





# THE QUALIFIER

At 31, the Dynamo's all-star midfielder is fighting for a place on America's World Cup team.

**Brad Davis** Houston Dynamo

**L**ast December, Brad Davis was on vacation in Illinois, driving to a gun range with his wife to shoot clay pigeons, when his phone buzzed with an email. He'd been asked to join the United States national soccer team's training camp, which was an invitation he had seen before but not one he thought he'd see again. His wife Heather broke into joyful tears. Davis couldn't believe it—having watched his 30th birthday come and go, he thought he'd missed his last chance to com-

pete for one of the 23 spots on the 2014 World Cup team, which will be chosen by head coach Jurgen Klinsmann next year.

"I thought I was done with the national team," the St. Louis native says, soaked in sweat from head to toe after a recent early-morning Dynamo practice. Sitting on a bench in the shade, Gatorade in hand, he talks about a goal he's had since childhood. "It's the utmost honor to be sitting here with the possibility of going to Brazil and representing your country in the World Cup. I mean, as a kid that's literally what you dream about and what you aspire to. It's why I put 12 years of work into this game."

Twelve years. In soccer terms, that's three World Cups, and Davis hasn't played in any of them, despite being a six-time MLS All-Star and the Dynamo MVP for the last four years. It's not as if he hasn't had his chances. He made his international debut in 2005, playing 76 minutes with the national team in the CONCACAF Gold Cup to help the U.S. beat Cuba; he even scored the game-winning penalty kick in the Gold Cup final against Panama. Davis made appearances with the team again in 2008 and 2010, but it wasn't until this year that he played in his first World Cup qualifier, a 0-0 draw against Mexico in March at Mexico City's legendary Estadio Azteca. (Playing in qualifying matches indicates that a player is in the running for a place on the World Cup roster, but does not guarantee a spot.)

So far this year he has played in six international matches, twice as many as any other year of his career. Not bad for a guy who's over the hill.

"Brad was always a skillful player," says assistant coach Wade Barrett, a former Dynamo captain who, like Davis, has been with the team since their move from San Jose to Houston in 2006. "He's always had good vision, he's always had a great soccer mind. Now he's stronger, he has better stamina, he has all those physical attributes that are just a little better than they were before. Add that on top of the fact that Brad's just played well. There's no easy formula for that."

Actually, says Davis, there is a formula. It's called getting married and having children. Before that, he says, he often rolled out of bed 30 minutes before training, grabbed something quick to eat, trained, then returned home and sat in front of the


TV. "I definitely would say that I had a lot of God-given talent, and I was getting by on what I was given," Davis says. "I really wasn't putting that extra, extra work in. I'm talking about off-the-field stuff—eating right, treating your body right, sleeping well, hitting the gym. ... It's a full-time job."

Having a family changed everything. (Davis has a 3-year-old son and a 2-year-old daughter.) Suddenly, soccer wasn't just a game; it was a job he needed to support a household. These days, he wakes up early, eats a proper breakfast, and hits the gym before many of his teammates have even arrived at the practice field. He also follows a self-described "crazy diet regimen," so crazy that when Heather isn't working as a part-time physical therapist, she's usually shopping and preparing meals for Davis. "My wife has caused a huge turnaround in my life, as far as [soccer] goes," Davis says. "For her, it's a full-time job trying to keep up and care for me."

The results speak for themselves. At an age when most soccer players are beginning their decline, Davis is fitter and faster than ever. "A lot of guys recognize that a change like that would help their career, but it's a totally different thing to commit to it," Wade Barrett says. "And it's not a commitment that Brad made over a month or two months—it's a complete lifestyle change. I don't think some people realize how difficult it is to do that. ... He committed to it, and he's reaped the benefit from it, as have we as a team."

As one of the team's original players, Davis has seen the Dynamo evolve from California transplants to hometown heroes, from playing in U of H's Robertson Stadium to a custom-built downtown arena. Although they won the MLS Cup twice, in their first two years in Houston, Davis says that it was the opening of the BBVA Compass Stadium last year that solidified the Dynamo's reputation in what has traditionally been considered a football town. "A stadium," he points out, "automatically gives you credibility. If you want to compete with the other sports, you have to have your own place to play." The numbers seem to bear that out—this year, the Dynamo sold roughly 12,000 season tickets.

Davis says that he regrets not taking soccer more seriously earlier in his career, but he's happy to be at the top now, however long it lasts. As one of only 26 Americans who has played in a World Cup qualifying match this year, Davis knows that this will likely be his last best chance to achieve the dream of every soccer player in the world.

When asked whether he's optimistic about going to the World Cup, Davis immediately nods yes. "You have to be," he says. "I thought my opportunity was gone, but I got an opportunity. So far it's been working out pretty good." 

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