

Sports

SLAPSHOTS

Soccer on the rise, fans multiply

Brian Castle
Columnist

What's the most exciting new sports league in America today? The answer to that question is easy—Major League Soccer (MLS).

MLS is the first attempt in over ten years to initiate a first-division professional soccer league in the United States, soccer's last frontier. Many observers thought that soccer would never succeed in the reluctant American market, especially after the demise of the one-time monstrosity successful North American Soccer League (NASL).

But the NASL suffered from its own mismanagement, as it allowed the New York Cosmos franchise to monopolize the talent pool by signing virtually every major star of the seventies and eighties—Pelé, Giorgio Chinaglia, and Franz Beckenbauer—while the other teams fought valiantly with rosters full of nobodies.

MLS founder Alan Rothenberg, the guru of U.S. soccer, has apparently learned from professional soccer's past failings. Rothenberg has taken great care to ensure that MLS will be the permanent face of professional soccer in the U.S.

First, Rothenberg courted and won commercial clout for the new venture by signing huge corporate sponsorship deals with the giants of sports advertising—Nike, Budweiser, and MasterCard—which enabled the nascent league to ink a high-exposure television deal with the Capital Cities duo of ABC and ESPN, along with Unavision, a Spanish-language satellite service.

Next, Rothenberg awarded franchises to ten cities, as he included not only traditional sports markets like New York and Los Angeles, but areas with burgeoning youth programs like San Jose, California, and Columbus, Ohio. An ambitious marketing department came up with adventurous nicknames and funky uniforms to make them each easily distinguishable from the rest.

The San Jose Clash, for instance, are named for a seminal seventies punk band. The Tampa Bay Mutiny sport uniforms are colored in navy and puke-green. And the Columbus Crew's crest features three intimidating factory workers, clad in the requisite hard hats.

Finally, Rothenberg has done a masterful job of managing the allotment of players, particularly the stars, of the new league. Each team is required to stay within the framework of a tightly-regulated salary cap, which prevents the establishment of a New York Cosmos-type dynasty.

The league has also focused on soccer's inherent ethnic diversity to make its place in the country that proudly considers itself a melting pot by aggressively recruiting foreign stars from Europe (Italy's Roberto Donadoni), Africa (South Africa's Doctor Khumalo), and especially South America (Bolivia's Marco "El Diablo" Etcheverry and Colombia's flamboyant Carlos Valderrama). By spreading these talented soccer ambassadors around the league, MLS has taken an inclusive marketing approach that cuts across the United States' many racial lines.

In conjunction with the home-grown stars from the 1994 World Cup squad (Alexi Lalas, Eric Wynalda, Cobi Jones, and company), the foreign stars have given MLS consistent star quality from best team to worst.

Has the new league not only survived but proven a success in the fickle American market as well? The answer has to be a resounding yes! The proof is in the pudding. The league-wide attendance average of 25,000 per game has more than doubled Rothenberg's projections. The two major market clubs have drawn rabid crowds in excess of 70,000 on several occasions.

Look for Major League Soccer to establish itself as one of the premier sports leagues in the country, as the American society continues to diversify in the decades to come.

OUTDOORS

Rafting novice hits the French Broad River

St. Claire Ready
Staff Writer

You step into the water, then ease into the raft. It's just you and a sheath of air-filled rubber. Fear sends tiny shudders of alarm through your system. Look all around. Are you sure you want to do this? You glance over to your guide, the trained professional.

"You know how you can tell if a river guide is lying?" asks Joe Potter, a French Broad Rafting Company guide. "When they move their lips."

As the raft glides out onto the river, Potter emits a blood-curdling, "Whoooooo-hooooo!" reminiscent of a Scottish war-cry. What could possibly go wrong?

The guide tells you to hook your foot under a rubber tube in the middle of the raft, and then to perch precariously on the outside edge of the perimeter tubing. This is it, you wonder? What about seatbelts, or ropes to tie a leg to the raft? Shouldn't you be inside the raft, not lolling about on the very edge of the boat itself? Panic sets in.

The raft hits a slow pool of water and Potter offers some pertinent information. The rapids range from Class I to Class VI.

Today, the highest rapid will be Class IV.

The raft sets off down the beautiful, brown, and somewhat bedraggled French Broad River. Potter explains that it is brown because of all the rain and this is why the water level is so high. High? No one told you anything about

Class IV rapids. It seems to be a rafting novice rule of thumb to ask the guide the same question at least fifteen times over the duration of the trip. Potter says it's a Class I rapid. Barely.

The next hour is spent tossing and turning in the water, filled with the mindless barks of "Paddle

forward!" "Back paddle!" and "Drift!" Your foot falls asleep because you have it wedged in tightly underneath the tube to prevent falling out of the raft. They will have to cut your lifeless foot out, later.

Finally. The time has come. The first of the Class IV rapids, "Needle Falls." A deep breath is necessary. You try not to look at the drop off the ledge approaching you at a fast clip. You are moving towards it. You paddle as if fire-spitting demons are at your back. Rushing water, river, spray in your mouth, a feeling of power surging through you. Then it is done, over.

But not quite. It seems as though your guide has other plans. You and he are going to do the next-to-impossible, surf the rapid, paddle back, then catch the water and skim on top of it. Terrific. The raft hits the frothy water. Then the water hits the raft, hard. Heads start to spin. The raft starts to spin, around and around, side to side. Potter throws his body over the edges of the raft, screaming, "Hang onto your paddle!"

You have no idea what to do, so you get a death-grip on the ropes at the side of the raft. Water rushes into the boat, filling it up. Potter looks like a rag doll being tossed about. The river will not give you up. Around in circles, for minutes, seconds, you are not quite certain about the passage of time. No thoughts are in your head. You can only hear the roar of the water, and feel it spitting around you.

A rope is thrown. Potter grabs it and pulls the boat out of the churning hole, pulling it to a calm pool. As he lets out another "whoop," you ask when you can do it again.



A group of white-water rafters enjoys a day on the French Broad River

Photo courtesy of Joe Potter/French Broad Rafting Company

Miss football? Check out the local scene

Kyle Phipps
Staff Writer

Fall has finally arrived. It's been an eternity since Nebraska demolished Florida for the NCAA Championship and Dallas beat the Steelers for the NFL crown. Traffic is too bad to drive to Charlotte to see a Panthers game, and they don't really play football in Atlanta. However, quality football gets played locally.

In Western North Carolina, players with immense talents are easy to find. Brad Johnson, now with the Minnesota Vikings, played at Owen High School in Swannanoa. He had a knack for making every other player on the field look bad. His passes had so much velocity that they would often skip through the hands of his receivers. Johnson completely dominated the game, and the entire conference for that matter. Last week he threw for over 200 yards and two touchdowns in his first NFL start for the Vikings. Don't expect to see players of this caliber every week, but surprisingly enough, most high schools in the county turn out at least one player a year who goes on to play college ball.

North Buncombe High School head football coach, Perry Sanderson, spoke highly of one of his senior players, Sam Lister. "Sam is a 6'5", 300 pound, senior nose guard. He has already been contacted by Notre Dame, Stanford, Duke, N.C. State, and Carolina," said Sanderson.

The high quality of the football played in the mountains is evident from the 1-A teams, who have

more state titles than any other region in the state. "The quality of the football played here is very good," Sanderson said. "The competition is also very good. The 1-A schools in the region are tough," Sanderson said.

Sanderson's comments were echoed by several other area coaches. "Top to bottom, the competition in the area is stiff. There are some teams that will stand out this year, but on any given night, an upset could happen," said one area coach.

Brevard, Pisgah, and AC Reynolds High Schools have some of the better teams this year. "The competition in the region is very good. There are several teams in the area that could advance into the state tournament," said Sanderson.

All of the intensity and desire that is found at big-time football games is also on the fields at the high school level. When a player flattens a member of the other team, you still see the taunting and the celebration. When the scrawny kid from the soccer team, who was recruited by the football coach to kick extra points and field goals, boots the game-winner with seconds left on the clock, he still gets carried off the field by his teammates. But that's what playing the game is all about anyway, isn't it? Having the desire and heart to leave everything on the field to help the team win.

Even people that aren't football fans can still enjoy local high school games. The marching bands and drum corps are still there, playing with all the emotion and enthusiasm that college bands have.

They still have cheerleaders at

high school football games. Sure, they may not be the buxom blondes that get shown before the commercial breaks of an NFL game, but they're still supporting their team and they still wear really short skirts. Is it possible to go wrong watching a girl in a really short skirt jump up and down?

The coaches at the high school level may not be big-name celebrities, complete with their own endorsement deals and afternoon talk shows that you find in the college or professional game, but they still care just as much about if their team wins. Several seasons ago, a local coach threw his headset and hat, stormed onto the field, and swore at a referee with everything he had in him. He was promptly thrown out of the game. High school games don't lack excitement.

Local coaches also tend to have more morals than their highly paid counterparts. A high school coach has never reinstated a player who was thrown off of a team for beating his girlfriend, just because the big game was next week. Also, high school football players don't receive five game suspensions for



Asheville High School's sophomore quarterback, Brian Fields, takes some heat from Daniel (S.C.) High School opponents. Asheville is ranked as one of the top ten teams in the state.

Photo Courtesy of The Asheville Citizen-Times

snorting cocaine in a hotel room with a couple of strippers. High school players are kicked off the team, kicked out of school, and then kicked out of town.

High school football games always draw a big crowd. They may not be the crazies that paint their faces and have the team name on their chests, but they still get into the atmosphere. Additionally, the high school students truly care about the games. They want to see their friends do well at something they enjoy.

Prep football has a lot to offer sports enthusiasts. The hits may not be as big, the players aren't steroid monsters, and there are no highlights on ESPN. But the players still have the desire and the fans are loyal. And let's not forget about those girls in short skirts jumping up and down.