob liked to play two defensive mids centrally, and two more creative guys on the wings. If Holden had been able to continue in this role Bob basically could have played one of Donovan or Dempsey wide left, with the other paired up with Jozy up top.

As it happened, without Stu, Bob put both Donovan and Dempsey in midfield, leaving Jozy to be paired with the way-over-his-head Robby Findley (seriously, WTF). Actually, in the all-important final group match against Algeria, Findley was out due to yellow card accumulation, and Bob threw in Herc Gomez, who looked WAY better. But in the next game, it was back to Findley. As many a MNT fan noted, if only Davies hadn't been in that car wreck, we would never have had to see Findley in South Africa.

The US had other problems, too. Bradley never identified a competent left back at any point in the 2010 cycle, despite giving long looks to both Bornstein and Heath Pearce. Gooch was battling injuries, too. Eventually, Bob stumbled onto the fact that Jay Demerit was a rock-solid reliable center back. So, he could pair Boca and Demerit and be ok in the middle. However, in the World Cup, he hoped Gooch would be up to the task and he swith Boca out to left back. Gooch broke down, though, and Boca came back in the middle, meaning Ghana could feast on Bornstein on our left flank.

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## 15. APEX

After the 2010 World Cup, Bradley stayed on as coach. Holden could be fairly confident that he would remain in the picture in the 2014 cycle if he returned to his best club form with Bolton.

At Bolton, Holden won a place in the starting line-up heading into the 2010-2011 season. Coyle's frontline paired the wily English veteran (and team captain) Kevin Davies with high-priced Swede Johan Elmander. Davies is basically the absolute epitome of the rugged target man -- he led the league in both fouls suffered and fouls committed. Behind them, Coyle preferred a four-man midfield. On the wings were the Korean Chong-Yong Lee (named the team's Player of the Year the previous season, his first with the club) and newly signed Bulgarian veteran Martin Petrov (monster left foot; picked up on a free after being deemed surplus by Manchester City). In the middle would be Holden in a dynamic two-way role, paired up with 22-year-old English midfielder Fabrice Muamba. In the defense, rising star Gary Cahill and solid-if-unspectacular veteran Zat Knight patrolled the center while old man Paul Robinson was out left and heavily tattooed Icelander Gretar Steinsson worked the right. The oldest player on the team (b. 1975) was starting goalkeeper, the towering Finn, Jussi Jaaskelainen.

The opening weeks of the season were uneventful for Bolton, and the team was in 12th place at the international break in early October -- just a bit above their their finish at 14th the previous year, and pretty much meeting expectations.

After the break, the team put together a bit of a run, with 4 wins, 2 draws, and only 1 loss over their next seven matches. Stu was starting every game and also scored twice during this stretch. Holden was also huge with fans. A twitter account for @stuholdenshair was created. The wins were adding up. The club climbed all the way to 5th place in the table, although a regression to the mean was expected.

Holden missed two games with a minor injury, and the team didn't win either one. Holden scored again in his return against Blackburn, and the team won 2-1. Two games later they won again against West Brom on Boxing Day and spirits were high. Despite losing to Chelsea in the last game of December, Bolton went into the new year hanging tough way up the table in 6th place. Visions of a return to European play danced in our heads. Come On You Whites! Errr, um, go Wanderers!

Just before Christmas that season, the Guardian published its analysis of player ratings submitted by readers for every player in every match of the season to date. They found that the top rated player in the entire league was none other than Stuart Holden (my guy!). Obviously, this is a weird metric, and not proof of how good a player actually is. Still, it says something.

The Guardian commentary:

"Dynamism, indeed, has been one of the features of Bolton this season as, for all the praise Coyle has received for introducing a more cerebral playing style, Bolton also work exceptionally hard without the ball, having attempted more tackles than any other team in the league. No player embodies this alluring blending of industry and invention more than Holden, who, as a bonus, over the last month has also added goals to his game."

The top-rated XI in that piece:

A. Carroll (Newc) -- J. Elmander (Bolton)  
R. Van der Vaart (Tott) -- S. Holden -- L. Modric (Tott) -- S. Nasri (Ars)  
L. Baines (Evert) -- R. Ferdinand (ManU) -- N. Vidic (ManU) -- B. Sagna (Ars)  
R. Kingson (Blackpool)

So, it's not like the readers rated a bunch of no-names really highly. With the exception of Holden, Elmander, and Kingson, all the others are widely-recognized superstars playing for big clubs. There were more objective numbers to support Holden's high ratings, too. He was first or second in the entire league in tackles, and was also in the top 7-8 or passes completed.

I don't really think Holden was the best player in the Premiership. But the thing that I honestly don't think most MNT fans realize is that he was really fucking awesome. His play in late 2010 through early 2011 was his professional apex to date. And at that peak, he was recognized by non-insane English fans as one of the best midfielders in the entire league and one of players most responsible for elevating a mediocre club to much-higher-than-expected heights. I dwell on that Guardian piece so much because it really seemed to vindicate the upward trajectory that I had been charting, and marking, and coloring, and counting, and investing actual emotion in for a few years. It sounds somewhat dumb, but that was a key moment of one of My Guys really making it.

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## 16. BEST/WORST OF TIMES

Holden kept his place at the heart of Bolton's midfield in the second half of the season. Despite a small stumble in January, the team kept getting results, both in league play and in the FA Cup. Coyle had brought in striker Daniel Sturridge in January on loan from Chelsea, and he immediately started scoring goals. A six-game stretch across both competitions in February and March saw Bolton post 5 wins and 1 draw. By late March, the team was still hanging on to 7th place in the PL and had booked its place in the FA Cup semifinals.

Then came the 3/19/11 match away to Man U. Stu started, as usual, but things took a horrific turn when Man U defender Jonny Evans caught Stu's left leg in a tackle. Per reports, the gash was deep enough that bone was visible while Stu was laying on the pitch. According to doctors, the injury was freakish in that it involved not only an ACL tear but any actual fracture at the very end of the femur.

Anyway, surgery and a huge scar followed, and Holden, having recovered from the De Jong incident of 2010 and reached even greater heights, was now out of commission again, this time for for the remainder of the season and beyond. (Despite not playing again in the campaign, Stu was voted Player of the Season for Bolton.)

Meanwhile, Bolton fell to pieces. They got humiliated by Stoke in the FA Cup semifinal, losing 0-5. Their league run-in was shite, as they won 2 and lost 7 in the final 9 games and plummeted down the table to 14th place. Despite 2/3 of a great season, they wound up with no improvement over the previous year's finish. There was never a relegation threat, but the dreams of Europe were trashed and their was a dark cloud hanging over the team heading into the offseason. Several top players were expected to leave on fee or demand to be sold, and the Wanderers were in the dumps.

Things were also looking bleak for the MNT. Bradley was still running the show after the so-so performance in South Africa. However, in the string of friendlies arranged between the 2010 World Cup and the 2011 Gold Cup the following summer, the MNT won only once in eight tries. There were certainly some calls for a regime change.

The 2011 Gold Cup was an A-team version (like the 2007 Feilhaber edition), as the winner would get a 2013 Confed Cup spot. Bradley called in a team of, roughly:

Altidore - Agudelo  
Dempsey - Bradley - Jones - Donovan  
Eric Lichaj - Boca - Goodson - Cherundolo  
Howard

key subs: Wondo, Bedoya, Kljestan, Edu, Tim Ream

The US began group play with a 2-0 win over Canada, followed by a disappointing 1-2 loss to Panama. More howls of "Bradley out." The US squeaked by mighty Guadalupe 1-0 in the final group game (thanks, Jozy, phew). The team progressed to the final with wins over Jamaica (first US goal for Jermaine Jones) and Panama. Another showdown with El Tri. This time the US was looking for revenge for the 5-0 spanking in the 2007 Gold Cup final. Altidore was out with an injury, and good old Freddy Adu actually got the start. The US went up 2-0, on goals from Bradley (assist by Adu!) and Donovan (secondary assist by Adu!). Then the wheels came off. Mexico scored four unanswered for a 2-4 final.

The fourth goal was especially excruciating, as the US had almost leveled things at 3 through Dempsey (great save by Crossbar), only to see Gio Dos Santos pull off an extreme piece of wizardry dancing around the box, eluding multiple desperate dives and swipes from Howard, and chipping to the upper 90 far post in the tiny window of open space above Lichaj's head. Truly a great fucking goal.

That goal took on extra meaning, and came to symbolize the belief among MNT fans that Mexico was clearly superior (aka, the Gap theory). Basically, Gio killed Bob Bradley. Sunil Gulati gave him the axe and ushered in the Klinsi Era.

When Klinsi came into power in July 2011, Holden was still off the radar, rehabbing from the Evans tackle injury. Klinsi promised to close the gap with Mexico and develop a more attacking style. Those are things Holden could have helped with, but no one had any idea if or when he'd return to playing and what level of ability he would be able to perform at.

The total lack of expectations for Holden were, I think, also related to MNT fans disappointment over Charlie Davies. US fans were gutted at Davies's car wreck injury, as he had seemed to (finally) be our needed partner for Jozy. His recovery process got a lot of coverage, and Charlie himself openly talked of trying to return for the 2010 World Cup. He was nowhere close to ready at that time, though. Then Davies signed with DC United for the 2011 season and made more statements about how great he felt. Although he ended up with 11 goals, he never looked like a national team player. Davies left for Europe, but never found much success there either. He never earned another MNT call up. The power of collective positive thinking hadn't done shit, so I think most people never bothered to get their hopes up for Stu. (Most, but not all: Stu's name, though bracketed, remained relatively high in my depth chart.)

The point is, Bolton were in shambles, the MNT was in a dark place, and Holden was no longer expected to be involved with either group.

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## **17. WANDERING DOWN TO THE DROP ZONE**

The 2011-2012 season did not go well for Owen Coyle's Bolton. Daniel Sturridge's loan was over, striker Johan Elmander was sold to Galatasaray, and the team basically never found a way to replace those goals. Nigel Reo-Coker was signed (to a ridiculously high wage) to take over Holden's spot, but didn't prove nearly as effective. There was a brief flash of hope when the Whites smashed QPR 4-0 in the season opener, but they followed that up by losing 8 of their next 9 league matches.

The prospect of Holden's return was a rare spot of hope for Bolton. In September, Holden, tried a comeback, and played in three reserve games. Klinsi flew to England to see for himself.

Holden was given a first team start in a Carling Cup match 9/20/2011. He went 90 and was named Man of the Match in the 2-0 win over Aston Villa. However, the knee did not respond well. Stu went under the knife again, to have a screw removed, but the doctors found additional damage and proceeded with microfracture surgery. Holden was looking at a whole extra year of rehab and there were serious doubts as to whether he would ever return.

For Bolton, the losing continued. By the end of December, the team was sitting dead last with only 13 points from 19 matches. All hope was focused on trying to stay up, but things were looking grim, and the vultures were circling. Bolton's best player, goal-scoring center back and England international, Gary Cahill, was sold to Chelsea in January. His replacement? A relatively unknown American center back, Tim Ream, who failed to impress.

Up at the top of table, Man U and Citeh were locked in their epic struggle which resolved so dramatically in the final minutes of the season. But at the bottom end, Bolton were having no fun. Winning three league games in March helped Bolton come up for air, briefly touching 16th place. But they only won once more in the final 8 games, and were edged out by QPR for the final safe spot.

Holden had not returned to the field after his September surgery. Even worse, his former midfield running mate Fabrice Muamba essentially dropped dead on the pitch due to heart problems. Although he was later revived, he retired from soccer at age 24. Nine players were released at the end of the season, although Holden was confirmed to still be under contract, with hopes to return at some point in the 2012-2013 season.

Meanwhile, Year One of the Klinsi Era was friendlies-only, as there were no competitive matches until the pre-Hex qualifiers in June 2012. It was an uneven run for the MNT, with Klinsi generally getting the benefit of the doubt despite the fact that the team hardly ever scored and appeared to line up even more defensively than they had under Bradley, often using three defensive midfielders simultaneously. The main positives were the introductions of two versatile German-Americans, Danny Williams and Fabian Johnson.

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## **18. WE ARE (IN) THE CHAMPIONS(HIP)**

Holden was off the MNT radar. His only goal was to try to rehab and see if he could get back to playing with Bolton. He actually underwent another surgery in summer 2012, this time with some positive results, and continued to rehab.

Bolton came into the 2012-2013 season in the League Championship still under the black cloud of relegation. Roster turnover had seen the loss of some starters, such as goalkeeper Jaaskelainen and central midfielder Reo-Coker, as well as both starting fullbacks and their leading goalscorer.

The opened with a win, but then won only once in the next five. There was talk of another relegation down to League 1. Coyle was sacked.

Happily, new manager Dougie Freedman took the helm and managed to right the ship. In the first stretch of post-Coyle games, the team managed 3 wins, 1 loss, and 5 draws. Not lighting the world on fire, but at least holding steady in the mid-to-low portion of the table and not falling into the drop zone.

In December, Holden was cleared to return to training, but was still not ready for game action. It had been 21 months since the Evans injury. Stu was eventually cleared to play in games with the reserve team, and there was a minor groundswell of hopefulness among Bolton fans. In the new year, Holden made his return to first team play, coming on as a substitute in an FA Cup match away to Sunderland, which Bolton managed to win, 2-0. He came on as a sub again the team's next Cup match, where they were unfortunately knocked out by Everton, 1-2.

Freedman named Holden to the bench for a league match for the first time 2/19/13. Two games later, he made his first league appearance, as a sub in the 1-0 win over Peterborough. Holden continued to get named to the bench, but Freedman was having a hard time getting him any minutes. The team was on a minor winning streak, climbing as high as 8th in the table, any Freedman wanted to stick with the players that were (finally) winning.

So, a decision was made to send Stu on a one-month loan within the division to 21-st place Sheffield Wednesday (the Championship has 24 teams) to assist in their (ultimately successful) battle to stay up. Holden made his Wednesday debut 3/30/13, starting and playing 60 minutes. After one game off, Holden again started and went 60 minutes against Blackburn (and their wonderfully named goalkeeper, Grzegorz Sandomierski). Another game off, then 70 minutes against Leeds followed by another 60 against Blackpool. Stu's loan ended, and he returned to Bolton, where Freedman gave him a sub appearance in the Bolton penultimate match.

Freedman had been guiding Bolton up the table, and they stood just on the cusp of the playoffs, locked in a battle with Leicester and Nottingham Forest for that 6th spot. On the season's final day, Bolton secured a draw, to come level with Leicester in 6th place with 68 points, but Leicester advanced due to superior goal differential.

Bolton had finished well under Freedman. Although they missed a playoff spot, their second-half-of-the-season form was among the best in the league. Holden was still on the periphery, but his rehab had progressed just far enough to earn him a renewal when he contract expired in the summer of 2013.

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## 19. KLINSIBALL

Year two of Klinsiball began with a shocking 1-0 triumph over Mexico in the Azteca (TT, "Michael Freaking Orazco Fiscal?!"), albeit in a meaningless cash-grab friendly match. From there, Klinsi wrapped up the pre-Hex qualifiers. Despite a loss at Jamaica, and some rather unconvincing wins (home v. Jamaica, at Antigua & Barbuda) the US moved on to the Hex, and Klinsi cap-tied Danny Williams and Joe Corona in the process. Donovan (pre-leave) had mysteriously not been involved, and Jozy couldn't score, but the team was getting enough from Bradley and Dempsey to get the job done.

However, the Camp Cupcake team looked toothless in a 0-0 draw with Canada, and the full A-team opened the Hex with a poor performance and 1-2 loss (WTF, Omar!) away to Honduras at the San Pedro Sula. One road loss is hardly a deal breaker, but, as you know, the mood was glum. There was that famous Sporting News article, too, and the whole Klinsi project seemed to be failing.

Happily, everything swung around again over a 5-day stretch in March 2013 when the US rode a goal from Dempsey (money!) to a 1-0 win in the Snow Game, witnessed in person by Your Citoness, and then "beat" Mexico 0-0 in the Azteca (Besler, baby!).

The ensuing MNT glow was further brightened by Klinsi's announcement that Holden would join the US for both the three-game Hex set in June and the Gold Cup in July. Klinsi had followed Stu's progress and was trying to offer him an opportunity to gain further match sharpness was also re-establishing a place with the MNT.

Back on the depth chart, woo hoo!

Holden was with the A-team in mid May and got his first appearance in the Klinsi Era as a substitute in the friendly loss to Belgium. He then got his first competitive US game since the 6 minutes at the 2010 World Cup coming on as a sub again in the glorious 2-0 triumph over Panama in Seattle.

Stu's return to the fold was in tune with the overall good vibes around the MNT, as they closed out the June Hex set in first place. However, his minutes had still been very limited.

It wasn't until the Gold Cup that Holden would get a chance to truly impress. Stu came on for the second half in the pre-tournament romp over Guatemala and looked sensational, notching an assist and bossing the game. Holden picked up a goal (first for MNT since Gold Cup 2009 v. Haiti) as a sub against Belize in the tourney opener (Mix Diskerud: cap-tied!). From there more firsts: his first MNT start since October 2010 came in the next match against Cuba, and his first 90-minute game of any kind since that Aston Villa Carling Cup match in September of 2011 came next against Costa Rica. Klinsi rotated the lineup for the quarterfinal game against El Salvador, and Stu was on the bench. But he was right back in the center of midfield for the

semifinal, as the US beat Honduras 3-1. Although not facing Mexico, Klinsi chose his strongest lineup from the Gold Cup roster for the final against Panama, which ended up looking like:

E. Johnson  
Corona - Donovan - Bedoya  
Beckerman - Holden  
DMB - Besler - Goodson - Parkhurst  
Rimando

The general pundit consensus at that point was that Holden, while not as stellar as Donovan, had looked good in the Gold Cup and was most likely back in the 23-man A-team for Brazil 2014. Bolton fan blogs were giddy at Holden's continued resurgence and had penciled into the Wanderer's likely starting XI. US soccer writers all had articles about how Holden's dedication and determination had paid off. Stu was a widely-circulated feel good story.

And then the whole fucking thing went off the rails. Again.

20 minutes into the final, Holden goes down clutching his right leg (i.e., the De Jong leg, not the Jonny Evans leg). Stu is subbed out, and Fox shows him on the bench, face in hands, apparently crying.

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## **20. AGAIN**

Now we have news that there's an ACL tear in the right knee, and Holden is expected to be out for roughly 9 months. Stu will not get the chance to re-integrate with the MNT A-team as they finish up the last Hex games. Bolton will not be able to rely on him in the midfield. In fact, there is some talk that Bolton might try to cancel his contract due to debt problems at the club (not likely).

Let's consider a best-case scenario: If rehab goes well, there's a decent chance Stu could return to action in time to join the tail end of Bolton's 2013-2014 season (i.e. their glorious run through the promotion playoffs and back to the Prem). If Holden excels in the Spring for Bolton, he could catch Klinsi' eye and get a shot to prove himself in a friendly or two before the US must finalize the roster for Brazil. So, it's not a certainty that Holden's hopes for Brazil are dead.

However, the chances are slim. Not only because Holden would have a narrow window of time in which to prove himself, but also because the player pool is deep. Holden would likely be in competition with guys like Beckerman, Kljestan, Diskerud, Bedoya, Torres, Edu, D. Williams -- all of whom are likely to be on-the-bubble MFs who are not coming off huge injuries.

If Stu misses out on the 2014 World Cup, his MNT future is in question. He'd be 33 by the 2018 World Cup. Even if he recovers, returns to form for Bolton, and remains injury free until 2018, he'd likely be past his prime. As a point of comparison to present days, consider these players' ages for Brazil 2014: Jones, Brad Davis and Alan Gordon are examples of guys who will be 33; Donovan, Gooch, Beckerman, Beasley and Goodson are guys who will be 32. So early 30s is not unheard of, but it's an age where fewer guys can still be meaningful contributors (don't freak out, but Michael Bradley will be 31 in 2018!).

So while Stu is not old (even in soccer terms) now, 2014 may still be his last realistic World Cup shot.

Personally, I'm trying to stay level.

Of course it's somewhat ridiculous to be so emotionally invested in this team, and in certain players, like Stu. But once that investment has been made, it seems best to try to get a maximum return, rather than simply cut bait. I will follow Bolton again, whether Stu plays or not. I will track news of Stu's recovery. I will struggle with where to put him in the MNT depth chart. With a short-term injury, my approach is to bracket the player's name but place him where he would be if he were 100% fit today. With long-term injuries the approach can vary from being bumped down a few spots somewhat arbitrarily based on the notion that other players are improving and leapfrogging the injured player to being placed in a grey box entirely off to the side.

Perhaps in a self-protective move, I've currently got Stu in a grey box on the side.

This way, when he re-joins Bolton's reserves for training 6 months from now I can slide him in somewhere in the middle of the depth chart. And later, when he makes the bench for the Bolton senior team, another bump up. And again it goes; with each indication of continued progress, he will displace a Dax McCarty or a Benny Feilhaber, always slightly ahead of the twitter consensus, because that's what I can do for my guys.