

# 2023 MLS Cup

Friday, December 8, 2023

Columbus, Ohio, USA

Lower.com Field

## Commissioner

## Don Garber

### 2023 MLS State of the League Press Conference

COMMISSIONER GARBER: This 2023 MLS Cup between the Columbus Crew and LAFC is a terrific and a very fitting match-up, and it's capping off an epic, epic year for our league.

It's great to be back in Columbus. Soccer here in the city and in this region and in this state has such great soccer history. There's so much momentum and there's so much promise for our future.

In the last few years we've seen the Crew win MLS Cup in 2020 and the 2022 MLS NEXT Pro Cup. Lower.com Field, this beautiful facility that we're all in here today, is one of the great soccer stadiums in our league.

The Crew had 19 sell-outs this year alone and hosted countless big domestic and international soccer events. And Crew Stadium, the first soccer stadium ever built in our country, has been totally repurposed as the Ohio Health Performance Center.

A heartfelt thanks and congratulations to Jimmy and Dee Haslem and Pete Edwards and Whitney, here in the front row. Together, with the support of the city, their partners, fans and the community, the Columbus Crew is one of the great stories in our league history.

LAFC is back to defend their first MLS Cup. MLS has not had back-to-back champions since the LA Galaxy, which was over 10 years ago.

Our two teams in Los Angeles have built a passionate rivalry that stands with some of the best in our game -- Manchester City and Manchester United, Real Madrid and FC Barcelona, Boca Juniors and River Plate. And LAFC game is a must-see and must-attend experience. The club has achieved a rare standard of excellence since joining MLS five years ago.

I want to thank and congratulate their very committed and



passionate ownership group led by Bennett Rosenthal, Larry Berg and Brandon Beck, along with their staff, coaches, players and fans.

As we wrap our 28th season, I want to take a few minutes and reflect on what's been a transformational year for our league. It began with the launch of our exciting new partnership with Apple and MLS Season Pass.

In a matter of months, in just a few short months after the announcement, we literally created a production entity to bring over 1,000 MLS NEXT Pro and MLS NEXT matches in English and Spanish, along with thousands of hours of club and player-specific content. It was an unprecedented undertaking. We have some talent here in the room with us today.

Every game in over a thousand countries around the world on any device with no restriction. Fan response was very exciting and very positive. As Apple CEO Tim Cook said in a recent earnings call, "MLS Season Pass over-delivered on all of our expectations."

And this is just the beginning of a long-term partnership with the most innovative and important companies in the world. We look forward to continuing to grow and evolve together in the years to come. We have some Apple executives here today, and I want to say thank you to you guys.

And as you know, it was another important expansion year. It's hard to imagine that St. Louis, one of the founding cities for soccer in our country, didn't have an MLS team. Hard to believe all of that happened before this year.

We worked for many years to put together the right ownership group with the right stadium project, and we hit the jackpot.

Led by the Taylor family and CEO Carolyn Kindle along with Jim Kavanaugh they managed one of the best expansion-team launches in MLS history and, in our view, if not for the history or in the history of all of professional sports.

They built an incredible stadium and development center.



They sold out every game. They finished with the second highest points of an expansion team, any expansion club in our history.

St. Louis CITY set an entirely new bar for our next expansion team, which will come in 2025, San Diego FC, a great project and partnership with one of Egypt's most respected businessmen Mohamed Mansour, along with the Sycuan Native American tribe and the Right To Dream Academy. Stay tuned; there will be more news on that front in the months to come.

Earlier this year, we announced the extension of our long-term partnership with adidas, one of the most influential and important consumer-focused companies in our sport anywhere in the world. This renewal, along with the renewals of our other long-term partners, the presenter of our Cup and our playoffs Audi, AT&T, Captain Morgan and The Home Depot.

These renewals are indicative of how our league is delivering real value to the commercial community.

Once again, fans came out in record numbers this season. It started with two crowds of nearly 70,000 on our opening weekend and included an all-time high of nearly 83,000 on July 4th, a rescheduled match at the Rose Bowl for El Trafico, that rivalry match between the LA Galaxy and LAFC.

Including this game on Saturday, a league record of nearly 12 million fans have attended MLS matches this year.

We also set record highs for digital and social media engagement and merchandise sales. And thanks to our global audience on MLS Season Pass on Apple TV and our continued partnership with Fox, who will also be broadcasting this team along with TSN and RDS and great partnership with Univision, more fans watch MLS games here and around the world than ever before.

And then during what was shaping up to be the most successful season in our history, the greatest player to ever play the game made MLS his league of choice and joined into Miami. Leo Messi had many options for the next chapter of his iconic soccer-playing career.

The magnitude of his decision to join MLS cannot be overstated. A World Cup champion and eight-time Ballon d'Or winner, he's now playing in our league.

We're now just not part of the global conversation of sports, but one of the biggest stories in the world, and certainly one of the biggest stories this summer.

The eyes of the world are now on Major League Soccer, because the best player to ever play the game is here, and he's succeeding.

Like all of history's iconic athletes, Messi delivered in ways that few could have really imagined.

There's only handful of players who forever will be remembered as transforming a sport and delivering outside an arena. It's fair to say that Leo's game-winning free kick in Inter Miami's Leagues Cup match will go down as one of the great moments in our history.

Speaking of Leagues Cup, where Leo scored that goal, we've been working on an in-stadium tournament with Liga MX for several years. Our ambition was to produce something that's never been created for any league in any sport, pausing the regular season of two cross-border leagues for meaningful competition with real stakes on the line.

Leagues Cup was a smashing success on every measure. And as so many things this year went on to exceed so many of our expectations. And it's only the beginning. This is a tournament that will continue to grow in scale, in scope and in reach in the years ahead.

Importantly, one of the most valuable sporting developments over the past few years has been our continued investment in and the success of MLS NEXT, MLS NEXT Pro and MLS GO. Our commitment to the MLS player pathway is one of our biggest priorities.

We now have a firmly established development pyramid that mirrors the most important and valuable development systems around the world.

MLS NEXT is the most elite player-development experience in North America, and includes all of our academies in the top elite youth clubs in our country. There are currently 143 elite clubs playing in MLS NEXT with over 700 teams and over 15,000 players in that system.

MLS NEXT Pro provides our best young players with a platform to prove that they're ready to play at the next level, whether that be for their home club, whether it's for clubs abroad, or it's for our national teams.

Next year, there will be 29 MLS NEXT Pro teams with several independent clubs. We have an ambitious plan to bring pro soccer to dozens of new markets in the years ahead with teams in Carolina, Chattanooga, Cleveland and Jacksonville coming onboard very soon.



All of this is paying dividends. Aidan Morris and Patrick Schulte and Mo Farsi right here are shining examples of how the system worked for the Columbus Crew. And keep an eye on Miami's Benjamin Cremaschi, John Tolkin of the Red Bulls and Atlanta's Caleb Wiley, all great examples of players who have come through our pyramid.

I want to take a moment to thank our nearly 800 players and the MLSPA for their collaborative efforts in working with us to build a league and a sport and for supporting our communities that all of us can be proud of.

We can't thank them enough for the work that they do for being inclusive, for helping to build a diverse league, including just yesterday a great second step for our MLS ADVANCE program, a program that we have to develop underrepresented candidates for roles on the technical side and the business side to be employed throughout our ecosystem.

Looking forward, there's so much for us to be excited about. We're going to build on a second season with Apple and MLS Season Pass. We have Copa America coming in next season. The draw was last night. And it will be the second year for Leagues Cup.

In 2025 we'll have a debut of new team in San Diego. The CONCACAF Gold Cup will take place that summer, as well as the FIFA World Cup.

And of course, all of us in the soccer ecosystem couldn't be more excited about the World Cup coming here to North America in 2026.

For the next few years, North America will be the epicenter for the beautiful game.

And it begins soon. And all-time 10 MLS teams will be competing in early February in the CONCACAF Champions Cup. The 2024 MLS season will begin in late February, and the complete 2024 schedule will be announced on Wednesday December 20th.

**Q. You've detailed a lot of the triumphs of the league and the profile where the league is now. Where do you think MLS sits in the worldwide context of soccer excellence or play that, I guess I would call it where they stand in terms of the play that you're providing?**

COMMISSIONER GARBER: The best thing I could say is that our goal is always to be one of the top soccer leagues in the world, to be part of the global conversation.

That's the quality of our play on the field. It's the incredible facilities we have. It's the strength and commitment of our

ownership group, and it's the process in which we're managing sort of the overall growth and value of the league so that it can be continuing to have momentum in the years to come.

If you were to ask the question as to where does MLS fit and you asked that question in Europe, they would say that they look at us with admiration on all those measures.

We'll continue to evolve every aspect of our league, both on the field and off the field. And no different than any other league that is 27 years old as opposed to 100 years old. I think our best days, both on and off the field, are still ahead of us.

**Q. This season, with the addition of Leagues Cup and everything else, the teams have played a record number of games. Saturday's game will be the 53rd for LAFC. Houston, RSL, they've all played more than 45. Having gone through that season, players and coaches complain about the fixture crunch. Are you considering anything to do with roster size, maybe more allocation money, maybe a fourth DP to help alleviate some of that strain?**

COMMISSIONER GARBER: I think the biggest challenge of any soccer league around the world is managing a schedule. And unlike every league here in North America, we don't control that schedule entirely.

Our playoffs are an example of that, having qualifying come through in the middle of our playoffs.

I'm one of the founders of the World Leagues Forum. We sit with 45 different leagues around the world. And the subject at every meeting is, how do we manage the calendar.

So this is a complicated and it's a challenging issue. I encourage anybody who wants to sit down with the guy who manages our schedule, who is kind of like a mad scientist, and see how do you fit in managing a domestic schedule, the CONCACAF Gold Cup, with qualifying, with now World -- the Club World Cup and everything else. It's a unique dynamic.

Not every team is affected the same way. You mentioned Houston and the difference between Houston and a team that might not have qualified for the playoffs.

We also have to deal with some teams are not playing enough games and some teams in the view of coaches are playing too many games, and how do we manage that in a thoughtful environment?



Best thing I could say is the league has been able to evolve through all of the changes that come to us, like the Club World Cup in an expanded format, like Copa America taking place here next summer.

And we'll adapt and figure out the right way to change. Whether that's roster changes or whether it's participation in some tournaments and not others, or whether it's ways that we could manage the schedule to give those teams that have more schedule congestion an opportunity to have a bit more time in between games.

So there's no easy answer to it, but you should know we spend as much time as you and our fans on social media spend. And our coaches think about it.

**Q. Along those lines, specifically about this upcoming season, you have Leagues Cup again. Copa America is going to be a big event on U.S. soil. Do you take breaks for these? Can you afford to take breaks for these? And you're going to have to, of course, face that issue again in 2025, and obviously with the World Cup in 2026. Can the league afford to shut down for periods of time in order to accommodate everything?**

COMMISSIONER GARBER: Let me say, we can't afford it. So that's a message for everybody. If we have to shut the league down, lose games, it impacts our players. It impacts our partners. It impacts our fans. It impacts everything that MLS has to deliver for all of our stakeholders.

That being said, we've got to manage through that process and be clever and creative and figure out how do we reconfigure the schedule with all these different events so that we could make it work.

Clearly the World Cup in '26 is an entirely different animal. And I can't imagine we're going to be playing games during the World Cup. But the economic impact of that is significant.

How could we work -- or can we change the schedule format? Can we look at apertura and clausura? Can we reconfigure the Leagues Cup? Can we figure out ways that the competition exists differently in terms of how our teams play each other so that we can manage travel and rest?

The one thing I say to everybody internally when we have these discussions, remember, this is the largest soccer league in the world, by far. We play in the largest market in the world, by far. We have multiple weather changes, dealing with game disruption and the rescheduling of games more than any other league, the nature of weather.

Our players travel more than any players in any league around the world. All of that, I think, for everybody listening here, needs to be processed to think, understand how complicated all this is.

This is just one of the many complicated things that this league manages through. Through all of the challenges, through all of the opportunity, we still are able to come, be in a beautiful building, have a great event like the one we're going to have tomorrow, have a great partnership with the most advanced company in the world, have our players earn more, have a better living, have more infrastructure -- build all of those things with all of the pressures, both domestically and internationally, I think it speaks to the commitment of everybody, including media that believe in our league.

**Q. Are there plans to add a fourth DP for next season? And then an expansion question, if I may. Beyond San Diego, what other plans for expansion moving forward, and how might Sacramento fit into those plans?**

COMMISSIONER GARBER: No plans to add a fourth DP. But there will be announcements coming out of our board meeting which is next week, and we'll have press availability after that with a number of exciting things that we're doing that our folks that are focused on, what we call product strategy, the equivalent of a competition committee -- there will be some exciting things that we're going to announce next week. But all that needs to go to group of owners and inform them and have that approved. But no plans for a fourth DP.

On the expansion front, I've been doing this a long time, and we never thought the league would be as large as it is today.

There are cities where we are in, where we're in today that we never thought would be able to host an MLS team and build facilities and build the pyramid and attract the kind of fan base that we have in local markets.

San Diego is a good example of that. You might remember many, many years ago the league -- it was before my time at an all-star game in San Diego -- I don't think that was the high moment in MLS history. I think it was in 1998.

And here we are with a market that couldn't be more excited about MLS.

So we have no plans to go beyond 30 teams at this point. But I will say we never say never to anything. We've got to



look at how all this develops over the next number of years. And if expansion makes sense at the right time, there's a market with a facility and the opportunity for us to manage the competitive format and everything related to that, then we'll certainly consider it.

**Q. We have a very big final happening here in Columbus tomorrow, but there's also another final with the NBA In-Season Tournament with the Pacers playing the Lakers. You launched the Leagues Cup, which is your own in-season tournament, and spoke about what the learnings were in year one. Could you speak a little more to what those learnings were and if there's any changes planned for year two?**

COMMISSIONER GARBER: Sure. We're proud of the fact that Leagues Cup was launched. The concept of an in-season tournament is something that we're proud being the first league to actually launch that this year.

It brought with it enormous opportunity and value, and we couldn't be more excited about the ratings and all the folks that attended and supported our clubs in that tournament, both those who were supportive of our teams and the Liga MX teams.

But we have to work through some changes to that tournament that we're working with Liga MX about that are going to make it even better. Should we be thinking about a schedule that will be more productive, if you will, for some of those Liga MX teams, that will reduce some of their travel? Are there ways for us to think about how that tournament could elevate itself and have even more of an exclusive window of promotion and marketing opportunity, which means building on our relationship with Apple and some of the sponsors of that tournament?

The good news is it's year one of a partnership. It's not like we just said we are going to do this for a couple of years. This will go on. We'll continue to work with the Mexican League to make it even better.

**Q. Saying that great growth in the league, filling up stadiums, you talked about 19 sellouts here. They are older franchises. MLS .10, 2.0, that might not be filling stadiums as you'd like. What sort of solutions, how could they find a way to get back to maybe where 3.0 and 4.0 are doing?**

COMMISSIONER GARBER: It's easier to be new than to be new and improved. That's a statement about all businesses, and probably a statement about life.

We're proud this year, and you all probably know this, even though teams that were struggling at the gate years ago

did really well this year. Just look at where we were in Dallas is a good example of that. Our schedule changed dramatically.

We have most of our games on Wednesday and Saturday nights. There's a reduction in the number of game dates, thanks to our partnership with Apple. All of which are making it easier for our fans to attend our games.

But also when some of our teams that are legacy teams look at what's going on here in Columbus, they look at what's happening in St. Louis, or they look at what's going on in Cincinnati, they look at what's going on in Nashville -- and they say there's no reason why those markets can be delivering a product and a fan experience that is driving that level of fan passion and we are not.

So we have formed a group that's working with all of our teams to drive what we call "club performance." We hired a guy that's one of the most experienced executives in sports. He's worked, probably one of the few executives that has worked for all five of the major leagues, and we're seeing results that have been dramatic.

So of the things that we are concerned about moving forward, that's not the issue that it was for us in the past. And I want to really give a real pat on the back to Houston, much, much better than they were years ago. Dallas, what the Hunt family have done has been remarkable.

I think we've got to look at some of the growth and success and feel really good about that.

**Q. In terms of the playoffs format this season, the best-of-3, how did you feel that went? Is that something that you're going to stick with? And you mentioned the schedule being tight. U.S. Open Cup, you've made comments in the past that maybe you're not entirely happy with that competition. Are you looking at MLS skipping the U.S. Open Cup?**

COMMISSIONER GARBER: I'll start with the U.S. Open Cup. I made those comments because I believe if we're going to have our professional teams competing in a tournament -- that is the oldest tournament of its type anywhere in the country -- we all need to embrace it, from our federation to our respective leagues, and give it the profile and give it the support it needs. If we can't do that then we should meet together and decide there needs to be a new plan.

I will say that I'm pleased that our competition group and U.S. Soccer have been working together since that last U.S. Soccer board meeting and have been working on ways to evolve the U.S. Open Cup so that it can be more



valuable to everybody.

That process is ongoing. There might be changes to our participation sometime in the future. There's nothing that we can announce right now. But I want to thank the federation, whether it's the CEO, JT Batson, or it's the group that supports it from a committee perspective to actually start saying, hey, this is ours. Let's try to make it better.

On the first one, listen, we have been, as a league, constantly working at ways to evolve our format. Part of that is driven by a calendar which changes often but part of it also, as the league expands, how do we create a playoff format that's going to deliver the most value for our fans.

We love the format. We had more teams have home games than in the last go-around. Our attendance was up. Our ratings were up. There were more teams sort of towards the end that were performing best during the regular season. So when you look at all the things that you use to evaluate a playoff format, we check all those boxes.

But like everything else, you could assure that we're going to sit down with our committee in February and say are there are things we should look at, whether it's next year, years to come, to continue to evolve it. But we thought it was a great success.

**Q. Leo Messi brought a lot of new eyeballs to MLS last year. As you said, the eyes of the world are now on Major League Soccer. But his contract is up at the end of the 2025 season. When he goes, some of those new eyeballs may go, too. How can the league maximize how many of those fans stick around once Messi is gone? And do you think it's possible to take full advantage of this moment in time with Messi and the World Cup and the Copa America and everything else without significant changes to your league's roster rules?**

COMMISSIONER GARBER: The answer is we've got to look at it all, including our roster rules to ensure that with a growing audience we can capture the support and the attention of a whole new audience of soccer fans. That's ultimately the process that we're going through now.

Our group is very, very focused and have been for decades to constantly look at is the system that we have in place the right system, and can we evolve it or tweak it in ways to ensure that we're capturing the market.

I wouldn't say that the market is about or the timing is when Messi leaves the league; it's really, what do we want to be by 2027?

We're going to have the eyes of the world on us. And the soccer market here in the United States is going to be exposed to the entire global soccer and football community. And that is the pressure that we're under to ensure, as everybody's paying attention to us, what is the product that we can deliver.

And that product is not just the players that we have on the field. It's the fan experience. It's everything around that. It's the competition itself and the competition format. All of those things are part of the evaluation process.

So, first, I hope Leo decides to stay longer than 2025. So maybe 2025 isn't the deadline, but our plan is being the league we want to be in 2027, which gives us enough time to continue to do the research, speak to our fans, evaluate what the impact is of some of these changes and then be able to move forward in a positive and productive way.

**Q. With the Apple deal, there hasn't been a lot of transparency around the numbers of folks watching. I'd love to get your thoughts on, a year into this deal, do you feel there's more eyeballs on MLS from a viewership perspective than there were under the kind of previous linear deals that you guys had? How would you sort of assess that?**

COMMISSIONER GARBER: The best way to describe what you're calling "transparency" is, remember, this is the first year that any media entity has ever produced and delivered a global broadcast if you will.

So just us collectively understanding what's the best way to measure that is part of our task. Everybody wants to know what exactly does that mean? Are you comparing a regional broadcast to a global broadcast is not an easy formula to be able to put together.

I think you've heard Eddie Cue say when he was in Miami that we had over a million people watch a couple of our games this year. That's way more than we've had for any regular season game, and you guys know what our audiences have been.

What we're focused on is the amount of subscriptions we're selling, the amount of time that those people who are watching those games in front of and behind the pay wall are spending on our broadcast, how are they engaging with that content, what is the demographic of that content?

And then all of those things are things that we and Apple have to work together on so that we could, at the right time, communicate, is all of this working for us and is it working for Apple?



What I will say is when you have the CEO of the company saying it's over-delivered on his expectations, you can imagine that we're delivering on the numbers of people that are engaging in ways more than we thought. I think that's a positive.

This was a long-term partnership. We're going to get there in the right time. But together we've got to work on figuring out what those metrics are, and then we'll figure out how to communicate them.

**Q. We saw that since Messi's arrival, teams that hosted Inter Miami sold out their stadiums, recorded soaring revenues, added sponsors. In short, they took full advantage of the Argentine presence in the league and during Leagues Cup. This coming season in 2024 how are you prioritizing who is going to host the Pulga, and who is getting advantage to have him at home, at their home stadiums?**

COMMISSIONER GARBER: Good question. It's a little bit of an inside story. Obviously we have a competitive format where X number of games within conference are played, and then we have a certain number of games that are played out of conference. You saw some of them. The LAFC game is an example of that.

What we try to do is have logic to that as opposed to picking those games that everyone thinks are just going to grow the popularity and audience around those particular away matches.

We don't think that's fair. We think we need to have some rationale to that. How many times has a team played against Miami? How many times have teams and their fans seen Miami on the road? We're looking at that format and then figuring out a way -- you'll see when we announce our schedule -- figuring out a way we can have those four or five games spread over for X number of teams in '24 and X number of teams in '25 so that as many of our Western Conference teams can see Leo Messi at home.

The best way to answer that is formulaic. It's not sitting around and just using our judgment as to what we think are going to be the best home matches for Messi away games.

**Q. Piggybacking off of that last question, we've seen teams start to release their season ticket packages and holiday packages for next year. In most cases, the Inter Miami game, it's either not included in those packages or it's separate and more money. At the same time, Inter Miami season tickets, those prices have increased a lot. It makes sense in a lot of ways. Teams are going to want to capitalize on Messi's**

**presence, but is there any concern that maybe the average fan is going to get priced out of the chance to see Messi? Is there anything that can be done about that?**

COMMISSIONER GARBER: In our business, the concept of selling mini packs that have certain teams that a home fan might want to see and pricing those differently, that variable pricing is part of the pro sports. Every other league does it.

I don't see any reason why it wouldn't be appropriate for Major League Soccer to do that. I think the question as to whether or not fans are being priced out of experiencing a Leo Messi game, I don't believe that's true.

In the actual market where teams are selling tickets, those tickets are still reasonable. We can't control what happens on the secondary market. And as you know the secondary market pricing has been very high. I think it speaks to the unique experience of watching Leo Messi live, but I know that our tickets are amongst the most affordable in all of professional sports, and I'm pretty proud of that.

**Q. We've been almost obsessed with talking about New England Revolution working on building a stadium in Boston. Yet they were ranked eighth in attendance this year and they're expecting to average 28K next year per game. Wondering what you make of that? Can the Revolution be considered an exception to the rule, successful team playing in an outsized stadium outside the city center?**

COMMISSIONER GARBER: Remember, the Revolution were a legacy team. And playing in Gillette as well as many of our teams playing in football stadiums in the early days was the plan. When the league was launched nobody conceived soccer-specific stadiums. The Revolution did a good job. This year attendance was up. Their team performed well and ultimately -- you know this Frank, Jonathan Craft is probably the most engaged owner we have on a board level and a committee level in our entire league. They're committed to building a stadium.

They've been very focused on a particular site. That site had a setback. We hope that site can get back on track. There's no doubt in my mind if they can get a stadium project done that will be one of the great soccer markets in our league. It's one of the great sports towns in our country, if not in the world. So I have no doubt, with the stadium, it will be even better than it is today.

One thing, Frank, you've been around longer than I have. These projects take a long time. We never thought that we would be where we are here today in many of our stadium

projects. Miami is another example of that. New York City is the best example of that. It will be way more than 10 years from the time that team was launched until we got a stadium deal announced and shovels in the ground. This is a long-term project. I have no doubt at some point the city and all those people who really want men's professional soccer to exceed at the highest level will get together with the Crafts and figure out a solution that's better, if you will, than where they are today.

**Q. You noted in your introductory remarks, you've talked a couple times here about how the eyes of the world are on this league now. And a lot of the eyes are new to MLS, and one of the questions that a lot of us have in the media have to deal with often is, why are there so many roster rules? Each of them has a justification. Some of them are from the present. Some of them have been around for a long time. But I wonder if it ever comes up where you or somebody in the league office looks sort of from 20,000 feet and says there's just about too many rules. Again, I get it that each individual rule may have a justification, but is there a point where, in the aggregate, there are too many, especially as this league tries to pursue more big-time talent to join Messi in this league?**

COMMISSIONER GARBER: The rules are in place to manage the strategic investment that our owners and teams have in delivering a product on the field that can capture all the attention that we're looking for, locally and now globally.

These decisions that we make, designated players outside the salary budget and our teams having the opportunity to invest discretionarily in certain types of players, investing in young players like the U-22 rule are all part of a strategic plan to ensure we're effective and efficient in how we're building our rosters.

The time will come when we no longer need to be segmenting our spending, and not necessarily to provide more freedom, but because all of the objectives that we were looking to achieve with all these strategic initiatives, will have been achieved. Therefore, we could move in a different direction. I think you'll start seeing in the years ahead some streamlining of those rules now that we have more fans, particularly more fans that are looking outside the United States or soccer fans of international leagues here and looking at clubs that don't have those restrictions.

But I will tell you, it has really, really been working for us up until now and the reason to change it is because we'll no longer need it.

When that time comes, I can assure you the league office, all our clubs and our fans will look at it as a new day.

**Q. What have you made of PRO's performance this year, the quality of officiating on the field? Maybe a talking point in the playoffs. Though it's a talking point in any sport. And also obviously multiple instances in this postseason, you had a player entering the referee changing room. The comments Vanny Sartini made. Do you think there's an issue of referee safety in the league, something on your radar, the league is trying to address at all?**

COMMISSIONER GARBER: Let me start with the safety of our fans, players, and officials is a massive priority for our league and it ought to be a priority for everyone. Whether it's those people who have to make decisions about rules and regulations or discipline when those rules are violated or those who are responsible for behaving in a way that could either threaten the safety of others or who might be thinking of doing that.

Those are not easy things for those who have to make those decisions to manage; but I want to say to everybody, it is a paramount position that all of us as leaders of this league need to be very thoughtful about.

We have never had a player enter the locker room in the history of our league, and a player entered a locker room this year. That's not taking away anything of the character of the player. There's sometimes when passion gets the best of people. But that can't be tolerated. And ultimately it was a tough price to pay. But we need to tell every player and every team administrator, they cannot go into an officials' locker room and do anything that might appear or might be perceived by an official as being threatening to them, whether it was intended or not.

I believe that PRO has performed well. I say this in a way that can lighten up the room a little bit. It's a tough job; I'm not quite sure why anybody signs up for it. But those men and women are committed. They're incredible professionals that are performing at the highest level and we're investing deeply to ensure that we're assessing them properly and training them properly and organizing their development in ways that I think will make PRO officials even better. I'm proud of the fact that we had a bunch of PRO officials officiating at the World Cup final.

So I don't think that our officials are being positioned properly. That being said, I get more calls from owners -- I get more hate mail from fans and I'm certainly not getting love letters from a lot of our coaches when something happens that they don't like. That's the nature of the game, and we're going to deal with it in ways like we have when somebody steps over the line.



**Q. You opened the press conference by congratulating the Haslem and Edwards families on hosting the MLS Cup in a stadium they recently built. Next month is the five-year anniversary of when they bought the Crew following the Save Crew movement and the decision to eventually to award an expansion franchise to Anthony Precourt in Austin, another club that has made a conference final since launching. What lessons have you learned over those last five years? And reflecting on that process, what was so important to get the calculus right?**

COMMISSIONER GARBER: As you can imagine, particularly when you're here, you're reflecting on that a lot, whether it's me in my office or it's all the folks that have worked together, managing through all of the challenges that we went through to get to that announcement five years ago and to get to where we are today.

I believe that life always delivers you real challenges and real tests to your character and your beliefs, and how we manage through all of those and have the courage to deal with difficult issues is what defines us professionally and personally.

That was not a fun time for anyone, but we had said from the very beginning that if we're thoughtful, if we have patience, we will get through this and there will be a good outcome.

Now, going through that process was not one that I would hope to ever have to go through again. But when I look at where we are today, we have a stadium that's one of the best soccer stadiums in our league, if not the best small soccer stadium in the world.

We have a team that's performed incredibly well. We have a bunch of fans who now have more to engage with and cheer for. We have more sponsors for the team than we had before. We have more political and municipal support than we've had before, and we have an ownership commitment that is at the highest level.

So if we had to go through that again and end where we are today, then I would go through it again. And I will say, though, it's probably not the most popular thing to say in Columbus, we are really proud of what is going on in Austin. They've done a good job. They built a great stadium. They've got a successful team, and they're being part of this global movement of trying to show what Major League Soccer can be in markets, even when you've got to go through some trauma to get there.

**Q. I know we've had a number of questions about the schedule and the complicated nature of what you guys**

**are trying to accomplish. With the mid-season shutdown that will have to happen with the World Cup in '26, will you consider this an opportunity to reconfigure the schedule to make it a summer and spring calendar for which there are a lot of benefits such as aligning the transfer windows with Europe and also creating a long runway to finish the playoffs without the break of a transfer window that obviously supplies the momentum that now takes place?**

COMMISSIONER GARBER: We have to look at everything, but we also have to realize -- and we've had this conversation with CONCACAF and FIFA, we've had that conversation internally -- we are weather constrained. And we have to figure out a right way to manage that.

Now, are there creative and unique ways to manage through that? Should we be thinking about playing in a single destination for a period of time during winter months where you can't play necessarily in Toronto or in Kansas City or in Chicago or New York, Boston, who knows? Maybe that might be the answer.

What I will say, we have to look at everything to ensure that we could not lose games in our schedule and be able to have a schedule that works for our players and works for our fans. And that's the tough work that our schedule group and our commercial group and our ownership will work on to finalize a format for 2026.

**Q. There were several incidents as well this season of players using racist slurs on the field. It seemed like there had been a period of time where there hadn't been reports of that happening, and then the last few years it seems to have kind of seen an uptick of sorts. I'm wondering if the league is looking at new education policies or setting different standards to hopefully prevent incidents like this from happening in the future or to try and make the field of play more inclusive and more welcoming to everyone regardless of identity?**

COMMISSIONER GARBER: I think it does play in many ways off of Pablo's question. It starts with discipline isn't the answer to change behavior in this case. Education is. And I'm proud of the work that Sola Winley and the group in and around him and Jamil Northcutt have been working with the Black Players for Change to come up with a way that we can educate our players properly and make the commitment and resources to go player by player and club by club to ensure that we're entirely eradicating any offenses in any sense of there being any type of abuse, particularly racial abuse, of our players.

The challenge that we are faced with is, when they do occur, what's the best approach for the league to ensure



that we're managing it in a way that is in the best interests of our player pool? Because this is an issue amongst our players.

And I've got to give our union credit and the VPC credit for working closely with Sola and his team to come up with a process of restorative justice where those players who are offenders have an opportunity to understand the harm and hurt from their behavior and then go through an education process so that they could understand why that's a problem and then ultimately ensuring that we could eradicate it anywhere from our fields.

I will say that we are dealing in a world where more and more of these issues are happening both in the workplace and outside the workplace. It concerns me as a citizen of the world. Concerns me as a leader of a business. It certainly concerns me as a leader of a diverse professional sports league. It's a huge commitment from the league office and of our owners and our league staff, and I will say also of our players. So I think you're going to see improvement in that front in the years ahead.

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