

# Major League Soccer Media Conference

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Orlando, Florida, USA

## Don Garber

### Press Conference



DON GARBER: Thank you all for joining us here today. We all have been living in this zoom world and hopefully our technology works and we can get everybody's questions after some opening remarks. It has without a doubt been a most remarkable season. Not just because of the challenges that our entire league faced but because on Saturday we are going to crown an MLS Cup champion and will conclude our 25th season and that's a milestone event, something we are so very, very proud of.

When we begun 2020 it was supposed to be a year-long recognition, something that we worked on for probably over a year to celebrate and recognize the great players that, the very many great moments in our rich history and in the first couple of weeks we were off to a very, very strong start, and instead like the rest of the world, in mid-March, actually on March 12, we put the entire season on hold and then we very, very quickly turned all of our attention to getting our players back on the field, begin to start playing games, in the safest and healthiest possible way for all of our players for our club and league staff as well as for our fans, and it seemed like such a long time ago when we kicked off our season back in February and we had going into this celebration, and it was led by the excitement of our two newest expansion teams, Nashville and Miami.

I was at the opening game in Nashville. It was a terrific celebration. We set a Tennessee soccer record for that opening game with nearly 60,000 fans at their home opener. It was really foreshadowing, really, what we thought would be continued excitement throughout the year. After so many years of development, I'm glad I don't have to get asked questions about what is happening with David Beckham's Miami team anymore. But after all those years, finally, Inter Miami takes the field against LAFC, a loss for them but really a very, very exciting moment for our league. And Atlanta United, which shouldn't be lost on any of us, showed that they were continuing the enormous excitement and momentum that they had in their market with almost 70,000 fans at their opening game.

But with the pandemic forcing the postponement of the

season, we all sat down to focus on a plan to return to play. Speaking of players, obviously we were in the first year of a CBA with our players and during the uncertainty of how and when we would be able to get back to play, we went through very extensive discussions with the MLS PA about making adjustments due to COVID-19. And most importantly we needed a return-to-play plan that would ensure we would get our players back on the field quickly but to do it in the safest possible way for them and everyone involved. That had all of us working tirelessly, our entire enterprise to very well health and safety protocols, again, these were unprecedented nature that led to the creation of a tournament in Orlando that had us taking over a thousand players and staff essentially into what we now call a bubble. What we now know as the MLS Is Back Tournament which took place at ESPN's Wide World of Sports Complex was unbelievably complicated, a massive operational and logistical undertaking. We played 31 games in 35 days, if you think about the cadence, some days we had games as early as 9:00 AM and some days as late as 11:00 PM. Some days we played as many as three games a day and though we had the challenges of the beginning of the tournament with Dallas and Nashville, we had little to know other issues, even with testing every other day and executing well over 30,000 COVID tests during that period of time. Most remarkably and something that I think has us all feeling really proud, we created these unique virtual stadiums that had technologies that really had been never used before and taken to an entirely new level that essentially took youth soccer fields, a youth soccer complex and we delivered a really special exciting and unique broadcast experience that delivered value for our sponsors and broadcast partners and delivered value for all our TV viewers. All those games were broadcast US for ESPN, Fox and Univision, in Canada for TSN and TVA and for more than 190 international partners.

Now it shouldn't be lost on anyone, the size, the scope and the difficulty of pulling off a month-long tournament during a pandemic, featuring 24 teams playing games almost every day, at a youth soccer complex while everyone lived in a bubble. It's a test amount to the hard work, to the commitment, to the dedication of our players, our ownership, our staff, and particularly the dozens and dozens of MLS that workday after day, night after night, week after week managing all of the protocols, operational issues, managing everything that we needed to deliver on

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and off the field. I am so internally grateful to all of them and I want to thank everyone that was involved in the MLS Is Back Tournament for their courage, for their hard work, for their patience and leading and managing what was an enterally, and I will believe be forever known as an historic period for our league, working alongside them has been one of the most challenging but without doubt one of the most rewarding parts and experiences of my career.

After the Timbers captured the championship, we returned to our local markets in August and we were able to complete 975 percent of the scheduled games that we had laid out for the rest of the year, and all of our playoff matches. Looking back, and I don't think this is something that has been noted enough, we were the only league in the world to play in a bubble, and continue in our markets with a regular season and then complete a postseason in our local markets. It was an outstanding, remarkable undertaking and again, one that I am so appreciative for everybody's hard work and support.

We also recognize that the resumption of our season came at a time of unbelievably important discussions about racism, social justice and about equality and it started down in Orlando with a powerful demonstration by the 170 Black Players for Change for the first match of our restart in Orlando. That I think was one of the special moments in the history of our league. It was incredibly moving for all of us.

Earlier today, just I think a few hours ago, we announced that the Black Players for Change were the recipient of the MLS Humanitarians of the Year Award. It's a really well deserved recognition for the collective effort to bring awareness to racial and social justice issues both in our league, our sport and our society. The leadership shown by the executive director.

Justin Morrow, Jeremy Ebobisse, Mark-Anthony Kaye, and the entire membership has been really, really impressive. I don't think they, as well as the members of SCOR that consistent primarily of MLS alumni have received the recognition and credit that they deserve in our industry and I really think throughout society for advocating how sports, our league and how our sport can come together and work hard to create meaningful change.

As I know you know, back in October in conjunction with the BPC Score and internal group into in the League called Pitch Black as well as members of our staff and the MLS ownership group, our MLS board, we introduced several long-term initiatives to confront racism, to confront and address social injustice and to increase representation in our sport. There's a lot of work ahead for all of us but we are committed to doing the work and to doing what we can

to inspire and to create real change

On the field, despite the pause and the necessary adjustments during 2020, it was an incredibly exciting season and it had two key narratives. First was the influx and continued contribution of international players and second, the development and contribution of young American and Canadian players.

On the American front, or the international front we saw Diego Rossi from LAFC have a break out season and lead the league with 14 goals

Toronto's Alejandro Pozuelo was just announced as our Most Valuable Player yesterday, despite the club playing nearly it's entire season outside of Canada, our second Spanish player to receive that award.

And Nico Loderio was our MVP finalist leading Seattle to another trip per their win last night at the MLS Cup. Reynoso, what a game he had last night, another great signing this year and Inter Miami's Rodolfo Pizarro a great player from the Mexican international team had a good season for their club though they struggled this year.

And as we saw and might see again on Saturday, Columbus's Lucas Zelarayan had an unbelievably strong and significant impact on his team and exciting player for the Columbus Crew and importantly switching over to what's going on on the youth front, this really became the year of the youth movement in Major League Soccer, something that we have been talking about and been thinking about for so many years.

Our owners continue to invest in training facilities youth academies and more and more young players in ways far beyond ever before. Those players are getting more minutes than ever before. Teenagers like John Gianluca Busio, Brian Reynolds, Caden Clark, Efrain Alvarez, and so many more young players made real contributions to their club this year. Many of these young players will be playing for the U.S. tomorrow against El Salvador in our stadium in Inter Miami.

And I think you're going to see more and more young players being a part of the U.S., part of the Canadian national team and speaking of Canadians, look at the great season

Ayo Akinola, what a great tournament he had in Orlando and Taj Buchanon, he had another break out season. These are guys in their early early 20s, 20 and 21 respectively.

While the U.S. Soccer Federation ceased the development



academy, first I want to say I want to give them a lot of support and shout out for the great work that they did for so many years with the DA Academy

But for reasons that I think were smart when they ceased operations of the DA Academy, they quickly launched MLS NEXT, a youth league with more than 11,000 players across 1,300 academies and elite youth clubs. More than 90 percent of the players in the current youth national team pools for the U.S. and Canada are part of MLS NEXT clubs. That's an astounding static.

And working very closely with our clubs, MLS NEXT will provide increased and enhanced competition, will provide increased and accelerated talent identification, coaching education, professional environments for these young players, all working to ensure that we could maximize the potential for young players in these two countries and hopefully stimulate the success of our respective national teams.

Frankly I think MLS NEXT is one of the most innovative and important commitments that our league has made to player development in our entire history.

Moving to officiating, our officiating continues to get better and better, and even with the challenges of 2020, our officials having to challenge -- all of the things that are no different than the impact on our players, they have been able to train. They have been able to work these games and have been able to do a really incredible job. The accuracy from our officials through video review continues to improve, our decision-making, our key match indicator success continues to improve, well over 98 percent, and we've got a talent pool that continues to grow.

I am excited and optimistic about what's happening with the Professional Referee Organization and with Howard Webb's leadership; and I think it should be noted that our league now has 12 female officials that have been assigned to MLS games. That's up from three last year. I imagine what that will be two, three, four five and ten years from now

And as you probably know, Tori Penso became the first female referee to be in the center circle from an MLS match in 20 years, and Katy Nesbitt was named our assistant referee of the year, and she'll be on the sidelines as the assistant referee for MLS Cup on Saturday.

Now for 25 seasons, MLS has been a story about resilience and innovation and a commitment and our players, our owners, our staffs and our fans. And these attributes were demonstrated more than ever this year. And I want to remind everybody, and reflect how far we've

come since our founding 25 years ago to become a top flight professional soccer league in the world. We began with no soccer stadiums. It wasn't part of our original plan in '96, and soon we will have 27 world class soccer stadiums, more stadiums that have been purposefully built for our league and that is going to be really brought to bear when our new stadium in Columbus comes online and our MLS Cup which will be -- and how significant is that that just over 20 years later, actually, 21 years, we will have a brand new stadium replacing an original stadium in Major League Soccer.

Major League Soccer has become a league of choice for so many top players and coaches. You see this with international signings and with the growth of our fan base, our supporters continue to put MLS as a league of choice in creating a soccer culture that's benefitting the entire soccer ecosystem throughout the United States and Canada.

And finally our ownership group has expanded from our great founder, the original sports industrial list is being viewed today as one of the most strongest and diverse ownership groups in all of sports.

We look forward on Saturday to the culmination of a great season, our 25th season when Columbus Crew take on the Seattle Sounders at Mapfre. This year's event will be broadcast on the FOX UniMas, TSN, TVA Sports and in more than 190 countries via our international partners. More than we have had in the history of our league.

I want to really congratulate and give a shoutout to Dee and Jimmy Haslam and the Edwards family. In such a short period of time, the Haslams have made an incredible job impact in Columbus through their ownership of the crew, just their second season of ownership, their leadership has led the crew to their second MLS Cup in Mapfre's Stadium. Next year, the club will move into a world-class stadium in the arena district downtown. I will take a tour of that on Saturday, and I understand it's supposed to be spectacular and I will also take a look at a state of the -- very importantly their ownership and partnership with the Edwards family, there is incredible energy in the market.

Sponsors have shown interests in partnering with the club and we're hopeful that season ticket sales will continue to grow. I want to wish president Tim Bezbatchenko, Head Coach Caleb Porter and the rest of the staff best of luck this week-to-week at MLS Cup.

The Sounders return to our championship match for the fourth time in the past five season, an absolutely incredible run. The Sounders have reached the playoffs a record 12



consecutive season. That's the second-longest active playoff streak in all of major professional sports in the United States and Canada, second, by the way, only to the Pittsburgh penguins. I'd like to congratulate Adrian Hanauer, Jody Allen, Drew Carey and the new owners for creating a best in class professional sports organization on and off the field.

I also want to congratulate Sounders GM and president

Garth Lagerwey, Head Coach Brian Schmetzer and their entire technical staff for an incredible win last night, one of the more exciting games in playoff history and producing another great season.

Looking ahead, although we only have one game to play this year, the preparations for the 2021 season are ongoing.

We certainly have some uncertainty remaining as the pandemic continues and I'm sure as you all know and I'm sure I'll be asked questions about this, we're reviewing different time frames and models for the start of the season. As of today we continue to target an early to mid-March opening for the MLS season in 2021. Austin FC will take the field in their beautiful new stadium with their passionate fans already creating a culture that will reflect the rich and exciting and unique spirit in the City of Austin.

We will also open two new soccer stadiums in the State of Ohio, FC Cincinnati in downtown Cincinnati and obviously the new venue for the Crew. Charlotte will begin play in 2022 and Sacramento and St. Louis will debut their soccer stadiums in 2023. There are incredibly exciting things going on in all three markets, Charlotte, Sacramento and St. Louis, and I'm happy to talk about that should anybody want me to go into more detail in the Q&A.

As it relates to stadium investments, when we complete our new stadium round and finalize that in 2023, all-in, we'll have an investment of over \$5 billion in MLS soccer-specific stadiums and that speaks volumes about the passion, the support, the commitment that both the public and private sector have shown for our league, both in the U.S. and in Canada.

Concluding, if I told our owners back in April or our staffs or our players, that we would have completed a season with 324 games while being faced with an unprecedented health crisis, they would enthusiastically signed up for that deal.

We pledged that we would put the health and safety of our staffs at the forefront of every decision we made from

extensive testing to tough decisions on rescheduled games to managing the bubble in Orlando as well as team travel and logistics with games back in our market and I'm pleased to say, that we have achieved that.

We also maintained our pledge then to continue to serve the communities where we live and where we play our games. Through the creation of MLS Unites, we supported organizations throughout our team markets in both countries, like feeding America in the United States and Food Banks Canada, up north. We told the stories of heroic efforts during the pandemic of our players and our staffs and we helped drive voter registration during the recent election in early November.

For all that we achieved together, I can proudly say that this year will be a season that we will remember forever. And from these challenging times, Major League Soccer will continue to persevere, we will continue to grow, we will continue to emerge even stronger than ever.

So I thank you for your time and now welcome all of your questions.

**Q. I'm wondering if that's still the case, if returning to the local markets helped offset that or any of the television revenue helped offset that prediction, and what -- is there anything the league can do going forward to kind of offset that?**

DON GARBER: Well, it's a good question.

**Q. Will returning to the local markets help offset that or any of the television revenue helped offset that prediction, and what -- is there anything the league can do going forward to kind of offset that?**

DON GARBER: Well, it's a good question. Our revenue for the enterprise, our league and our clubs is down almost a billion dollars compared to last year and not only have we lost a significant amount of revenue, as have so many other businesses, certainly, in our industry, but we've also incurred expenses that we were not intending to incur.

We chartered players to every game; that's not currently part of our CBA. We had the expense of managing the MLS is back tournament and while that was able to allow us to capture some revenue, the expenses of housing so many players and operating those games and creating the virtual stadiums were enormous.

So actually, the impact of all this is probably deeper than what we expected and that is concerning to us but our owners have been understanding this impact from the very beginning. We are concerned about what this will look like



leading into 2021 and are working, as I'm sure everybody could imagine, on figuring out how we could manage through that.

I am very, very hopeful that 2021 will be a way better year than 2020, because I don't think any business could sustain the kind of impact that we sustained in 2020 for two years in a row.

**Q. Looking ahead to next year, is it fair to say that you probably would not start the season if fans and game day revenue is not available, meaning, you would wait to start the season when you can actually get a decent percentage of fans into all the stadiums?**

DON GARBER: The challenge is nobody has that magic date, right, and it will vary state by state and province by province. So we need to make a schedule for all the reasons that you would expect. We can't wait for an understanding of the impact on the vaccine, not only on the vaccine nation of hopefully the entire country, both United States and Canada, we aren't going to know that and we have to set a schedule prior to that.

We also aren't going to know what reaction fans are going to have to return to stadiums. So just the idea that the vaccine is available does not give us an indication fans will be returning to stadiums.

We have established that March time frame because what we do know is that FIFA through CONCACAF has laid out layer dates. CONCACAF has laid out the 2020/21 Champions League dates. We haven't found out what's happening with the U.S. Open Cup and we have to address the fact that the Open Cup wasn't played in 2020, and we want to play as many games as possible. Because it's not just about fans; it's about are we going to retain as much of our sponsor and media revenue.

So we obviously have a lot of work to do. What we can do, say here today, is evaluating this as we speak, we will continue to do that. We understand we're going to need some flexibility but we are not going to be able to wait to make a decision until somebody decides that fans will be able to attend stadiums. That is a date that is so uncertain at this point.

**Q. In 25 years, many things have changed for the better, but if you could mention something that has not changed and you like it that way, what would it be and why?**

DON GARBER: What do you mean, changed or something that we would hope it would develop faster? What do you mean by what has not changed?

**Q. Like the essence of the league, something that hasn't changed over the years besides the big evolution of soccer in the U.S.**

DON GARBER: It's a good question, and what I'll say is that there are things that have developed over the last 25 years that have evolved more significantly than we thought. We never expected that we would have what will soon be 27 soccer stadiums. The concept of soccer-specific when the founders wrote the original plan.

We didn't expect we would have a soccer culture that exists today or through marketing would have stimulated the growth of a commercial soccer market. We wouldn't expect as many young players playing in our academies and going through our league and so many performing not just as great stars in soccer but performing at high levels in the biggest leagues in the world and I think that's perhaps one of the biggest achievements and contributions that MLS has made to the sport.

I would not have expected that we would have been able to develop an opportunity for thousands and thousands of people to be working full-time in our sport and many players who play in our league and then come off our fields and that are able to be employed in our industry.

One thing that is continuing to frustrate me is that soccer continues to struggle to get its fair share of the recognition of how important and influential and relevant our sport is and Major League Soccer is in the sporting landscape. I think we've made great strides in that area but not as much as I would hope. When I see us being left out of the narrative of the things that are going on in the professional sports landscape, it insults me, doesn't just frustrate me.

I also think that our perception internationally ebbs and flows. If you ask certain members of the international community for their views of what's going on, Major League Soccer, reviewed as one of the smartest, most strategic and most thoughtful and most important leagues in the world, and then at times, particularly at the governing body level, I don't think our league is recognized for the contributions we're making to the sport, and contributions to influencing the positive things that come out of well-run and popular professional sports businesses here in North America.

**Q. Wondering if you might provide an update concerning the ownership situations in Salt Lake and Orlando. Is there any concern about either of those two potential sales, and as a follow-up, would you consider a bid for Salt Lake from an investor outside of the market if there was the opportunity to perhaps**

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## **move that franchise to a larger market?**

DON GARBER: Well, I'll start with the last one. I mean, this is part of the 25 years of Major League Soccer. So much of MLS has been new owners coming in to new teams and expanding the footprint of MLS in the United States and Canada. In other leagues, where they are almost entirely for the most part expanded, when you see teams trade their existing teams, and we have had very little of that over our 25 years.

Obviously very recently, Andrew Hauptman sold the Chicago Fire. We had a transfer in D.C. recently, just to give you a couple of examples. But I think you'll start seeing that more and more in time, and that's natural, and to be expected.

So it doesn't concern me in any case when an owner has decided for whatever personal reasons that they are looking to sell their team.

Conversations, switching to Orlando, to Flavio Augusta da Silva, had a great run this year and they were great supporters and hosts for the MLS Is Back Tournament. They continue to happen. He has indicated publically that he is willing to sell his shares of the club. He has the controlling interest.

But at this time, there is no news about a change in majority ownership in the near future. I'm not concerned about that. I speak to Flavio quite a bit, and I have confidence that he will continue to be a great owner in the event that that team doesn't sell in the short or the midterm.

As it relates to Salt Lake, I think Salt Lake has been a great market for Major League Soccer. It's been a good market for -- for the Monarchs and for the Royals, as well. Started with Dave Checketts in the building of their stadium, Rio Tinto, passionate fan base. They have had on-field success and continue to have that success over time in a small market, so there is absolutely no plan whatsoever to move that team. There are interested parties in discussion with us about buying Dell Loy Hansen's interest in the club, and in the Monarchs, as you know, the Royals have announced that they will move to Kansas City that team has already been sold. Nothing further to announce on that but discussions continue to be ongoing and frankly productive.

**Q. You cited energy in the market. Why do you think there's more energy now compared to before they took over and secondly, what do you think an MLS Cup will mean to the fans who saved this franchise?**

DON GARBER: Well, you know, again, I think there's a couple of things that drive that. This city has embraced this club with the new ownership group, and that's a step -- a strong step that got us where we are today. And that support, while it was never absent, was not nearly as energized as it is today.

When the mayor and Alex Fisher and even the governor stepped in and said, hey, this team is going to stay here and you, the league, need to figure out a way to achieve that, there was an enormous amount of work from people locally and at the league level to try to find a solution that has us where we are today which is incredibly positive. We tend to focus on where we are today. I'm really not focused on what happened and why, because I think that is irrelevant to the success that we hope to be able to build on in the months, weeks and years ahead.

Then you have to add the Haslams in the mix. Jimmy and Dee are very involved. They are engaged at our board level. They have a local connection and that local Ohio base, I think is important. They have built a very, very strong organization and obviously have made massive financial commitments, both with the new stadium and training facility that should give the Columbus Crew the position of being one of the top MLS clubs in the League.

As I mentioned, there's sponsor interest, but we really do want to see an increase in fan interest. The interest that you start seeing in some of these other markets, I'll use St. Louis as an example which has I think the fastest path to a sellout of their season tickets in the history of Major League Soccer, could be in the history of sports. We are hoping that all the energy that an MLS Cup host position would bring, along with the stadium, which is remarkable, will light up this market that we always believed in and always believed would be a great market for Major League Soccer. So we are optimistic about a bright future.

**Q. You guys agreed to put in a force majeure clause in the renegotiated CBA. To what degree will the return of fans determine whether that clause gets invoked?**

DON GARBER: The timing for the invoking of the force majeure is going to be way earlier than an understanding of when fans are going to be allowed in stadiums.

I mean, let's remember, we are at the peak of the pandemic today. This pandemic is raging a far deeper and more critical levels than it was even when we postponed the league in early March.

So the timing of those two things are not necessarily related. We negotiated hard for that clause but at this time, there's nothing really for me to add as to when and if that



clause would be triggered.

**Q. We have had had many conversations about the complicated Miami market. This year, finally get something going and then a lot of hurdles. Wondering if you can talk about your assessment of Inter Miami this year, what do you think?**

DON GARBER: I thought, listen, imagine this. We've talked I think since my first years in the League, so you've been at this a long time, so good for you and thank you for doing that.

This is a team that launched their season after ten years of anticipation without ever being able to play a home game until they returned in the summer. They did not get to play that game, as you know. That was days before we postponed -- canceled that game days before the full postponement of the season. They spent north of \$100 million on a temporary facility. They were in very positive discussions on a downtown stadium. They were in the midst of what I think would have been an unbelievably optimistic and energized level of passion at all levels. And it all kind of was shut down for them.

So the fact that they were able to get into the position they were, to be able to have a reasonably competitive season to get into the playoffs, to be able to get some fans into their stadiums, to be able to get guys like Pizarro on the field and to be able to have a very, very passionate and successful coach, and to do all of that during the pandemic as a new team, I think has been remarkable.

So I have said to some journalists who I thought were hard on Inter Miami, you have to really look at it through what it is they actually went through, which perhaps is more challenging than almost any other club. I have great faith in the ownership group. I have great faith in their ability to get the excitement back. The fan base obviously is very passionate, you saw that, with the brief number -- few number of games where they were allowed to have fans. Everything will be fine there.

**Q. It was reported earlier in the week, NBA is doling out \$30 million ahead of the upcoming season to each team. Given the financial losses and ripple effects of COVID, how are you working with clubs for additional help?**

DON GARBER: Well, I wish we were in a position to be able to sell in the private market hundreds and hundreds of millions of dollars to be able to distribute to our teams. You think about \$30 million, that distribution would do a lot to support the losses at the league level. When you start thinking about the total number of losses, \$30 million would

not solve that issue for all of our teams, right, so the losses have been dramatic.

So we have been able to secure some financing. Obviously our debt capacity is less than the other Major Leagues. Right now our teams have been able to manage through it through their own equity infusions and their own ability to put debt on their clubs up to the limit that we have established for our teams as all leagues do. We have not expanded the debt limit for our teams at this point. We are looking at alternative financing and there are a number of things, as you reported in the SBJ, that there are different groups that have come together, like ARCOS and others that are coming together and looking to make equity -- minority equity investments in teams. We have met with all of them to see if those possibilities exist.

But at this point, which is what our challenge is, our need to manage the losses through adjustments that we are making to our operating expenses is something we can control far greater or for better than we are able to control our ability to seek funding on the outside market. That's why we've laid off nearly 20 percent of the MLS staff, which was traumatic for all of us, particularly for the leadership, the leagues. The clubs have announced layoffs. We were able to get our players to take a five percent salary adjustment in 2020, and so many other things that we have had to do to manage our cash flows and ensure that we can remain strong and viable.

**Q. You said earlier that talks regarding the sale of Salt Lake have been productive. Does MLS anticipate taking over the sale in January, and if so, will that mandate include the stadium and other facilities or just the franchise rights to the team? Also, it's been more than three months since a team retained a law firm to investigate. Can you update the status?**

DON GARBER: E have completed our investigation and will announce the findings after MLS Cup. Sullivan & Cromwell, leading investigators have led that investigation. We completed it several weeks ago and we will announce it shortly.

MLS is prepared to take over the sales process for Real Salt Lake and Utah soccer holdings. That is the entire entity of Utah soccer holdings, other than the Utah Royals, it is the facilities, it is all the other elements within it, RSL, Rio Tinto, etc. While we are not announcing that that's happening today, our tried to take over the sales process is soon and it's more likely than not that we will be assuming that role in the weeks -- I'll just say within the next 30 days.

**Q. I'm not seeing too much open space around here. Assuming the pandemic reseeds at some point, but**

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**does the league place a high priority on the Revolution getting a stadium in Boston?**

DON GARBER: I saw a great view that Robert and Jonathan did, local paper so they talked about that and I think John than talked about his disappointment that they were not further along. As you know, developing these stadiums in cities like New York City and Boston, Chicago, are very, very difficult for all the reasons you would expect. They did invest in their new training ground, I think it's one of the great ones in our league and they have made investments on the player front, a lot of exciting things going on with that club, it was good to see them go as far as they did this year and the stadium remains a priority. Robert and Jonathan, they talk about it at board meetings, they talk about it publically. They remain committed to building a stadium in downtown Boston.

What the timing of that is is something that you can get -- you've got a good relationship with the two of them to get any more details on the timing, either from them or from Brian, but I am confident they will be playing in a soccer stadium as I am confident all those other MLS markets that are looking to very well stadiums are looking to achieve their plans as well. It doesn't get any easier when you lose a year of timing and all the other tax implications with municipal ties and the like due to the pandemic.

**Q. What sense do you have for the Canadian teams in 2021 in terms of where they will play?**

DON GARBER: We're concerned about it, and we obviously have Larry Tannenbaum is a very active member of our board and you know what their plans are with the Raptors and I want to give a real expression of support and gratitude to the Toronto players, Montréal players and traveling down to Orlando to play in their Champions League game. These are enormous challenges for players and staff. We don't have any news on what's going to happen with the Toronto MLS teams.

We are certainly hopeful that we are going to be able to play in our home markets but it's too early to make a guess on that. I've been impressed with how the Canadian government has managed through the pandemic. I just read very positive news about vaccine accessibility and availability in Canada. Let's hope that they are able to get through it quickly and we can play our games in our home markets and teams can then travel back and forth no different than the other MLS clubs south of the border.

**Q. Do you think that the future of MLS is going to rely on its capacity to convince the next players to shine in MLS and how are you going to make that happen?**

DON GARBER: It's a good question and one that you know from your background and where you are, there are countries like France where some of their best players develop in their clubs and they are sold on to other leagues for whatever reason makes sense for that player or for the club that has developed that player. I think you'll start seeing more and more young players being developed at MLS clubs. Some of them, Jordan Morris would be an example in Major League Soccer, Landon Donovan did that for the vast majority of his career and he was one of the first guys to come and apply his trade entirely in Major League Soccer, and then some of them will get sold on. Aaronson in Philly is a good example of that. It was a sale of a good, young American player for us. I think it's a positive for American soccer and it provides owners for more and more rationale on the investments they are making on the youth development side and academy side and now the funding of MLS next.

So it's a careful balance and I think that balance will move and ebb and flow over time. I kind of like where it is today. I think we're in a good spot and I'm pleased today when I see say sale like the Aaronson sale where maybe four or five years ago I would have been disappointed because I think we have so many players that are exciting in our league.

Part of the excitement is to see them grow and create value for their team but also create value for the narrative of playing MLS Academy, it could be a path to college. It could be a path to the first team at MLS or it could be a path to one of the large Champions League playing leagues in Europe.

**Q. Talked earlier about momentum and how it was impacted by everything that happened this year, can you speak a little bit going forward in terms of momentum, how everything will have impacted the negotiations related to a new national broadcast deal and also what you mentioned -- momentum being related to using the 2016 World Cup as something that the league and all its clubs can take advantage of.**

DON GARBER: That's a good question, clearly this year plus shut down has caused a delay. It's delayed our expansion and plans and focus, and the things we need to do to build the league to ensure we can maintain the league in a safe and healthy way for our players. I don't think it will have an effect on our media negotiations at all.

I don't think it will have an effect on our media negotiations at all. That agreement, those agreements expire at the end of 2022 so that we have time to be able to rebuild all of the excitement and momentum on that front. I will point out, you know, we had our highest network, non-MLS Cup





playoff game on Thursday night when Kansas City played Minnesota live primetime Thursday night on fox. Our playoff ratings have been strong. Our ratings overall have held up at a time when other sports ratings for the most part have decreased.

So I feel pretty good about the growing fan base that we have and their connection to our broadcast partners, both nationally and locally. Clearly we've got a delay in some of our stadium projects and that's to be expected but these are the cards we were dealt, and it's no different than what you've had to deal with in the media space. We all have to look at what we've learned from this, how can we try to avoid it going forward and that's work that we all need to do and start thinking about the work that the sports industry needs to do to ensure that we have consistent testing to make sure that we can test more regularly and get quicker results. Perhaps it's even testing fans when they come into stadiums.

There's so much work and investment that's going to need to happen on that front. I do think that you'll see us investing a lot in innovation and technology and you're start seeing more and more unique things happening on the broadcast front and I'm excited about that.

Overall, as I said to the question as it relates to the labor front, as it relates to Columbus, I try not to look back. You can't be in the soccer business and spend your time worrying about the past. You've got to get focus on the future and the future for MLS is very bright. And we are going to be here bigger and better and stronger in the years to come.

**Q. The timing of this with Columbus in the final this time around, Austin is going to be in the draft next week, just thinking about the State of the league three years ago and the number of questions on that topic and I was wondering if you can sort of reflect on the progress that's been made both particularly in Austin that looks like it's going to be the next expansion in this league and what it means to the team to have a future if both of those market?**

DON GARBER: It's a good question. As I said I don't focus on the past. When I think about what we experienced at this time last year, you know, I knew, our owners knew, and the people that we were in negotiations with knew that we were going to end up in a result that is going to be very positive for Major League Soccer, for our fans, for an investing owner and new ownership group.

But we needed to go through that process and it was a traumatic one, and I don't expect that every member of those constituents that were involved in that would look at

it the same way. But when you look at where we are now, we have a new ownership group in Columbus that is deeply connected, deeply embrace, building a brand new stadium and what could be better than that. We have an owner in Austin that has built one of the more exciting new brands with a great ownership group and a fun and committed partner in Matthew McConaughey with a brand new stadium, hundreds and hundreds of millions of dollars invested in that facility we enormous popularity and connection.

When you think about where we are today, we went from a situation that had negativity associated with it and we are now \$50 million more at least invested in Major League Soccer in those two markets with a brand new ownership group in one of them. I am optimistic about both cities and Columbus, some people might not think it's true but I love that city and I'm grateful to all those that worked hard to get the support to get behind the Crew stadium in that city. I still keep in touch with Alex Fisher and have great respect for him, and when we kick off in Austin, it's going to be one of the great moments in MLS history. It's exciting for them and I think great things will happen in Austin.

**Q. You've been talking about stadium progression throughout the league, but obviously with what happened in preseason in 2020 going on with the National stadium, how much has the progress of that stadium measured to your expectations going into this next season as they have begun construction obviously in the context of everything that went on last year? That's my first part of the question. My second part is more about on the field. Is National going to permanently play in the Eastern Conference?**

DON GARBER: I'll answer the last one. That's an easy one. They will play there next year but I can't really respond to what's going to happen after that but they will be in the Eastern Conference next season.

The stadium project in Nashville was not an easy one and it had its ups and downs and new political leadership created all sorts of trauma and created some delays and created some challenges for John Ingram and Nashville FC to overcome. But what does it say about John and his family that they were able to get through that, and John is just one of the more -- most optimistic and steady individuals I've ever dealt with in my career. He never loses hope. He has such passion for the City of Nashville and loves the team and was so excited with their playoff run, and they put together a fun and exciting team.

And when you see that team playing in its new stadium you can imagine it's going to be rocking in yellow and fun things that will capture the color and brand that is Nashville. We



undoubtedly have been delayed but are back on track. The last obstacle was eliminated, and we are optimistic we are on a good path.

**Q. MLS did a great job to continue the tournament during the pandemic. Is there a plan in the future to reduce economic losses to the club?**

DON GARBER: Again, the clubs are going to have to manage their economics as diligently as possible. When we look at next year, just listen to Mr. Fauci who doesn't believe that you're going to see fans back in stadiums until the summer, we are concerned about when we are going to be able to at least have an opportunity to have fans attend our games and revenues from ticketing and sponsorship and concessions related to that. We will make adjustments as we have, cuts to programs and staffing and other adjustments to how we go about our business, and that is the reality of managing a pro sports league in the middle of a pandemic. Not much more I can really say about that.

**Q. You teased before about St. Louis and upcoming expansion news. What have you liked about the progress so far?**

DON GARBER: I'm smiling now because even out of darkness there is light, right. I have to say one of the bright lights this year was my discussions with St. Louis, and they are so optimistic about MLS and the City of St. Louis. Their brand launch was spectacular, terrific logo. They have done an enormous amount of work in both on and off the field. Hiring Les heir sporting director was bold and I think will give them the positioning of one of those clubs that's going to have a European way of going about how they are developing players and you'll probably see that with some of the players that they ultimately signed.

Their ticket sales, as I mentioned, they have shattered records. It's crazy, 30,000 season tickets deposits in 30 minutes. I don't know how that computer could handle that many requests in that short a period of time. They had 30,000 seats reserved in one day, in 24 hours and they are working to convert all of those. Just a few days I saw their most recent renditions for the stadium and whole project, going from the Gateway it's going to be fantastic. Caroline and her group have been very involved in the board meetings. It's going to be fun. It's going to be great for St. Louis, a long time coming.

I'll finish that I lived in a town where Yogi Berra was a resident and I once bumped into him in a local deli and I said, "Hey, Yogi, I just heard about this movie, the Game of Our Lives," which is a movie produced about the 1950 World Cup team primarily with players from the hill. And I

said, "Do you know any of those guys?" He said, "Obviously, I was a better soccer player than I was a baseball player." So I know there's great, great history in the City of St. Louis. A lot of good things are going to come out of that city.

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