

## Why there is no soccer in America

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### Why there is no soccer in America

AS THE Euro 2000 championship looms and the continent again becomes football-crazy, an old question is being asked once more: will Americans ever learn to love football—European football, that is—or are the rhythms of the world's most popular game somehow out of sync with the American spirit?

Soccer is the fourth most popular game in American playgrounds after basketball, volleyball and softball, and the fastest-growing recreational activity among schoolchildren. America has hosted two hugely successful World Cups and is rapidly emerging as an international force. Football's place alongside more traditional American pastimes would seem assured.

But when it comes to a professional league of their own, Americans remain blissfully indifferent to this variety of football. Currently in its fifth season, Major League Soccer (MLS), the long-awaited successor to the North American Soccer League (NASL), is still playing mostly to empty seats. True, the Los Angeles Galaxy and the defending champions, DC United, have cultivated small but deeply loyal followings. And the calibre of play has clearly improved. Seamus Malin, America's foremost football analyst, reckons the MLS is now a credible second-tier league and believes some of its clubs could well hold their own against many European sides. Yet, although the MLS drew 17,000 spectators a match during its inaugural season, the average attendance is now just 14,000. The league does even worse on television; its games barely register a rating.

Selling football to Americans requires patience, say MLS executives. Above all, they want to avoid repeating the experience of the NASL, which folded in 1984. The NASL, they say, depended too much on one star-studded team, the New York Cosmos, and its free-spending owner, Warner Communications. The Cosmos fielded a line-up that included Pele, Franz Beckenbauer, Carlos Alberto and a host of other legends who, though no longer in their prime were still highly entertaining. But when Warner lost interest in football it pulled the plug on the Cosmos—and on the entire league.

Given the money top internationals now command, the MLS does not have the option of importing superstars. The league has a few big-name foreigners, but it believes that Americans generally prefer to watch Americans and that its main purpose is to serve as a showcase for home-grown talent.

Keeping the talent at home is a headache for these very reasons. The lack of world-class competition diminishes the league's appeal and the pay is uncompetitive. To help contain costs (or at least limit the bleeding: the MLS reportedly lost over \$100m in its first four seasons), the league caps team payrolls at \$1.73m and salaries at \$270,000, though exceptions are occasionally made for high-profile imports. Thus, some of America's finest, among them Joe-Max Moore, Claudio Reyna (pictured left) and Tony Sanneh, have taken their studs abroad. Up and-coming stars are also defecting. Landon Donovan, named player of the tournament at last year's under-17 world championship in New Zealand, has joined Bayer Leverkusen, a German club. Another promising junior, DaMarcus Beasley, Mr Donovan's runner-up in New Zealand

is, for the moment, sticking with the Chicago Fire. But several European clubs, including Arsenal, Barcelona, and PSV Eindhoven, are said to be interested in the 17-year-old mid fielder and it may be just a matter of time before he too departs for greener pitches.

Possibly, the inferior quality of the MLS is keeping fans away. More likely, though, Americans just find football too slow and maddening. Whereas basketball guarantees 48 minutes of slam dunks, football threatens 90 minutes of dashed hopes. Americans, not always known for their patience, seem to prefer more gratification—that is, more scoring—from their pastimes.

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