



11/11/11 is an easy date for everyone to remember. For Rush and its Chairman Jérôme de Bontin, it turned out to be a memorable day for many good reasons.

The scene is Paris, France. The occasion is France-USA, a friendly game between two nations which had only met twice before, 32 years ago, twice in the same year of 1979, in East Rutherford, NY and Paris France (6-0 and 3-0 respectively for France). Your Chairman was fortunate to be the guest of US Soccer President Sunil Gulati and was blessed to reunite before the game with his friend, US National Team Coach and former Monaco player, Jurgen Klinsmann. As if going to the game and joining all those prestigious personalities weren't enough already, fellow Rush Board Member Gérard Houllier surprised me a few hours before game time by offering to drive me to the stadium. He later invited me to dinner with a surprise guest. (Jérôme and Gérard celebrate a title at right)

The game was "friendly" with France winning 1-0. Jurgen Klinsmann was aware of the challenge when discussing the French team on the sideline before the game. Missing Landon Donovan was clearly a handicap for his team but he also knew that he had to look beyond the evening's result and that playing France was already a success in itself. Considering that the US had lost the previous two encounters 6-0, then 3-0, losing 1-0 can then be regarded as a relative success. It was not an exciting game but Sunil Gulati was a gracious host and introduced me to the US Ambassador in France, Charles Rivkin, originally from Chicago, and his wife - both diehard soccer aficionados. Approximately 65,000 soccer fans filled in the Stade de France and it took a little time to make it to the restaurant.



It was past 11 pm on that 11/11/11 when I realized that the "special" guest would be Gérard's close friend Arsène Wenger (working for French TV that evening), and that I would be spending a memorable two hours between two of the most prestigious coaches in the world.

Gérard and Arsène (pictured at right) are only a few years apart in age and their respective careers brought them together when Gérard coached Paris Saint-Germain to its first French Championship (85-86) and then the French National Team at a time when Arsène was competing against PSG, coaching Nancy and then Monaco (Champion in 87-88). Gérard is regarded by many as the architect of the French soccer revolution that eventually brought the World Cup (1998) and the European Championship (2000) to a country that had rarely won anything in the past. A close relationship between Gérard and other French coaches such as Arsène Wenger in Monaco (where David Trézeguet and Thierry Henry were playing) proved to be key to the success of the French national teams, Youth and Senior.

Eventually, Arsène left Monaco for Japan and then joined Arsenal in 1996. Unknown to many, Gérard recommended Arsène to the Board of Arsenal and in turn Arsène was one of few friends advising Gérard to accept the offer from Liverpool right after the 1998 World Cup victory. Gérard became the manager of Liverpool and for many years competed against his friend Arsene, winning 5 memorable cups (FA Cup, League Cup, UEFA Cup, Super Cup and Community Shield in the spring and summer of 2001) but never finishing ahead of Arsenal in the English Premier League. Their competitive spirits and unique personalities kept them together and I am glad to report that they are like two brothers sharing the same passion making sure that it does not come in the way of their friendship. They are indeed passionate about soccer but more importantly they are great human beings. I was very fortunate to be invited to be their guest that evening.

Had I known ahead of time, I would have probably prepared a notebook long list of soccer questions, comparing players like Bergkamp to Van Persie or Henry to Fabregas and many more,

asking about MU versus City, or Liverpool versus Tottenham and many others, or asking about 4-4-2 versus 4-3--3 and any other possible configurations, or asking about recruiting, club finances and player development.

But I did not. I did not ask any of those questions.

In fact I did not talk very much. I was too content listening to the two of them talk about their families, their friends and upcoming trips. I guess the most memorable aspect about this dinner was the camaraderie, the friendship, the togetherness that they both conveyed. Yes, I did ask a few soccer questions but in the end we did not talk much about the France-US game, Arsenal, Liverpool or Monaco, or about individual players or systems.

But, I did get to see the best side of those two great men. There was a "realness" about the two of them that has stayed with me ever since that evening of the 11s. I quickly forgot about my soccer questions and focused on the memories of the moment that I could eventually share with others and I hope that it transpired in those short paragraphs.

Rest assured that we did talk about Rush and its Colorado Headquarters. Arsène and Gérard were both impressed by the 35,000 children who play under the Rush banner and as some of you know, one of the major shareholders in the Arsenal Football Club is based in Colorado. In the end it was fun to have three soccer teams represented around that table, Arsenal, Liverpool and Rush. A pretty good mix I would say and with 11 players per team, a field of dreams for an 11/11/11.

Jérôme de Bontin