

Major League Soccer Media Conference

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Don Garber

Press Conference



DON GARBER: Thank you very much. Good afternoon, everybody. Welcome. And thanks for joining me once again today. You know, at least to me, it seems like yesterday that we were in Portland for MLS Cup and New York City FC's first MLS championship. And as you all know, we had the shortest off season in history, but it's great to officially kick off season 27, which we're sure to be, as Dan mentioned, a really extraordinary year for our league and for our sport. We're looking forward to seeing fans back in our stadiums all year, and that starts with the 14 matches that we're going to have on our opening weekend.

Before I take your questions, and we've been doing this, at least for me, for the last 23 years, I'd like to take a few minutes and just take a look at the year ahead and reflect on what's really been an incredible period of growth for MLS, especially during the last five years, and that's kind of what I'm going to focus on a bit in my remarks today. It's been driven by investment, by research and by a lot of progressive and collaborative thinking from our owners, from our team staffs, from our players, from everybody what we call the MLS ecosystem that has put us in a position where we've just experienced an incredible shift, a seismic shift, that is showing us all that there's really no limit to where Major League Soccer can go in the years ahead. By all measures I think everybody would agree the progress has been remarkable, but the most important period of growth and opportunity is really in the years ahead leading up to the World Cup.

Between 2017, five years ago, when Atlanta and Minnesota debuted and now 2022, we've added eight new teams, and all of this growth, both in our markets, on the field and off the field and the momentum, have come particularly despite some major disruptions and challenges that have marked the last two years for all of us, and certainly for Major League Soccer.

This year we're looking forward to Charlotte FC, who will play their home opener on March 5th before what we expect to be an MLS record of nearly 75,000 fans at Bank of America Stadium. They will join MLS as our 28th team. And you've heard me say this, those of you who have

known me for many years. We've been very focused on expanding our league in the Southeast, and as our geographic footprint continues to grow in that part of the United States, I think it will be a very historic moment for our league, for our sport, as the Carolinas is a hotbed for the sport of soccer enter our league in just a few weeks, at least the home game in a few weeks. Over the same five years we have opened nine new stadiums, and that number will go to 11 with new stadiums that will open this year in Nashville, later this year in Saint Louis, and all of them are really spectacular, over-delivering for their players, giving them a home they can call their own, fans that same feeling of celebrating something very specific for our sport and for their team, and very importantly, for their communities.

During qualifying for this year's FIFA World Cup, our stadiums in Austin, Cincinnati, Columbus, Minnesota have provided a great home field advantage for the U.S. Men's National Team down here. The U.S. will have that competitive edge again in their final home match of the qualifiers later on this month against Panama at Exploria Stadium, the home of Orlando City FC. Earlier that day BMO Field will host the Canadian National Team's final home opener. And as I'm sure you know that this year's SheBelieves Cup is taking place at the LA Galaxy's Dignity Health and FC Dallas's Toyota Park, providing home for both the men's and the women's national teams here in the U.S., and of course, up in Canada.

As you've heard me say many, many times, a lot of this momentum and this growth has started with our ownership.

The league was built by our founders, Phil Anschutz, the Kraft family, Lamar Clark and Dan Hunt. And in just the last five years, we've added more and more great partners to what is considered by many in our business to be one of the best ownership groups in all of professional sports. In just the last eight months alone, the Wilf family purchased Orlando City and the Pride. Ted Segal bought the Houston Dynamo and the Dash; and David Blitzer and Ryan Smith -- Ryan, the owner of the Utah Jazz -- purchased Real Salt Lake. In addition, dedicated, resourceful and very, very committed, involved owners like Arthur Blank, Bill McGuire, Carl Lindner, Meg Whitman, Larry Berg and his partners at LAFC, Dee and Jimmy Haslam in Columbus, Carolyn Kindle Betz and her family in Saint Louis, John Ingram in Nashville, Joe Manseuto in Chicago, and our newest owner, David Tepper, are among those that have



diversified the thinking around the MLS Board of Governors table, something that I think is really, really crucial to helping MLS to be bold and innovative as the world of soccer and the world of sports continues to evolve. Their investment, their ideas, everything that they've done as they've entered the league, have helped play a big role in continuing the rise of our standing in the world of soccer and in the world of sport.

Like any company, your product drives your success, and when it comes to player development and player acquisition on the field, these last five years have been transformational, certainly probably the most important era in Major League Soccer's history. The dramatic shift has helped through the simultaneous focus and success of two key factors, the development of elite players through MLS academies and the acquisition of world class international talent we're making Major League soccer their league of choice. And I think you've seen this stat. If you haven't heard it, it's pretty astounding. This past off season MLS ranked in the Top 5 among global soccer leagues anywhere in both transfer fees received for player exports and transfer fees spent to acquire top talent from around the world, reiterating our commitment to being a major player in the global transfer market. It's very clear that there's a global demand from the biggest clubs in the world for our young players, and those are players that are developed in our MLS Academy system. According to a FIFA's most recent report, the close of the European transfer window, the winter window as we call it, the U.S. -- the United States Major League Soccer ranked fourth in the world in transfer fee receipts for exports, behind only England, France and Portugal. That's a five-time increase over the previous five years.

And it's also clear, at least to me, that to be, like all the top leagues around the world, it's about both selling and buying players. Since January five clubs set new highs for what they spent to bring in top international players, and the overall investment in buying players league wide has increased by six times over the last number of years. Obviously, as I talk about an important year, we are in a World Cup year, and that has us starting our season earlier and ending earlier than ever before. Once again, MLS players are contributing to their national teams at record levels. Looking at a complete picture during the fall, this fall qualifying window, MLS ranked sixth among all global soccer leagues for players competing in World Cup qualifying matches. With dozens of MLS players expected to represent their national teams this fall in Qatar, we're confident that our league will have a record number of participants playing in the World Cup.

And what a great time it's been for the Canadian National Team. 2017, just a couple of years ago, five years ago,

Canada's FIFA ranking was 117. Today they're ranked at an all-time high of 33, and are in first place in CONCACAF region in World Cup qualifying. Back in 2006 when we announced Toronto FC, I said at our press conference that the real measure of MLS's contributions to the sport of soccer in Canada would be when their national team qualifies for the World Cup and our three leagues in Canada and the league overall would be major drivers of the success of the Canadian National Team, and when it qualifies for Qatar, it will be a very, very proud moment for all of us.

Looking ahead, as I mentioned, this is truly the most important era for our sport looking forward. This year, besides the debut of Charlotte, opening new stadiums in Nashville and St. Louis, the MLS Cup right before the national teams leave for Qatar, 2022 marks the first season of MLS NEXT Pro, our new league to complete the player pathway, from MLS NEXT to the first teams for the first roster of Major League Soccer. The match schedule for MLS NEXT Pro will be announced on Thursday. We've just launched the MLS NEXT Pro website. Be sure to check it out. It's going to be an important part of Major League Soccer's investment and our future in the years ahead.

This also will be a time where we hope that our commitment to diversity, equity and inclusion continues to provide job opportunities for people of all races, genders, ethnicities and backgrounds to help contribute to the growth of MLS on and off the field; and I am incredibly proud of the work that Sola Winley, our head of DEI, has done at the legal office, and the MLS DEI committee that's consisting of owners, ex-players, of members of MLS Black Players for Change, our MLS Pitch Black internal group, et cetera, et cetera. Last year we've made strong enhancements to our diversity hiring policy. You heard me talk about that at MLS Cup. And later this week we're going to have a very important announcement on our ongoing efforts to make tangible contributions to advancing racial justice.

So I'm sure you're going to have a couple of questions on those topics and many more. So I welcome the opportunity to address as many of them as I can. Thanks for your time this afternoon, and I look forward to your questions.

Q. Good afternoon, Commissioner. Appreciate your time today. You spoke to us in 2019, on a much rainier day, about how Bank of America Stadium was not going to be a stadium that was football specific and just happened to have soccer being played there. The teams obviously put in 50 million in soccer-specific renovations, but is the conversation about a new



soccer-specific stadium in Charlotte or the Carolinas something that's ongoing with David Tepper? And what have you heard about the latest number -- you alluded to 75,000, but what have you heard about the latest number for March match?

DON GARBER: Right. I think right now David and his team are very focused on ensuring that Bank of America is the best possible home stadium for Charlotte FC. Any discussions as it relates to what their future plans are with that stadium or anything beyond that, I think, is something that you should speak to Nick Kelly about or speak to David about. I'm very pleased with the development of the club on and off the field. Obviously they've got great level of excitement with their fan base, and I'm hearing it could push 75,000, but we'll wait and see when we're there in just two weeks' time.

But, you know, I've got a lot of faith in David and his belief in the game. You were at that opening press conference. I mean he could not have been more passionate. I think they've made some organizational changes, which I anticipate will be very positive for the club, both, by the way, for the football team and for the soccer team. So I'm very encouraged by everything that they've done and excited for them joining our league.

Q. Commissioner, I had a two-part question for you. The first is you made reference to some changes at the top. Tom Glick was obviously a big part of the bid, had the most extensive experience in soccer of anyone in the Tepper organization. So how concerned are you about that? And, secondly, how will you benchmark business success for this team this year? Is it a matter of revenue? Is it a matter of profitability? Is it a matter of something else I'm not thinking of?

DON GARBER: Well, you know, listen, Tom is a long-time member of the sports business community and has had a great career. His tenure there is something that I think David can chat about. It's not really for me to really comment on. We've known Nick Kelly for a really long time. Nick has been around the sports business for many years, and he's well known to all of us; and when he joined the club, we were very excited. So I have great confidence in their ability to take what has been started and take it to a higher level.

You know, as it relates to the measures of success, Charlotte is an exploding market, and I think you know that being there. It's one of the top markets for millennials. There are lots of big corporations moving there. They've been doing an unbelievable job with their corporate sponsorship work. They have been very ambitious with what it is that they've looked to do in terms of how they've

been thinking about their academy and the development of the sporting side. So I think with every new team you want to see them do well on the field in the best they can, and you also want to see them do well off the field. And what those measures are in their first year is really less specific than that. We want them to be relevant. They want them to be popular. We want them to have a buzz in the community. You want to have fans excited and be able to cheer for some goals and hopefully be there for some success at home. That's the best way I can describe it.

Q. Don, I wanted to ask you, obviously you've talked a lot about Charlotte coming in, and we know St. Louis comes in a year after. Is it fair to say at this point Las Vegas is all but in? If so, are you looking beyond 30? Is it 32? Is it 36? What's your latest outlook and time frame?

DON GARBER: Well, it's not fair to say that they're all but done, Steve. Expansion deals are complicated in any market, and certainly going to a place that requires a soccer-specific stadium, you have to be sure that everything is aligned in the community, everything's aligned with building a fan base, everything's aligned politically. And certainly we've gotta get a deal done with Wes and his partner. But we are making a lot of progress. We do hope to finalize something in the first third of the year and giving us many, many years before that team gets launched. But I could not be more excited about working with Wes. He's had great success in business, great success with the NBA. Nassef Sawiris, his partner, is a wonderful man and he's got a lot of international soccer experience and loves the sport.

Beyond Las Vegas, I've said this in the last couple of times that we've been together with the media. We've gotta pause and get our 30 teams up and going, and then we can decide if Major League Soccer is going to expand beyond 30 to 31 or to 32. When we said we were going to have 28 teams, we never thought we would go beyond that; and then when we had a path to 30, we never thought we'd go beyond that. As soccer becomes more popular and more cities see the opportunity with their fans and their communities to host a first division MLS club, we've gotta process all that and determine whether MLS will be a 32-team at some point in the future. But we've got some time to figure that out, Steve. There is no timetable for any decision beyond 30 teams.

Q. I understand the teams are still in the process of finalizing rosters, but do you have a sense of the vaccination rate among your players? Obviously rules are changing as numbers and the pandemic changes, but there were some instances with border causing a problem last year. How do you see it this year?

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DON GARBER: Well, you know, right now, leading into the season we're 97 percent vaccinated. So that's the vast majority of all of our players. We will, similar to the other leagues, only test vaccinated players if they are symptomatic as opposed to the protocols that we've had in the past; and unvaccinated players will be tested more frequently. Specifically, we'll determine that in the week or two to come. You know, we continue, as you know, to evolve our medical health and safety protocols as the regulations come down from different states and different provinces. And, clearly, we're paying close attention to what the rules are going to be in Canada, and that's work in progress.

What I will say is I applaud our players and our union for being very supportive of doing everything they can to keep themselves healthy and safe, and I hope that the 97 percent grows to 100 percent at some point.

Q. Commissioner, quick update on your media rights. I know you've been on record as saying at the end of the first quarter. If my calculations are correct, it's about a month away now. And, also, the NFL has put out some revenue projections. Is there a number -- and, if so, what is that number? Can you give me a range that you would like to see the league at by the end of this decade?

DON GARBER: That's a good question, and I applaud Roger and the NFL owners for being as ambitious and as successful as they've been. We have not put a specific financial number on the wall and said this is where we want to be ten years from now. What I will say, though, is that we are working on a very comprehensive strategic plan as to what Major League Soccer will look like over the next five years, and that's work-in-progress. And at some point, perhaps, maybe at the All-Star Game or later in the year when that project has been completed, we can share some of those strategic initiatives and details with the public.

As it relates to our media deal, we continue to make progress. I hope to be able to be in a position to finalize something by the end of March. We're not there yet. We continue to be very encouraged by all of the interest, both from our current media partners, ABC, ESPN, Fox and Univision, TSN and TVI in Canada, and obviously our global partners. And, remember, but I think I might have mentioned this to you, it is an unprecedentedly unique package with every single game, whether it's a traditionally national linear game or it's a local game that has been aired locally in our markets in the U.S. in particular, or it's a global game. And all of that is in a package along with the Leagues Cup; and as you would expect, there's a lot of interest in that, but as the world continues to shift from a

media perspective, we're talking to anybody that is in this business, whether it's a streamer, whether it's a more traditional media company. So I'm encouraged by the interest, and hope to be able to finalize something soon.

Q. Wanted to follow up on Steve's question about Vegas. Considering you are looking at a pause after 30, could you elaborate on why Vegas is the right market for the last team before you sort of enter that pause? I realize market size isn't everything, but it's the 40th ranked media market in the country, and they already have two pretty new sports teams that'll be competing for time and eyeballs there. By my count I think there are seven markets in the Top 25 where you still don't have an MLS club. So could you help me understand why Vegas is the right choice before you enter this reevaluation?

DON GARBER: That's a good question. I would say market size in the future of media is probably going to be less important than market engagement. So we're thinking about -- and it's an interesting part of what we do -- where is the future growth and opportunity happening in North America and where do we think MLS can be successful. What are the demographics in that community? What's the corporate base in that community? What's the international appeal in that community? What's the likelihood of getting the right stadium in the right location? And not thinking about it today, but sports teams for a long time, what it will look like over 10 years or 20 years or 30 years or beyond for generations. And when we look at Las Vegas and all the growth and opportunity and the opportunity of a train, an electric-speed train that will connect Los Angeles to Las Vegas, we, like the other leagues, are very bullish about the market.

Q. I have a question about at the beginning of your talk you mentioned the stats on transfers in and out for MLS. As the league continues to grow from a competitive standpoint on the field, how do you think about the long-term balance of transfers going out, transfers coming in? Do you want to see it growing? At some point does that start to slow down? How do you think about the balance of the in-and-out of the transfers?

DON GARBER: I think the transfer market is a living organism. I don't think that, as I've been accused of saying, MLS is going to be a selling league. What I really said back at that press conference many years ago is that we need to become more of a selling league than we were, and clearly we've been able to achieve that. And certainly in this transfer window we were among the world leaders in terms of incoming transfer fees paid. And what we do, and I think it's something that our product strategy committee is

focused on, our chief soccer officers are focused on, all the internal people that work on all the data analytics internally on the sporting side, is to try to get the right balance, what do we want our player pool to look like, how ultimately can we be the most attractive to our current fans and future fans. How do we convert those people that are fans of other leagues to believe in Major League Soccer and how do we convert those people that are just coming into the sport to be connected to their club, because they could identify with a young 15-year-old or a 16- or a 17-year-old who's going to come up through the academy show great success and then perhaps become a worldwide star should that player be transferred overseas. So I don't think that these things are spikes. They oughta be able to work in a smooth way so that ultimately we can ensure that our player pool and the product that we are presenting to our fans is attractive and that the investments that we're making in development, but also in the incoming players that ultimately are going to work to improve the quality of play and make the quality of play more globally attractive has a nice balance to it. It is a science as much as it's an art.

Q. Commissioner, there's a U.S. Soccer Federation presidential election coming up soon, and you have a vote, and a lot of people would like to know who you're going to vote for. So if you don't mind my asking, who are you going to vote for?

DON GARBER: Nice try.

Q. Also, you're a board member. You were involved in the approval of the landmark settlement with the U.S. Women's Team that was announced this morning. What was it like to be part of that? And, of course, if you want to tell us who you're going to vote for, you're welcome to.

DON GARBER: You know I'm not going to do that, but it doesn't hurt to ask. Let me start with I do have a vote as a board member, and then Major League Soccer as a member is a member of the Professional Council, and we have a reasonable amount of influence because of the size of our league, the numbers of fans we have and et cetera, et cetera.

You know, I want to start and I'll kind of answer the question sort of -- both questions sort of with the same answer, if I can. I want to start by congratulating Cindy. What she's been able to achieve over the last couple of years managing the Federation during a pandemic, inheriting the spot, though she was recently elected, she was put into the position when Carlos resigned, and having to chart through a number of enormous challenges, not the least of which were multiple lawsuits and litigation with the

U.S. Women's National Team. And if it wasn't for her focus and her courage and her steadfastness, I don't believe that she would have been able to lead a settlement that was announced, as you know, today. So I want to congratulate her for that. There were other members of a committee that is chaired by one of the independent members who also was very focused on that. As a board member, I was kept up to speed on those negotiations, but for a wide variety of reasons, I was not even remotely involved in any of those discussions. I think it's time for the Federation to move forward with the U.S. Women's National Team, and I think that together they'll repair some of the challenges that they've had in the relationship. And then as you know, Jonathan, it's very important that the Federation gets a CBA finalized with both the Men's National Team and the Women's National Team. And when that happens, I think, together, both the men and the women can work to help grow the sport.

You know, as it relates to the election, we have not taken a position, and I don't plan to publicly do so, at least on behalf of Major League Soccer. For the first time, though, I will bring Cindy and Carlos, separately obviously, together to meet with members of the MLS Board of Governors so that the owners of Major League Soccer clubs, who have invested at this point well north of 12 billion dollars in the league, should have an opportunity to talk to the potential presidents to see who ultimately will lead the Federation during this very, very important part of era of growth leading up to the World Cup. And we'll see how that comes out. Obviously the election is in just about two weeks.

Q. I have a question about Portland. Given what happened there and what was reported last year about how they handled (indiscernible) audition to the WSL team, and given the fact that you guys just launched an investigation into how they handled the allegations against Andy Polo, what do you make of the state of ownership and leadership at the club at this point in time?

DON GARBER: Well, you know, listen, I have great faith in the Paulson family. Hank Paulson could be the most involved MLS board member, and I have enormous faith and confidence in Merritt Paulson, who has built from scratch one of the great sports teams in any sport in our country, if not throughout North America. I know that he's very passionate about his team, both the Portland Timbers and the Portland Thorns, and is going to cooperate in anything that is being reviewed, whether it's the Federation reviewing the issues with the NWSL, which Sally Yates is leading, or any other issues that Major League Soccer is looking at as to whether or not the investigation or the situation with Andy Polo was properly reported. We're

going through that investigation now. It's too early to talk about what the results of that will be. But once we do have a conclusion of that investigation, we'll make that -- those findings public.

Q. Commissioner, I just wanted to follow up on Sam's question regarding the Portland Timbers. In the league's view, should the Timbers have reported the May 23rd incident that has been alleged involving Andy Polo's alleged domestic violence? And is the league concerned in general about the recent scandals involving the Timbers ranging from the Polo incident and obviously the franchise's response to the Portland Thorns issues as well?

DON GARBER: Well, again, I mean, I don't want to be disrespectful and sort of saying I think I answered that with Sam's question. You know, the question as to whether or not that May 21 incident was properly reported is what we're reviewing. So we've gotta go through that process. And as I mentioned, when we do complete that, we'll disclose it. And that's not a local investigation by the Timbers. It's not an investigation by Major League Soccer. It is an MLS investigation managing an independent law firm that will take a look at whether it was properly reported. And as I said, you know, I have faith in the Paulson family. I have faith in Merritt and Hank, and we'll wait and see what comes out of this investigation, which is the only one that we really are engaged in, and then we'll make the decisions that we need to make once that investigation is concluded.

Q. How important does the league feel these CCL games are or your team, your league, as far as expansion, (indiscernible)?

DON GARBER: You know, they're very important. I mean I get asked this question a lot, you know, how are we going to measure ourselves against our neighboring league, Liga MX, and how are we going to manage our schedule and our investments to ensure that we can be more competitive against Liga MX in the Champions League. We've had our ups and downs. We've had some years where we've done really well and other years where we haven't, but it is a priority, as it is for them by the way, to be able to win that tournament and ultimately get a spot in the World Cup Championships.

It's important to note that that will take an advanced step when we launch in 2023 the recently announced Leagues Cup where our leagues will compete against each other in a knockout -- group play and then a knockout tournament and crown a champion, and the winner of that tournament will get a spot in the Champions League, and in various levels they get entry into the Champions League. So it's

one more path into what I think is a very important tournament.

I'll say to you and the rest of the group it's important that Concacaf becomes more relevant, becomes more popular and is able to drive more revenue and can stand toe to toe with any confederation. The group of confederations around the world are what govern soccer at the national team level and in intercontinental club competitions, and I'd like to see Concacaf become more and more successful, more and more popular, have their games become more important, so that when our teams are playing they get the kind of prize money that clubs are getting in other continental club competitions and ultimately provide us with a great platform of political influence as our country and as our region becomes more important with the eyes on this part of the world leading up to the World Cup.

Q. Thanks, Commissioner, for taking a question from up here in Montreal. We don't get a chance to speak to you very often. Commissioner, I remember a few years back you were here in Montreal, and I was present for that press conference, where you raised certain issues concerning the implication of the business community here, also the political will. The club has certainly had its challenges. At this moment they don't have a president. We know that there are renovation plans for the stadium, but that seems like it's also on hold. The rebrand didn't work very well. The team also chose not to enter MLS NEXT. I remember at the beginning when you guys first came in, you said, one day the All-Star Game will come here, and being in this market we can certainly understand why that hasn't happened yet. But if you could just give us a global thought and reflection on where this franchise is at at this moment, what you would like to see happen over the next couple of years here. Thanks.

DON GARBER: You know, it's a very good question. And, again, I'm going to start by saying -- and I know you know Joey and you know his commitment to the city, to the sport of soccer in Canada and obviously to the professional game with Major League Soccer. This is a guy that lives for his team and wants nothing else other than for it to be more popular, to be able to have a venue that ultimately could stand and shine like BMO Field and like many of the stadiums down here in the United States. But there have been challenges. There's a uniqueness to the stadium situation there with his ability to even invest in the stadium in a way that is rational so that he could continue to provide the amenities and the opportunity for fans to really engage in a modern way. I know Joey wants to do that, and he has frustrations that he has some limitations as to what he's able to do in a way that makes rational economic sense. He has had some challenges organizationally, but

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Joey was down here not too long ago, laid out his business plan and talked about how he wanted to get the branding right. I do think he's done that with the new brand. He managed that himself. And now he's very, very focused on building the right organization so that he can take the club to the next level. You know, Joey, and Larry Tanenbaum and Bill Manning in Toronto, and Greg Kerfoot and Jeff Mallett in Vancouver fully understand what's happening with soccer in Canada and that we've got a number of years before the World Cup is there, and all of them know how Major League Soccer and the professional game can continue to drive the growth and success and opportunity for the sport. And Joey is no different than his counterparts in Toronto and Vancouver in wanting to make soccer, professional soccer great in the country. So all I can tell you is I have faith in Joey and his family, and I wish him best as he continues to invest a lot of money in trying to make that team more successful.

Q. So, Don, this is the first time in a long time that MLS is selling its media rights deal without it being combined in the same package as U.S. Soccer. In your eyes what are the advantages of selling this package on your own? And does MLS lose out on anything by not being partnered in this rights deal with U.S. Soccer?

DON GARBER: You know, it's a very good question. I haven't talked about it for many years, so I appreciate the question. Let me start by saying when we, in 2002, took over by purchasing the rights to the U.S. Soccer Federation, along with purchasing the rights for the English language media rights for the 2002 and 2006 World Cup, it was done out of necessity for those properties. FIFA wasn't able to sell the English language rights, and U.S. Soccer did not have anybody bidding for those rights at that time. So MLS invested in those rights. Put FIFA aside, it worked out very well getting the market rejuvenated and creating an interest in the game, particularly on the English language side, because they had no challenges on the Spanish language side; and then 2010 and beyond, they were on their own, and look at how successful that's been.

Over the last 20 years Major League Soccer's marketing company, Soccer United Marketing, managed both the media rights and the sponsorship rights and built a business for U.S. Soccer, one that now they are managing on their own. And in many ways, while we were a strategic partner as an agent representative, because the money that was generated was invested back into the sport as opposed to an agency that would just use it for whatever business purposes they had, you know, operating as an agent, we put them in the business, and that's a positive. U.S. Soccer has built out a commercial company. They

are certainly very capable and have gone out and renewed their deal with Nike. They're out in the market, and I'm hopeful they'll be able to finalize a media deal soon. But it's a very different business for us and for them than it was back in the day.

As I mentioned, look at our media package. It's a global package. It's got 5 to 600 games, including MLS NEXT, MLS NEXT Pro. It has all of our local rights, which have never been offered before, our Spanish and English rights, our Leagues Cup. The idea that we could have managed the package of U.S. Soccer games when you have hundreds and hundreds and hundreds of other games in that package gets complicated to the point of it being impossible. So while there was a lot of buzz on U.S. Soccer making decision to go on their own, it was one that was in their best interest, and frankly, it was one that was in Major League Soccer's best interest. So I have absolutely no concerns whatsoever that will have any effect on our negotiations. And, frankly, if I were to sit and look from afar, I think it sets up U.S. Soccer to be on their own, like any property would want to be when they have the capability to be able to manage their rights. And I wish them the best. I truly do. I'm a board member, and I want nothing more than for them to be successful.

Q. Hi, Don. Thanks for your time today. I wanted to ask about the efforts to improve diversity, equity and inclusion, particularly when it comes to hires at clubs, coaching, staff, front office, that kind of thing. With one off season in the books under the new policy, what are your thoughts about how it's going so far? Is there anything that you think should be tweaked in terms of the policy? And to throw you a little bit of a curve ball, I'm wondering if any thought has been given to these efforts in encouraging female coaches or nonbinary coaches to be part of the pool of -- or any position, but particularly in coaching in the league.

DON GARBER: So let me -- I might wander around a little bit on this. I appreciate the question. So far we feel really good about where we are. Remember, the initiative is new. You know, when you have an initiative that requires, in this case, two black candidates for every technical position, that's a quantum shift from the policy we had in the past. And you have to have the pipeline to be able to provide opportunities for all those particular candidates. And as you know, the initiative was announced just a way back into the fall. I'm glad to see Ezra Hendrickson being hired. He's been in the league a long time as a player and as an assistant coach, and I'm proud that that hire was made, and we're excited about him and hope for success that he'll have in Chicago.

When you look at the policy itself, you know, diversity



hiring initiative, today there is so much focus on underserved categories, particularly in the black community, but we are also, while we're focused on that, focused on gender, and now I think we have four or five women CEOs or CBOs in our league. I think that's probably more than any other league. I'm very, very proud of that, and that's something that's just happened over the last year, year and a half. And I think you're going to start seeing more and more people from different underrepresented groups coming into our league. We are the league for new America. We have to reflect that in the people that are working for us on the field and off the field, and there is not only no resistance to that; it has been totally embraced by our ownership and by our new DEI committee and by Sola Winley, who's leading that effort quite capably internally.

As it relates to female coaches, I think it's a very, very good opportunity for us to really dig in deep. Perhaps it's with the United Soccer Coaches Association; perhaps it's internally going out into the community with both intern programs and training programs, but also in outreach programs, because I think nothing could be better than having more female or nonbinary coaches in our league. And I wouldn't see there be anything other than real interest should we be able to find those candidates. I appreciate the question.

Q. Don, I wonder, considering the growth that you talked about in this league and the transfers going out, the types of players you're signing and also the growth you've discussed you want to see from the league in the future becoming one of the best leagues in the world, has there been any discussion about changing or altering league rules? Not to change how much money can be spent; substantial money is already being spent, but in how that money is being spent and whether the buckets that exist, the U22 Initiative, TAM, DPs, Home Grows, all of these different buckets should continue in the way that they are right now or whether it should go to a more open system where teams can strategize however best fits their model and their ownership's model. Thank you so much.

DON GARBER: Paul, it's a good question, and maybe at some point it might be a separate discussion that we have media to sort of lay out some of the rationale behind why we have what we have. I think what we do is we share with you what it is and probably not enough of the planning that goes into why we make the decisions that we make. Just last week we had a products strategy committee meeting in Los Angeles, and Todd Durbin and Jeff Agoos and Alecko Eskandarian and that group, Fred Lipka, come together and plan for months to provide that committee with the data that they're collecting from the chief soccer

officers in terms of what it is that they think they need to put the right product on the field in their markets, and then how do we manage that with our collective bargaining agreement, our revenue plans and how do we make economic sense of the decisions that we're making, and then that goes into rules, if you will, or approvals that we need to have so that you could move forward in a very effective but efficient way.

I do hear a lot, particularly when I travel abroad, that we have restrictions that, you know what, I think somebody has said to me, when are you going to take the training wheels off? Well, when I travel around the world, they like the fact that there are the guidelines and restrictions and procedures in place to ensure that you can take a look at your entire player pool and be sure that we're able to have a product that is competitive with all of those leagues that are exposed here, but also, how do we compete effectively within our means with our competition, on-the-field competition in Mexico.

So I'm very confident that we will continue to evolve the system that we have, to achieve the product on the field that makes the most sense for our league. And that's not just owners. It's for our fans; it's for our players; it's for our local teams staff, and it's for our -- ultimately our positioning as we continue to try to be one of the top leagues in the world. And you referenced the U22 Initiative, TAM and designated TAM and how we continue to look at our Homegrown player rules and what it is that we're doing with MLS NEXT and MLS NEXT Pro. Dozens and dozens of people are working year around on ensuring that we have the right rules and guidelines in place so that ultimately we can be the league that we become, which is continuing to evolve and continuing to get better. So best thing I could say is, you know, stay tuned because the rules might change, you know, sometime in the future.

Q. First of all, thanks. It's a bit of an unintentional followup to Paul's question. We did not plan it this way. Trust me. The last few days, and actually starting last year Lionel Messi gave a quote to a paper in Europe that he would like to experience life in U.S. and experience the league, MLS. James Rodríguez, Neymar within the last two days have said publicly that they'd like to play here. What are your thoughts on that, on that caliber of player wanting to come to the U.S., or at least publicly stating that interest? And not only that, but in the stage of the career that they're in. They're older players; they're not getting any younger, and within that evolution that you just spoke about, will there be mechanisms to allow players like the top players in the world, Neymar, Messi and Cristiano perhaps to come to MLS at the right time.

DON GARBER: That mechanism and system exists today. I mean anybody could sign Messi today and pay him what they want to pay him as a designated player, should Lionel decide that he wants to play in Major League Soccer. And that's the same for Neymar or for any other player. You know, I think what's been happening, and this has been a stated focus for the league, is we want our story to be about young players who are coming here at the earliest stages in their career, or in the prime of their careers and making our league their league of choice. You've seen a dramatic shift from where we were to where we are today. You know, if you look at Amauri. You look at Velasco, you look at Torres, these are young players that we were competing against the top international clubs, and they decided to come to Major League Soccer. Shaqiri is 30. You've got players that are coming at 30 that, you know, personally, I don't think 30 is old when you're a Major League Soccer player. And when we look at bringing in players at 30 and younger than that, I'm proud of that. As it relates to when they get older, if that makes sense, that's great. If they're not here to come and play and be a great contributor to their club and to our league and to respect the league and its fans, then we don't want them in Major League Soccer. We don't need to bring in a big-name player at the end of their career because they've decided they'd like to retire at MLS. And I think there have been no shortage of players towards the end of their career that have been great MLS players, and perhaps one of the great examples of that, David Beckham is one of the great examples of that. I can't imagine what Major League Soccer would be without players like that. But you'll also think about Josef Martinez, and you think about Almirón and you think about some of the players that have come in recently, they are what is making Major League Soccer the league it is today, and it really speaks to the previous things we've talked about. It's the transfers out, and it's the transfers in, and that creates something that ultimately is going to be attractive to our fans and I think earn the respect of our media and those who follow the league and earn the respect of our partners. And that's what I'd like to see happening going forward. Interestingly, when Zlatan left Major League Soccer, nobody said that he went to go retire in Italy; and, frankly, I was insulted by that, because if Zlatan came to us at the same age he went back to Milan, it would have been a retirement move on his part. And he worked his tail off at MLS, and he's working his tail off in Serie. So I'm not quite sure why we're viewed differently, but that is what it is.

Q. I'm going to jump ahead to the 2023 season. St. Louis, right in the middle of the country, eastern conference. You got Chicago in one conference, Kansas City in the other. How are you going to decide which conference St. Louis goes in next season or have you already decided? And, ultimately, will the

identity of team number 30 decide where it ends permanently?

DON GARBER: You know, that's a question I don't have an answer to. There's probably some aspect of logic to that, Tom. But we're not going to make the decision on realignment yet. We don't have to right now. But, obviously, if we have more teams in the west or more teams in the east, it's going to affect those decisions. So you're just going to have to hang tight on that. It does give me an opportunity to talk about how impressed I am with Carolyn Kindle Betz and with Andy Taylor and the development of their team and the 50-plus-thousand season ticket deposits that they have. I took a virtual tour with Carolyn and Andy the other day of their stadium. I mean, this is what nobody ever dreamed of happening in Major League Soccer. You've been around this sport longer than I have. To think that we'd have an MLS team in St. Louis with a 500 million dollar project downtown with a great brand, with years to prepare to build a fan base and to build product that could deliver everything that people in St. Louis and the region want is everything that makes us really optimistic about Major League Soccer.

Q. Don, thanks for taking the time today. Sporting KC had to rework their television deal to get back into more homes in our market, announced a free streaming platform through, can access to help alleviate the issues that arose with their local TV deal. I believe you said the local rights are part of the negotiating package for your media rights deal you're seeking. So how is the league going to ensure that the issues that sporting and a few other clubs have come up markets is something that won't really be a problem going toward?

DON GARBER: We've gotta manage through that, and I think it's a good question. The world is changing and shifting dramatically. And we're going to have to make the right decisions to ensure that we're providing the best access for our fans, the right production model, the right opportunity for us to have a broad offering both in local markets but also nationally and internationally, and I think this is something that all sports teams and sports leagues are working through, and I'm confident that we'll end up in a situation that will be great for fans of Major League Soccer here and abroad but also great for fans in local markets like sporting Kansas City's great passionate fans.

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