

Major League Soccer Panel Discussion

Wednesday, February 22, 2023

Carolyn Kindle

Panel Discussion



TAYLOR TWELLMAN: On a personal level, it's a new team, it's a new stadium, but more importantly, this is a new era for my hometown of St. Louis, Missouri.

1,609 days ago, Carolyn Kindle looked at me in Kansas City and said, I think I'm going to pull it off. I've heard it numerous amount of times, and I said, yeah, right, no way.

Here we are, February 25, they will become the 29th team to play in Major League Soccer. They will open up at Austin, but more importantly, in a billion-dollar complex downtown with a training facility, an office building, they will open up their franchise history in St. Louis, Missouri, and I am proud to introduce the face of it, the president and CEO of St. Louis City, Carolyn Kindle.

When you think about that day and you looked at me in the eye and said, I know we're St. Louis and the roots are and where everything is, and then you call me and tell me we have 63,000 season ticket deposits, did it supercede all your expectations? Was it better than you thought?

CAROLYN KINDLE: Yeah, I think in full disclosure, I think being naïve and not knowing what I was getting into worked in my favor because 1,600 days later, I'm sort of like, wow, it's an incredible journey. I knew St. Louis was going to support us no matter what. It's a soccer town. It's an incredible project that's helping transform and revitalize downtown St. Louis.

But I think more importantly, it's two local families that came together and understood some of the challenges of the past when there had been previous bids trying to get a professional soccer team to St. Louis.

So I think people were just very excited and they were ready. I think being able to create a whole new brand, a name, a crest, colors with all the construction, I think it really -- it gave people time to really kind of enjoy what we were doing but also feel like they were part of it, as well.

TAYLOR TWELLMAN: When you guys see it, you see the training facilities, you see the Arch over it, you see the

team office building that they're now gutting through it, putting windows there, you see the team store, you see the stadium, but you also see a really interesting public art display because this stadium, and I want -- very few people understand that because this was a neighborhood that was predominantly Black, and yet where all of this is, you guys put together an art display in memory of that, but more so, our city needs to become more diverse and more inclusive, and you're using this as a vehicle to do so.

CAROLYN KINDLE: Yeah, so there was a thriving Black community called Mill Creek Valley, and also back in the 1950s it was razed due to some political changes within the city.

So we realized, as a fourth generation family in St. Louis, but also how important that history is to St. Louis, but our beautiful stadium is right on what used to be a thriving community. There were people that had families there, great jobs, great restaurants, so we really wanted to make sure that we commemorated and acknowledged what we were on top of.

So we actually used a local artist, Dana Davis, who's an East St. Louis native, and he created "Pillars of the Valley." It's a very moving experience on the corner. You can see the plot lines for some of the houses down on the south side of the stadium. But most importantly, it's brought the community together.

What we're hearing is a lot of people saying, I didn't even know the story of Mill Creek Valley. Even my parents' generation, I remember driving by that neighborhood, but I didn't know the history of it.

So we're using it as a way to sort of bring the community together, educate, but also understand that there are hard issues from the past that we have to acknowledge, that we need to be able to start having more open and comfortable conversations than usual.

TAYLOR TWELLMAN: Especially the history of St. Louis and some of the bumps in the road that they've had, I think it's very important that the public understands that you

wanting to be diverse, you wanted to be inclusive in your front office, and the first of its kind in Major League Soccer is the chief experience officer, and as someone that bought four season tickets to St. Louis City, I've had many conversations with Matt Sebek. Why did you do that, and what was the whole goal behind doing that regarding that game day experience and people coming down to the facility?

CAROLYN KINDLE: I think one of the things is we wanted to provide by far the best fan experience when you came down to the facility, whether game day or match day or non-match day. To be able to hire somebody who could oversee not only how you create this experience but how you build in the technology, which has become what everybody expects, was probably in our opinion the most efficient and yet most forward-thinking way of handling this.

So when you look at a match day, for instance, and how we have the just walk-out markets to make sure people can maximize that 15-minute break, it was things like that. It was how do you order, local ordering, but it also comes back to we had to do all of this during the pandemic. So when we were trying to figure out how is the stadium going to function coming out of COVID, it became very touchless and very quick, rapid response.

So using Matt Sebek and his technology background but also his marketing background, we are trying to create, like I said, that very unique experience. But you take it one step further, it needs to be tailored towards that individual. So if you're a die-hard soccer fan, you're hopefully going to have a great experience with the product on the pitch, but if you're more of a foodie --

TAYLOR TWELLMAN: Toasted raviolis on speed dial? You don't have toasted ravioli on the menu, do you?

CAROLYN KINDLE: Of course we do. We have everything on the menu, actually.

TAYLOR TWELLMAN: I want to move to what you represent but how important this is I think for the league but I think more so, Carolyn, and I've said this to you and I've said it publicly, how important it is we get more females involved. You are the head, you're the face of the female-driven ownership group. How important is that to you? I know we're in this building and we're talking about MLS, but take a bigger picture. How important is that? Is that privilege or pressure for you?

CAROLYN KINDLE: I think if you look at it from the perspective is this is still a business that has a sporting component to it. If you look at it, I'm very blessed. I've been surrounded by incredibly smart businesswomen,

whether it's my family members, whether it's Enterprise Holdings executives. And so with that lens, it's an opportunity for anybody to be able to get into the sports world.

I think actually you once said to me, one of the best qualities is that I'm not a die-hard soccer fan because I have to make business decisions based on what's best for the business, not because I want to have --

TAYLOR TWELLMAN: I was just dying to have you hire me. That's the only reason I said that to you.

CAROLYN KINDLE: So I think that there's not a lot. I don't think there's a ton of pressure. I think what I've seen is the opposite of common support. So if it's other -- if it's MLS headquarters, if it's other team owners, I think everybody wants the city as a whole to be supportive. I just happen to be the face of it right now.

TAYLOR TWELLMAN: Before we get to the next question, how big of a fan is your mom now with the brand and everything? I've seen pictures, I've read the texts.

CAROLYN KINDLE: Yes. I mean, I tell the story, three years ago if somebody had a City sticker on their car, they worked for me. Now they might actually have purchased that sticker and put it on their car because they're a fan.

It's just so incredible, so there was a Starbucks in St. Louis, they all wore City gear one day, and to be able to have that moment where my incredible team built all that and created all of that, it's a humbling moment but it's also a super exciting moment.

But yeah, it's almost to the point where you kind of don't want to wear City stuff because everybody wants to talk to you about it. They want to talk about City -- at one point, people were shouting, I'm 102, 8 to 12. I was like, what? They're like, that's my section and my seats. We're so excited to hear stories like that. So yeah. But she's definitely a die-hard fan now.

TAYLOR TWELLMAN: We mentioned it, 1,600 days now, you and I have gotten to know each other. You have been immersed in Major League Soccer. I want to move to on the field. How do you define success in year one regarding play on the field?

CAROLYN KINDLE: I think it's probably more we've just put together an amazing team. I've seen them practice in Miami and St. Louis, and I think most importantly, you see the teamwork and you see them coming together. I think that at the end of the day, that's the most important thing.

I think that as far as am I making predictions? I don't want to put that kind of pressure on them.

TAYLOR TWELLMAN: I'll do that for you in a couple of days, but go ahead.

CAROLYN KINDLE: I think for me, at the end of the season, to see people with the kids have their favorite player, that they know more about these players because they're new to St. Louis. We have some great home-grown talent, but a lot of these players are not from St. Louis, so to be able at the end of the season to have people talk about our players like they talk about an Albert Pujols or a Ryan O'Reilly, to me that's the biggest win because it means we're doing everything right and fans are truly engaged with our players and what's out there on the pitch.

I think actually one of the first meetings with the commissioner, he once said to me, when the community feels like they own their team, not the owners, then congratulations, you've had success.

TAYLOR TWELLMAN: To that point, they just announced their second home-grown, Miguel Perez. Miguel Perez was told two years ago he wasn't good enough, but the technical staff went and found him in Cape Girardeau, Missouri, and he just signed as the second home-grown at 17 years old, right, and is expected to play big minutes. St. Louis -- I've been talking about it for 25 years. They have players that can be found -- Caden Glover is another one, 15 years old. So already home-grown is becoming a huge part of what they're going to do.

I'm going to text you at about 5:30 on February 25 when you're in Austin, Texas, as the season opens up, and are you going to have to get some oxygen or are you going to have to prepare yourself this is really going to happen?

CAROLYN KINDLE: I think I'm just so excited. You've watched hundreds of people, actually thousands if you include all the wonderful people that built the stadium in the district. This is the moment they've been waiting for. It is sort of like Christmas Eve, because Christmas Day obviously is March 4 when we're having our first match at our stadium, so I think I'm just excited for my team. It's been countless hours, sleepless nights, and being able to finally celebrate all of this coming together, it's worth it from that perspective.

But it's also been a fun journey for my family because none of us knew about soccer going into this and now we watched World Cup and now we send articles to each other, and it's been a great way to bring us back to the table in a different setting.

I think it's like, okay, I'm ready, let's get this going.

TAYLOR TWELLMAN: I get it. Thank you. I've said this publicly, but I'll say it to you again and to this group, different people, Don Garber's 25 years, we can talk about many different things, but we are talking about Cincinnati, Nashville, Austin. Throughout my entire time in this country, the conversation was always about St. Louis. I get choked up talking about it every single time.

On March 4, 2023, you made my dream and about a thousand other players come true, so thank you for that.

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