

Making Soccer ‘Major League’ in the USA and Beyond: Major League Soccer’s First Decade

Matthew Strutner
Tennessee Smokies Baseball Club

Charles Parrish
The Center for the Study of Sport and Leisure in Society
Division of Sport, Recreation, and Tourism
George Mason University

***John Nauright**
Co-Director, The Center for the Study of Sport and Leisure in Society
Director, Academy of International Sport
Professor of Sport Management
George Mason University

* corresponding author

Contact: Professor John Nauright
The Center for the Study of Sport and Leisure in Society
School of Recreation, Health and Tourism
George Mason University MS 4E5
10900 University Blvd.
Manassas, VA 20110

Email: jnaurigh@gmu.edu
Phone: 703-993-2061
Fax: 703-993-2025

Making Soccer ‘Major League’ in the USA and Beyond: Major League Soccer’s First Decade

INTRODUCTION

By 2006, following its first decade, Major League Soccer (MLS) appeared to have proven American skeptics wrong about the potential for success and the likely fate of the league. Success, however, is very much a relative term. One must concede that MLS has helped bring professional soccer attention in the United States, played a role in the growth of the sport among America’s youth and experienced significant progress as a league since its inaugural season of 1996. However, the deficiencies of MLS were its struggle to compete nationally with the Big Four North American sports of baseball, American football, basketball and ice hockey, and its inability to convince the rest of the world that it offers a comparable, first-class brand of “football,” when measured against the “Big 5” European leagues. Despite its recent strategies, which include luring international premier players to the USA as well as the development of intimate soccer specific stadiums, MLS continues to be stigmatized as being inferior to the other major professional sport leagues in the United States as well as the high profile soccer leagues of Europe.

Many Europeans equate MLS to its U.S. predecessor, the North American Soccer League (NASL), and it is often referred to as a “retirement league”, known for attracting famous foreign players whose best playing days have passed by offering easy money. Early in the league’s existence, MLS experimented with this strategy and then opted to pursue mostly young prospects from the CONCACAF region after the ‘hyped’ veteran players failed to live up to the promotion of their arrival (“Major League Soccer,” 2004). While the adoption of the “Beckham Rule” in 2007 rekindled this strategy (Wahl, 2009), MLS still draws the vast majority its players from North, Central and South America. Unfortunately, negative connotations followed MLS to many parts of the globe, particularly in comparison to four of the most renowned professional soccer leagues in existence: the English Premier League, the German Bundesliga, Spain’s La Liga, and Italy’s Lega Nazionale Professionisti. Even the leading American players of the early and mid 2000s, including Freddie Adu, Tim Howard, and DeMarcus Beasley, left MLS to pursue what were perceived to be better financial and developmental opportunities in Europe, joining other American players already plying their trade across the Continent.

The flight of young talent from MLS mirrored the situation of the domestically successful Dutch and Belgian clubs who have failed to market themselves in the international market, missed out on star players, and therefore have been unable to raise their leagues to the level of international prestige that the top leagues enjoy. Ajax may be the most recognizable club in the Dutch league but due to a lack of star power on its roster, investors have not been interested in a venture that would create revenue and advance the team globally. As a result, Ajax remains competitively and financially inferior to the elite clubs of England, Germany, Spain, and Italy (“Football frenzy,” 2004). In its first decade of operation, MLS was faced with a similar scenario in which it needed to procure some of the world’s best players while they were still in their prime—not veterans nearing retirement—in order to capitalize on the publicity and the interested investors that were likely to follow. Further, the key for the league was to devise a strategy to do this while retaining the best domestic talent (Davis, 2007).

ESTABLISHING A PLAN FOR STABILITY AND GROWTH

Throughout this first decade, MLS faced a number of obstacles on American soil. These included acquiring the services of passionate and motivated investors, reaching out to a more ethnically diverse market, and emphasizing that soccer has the largest following of any sport in the world (“MLS commissioner Don Garber,” 2001). Taking into account the unique intricacies of MLS and its need to avoid the errors of the defunct North American Soccer League, the league adopted a more globalized approach to its professional soccer structure by establishing the Project-40 player development program. MLS hoped this program would develop a deeper pool of players with which it could draw talent from to help increase the level of play and improve the league’s image and appeal for investors both nationally and internationally (Markovits & Hellerman, 2001).

With respect to its marketing strategy, MLS focused on four primary interests: the construction of soccer-specific stadiums, catering to the Hispanic population, encouraging the youth of America to become spectators of the sport as well as participants, and the recruitment of new investors to the league. Secondary considerations related to increasing sponsorship, the establishment of team rivalries, league expansion, the inclusion of a healthy mix of domestic and foreign players, changing and or developing team identities to resonate with fans, participation in national and international tournaments, and the hosting of international exhibitions.

It is apparent MLS also explored adopting or modifying several of the techniques that bolstered the reputations of professional leagues overseas and highlighted the global charm of some of their clubs. Primarily, the placement strategies and marketing models used by the thriving English, German, Spanish, and Italian soccer leagues differed from those being used in the U.S and had a track record of success. Specifically, these leagues and their leading clubs efficiently and successfully tapped into foreign markets (including Asia and the sizable U.S. market), established strategic alliances with global media outlets (i.e. media mogul Rupert Murdoch) to generate revenue and enter the global arena, and sold clubs as popular international brands with appealing identities. Also, the creation and development of the Champions League tournament permitted further global promotion through which the top four professional soccer leagues and their member clubs were able to maintain or improve upon their status. After a decade in existence, MLS appeared to have appropriated some of these strategies. Clubs were competing in CONCACAF’s “Champions League”, working to develop recognizable brands and identities, securing media contracts with major television networks, and promoting its brand abroad (specifically through the inclusion of Chivas USA into the league in 2005 and awarding an expansion franchise to Toronto, Canada).

In order to understand why Major League Soccer employed certain marketing and branding techniques in its first ten years, one must first possess a basic knowledge of the history and structure of the league and the ways in which the American soccer system deviates from those known to Europe and the United Kingdom. The precursor to MLS was the North American Soccer League (NASL), a top professional league that folded in 1984. In addition to declining attendance figures and gate receipts, rapid franchise expansion, the absence of a salary cap, inconsistent media exposure, and the overwhelming presence of the New York Cosmos contributed to the demise of the league (Parrish, 2012). There was much to learn from the NASL in terms of what not to do, and MLS began by differentiating itself from the outset. One key difference between the NASL and MLS is the latter’s adoption of a single entity structure. In contrast to most other professional leagues, MLS contracts directly with the players in an attempt to maintain control over spending, the cost of labor, facilitate an equitable revenue sharing

relationship among clubs, and uniformly promote competitive balance (Dure, 2010; Wahl, 2009). Although this strategy has been controversial and resulted in a lawsuit by the player's union (Singh, 1999), it did achieve its objective. With respect to ownership, MLS owner-investors play more of a participatory role in operations than the typical professional sport franchise owner, and each benefits from the success of competitors. The league and its teams share revenues from the gate, and while the league covers the cost of player salaries, travel, and half the cost of running or renting each stadium, each club is responsible for the salaries of coaches and office staff, as well as costs associated with marketing and promotion (Cohn, 1999). While the NASL ultimately collapsed it brought the sport of soccer into American consciousness, as evidenced by the increased numbers of children and women who felt motivated to take up soccer in the 1970s and 1980s (Markovits & Hellerman, 2001). With this foundation laid, MLS administrators were keen to capitalize on the consumer interest that existed following the 1994 FIFA World Cup held in the United States.

INFRASTRUCTURAL DEVELOPMENTS

Between 1996 and 2006, two reform movements within the American soccer landscape occurred and these helped MLS improve its global image. One involved the emergence of three distinct professional leagues and one amateur league. This development created a type of farm league system, whereby an MLS team and their A-League affiliate team could vertically exchange players. By contrast, most European and Latin American professional leagues operate under a system of promotion and relegation, which influences the competitive fate of entire teams rather than mere individuals (Markovits & Hellerman, 2001). Specifically, the promotion and relegation format calls for the strongest teams from a lower league to switch places with the weakest teams from a superior league. The American system and the promotion and relegation system differ significantly. The American system is a much more stable environment for franchises situated in the top league (MLS) and this appealed to investors given the risk of performance based relegation was eliminated. Further, this framework established a preferential labor exchange system in which MLS teams were the procurers of talent rather than developers in comparison to the teams competing in the lower leagues. In summary, the emergence of additional leagues served to develop additional talent beyond the rosters of MLS teams, expense free, for MLS investors.

The second movement, called the Project-40 program, is a product of MLS's partnership with U.S. Soccer and Nike. According to MLS commissioner Don Garber, this joint venture "creates promise for future American players participating in international competitions" (MLS State of the Union Address, 2001). Specifically, Project-40 was a development program for college players ages 18-22 that intended to showcase and enhance their skills in an effort to develop these participants into world-class competitors. The program also covered their college tuition and paid them the minimum MLS salary at the time. Project-40 recruited new talent from grassroots soccer organizations for MLS in an effort to improve the league and to enhance the performance of the U.S. national team (Markovits & Hellerman, 2001).

In addition to these two infrastructural developments and the aforementioned business marketing initiatives, MLS embarked on a strategy to finance and construct soccer specific stadiums early in the league's existence. Many thought this to be an important step to promote the sport to an American and global audience skeptical and critical of a league playing games in stadiums holding 70,000 fans or more and on fields designed and marked for gridiron football (Dure, 2010). In 1999, Columbus Crew Stadium in Columbus, Ohio opened as the first major

stadium in the U.S. built specifically for soccer. Longtime soccer pioneer Lamar Hunt - owner of the Crew, the Kansas City Wizards, and the National Football League's Kansas City Chiefs - funded the \$28.5 million, 22,500-seat facility. The stadium automatically impacted the team and the league. Average attendance in the MLS increased between 1998 and 1999, a direct result of the Crew selling 9,000 season tickets and averaging over 22,000 spectators for their stadium's opening season. Revenue came from sources beyond paying customers as eight new sponsors joined the team as well that year (Cohn, 1999). Columbus was MLS's smallest soccer market, but the presence of the stadium made the Crew the league leader in attendance in 1999 (Dure, 2010). Crew Stadium featured a \$1 million scoreboard, a 'Wreck Room' area for children, an 8,000-square-foot video arcade, and a plaza for local bands. Columbus president James Rootes commented on the importance of making fans' experience at the stadium as interactive as possible, while the MLS marketing director pointed out that Crew Stadium created an "electric atmosphere," and that was something additional sponsors would quickly latch on to as a way to most effectively place their own products (Cohn, 1999). Prior to 1999, the Crew played their games in the colossal Ohio Stadium, home of The Ohio State University Buckeyes football team which at the time seated well over 90,000. In fact, nearly every MLS team started out renting its stadium from a NFL or NCAA football team but following the success of Crew Stadium the trend began to change (Hopkins, 2010). Prior to the opening of the Home Depot Center in 2003, the L.A. Galaxy played at the Rose Bowl stadium (capacity over 100,000), the San Jose Earthquakes shared Spartan Stadium (later Buck Shaw Stadium) with San Jose State University, and Dallas initially used the Cotton Bowl stadium. All of the remaining league teams made use of NFL stadiums for their home fields, with the exception of the Miami Fusion who played in a converted high school football stadium (Cohn, 1999).

There are several reasons why football stadiums are problematic for MLS teams. To begin, the stadiums are costly to rent and the burden to cover the lease falls on the League ("Major League Soccer," 2004). Secondly, football stadiums are much too large for a typical MLS crowd of around 15,000 fans. Playing among this number of fans inside a cavernous stadium diminishes the atmosphere at games. Other reasons football stadiums do not suffice include the fact that the fields are too narrow and short for soccer, and because administrators, players, and fans lack a feeling of independence and significance as a franchise when they share another team's facility and have no site to call their own. According to Galaxy vice president and general manager Doug Hamilton, there was an added dimension to constructing a soccer-specific stadium:

It communicates to the business community and to the nation at large that soccer is a viable sports and business venture. When you're renting, you pretty much can pack up and go anytime you want. When you invest in brick and mortar and you've laid the foundation, there's no place to run. That's a bold statement (D'Hippolito, 2002, p. 1).

In 2003, the Los Angeles Galaxy moved into the Home Depot Center in nearby Carson, California. This venue was the second soccer specific stadium to host an MLS franchise and was the result of a \$150 million dollar investment from ownership group AEG (Anschutz Entertainment Group). With seating for 27,000, the stadium is situated in the middle of an 85-acre complex that also includes facilities for track and tennis, seven soccer fields, and a three-mile jogging path. The Home Depot Center was dubbed "the spiritual home of soccer in the United States" by MLS Commissioner Don Garber. In 2005, the expansion CD Chivas USA

team called the complex home and it now serves as the training grounds for the U.S. National Team. The facility is often used for local youth clinics and academies in order to help peak their interest in the team. With the opening of this venue, the money the Galaxy previously spent training overseas could now be diverted to participation in international tours and tournaments as a result of sufficient local facilities. In fact, the team made its training facilities available to both foreign clubs and national teams who are willing to pay for use of the state-of-the-art amenities. In contrast to other MLS teams at the time, the L.A. Galaxy was able to offer visitors and fans an in-stadium team store, a 450-seat restaurant, and 43 luxury boxes and these additional revenue streams provided a boost to the team's bottom line.

A European-based design was used in the construction of these new soccer-specific stadiums. Stands were constructed in rectangular configurations, not oval, and field level seats put spectators closer to the action. In addition, administrators hoped that by having a smaller seating capacity, an increase in the demand for tickets would have a positive impact on their market value (D'Hippolito, 2002). Additional soccer specific stadiums were constructed after Crew Stadium and the Home Depot Center. At the close of the first decade, two additional soccer specific stadiums were in use; FC Dallas moved into "Pizza Hut Park" in 2005 and the Chicago Fire relocated to "Toyota Park" in 2006. Also, additional stadiums were being constructed and or were in the planning stages, including the expansion Toronto FC's BMO Field and Colorado's Dick's Sporting Goods Park (Dure, 2010).

However, not all clubs were eager to invest in new stadiums. For example, the owners of the New England Revolution and Kansas City Wizards were happy to maintain the use of their stadiums and this is not surprising given both teams were operated by investors who also owned the NFL teams in residence at their respective stadiums. This allowed both the Revolution and Wizards to avoid stadium rental fees and the financial burdens associated with constructing and operating an additional sports facility while also providing additional sport related revenue for the ownership groups. In this instance, however, fans of both teams were left to deal with the annoyance of visible football lines on the field as well as inferior sight lines and a lack of an intimate atmosphere that accompanied home matches in these venues.

TARGETING DIVERSITY

Midway through the first decade MLS defined the growing Hispanic community – which at the time comprised approximately 13 per cent of the U.S. population - as its most vital market segment. A number of MLS teams were located in cities with large Hispanic populations, including L.A., Chicago, and New York. Although several MLS teams have marketed to Latinos from the beginning, the idea did not become a league priority until 2001 (Stone, 2001). Up until this time, MLS concentrated its efforts on middle-class college students and potential wealthy investors. Its initial strategy sought to place the new professional soccer league in the middle of the entertainment industry and Americanize the sport rather than trying to gain fans based upon the on-field performance of the players. Players and teams were given flashy nicknames such as Roy 'Lights Out' Lassiter and 'The Wiz' (Kansas City), and instead of allowing games to finish in a tie, MLS instituted a shoot-out to satisfy American fans' appetite for a winner of each match (Dure, 2010).

According to a 2001 survey, however, 40 per cent of MLS fans came from Hispanic communities. The league finally realized that it was looking in the wrong direction and too far into the future, and determined that it must first start catering to its core base of Hispanic fans. MLS began pushing its product with the slogan, 'It's Your Game,' implying that the league was

giving the game back to Latin Americans in a form that they could respect. By 2006, Hispanic Heritage Nights were commonplace at stadiums throughout the league. The aforementioned amended 'tie breaker shoot-out' was also eliminated and the typical extra time format followed games that ended in a draw. Even after the changes, the targeted population continued to be a difficult segment to attract because these consumers found it hard to identify with the MLS clubs and the American football stadiums in which they played (Vickery, 2001).

The Hispanic Heritage Nights were a more successful promotion. Each MLS team sponsored and operated its own pre-game festival, filled with Latin entertainment, food, products, and most notably, the on-field recognition of 50 individuals from the Hispanic community who were named 'Hispanic Heroes.' Portions of the proceeds from these nights were set aside to support the Hispanic Scholarship Fund. In selecting the heroes, MLS teams successfully immersed themselves in a number of prominent Latino communities and this allowed the league and its teams to form meaningful contacts and relationships while also expressing a clear desire to promote diversity in the league. Recognizing the large melting pot that the U.S. increasingly represented, MLS branded itself as 'the League for the New America' in an effort to reach a fragmented domestic market ("About MLS," 2004). Further, the addition of CD Chivas USA in 2005 was a clear indication that MLS stood firm with its commitment to increase the presence of Hispanic fans by adding a team with an identity that resonated among the many Mexican-Americans living in the United States (Pierce, 2004).

With respect to the marketing efforts of individual teams, D.C. United discounted match tickets and sold them to Hispanic businesses that in turn dispersed them at face value to their many regular customers (Stone, 2001). The Dallas Burn (now FC Dallas) targeted Hispanics beginning in 1997, when it feared it would lose much of its fan base due to the departure of the team's biggest draw, Mexican star Hugo Sanchez. The team looked to focus its efforts on Hispanic immigrants, and hired a local Hispanic advertising agency to research the community and develop a promotional strategy for the club. '*Vive La Pasion*' (Live the Passion) became the club's slogan, and the Dallas players took calls from listeners from the local Spanish-language radio stations, visited local schools, and attended community events. The club also discounted weeknight game tickets, used Hispanic media sponsors, and advertised upcoming games in Spanish-language newspapers and on Spanish-speaking radio stations. Dallas' home games were broadcast on these local radio stations, while away games received coverage on Spanish television station Telemundo. Finally, the team formed a relationship with a Hispanic adult amateur soccer league whose members agreed to purchase group tickets in exchange for use of the Cotton Bowl for their league final, sold tickets through vendors in Hispanic neighborhoods, and hired more bilingual employees to staff the team's front office (Parker, 1999).

DEVELOPING FUTURE CONSUMERS

Along with the Hispanic community, MLS understood that America's youth played a significant role in the popularity and future growth of the market and the league based much of its business philosophy around this idea. In fact, appealing to this demographic constituted two of the league's five guiding principles for the future ("About MLS," 2004). An estimated 18 million children (high school age and under) participated in soccer in the United States at the turn of the century yet the translatable number of participants to MLS spectators was very low (Cohn, 1999). A poll conducted by ESPN, however, revealed that MLS tied MLB as the third most popular professional league among youth. Breaking into the Big Three with children was viewed as a significant step for the league. In his 2001 State of the League address, MLS

Commissioner Don Garber professed that the increase in season ticket sales was due to the pressure children placed on their parents to take them to games. By securing young talent, such as Bobby Convey and Freddy Adu, MLS made the sport more appealing to this demographic. Also, league administrators understood that the youth demographic was becoming increasingly technological and the Internet was identified as a necessary medium to communicate with the younger generation. MLSnet.com was completely revamped and improved, with a Spanish-language component and video clips section added. The move spawned an immediate 60 per cent increase in visitors to the site (“MLS commissioner Don Garber,” 2001).

The league and individual clubs incorporated children whenever and wherever possible during the first ten years. For example, the Rapids introduced a Kids Club through which members received regular e-mail updates, discounts, and gifts, as well as an essay contest for club members. In addition, they partnered with local YMCA’s to create a program called Junior Rapids. In New York, MetroStars team members offered private training sessions to youth teams based on age and skill level, complete with enough tickets for everyone to attend a MetroStars game. MLS teams also attempted to raise club awareness using vehicles that traveled around with inflatable games, appearing at community programs, corporate events, and pre-game festivities. L.A.’s portable experience brought the team’s brand and promoted the game to children using the Galaxy Shuttle (“Galaxy Shuttle,” 2004). Chicago used its F.I.R.E. Express for the same purpose (“F.I.R.E. Express,” 2004).

ATTRACTING INVESTORS & CORPORATE PARTNERS

Beyond stadium construction, target marketing towards Hispanics, and transforming the nation’s young soccer participants into consumers, the league understood that if it was going to grow its brand domestically and internationally attracting new investors was of the utmost importance. A cohort of confident investors would reflect league stability and also represented the possibility to introduce expansion clubs to new and previously untapped markets. However, over its first ten years MLS established a track record of losing money (including \$250 million over a 6 year span) and at one point in time experienced a three-year draught in terms of recruiting new investors (Dure, 2010). Contraction of the League following the 2001 season, left seven of the league’s 10 remaining teams in the hands of just two investors: Philip Anschutz with five and Lamar Hunt with two (Dure, 2010). This underscored the urgent need to reduce the financial strain and risk associated with investing in MLS in order to attract investors to the league. Besides having dismal attendance records, Tampa Bay was dropped from the League because it could not find an investor, laying a heavy burden on MLS. Meanwhile, Miami’s investor walked away because his sponsors had abandoned the team and the financial commitment was too much (Lisi, 2002). Anschutz, a powerful businessman who has holdings in oil, real estate, the nation’s largest movie theater chain, and a number of media properties in addition to several MLS franchises, at one point was the principal investor for six teams but eventually sold his rights to D.C. United, New York MetroStars, Colorado Rapids, and the Chicago Fire. While these decisions to scale back investment may appear to be a negative development some thought it beneficial for the league over the long term. “Not that they’re losing interest, but they think that the competition is good. – It makes sense. You don’t want ownership of every team” (McGhee & Barba, 2004).

Beyond the money supplied by investors, significant revenue was provided by sponsors and suppliers during the League’s infancy. MLS established long term relationships with more than twenty commercial organizations, including big name sponsors Honda, Budweiser, Yahoo!,

and Aquafina and this served to promote the sport to a large nationwide audience and allowed the league to capitalize on the established brand image these sponsors possessed. Corporate partnerships were also formed with Mardi Gras and Panasonic, both of which attract a specific group of target consumers the league sought to attract (“About MLS,” 2004).

DEVELOPING RIVALRIES & IDENTITIES

Also, MLS recognized it lacked rivalries. Although some tensions arose between San Jose and L.A. and their *California Clasico*, the league needed to develop its own version of the Red Sox-Yankees clash to give fans an exciting feud to anxiously anticipate. While one may argue significant rivalries existed prior to 2005, this year proved to be one in which several rivalries were constructed by the League. Chivas USA was introduced as an expansion team in Los Angeles and this created a natural geographically based rivalry with the L.A. Galaxy (Pierce, 2004). With the teams existing in the same market and sharing the same stadium (The Home Depot Center) the *SuperClasico* emerged as the foremost rivalry in MLS. Also, Real Salt Lake was added to the league in 2005 and this created a geographically based rivalry between Real and Colorado and the annual home and away match up was coined the *Rocky Mountain Cup*. While other rivalries have certainly emerged after the league’s first decade the vast majority of the rivalry cups were established during the first decade and these continue to be significant fixtures on the MLS calendar.

The Premier League, the Bundesliga, La Liga, and Lega Nazionale Professionisti all have 18-20 teams, whereas MLS maintained a much smaller league in its first decade (fluctuating between 10 and 12 teams). A commitment to league expansion clearly began in 2005, as two teams were added in this year, two more in 2006, and two more in 2007. In the mid 2000s, MLS had a goal to reach 16-18 teams by 2010 (“About MLS,” 2004). The two expansion clubs in 2005 were Real Salt Lake and CD Chivas USA. Obviously, Real Salt Lake used an overt European theme and hoped to project some of the same appeal and image that La Liga’s Real Madrid enjoys. Besides desiring a relationship with the Spanish club, by electing to use the Spanish word for ‘royal’ in their name, Real Salt Lake hoped to evoke an aura that is world-class, international in scope, and a unifier for the city (Halpin, 2004). CD Chivas USA also borrowed part of a foreign club’s name, but it has closer ties to its namesake than Real Salt Lake. The U.S. expansion club is actually owned by two Mexican businessmen, and its name is derived from its well-known parent club, Chivas de Guadalajara of the Mexican league. MLS’s objective with the new club was to make avid MLS supporters out of the heavily Hispanic population of L.A. based solely on brand recognition and distinctive Mexican identity (Pierce, 2004; Nierman, 2004).

During this era, MLS allowed a maximum of three senior international players on each roster, and an additional six players who had to be signed to a Project-40 or developmental contract. As a result, minimal opportunity existed for the inclusion of international stars on MLS rosters (“About MLS,” 2004). In Europe, the large and small clubs are often at odds as to whether teams can maintain their identities when rosters are full of internationals and the domestic players are sidelined. The large, rich clubs tend to sign many international stars in order to boost their image and brand (“European clubs split,” 2004). While the restrictions imposed by MLS helped to maintain the domestically oriented identities of its member teams these same restrictions worked to maintain their image and brand as competitively inferior in comparison to teams abroad and this was not lost on the perception of MLS based players.

American Tony Sanneh played three seasons with MLS's D.C. United before signing with Hertha Berlin of the Bundesliga. His new club regularly attracts up to 76,000 a match, and he admitted that the German fans know more about the sport and are more passionate than any MLS fans (Haydon, 1999). Clint Mathis, Bobby Convey, and DaMarcus Beasley were other high profile Americans who traded their MLS jerseys in for those of more prominent European clubs. After signing with Bayer Leverkusen as a young teenager and being sidelined by the coach, American star Landon Donovan opted to exercise his loan option and re-joined MLS club San Jose. Due to his performance at both the MLS level with the Earthquakes and at the international level as a member of the U.S. National Team, the German club subsequently renewed an interest in Donovan and asked him to return for the 2005 Bundesliga season (Wahl, 2009). Reflecting on these transactions, it appears as if Bayer Leverkusen used MLS to further develop Donovan until he was talented enough to contribute at the level of the German first division (Dure, 2010). This emerging concept of the MLS as a developmental league did not help achieve the League's goal of being recognized as one of the premier soccer leagues in the world.

As the first decade of MLS came to a close the League made a strategic maneuver by altering the names of its teams. This operated to change their identities and sent several franchises in new directions with respect to branding. Kansas City lengthened its nickname from Wiz to Wizards, the MetroStars eliminated their New York/New Jersey tag, San Jose switched from the Clash to the Earthquakes in an effort to reclaim the name of the old NASL team, and in 2005 the Dallas Burn changed to F.C. Dallas. These changes were a stark contrast to the flashy, marketing-oriented monikers and reflected a commitment to more traditional names that reflected the history of the sport in the United States and abroad.

THE U.S. AS A PART OF THE GLOBAL SOCCER MARKET

In trying to wield a more serious outlook on soccer in America MLS, through its subsidiary Soccer United Marketing (SUM) group, hosted a number of international exhibition matches. These included matches with major clubs, including Manchester United, Juventus, AC Milan, Barcelona, Liverpool, and Chelsea. While the financial returns from the exhibitions did not offset their cost ("U.S. soccer market," 2004), one could argue the League's investment did help to promote the visibility of MLS to a larger domestic audience as well as the global marketplace. At the same time, these exhibition matches benefited the visiting teams with respect to international exposure. At this point, many foreign soccer leagues had realized the potential for growth in the booming Asian market. Manchester United traveled through Asia in 1999, building club-themed Megastores and cafes along the way in some of the major cities (Connolly, 2003). In 2003, powerhouse AC Milan became the first Italian soccer club to create an entirely Japanese version of its official website. Increasingly, Asians became intrigued with European soccer and with Milan in particular ("AC Milan," 2003). When the German Bundesliga finally caught on to the English, Spanish, and Italian leagues' ongoing marketing plots inside Asia, it sent its famous goalkeeper, Oliver Kahn of Bayern Munich, to Japan to promote German soccer and the League. At the time, Kahn was still popular among the Japanese for his performance in World Cup 2002. However, a difficulty with this particular market arose as the Japanese tended to place a higher emphasis on the celebrity status of players rather than on the teams for which they are playing. The Bundesliga lacked globally recognizable names, but, nevertheless, it considered moving its afternoon game times up to noon in order to allow the Japanese audience to watch the Bundesliga's weekend matches *live*. Right before his transfer to Real Madrid, David Beckham toured the Far East on his own, doing early public relations

appearances. He later returned with his new teammates for a pre-season tour through Asia, and the club collected \$22 million as a direct result of the tour (“Bundesliga hopes to be big,” 2004).

The U.S. market was also viewed as a resource for some of the notable foreign soccer leagues. Manchester United led its own tour of the U.S. in 2003, making stops in Seattle, L.A., East Rutherford, and Philadelphia, and faced some of the toughest competition from other leagues including such teams as Celtic, Club America, Juventus, and Barcelona. The Manchester United versus Juventus game at Giants Stadium attracted a crowd of 77,000 – more than four times the attendance of any MetroStars game. Manchester United has since routinely sold out U.S. stadiums in just hours. North American sponsorship deals with Budweiser, Lycos, Nike, and Pepsi, as well as a partnering agreement with the New York Yankees all presented lucrative financial and marketing opportunities for the club. Under the Yankees agreement, Manchester United games were televised throughout the Northeast on a subscription network channel, increasingly penetrating the U.S. market further (Connolly, 2003). Other teams increasingly looked to the U.S. as well. With its large population and ethnically diverse demographic the American market represented a viable opportunity to attract additional followers for any team enjoying global appeal. With MLS struggling in its infancy other leagues, such as the Premier League, perceived an opportunity to ‘steal the limelight’ by capitalizing on their superior position in the global soccer market. Indeed, the global reach of Premier League teams in England led American professional sports team owners to take-on direct ownership of several large clubs such as Manchester United, Liverpool, and Aston Villa, and to invest heavily in others such as Arsenal (Nauright & Ramfjord, 2010).

A number of soccer clubs bask in the glory of having established themselves as global brand names that dominate the public eye and maintain fan bases that reach to all corners of the world. Manchester United, Barcelona, Real Madrid, AC Milan, and Bayern Munich are leading examples. For example, Manchester United executives strategically searched the world over for regions where native professional sports did not exist, then devoted the club’s efforts to each area by starting fan clubs, dispersing more of its merchandise, and expanding television coverage (Fisher, 2002). This is just one case of how teams have intentionally situated themselves in varying, widespread locations and built their fan bases to what were previously inconceivable levels. With such large followings, they are assured substantial profits for years to come—profits that can be utilized in star player acquisitions—leading to more dominating presence on the field in games within their leagues as well as in competitions with other top European clubs. Looking back at the first decade, it is clear MLS did not engage in this type of strategy as it was more focused on establishing itself within its own domestic market. A truly global marketing effort did not arrive until after the ratification of the “Designated Player” rule and the acquisition of David Beckham and other international superstars in 2007 (Wahl, 2009).

CONCLUSION

MLS is situated in a stubborn market, and although it faces a difficult road to international respect, the evolution of the league over its first ten years illuminates a glimmer of hope for American soccer fans longing for a viable and respectable domestic league. Although few would suggest MLS based teams were on the verge of accomplishing the feats of other major world soccer clubs at the completion of its first decade it did offer a glimmer of hope. The league’s commitment to financing and developing soccer-specific stadiums for all its teams, its pursuit of the large Hispanic population, catering to and facilitating an interest among the youth of America, and its work to attract new and insightful investor-owners are several indicators that

MLS leadership has a clear vision for the future. Further, the relationships it fostered with a plethora of corporate partners also suggest league officials understood that such partnerships not only led to revenue streams but also to an enhanced brand image. However, the decade did not demonstrate that the league had made significant progress in gaining the interest and cooperation of mass media outlets. As this was considered to be one of the factors that led to the demise of the NASL, inconsistent media exposure characterized MLS during its first decade and this represented a deficiency that restricted its growth (Dure, 2010). The issue remained a problem for several years however local and regional media outlets increasingly carried matches and the sale of broadcasting rights to the National Broadcasting Network (NBC) for the 2012 season offers a glimmer of hope for a sport that has traditionally found itself in desperate need of promotion through the traditional avenue of mainstream network television.

References:

- AC Milan launches Japanese website. (2003, November). Retrieved November 7, 2004, from http://www.findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_kmafp/is_200311/ai_kepm354911.
- Bayern Munich Leads Boom in European Football Traffic. (2003, August 1). Retrieved November 8, 2004, from http://noomeeja.blogspot.com/2003_08_01_noomeeja_archive.html.
- Chicago Fire's F.I.R.E. Express. (n.d.). Retrieved November 11, 2004, from <http://chicago.fire.mlsnet.com/MLS/chf/load.jsp?section=fans&content=express>.
- Cohn, B. (1999, June 28). Can Soccer Kick it Big? – Lamar Hunt, Owner of the Kansas City Chiefs Football Team, has Invested in Two Soccer Teams in Hopes that Major League Soccer will Succeed. *Insight on the News*. Retrieved November 7, 2004, from <http://www.insightmag.com>.
- Colorado Rapids Kids Club. (n.d.). Retrieved November 7, 2004, from <http://www.coloradorapids.com/FanCenter/Kids.asp>.
- Colorado Rapids Kids Club Essay Contest. (n.d.). Retrieved November 7, 2004, from <http://www.coloradorapids.com/FanCenter/Kids.asp>.
- Colorado Rapids Field Trip Program. (n.d.). Retrieved November 7, 2004, from <http://www.coloradorapids.com/FanCenter/Kids.asp>.
- Davis, S. (2007). Desire to maintain quality drives foreign player rule. *ESPNSoccernet*. <http://soccernet.espn.go.com/news/story?id=493683&cc=5901> (accessed July 12, 2010).
- Definition of Promotion. (n.d.). Retrieved November 4, 2004, from <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Promotion>.
- Denver Media Mogul Seeks to Reduce Stake in Major League Soccer Teams. (2004, September 21). Retrieved November 4, 2004, from <http://www.denverpost.com>.
- D'Hippolito, J. (2002, October-November). There's no place like home: the new home of U.S. Soccer doesn't open until next year, but it's already the sport's most important domestic development since MLS. *Soccer Digest*. Retrieved November 6, 2004, from <http://www.centurysports.net/soccer/>.
- Dure, B. (2010). *Long-Range Goals: The success story of Major League Soccer*. Dulles, VA: Potomac Books.
- Ernsberger, Jr., R., & Underhill, W. (1998, September 21). The Sporting Life: [Atlantic Edition]. *Newsweek*. Retrieved November 5, 2004, from <http://www.newsweek.com>.

- European Clubs Split On Need to Protect Home-Grown Players.* (2004, November 9). Retrieved November 11, 2004, from http://www.dailytimes.com.pk/default.asp?page=story_11-9-2004_pg2_11.
- Fisher, E. (2002, May 27). United They Stand...to Conquer. *Insight on the News*. Retrieved November 4, 2004, from <http://www.insightmag.com>.
- General Overview of Major League Soccer.* (n.d.). Retrieved November 6, 2004, from <http://www.mlsnet.com/MLS/about/>.
- Halpin, J. (2004, October 9). Introducing Utah's team: Real Salt Lake. Retrieved November 4, 2004, from http://real.saltlake.mlsnet.com/MLS/news/team_news.
- Hopkins, G. (2010). *Star-Spangled Soccer: The Selling, Marketing, and Management of Soccer in the USA*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hutchison, B. (2004, March 31). Major League Soccer- How it Started- How it Works. *World Soccer*. Retrieved November 3, 2004, from http://worldsoccer.about.com/cs/theposts/a/mls_04_intro.htm.
- Lisi, C. (2002, May). The Sunset State: MLS Will No Longer Shine in Florida After the League's Decision to Axe the Tampa Bay Mutiny and Miami Fusion. *Soccer Digest*. Retrieved November 3, 2004, from <http://www.centurysports.net/soccer/>.
- Los Angeles Galaxy "Galaxy Shuttle."* (n.d.). Retrieved November 7, 2004, from <http://la.galaxy.mlsnet.com/MLS/lag/load.jsp?section=fans&content=shuttle>.
- Markovits, A.S., & Hellerman, S.L. (2001). *Offside: Soccer and American exceptionalism*. Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press.
- MLS commissioner Don Garber's State of the League address. (2001, July 27). Retrieved November 4, 2004, from <http://www.mysoccer.com/mls01/sot10727.phtml>.
- Nauright, J. & Ramfjord, J. (2010). Who owns England's game? American professional sporting influences and foreign ownership in the Premier League. *Soccer and Society*, 11(4), 428-441.
- Nierman, J. (2004, September 23). Rongen named first CD Chivas USA coach. Retrieved November 4, 2004, from http://chivas.usa.mlsnet.com/MLS/news/team_news.
- Parker, K. (1999, November). What Works; Action in the Community – Marketing the Dallas Burn Soccer Team to Hispanic American Consumers – Statistical Data Included. *American Demographics*. Retrieved November 7, 2004, from <http://www.demographics.com>.
- Parrish, C. (2012). North American Soccer League. In J. Nauright and C. Parrish (eds.) *Sports Around the World: History, Culture, and Practice*, Vol. 3: pp 323-324.
- Pierce, K. (2004, August 2). Optimism, questions for new club. Retrieved November 4, 2004, from http://chivas.usa.mlsnet.com/MLS/news/team_news.
- Premier League Roles and Objectives.* (n.d.). Retrieved November 6, 2004, from <http://www.premierleague.com/>.
- Redhot Feature.* (2004, September). Retrieved November 7, 2004, from <http://www.ontoeurope.com/features/2004/sep04/business.html>.
- Singh, S. (1999). Welcome to the Club: Upstart Major League Soccer gets sued. *Sports Lawyers Journal*. Vol. 6: 217-246.
- The Metrostars 'Train With the Pros.'* (n.d.). Retrieved November 7, 2004, from <http://metrostars.mlsnet.com/MLS/met/load.ksp?section=tickets&content=train>.
- Wahl, G. (2009). *The Beckham Experiment*. New York: Crown Publishers.

