

By Bill Glavin

Warming Up for the Cup

With World Cup '94 fast approaching, soccer star Alexi Lalas is playing for more than just kicks.

To everyone but Alexi Lalas, the Rutgers soccer team had just blown the 1991 Met Life Classic after dominating the University of South Florida for 90 minutes. A strange bounce off the AstroTurf had led to a South Florida breakaway and the game's only goal with one minute left in the match. The disappointed crowd was filing out of Rutgers Athletic Complex. Coach Bob Reasso was fretting about facing the media after the game. Suddenly Lalas, a tall, lanky player with flowing red hair, raced forward from his sweeper position into the box, fought off two defenders, and scored to tie the game. "That goal still sends chills through me," says Reasso. "Alexi would simply not let us lose. It epitomizes his spirit and what he meant to our program."

Lalas, National Player of the Year in 1992, three-time All-American, and Scarlet Knight captain during a storybook career at Rutgers, has continued to add to his legend since the Olympic trials interrupted his academic career a few credits short of completion in 1992. After strutting his stuff for the U.S. Olympic Team in Barcelona last year, Lalas's star rose significantly again last spring when he played for the U.S. National Team in the U.S. Cup, a two-week, four-nation round-robin tournament that included some of the top teams and players in the world. In the National Team's biggest upset since the 1-0 win over England in the 1950 World Cup tournament, the U.S. defeated England 2-0 last June in the stadium that is home, appropriately enough, to the New England Patriots. Lalas, who came in as a substitute in the



Lalas's star continues to rise with the U.S. National Team, where he has played six positions.

second half, scored the game's second goal on a corner kick. It was the first time he had touched the ball in the match.

"I think we're proving that we can compete at a very high level," says the 23-year-old Lalas, a versatile player who has proven himself in six positions as a fullback and midfielder with the National Team so far.

While Lalas is happy to be competing for his country, his dream is to land a professional contract for a team in one of the world's premier soccer leagues. Lalas would like to follow in the footsteps of some of his national teammates who have signed lucrative contracts to play in Europe. He currently receives a salary for his commitment to training with the National Team in California, but it isn't anywhere near what he could earn for a club in Germany's Bundesliga, for instance, or England's first division.

American soccer players are hoping that next summer's World Cup—a month-long tournament held every four years that attracts dozens of national teams from all over the globe as well as a television audience of a billion people—will lead to a first-rank professional soccer league in this country. Although 16 million people in the U.S. now play soccer, the game has still not caught on here as a spectator sport.

Given the option, Lalas says, any player would prefer to compete in a league on home turf in front of family and friends—if the money is right. But for now, "I have to try to find employment elsewhere," he says. He spent a month at the end of 1992 trying out for Arsenal, a top English club, but it didn't lead to a contract. "I got my feet wet in terms of what English soccer is all about—the pace, the training, the lifestyle," he says. "If I have to,

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I'll knock on every single door in Europe until some club takes me."

That determination characterizes Lalas's play, says former Rutgers goalie Bill Andracki (Cook '91), now with the Tampa Bay Rowdies of the American Professional Soccer League. After Lalas ruptured his appendix, lost 25 pounds, and missed 11 games of Rutgers' 1990 season, Andracki recalls how his roommate rehabilitated himself in time to play in the national championship game. Although Rutgers lost that game to UCLA on penalty kicks after four overtime periods, Lalas came within

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inches of scoring on a header in the second half. "Alexi showed remarkable courage that day when he came on in regulation and hit the crossbar," says Andracki.

In analyzing his own game, the six-foot three-inch, 195-pound Lalas, a native of Birmingham, Michigan, says his strong points are his ability in the air, his tackling, and his strength. "Size can be intimidating if you use it correctly," he says. "But at the same time, size means that it takes a split second longer to trap and pass, and I'm working to improve my quickness."

By the end of Lalas's Rutgers career—which included a stint playing bass in The Gypsies, a popular New Brunswick band—his autograph was as coveted as that of any college athlete in the nation, and he was dubbed the Pied Piper of Soccer because of the entourage of youngsters who followed him. "From the day he stepped on the field for us," notes Reasso, "Alexi always had a blend of leadership and charisma." As World Cup '94 approaches, Lalas hopes those qualities will help his team to a few victories in one of the world's most celebrated sporting events. □

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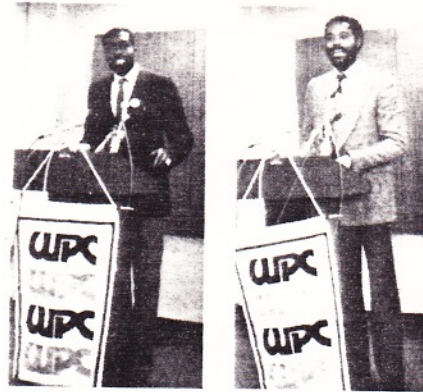
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MONROE

FRAZIER

BASKETBALL LEAGUE SET

WHILE hundreds of quality college basketball players are drafted by the National Basketball Association each year, less than 40 are able to land jobs. Some go overseas to play, others play for minuscule wages in the Continental Basketball Association and the majority retire.

Several former Knicks, including Earl Monroe, Walt Frazier, Cazzie Russell and Dick Barnett, along with former NBA official Richie Powers have helped launch a showcase for them: the United States Basketball League. The league will have two franchises in the state—the New Jersey Jammers and the Wildwood Aces. The Jammers will play in the 4,000-seat recreation center at William Paterson College in Wayne and the Aces in the Wildwood Convention Center.

"We intend on being a first-class organization because our images are on the line," said league commissioner Earl Monroe at a press conference announcing the formation of the Jammers. "We're not in competition with the NBA, although someday we hope to be affiliated with it."

The USBL, which in time could become the ultimate summer league, will have a \$250,000 salary cap per team and a 30-second clock. If the seven franchises that began play at the end of May are successful, 12 more franchises may be added in 1986. Kenneth J. Varga of Lakewood, president of the Professional Buyers Guild, Inc. is owner of the Jammers and Cazzie Russell is coach.

Tickets are priced at around \$5. When we went to press, the Jammers were negotiating with UA-Columbia in Oakland for possible TV coverage.

—BILL GLOVIN