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By Lee Godden

As one of only 10 people living in the U.S. who had the necessary qualifications for the job, America's own Brian Hall stepped onto the world stage in front of packed stadiums and nearly 1.5 billion TV viewers for the 2002 World Cup in South Korea and Japan.

U.S. FIFA referee Brian Hall and comedian Rodney Dangerfield could both use a little more respect. The American World Cup players returned home proud heroes, barely missing a semifinal spot in a close 1-0 loss to Germany. It was America's best showing ever. But not just for the players.

Brian Hall returned home to Gilroy, Calif., a proud but still relatively unknown man, despite being the only U.S.-born soccer referee ever to officiate in a World Cup, and despite earning the right to work high-level, elimination-phase World Cup games. No other U.S. ref has ever worked such late-tournament games, whether the refs were born in America or not. (Esse Baharmast represented the U.S. as an official in the 1998 World Cup, Arturo Angeles did so in 1994, Vincent Mauro in 1990, and David Socha worked both the 1982 and 1986 games. All of those men were born outside of the U.S.).

There are almost 100,000 USSF referees of all levels in the U.S. There are only 10 American FIFA referees. To be selected as the only ref to represent the U.S., Brian Hall had to prove not just world-class game management skills, but strength and conditioning that would enable him to keep up with some of the world's fastest sprinters. Hall's great adventure in Asia lasted only a month, but it took 20 years of preparation.

A self-described pudgy kid of 12, playing goalkeeper in the then-ubiquitous black goalie jersey, Hall became a referee by accident. After playing a game, he was approached by a referee who needed a helper on another field. "Come on," the referee said. "You're already wearing a black shirt. You'll do fine."

Hall started at the very bottom of the referee ladder before ascending to the very top. By age 14 he was wearing an AYSO referee badge, at 18 came the USSF patch, and by 19 he was running lines for NASL (North American Soccer League) games. Hall made National Referee at age 26, and he earned his FIFA standing in 1992 at the age of 31.

Hall is single and he has no children, but coaching youth soccer has been a big part of Hall's life for almost 20 years. He has three California State Cup Championships under his belt. This year his boys' U-17 team reached the semis, and his boys' U-19 team took second place.

He's worked Major League Soccer games (including an MLS final game) since the league began, and he's traveled to 27 countries as an international referee. But all of that experience was a mere warm-up for the conditioning work he did prior to the World Cup. "It's not just a question of can you keep up with fast play," says Hall, who turned 41 during the World Cup. "It's can you quickly recover from one sprint and get ready for the next."

"I was told in January that I was selected for the World Cup," he continues. "I knew I had a good shot at it, but I couldn't celebrate until the announcement was made." In March, FIFA flew every World Cup referee to Korea for a week of intense conditioning and training. "That was the most difficult training I've ever experienced," he says. Hall and the other refs did countless 12-minute runs, plus 100-meter and 50-meter sprints. Throughout it all the refs wore heart-rate monitors. In the classroom FIFA instructed the



referees to be especially on top of gamesmanship and embellishment. Diving would not be tolerated.

In May, Hall returned to Asia to begin the Cup. "I was in the best shape of my life. I was focused on nothing else but doing well in my initial games and being selected for additional games."

The focus paid off. Hall was one of three officials (Hall, Markus Merk from Germany and Carlos Simon from Brazil) who were — for the first time in World Cup history — retained by FIFA to work quarterfinal games onward, despite being from countries that had advanced to the quarterfinals. (No referee is ever assigned to work a match in which his home country is playing; therefore more referees than are actually needed are advanced to subsequent rounds.)

FIFA's message: The best, most-qualified referees will work the final games of the World Cup. Of the initial 72 total World Cup officials, including 36 center referees and 36 assistant referees, Hall was one of only 16 centers to reach the elimination round.

How did Hall handle the pressure of being on the world stage? "I smiled a lot," he says. "The U.S., from the world's perspective, has no tradition in soccer. Our reputation as Americans is often that of the marshal or the bully. If I screwed up, it wouldn't be just me failing out there on the field, it would be a validation that the U.S. has no place in World Cup-level soccer."

Hall was keenly aware of the challenge he faced. Refereeing a game in which 25 cameras are capturing every angle, including the ones the referee is screened from, has its risks. Fifty thousand fans will voice their opinions of the call when the replay is shown in slow motion on the stadium big screens. "The U.S. players had their job cut out for them, and so did I."

Hall says that he made a point of sitting with different groups of referees at their hotel every



breakfast, lunch and dinner. "The Europeans, the Africans, the South Americans, they all tended to group together. I belonged to no group, so I mingled." Hall, who speaks fluent Spanish, found that his fellow top-level refs slowly began to accept the lone American. "When the names of the 16 elimination game referees were announced I was surrounded with hugs and handshakes. I'd proven myself in their eyes, and in mine."

Hall had to earn that respect anew in each of the games he worked. "During the first 30 minutes of the

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games the players would test me by arguing every call. They'd get in my face, watching how I would respond to them. I held

my ground, told them what I expected of them, and sure enough the comments and dissent quieted down."

"I knew that controversy of any kind would hurt my chances of being assigned more games," continues Hall, "so I managed the players as tightly as possible. I took note of advantage fouls and legal hard challenges. I made it a point to have a quick word with the player involved as soon as possible."

World Cup 2002 officials were sometimes criticized for calls and non-calls in the penalty area. Says Hall, "I promised myself before each game that if a penalty kick was awarded, it would be earned and not subject to

debate. I stayed very close to the play, especially near the penalty area."

Hall showed four yellow cards and no reds during his first match, Italy versus Ecuador. "If they got the card, I got something in return, mostly game control," said Hall. By all accounts the game was hard-fought and aggressive. "I could have shown more yellows but I preferred to use my voice, looks and gestures with the players." That strategy worked well, as evidenced by the high marks given Hall by the inspectors.

Several days after Italy-Ecuador, Hall worked fourth official, meaning center referee replacement and substitute/sideline coordinator, for the June 7 England-Argentina game.

Then came Hall's second center ref assignment, England-Nigeria, on June 12. It was Hall's poise and professionalism during that game that led to his assignment in the semifinal Brazil-Turkey game, in which Hall was again the fourth official.

Hall says that semifinal selection was a result of demonstrating two distinct styles in the two matches he worked the center. "You can't have just one refereeing game style and work top level games. Each match, each team has a different feel, different emotions on the field. Tapping into and managing those differences is the trick."

The World Cup can make or break players and referees. Teams in foreign countries often snap up the best players. Unlike some other World Cup referees who return home to their full-time officiating jobs, Hall returned home after Japan to the life he left. Hall is currently out of work, recently affected by corporate mergers in the Silicon Valley. He is a former vice president of purchasing and operations of a large company. He lives in a house by a golf course. He coaches soccer, referees MLS and college games, and looks for full-time employment — an undertaking not likely to last too long: If you can manage 22 multi-millionaire international superstar players, you can manage a boardroom, no sweat.

Even if he's not always recognized here at home, Hall made a name for himself internationally. But still, fame is sometimes elusive. "In Italy they have Pierluigi Collina," says Hall (Collina was the center referee for the World Cup final game, Brazil vs. Germany). "I got to know Pierluigi pretty well during the games. I was his fourth official in the England-Argentina match. This guy (Collina) has a fan club and his own website in Italy. He's a star over there. On the flight from Tokyo to Sapporo I sat next to Pierluigi. Another passenger came into the first class section and stood beside our seat, holding a camera. Let's just say that he wasn't interested in taking my picture."

Our World Cup team made Americans proud in 2002. So did Brian Hall.

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