A time of transition

Eleven U-20 players last fall endured the difficulties and distractions of their first semester at college with varying degrees of success. Those from the phenomenal U-17 team expected to prosper in college, but they discovered the challenge wasn’t simple.

Kenny Cutler was in trouble. He knew it. His game had slipped, and his future with the U.S. under-20 team was in jeopardy.

It was just a few days after New Year’s, at the squad’s first training camp of 2001 in Chula Vista, Calif. Cutler’s confidence, undermined by a difficult freshman season at Clemson University, was affecting his performance.

Wolfgang Suhnholz, the coach charged with getting the U-20s into this summer’s World Youth Championship in Argentina, wasn’t impressed.

Cutler understood.

“I realized that I really was on the verge of not making this team,” says Cutler, a co-captain of the U-17 team that finished fourth at the ’99 World Championship in New Zealand. “I realized I had to step up, give 110 percent. I told myself it was now or never to make the 20s.”

Cutler, a defensive midfielder, had found the previous five months quite illuminating. When he departed for Clemson last summer, he expected to step into the college game and flourish. What he discovered surprised and humbled him.

“The college game is more physical than I expected it to be, and it’s also faster than I expected it to be,” he says. “I guess I underestimated the skill level of some of the players, and I paid for it at the beginning of the season.

“I figured: I was on the 17s — I thought I’d seen it all already. But the college level was a step up.”

Suhnholz isn’t surprised. He’s seen it before: Acclaimed youth player goes away to college — with all its freedoms and responsibilities — and the struggles that arise impact what’s happening on the field.

“There has to be an adjustment for any young player, any young kid, when all of a sudden you go off to college,” he says. “It’s a totally different rhythm.

“It has to be difficult for any player. Especially for those guys [from the U-17 team] because of all the things they had achieved before. Now they come into college, they’re seen already as young superstars, and they find out they’re not.”

INDEPENDENCE AND DISTRACTIONS. College is a time of growth and of maturation, and freshmen going away to college can be overwhelmed by their new-found independence. They’ve got to cook and clean for themselves, girls live next door, nobody’s making them go to bed — or to class.

“There’s a lot of distractions,” says D.J. Countess, the U-20s’ goalkeeper, who stepped from the U-17 team to UCLA’s starting lineup. "It’s hard to manage everything.”

Says Cutler: “I enjoyed the feeling of independence at Clemson, being my own boss. I think the hardest part was not having Mom there to cook you food, make you do your work or push you to make sure you’re doing well. I had to do it myself.”

Suhnholz sent 11 of his players off to college as freshmen last August. When they returned to him after their first semesters — and first seasons — they’d changed.

"For most kids, transition into the college life changes them somewhat,” he says. “When I got them back, they definitely were different. I’m not saying worse or better or whatever, just different.”
Six of the U-20 freshmen had been part of the U-17 residency program in Bradenton, Fla., and Suhnholz is considering five from that group — Cutler, Countess, and defenders Nelson Akwari, Oguchi Onyewu and Alex Yi — for the CONCACAF qualifying tournament March 14-18 in Trinidad.

(The sixth, Maryland forward Abe Thompson, is nearly ready to resume training after a foot injury suffered in January with the U-20s.)

Their stay in Bradenton provided a feel for life away from home, but the highly structured environment, Cutler notes, "didn't make us as independent as college [did], people looking over your shoulder all the time."

**NOT AS METHODICAL.** The soccer was more eye-opening, a game unlike what they'd encountered with the U-17s. It was speedier, more physical, more direct, and it took time for most to acclimate.

"The game is very fast, not quite as methodical as the national team game, where all the players are very skilled and it's all about positional sense," says UCLA coach Todd Saddana, who started as many as eight freshmen last fall, including Countess, Akwari and Yi. "The college game comes fast and furious, and mistakes are punished."

"It's rough and fast," says Yi, "not the prettiest soccer."

Most of the U-17 freshmen enjoyed solid seasons by college standards.

**Kenny Cutler (right) was a co-captain on the U-17 squad, but he was in danger of losing his spot in the U-20 pool after a difficult freshman year at Clemson.**

Below: Shot-stopping was D.J. Countess’ strength before he arrived at UCLA; he learned to deal with crosses during his first season.

Xi, who spent much of the season in midfield, was the Pacific-10 freshman of the year. Onyewu’s physical presence helped him become an All-ACC first-team defender at Clemson. Both were selected for Soccer America’s All-Freshmen Team.

Countess, who learned to deal with crosses, and Akwari, who struggled in midfield but thrived on the back line, also were on all-conference teams.

"Some did good, some struggled," Suhnholz says of his freshmen. "In general, most did not do extremely well, if I am very critical. Most of them had to work themselves back into the level they're at now." Onyewu and Yi, both 6-foot-2, and Akwari, at 5-11, 180 pounds, were equipped for the physical nature of the college game. Cutler, generously listed at 5-9, 140, wasn’t. He shared defensive midfield duties early in the season, then saw his playing time diminish and duties altered as the campaign wore on.

"I think the physical part may have got to Kenny," says Trevor Adair, Clemson’s coach. "You have a physical and mental drag, with playing three games in eight days, training every day, the pressures of school."

"Those things take a toll, especially if you're a smaller, weaker player. He wasn't able to keep up as he was earlier in the year. It affected his confidence a little bit."

**DRAMATIC TRANSFORMATION.** Suhnholz says Cutler made a dramatic transformation during that first camp in January, securing his spot within the pool.

"He still has to fight," Suhnholz says, to make the 18-man roster for qualifying or the finals.

"I think some of the physical qualities are starting to come out of him," Adair says. "You look at him, he looks a little more mature, like he's filling out physically. He seems fuller in the face, probably put on 8-10 pounds. I think it will help him." *(Scott French is a senior editor at Soccer America)*

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**U.S. Player Pool**

**Goalkeepers:** D.J. Countess (UCLA), Curtis Spiteri (Portland), Doug Warren (Clemson).

**Defenders:** Nelson Akwari (UCLA), Jose Buriaga (Kansas City Wizards), Ricky Lewis (Clemson), Oguchi Onyewu (Clemson), Seth Tremblly (Colorado Rapids), Alex Yi (UCLA).

**Midfielders:** Kenny Arena (Virginia), DaMarcus Beasley (Chicago Fire), Kyle Beckerman (Miami Fusion), Brian Carroll (Wake Forest), Kenny Cutler (Clemson), I- Brad Davis (Saint Louis), Kyle Martino (Virginia), I-Trevor Perea (Duke), Phillip Salyer (Maryland).

**Forwards:** Devin Barclay (Tampa Bay Mutiny), Edson Buddle (Columbus Crew), Conor Casey (Borussia Dortmund/Germany), Bobby Convey (D.C. United), Landon Donovan (Bayer Leverkusen/ Germany), Alecko Eskandarian (Virginia), Kelly Gray (Portland), I-Abbe Thompson (Maryland). I-injured.