

Tuesday, July 3, 2007

MLS Doesn't Need Saving

By Jeff L'Hote

Even if it didn't come out quite right, many in the U.S. soccer industry understood exactly what Los Angeles Galaxy President/General Manager Alexi Lalas was trying to get at when he recently defended MLS against some critical Brits: Beckham is a great signing - but the league is not in need of a savior.

I couldn't agree more.

In last week's [Soccer Business Insider](#), Jim Paglia wrote that Beckham's time in MLS will not amount to any long-term value to the league and that historically he will be regarded on par with Freddy Adu and Kyle Rote Jr.

With all due respect to Adu and Rote, Jr, Beckham has already had a much greater, and more tangible, impact on commercial matters affecting U.S. professional soccer. Before donning a Galaxy uniform, Beckham has sold an additional 7,000 season tickets for the Galaxy and generated substantial investment among local and national sponsors. Herbalife is paying the Galaxy \$20 million so that its jersey message is available to a global audience, something no other MLS player has accomplished.

While it is impossible to predict Beckham's long-term impact on MLS, Paglia missed an important point: before Beckham, MLS was already healthy and secure in its future; his signing certainly was not a situation of "Beckham or bust" (although he clearly brings needed star power to the league).

Largely due to its "perpetual-sport-of-the-future" designation, naysayers will criticize MLS, with or without Beckham. In a crowded and impatient U.S. sports marketplace, we need to be more realistic about how MLS success is measured.

As the most lucrative professional sports league in the world, the NFL is not a fair standard. Nor is MLB or the NBA, which rank second and third respectively. NASCAR may be a more relevant U.S. standard, although it has a 25-year head start over MLS.

In terms of professional soccer leagues abroad, the English Premier League (EPL), launched in 1992 after more than a century as England's First Division, is today by far the most lucrative foreign league, yet it has only recently surpassed the NHL in terms of revenue.

If the EPL - which averages about 35,000 fans per match/more than 90 percent stadium utilization -- were based in the U.S., would it be deemed in an MLS-like manner?

The detractors' standards are unattainable.

By objective standards, however, MLS is clearly a success: It has survived 11-plus years in a difficult market; already ranks 12th in attendance among worldwide professional soccer leagues; continues to build necessary infrastructure through facility development; employs dozens of international players; and has the backing of such partners as adidas, AEG, Anheuser Busch, ESPN, etc.

Importantly, MLS has viable and identifiable opportunities to grow its fan base in the U.S. Millions clearly don't share Paglia's view that soccer lacks the "fundamental elements" for a successful spectator sport, including:

- * 90 million watched all or part of Germany '06 on English-language television; 50 million watched on Spanish-language television.
- * Last week's sold out Gold Cup final on Univision drew a higher U.S. television audience than the final game of the Stanley Cup on NBC.
- * Barcelona and Real Madrid attracted more than 350,000 to their five sold out matches last summer.

There are numerous other examples to encourage MLS executives and deflate MLS detractors.

To be sure, MLS needs a better product -- on the field, in the stadium, and on TV -- to potentially attract those already interested in the sport and to entice the millions who participate but do not support the league. While progress may be slow, MLS, in only its 12th year, now seems focused on creating a more interesting and exciting league.

Signing a player like Beckham is a step in the right direction. Paglia, not MLS or its partners, inappropriately puts the "Messiah" tag on Beckham. The league needs improving, not saving.

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