

Major League Soccer Panel Discussion

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Todd Durbin

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Panel Discussion



So let's begin with you, Todd. We've seen this global awakening to the talent that is playing in MLS, and in particular for the talent produced by the MLS Player Development System. Why is the investment in player development so important to rosters in 2023 and also the future of the product on the field?

TONY CHERCHI: I'm Tony Cherchi. I'll be the leading host for the pregame and postgame in Spanish, so welcome. (Speaking Spanish).

Yeah, the 2023 MLS season kicks off on Saturday, and we're lucky to have here with us three individuals that have touched the game and helped shape this sport, our sport. To speak with us about the shifts, the tremendous shifts, that we've seen on the field with the economics also of this North American game, we have special guest Todd Durbin.

He is the Executive Vice President of Player Relations and Competition for MLS. Since joining the league in 1995, Todd has been one of the architects of the competition and player relations structures of MLS and has been a key contributor to the MLS rise in the global soccer landscape. Also being told that you are the guy that sets the rules, so kind of intimidated by that.

Let's welcome also Ali Curtis, which is Senior Vice President of Competition and Operations for MLS NEXT Pro. He has also served as General Manager of Toronto FC and Sporting Director for the New York Red Bulls. As a player, he was selected second overall in the 2001 MLS Super Draft by Tampa Bay before spending most of his playing career request DC United.

And, last but not least, Ernst Tanner, Philadelphia Union Sporting Director. He oversees sporting decisions for the first team of the union. Also, the MLS NEXT Pro team and academy, and he was named 2022 MLS Sporting Executive of the Year after his club finished atop of the Eastern Conference. Congratulations on that. We'll touch on the final also on the MLS Cup. He arrived in Philadelphia in 2018 following 24 years of previous technical experience in Europe.

TODD DURBIN: Yeah, so, I mean, what's happening in player development in this country is, obviously, truly extraordinary, and the way I try to frame it or characterize it is that if you are thinking about on field quality, in its simplest form, there's really only two ways to do it. How are you going to improve player quality, and one way is to go into the international market and identify and sign players, and the other way is to develop players domestically.

So, clearly with our international rules that provide a limit as it relates to the number of international players that a team can have. That really highlights how important it is to make sure that we are investing in this space. I mean, the domestic player, both here and in the U.S. and in Canada is foundational to where our future is going to be, and we have to make sure that we are continuing to invest in that space and continuing to develop elite players.

You know, people forget we haven't been in this for that long. Back in the early days, back in 1996 when we launched the league, there was no academies. There was no way for a team to invest in the academy space and take a player and add them to their roster. All of the players back in the early days were assigned via the draft.

That did a really good job of distributing the domestic talent sort of evenly across the teams. As you can imagine, it provided no incentive at all for teams to invest in player development. We made that big change in 2007, and you can really see what happened since that date.

The teams have really taken that and run with it. You've seen investment in coaches, in scouting, in infrastructure, the launch of MLS NEXT where we were able to expand our reach. Not simply about our existing players, but now we're touching on a day to day basis over 10,000 elite

young players across the country.

We, further, added on top of that with MLS NEXT Pro, which provides that really critical bridge between the youth side and the professional game. Now players, when they finish the youth side of their playing, have the ability to migrate in a way that's in a professional environment to help them become first team players.

There's a last part about it that I don't think gets talked about too much, and that is the other side of it is that it provided a big cultural shift. And so once we launched the academy program back in 2007, our teams were now out in their communities in a way they hadn't been before, and they were providing a real aspirational point for everybody in the community in terms of where they wanted to be as it relates to soccer.

And if you think about that and you compare that to the other sports in the U.S. and Canada, we are the only sport where you can be alongside the professional team in your market and literally train in the shadows of the stadium that you hope to play in. So that along with all of the investment and all of the focus on it, not only has gotten us to where we are, but it's clearly going to help us really develop the domestic player, which is foundational for us.

TONY CHERCHI: Also the league not so long ago launched the Under 22 initiative, which was very important to see incredible players on the field in MLS, but also has led to remarkable transfer fees, like the one that we saw in the Fire's selling of Jhon Duran to Aston Villa for more than \$22 million.

What does it say about the league growth in scouting young high level international talent and how the league is perceived right now abroad the USA?

TODD DURBIN: It's been one of the great positive stories over the last two or three years. When we looked at, you know, sort of the player product going forward and we had the resources available to go out and sign high quality players for the first team, we were addressing the domestic space. The one area that we were not in was in high level international players between the ages of 18 and 22. So we came up with this initiative that allowed teams and gave them the resources to get into that space.

Clearly, that's been a success. We've signed a number of players. Some of them have been transferred. Some of them are going to remain hopefully in play and have illustrious careers in the league.

I know people are focusing on the big numbers from the transfer fees, and that's obviously important, but the

subtext of that is that those dollars from the transfer fees are now monies that we can now reinvest back into the player pool. They're also providing a very, very important source of revenue that will allow us to continue to build on the product and continue to accelerate our growth.

TONY CHERCHI: And also improve the quality of play. Comes to mind a guy like Thiago Almada, who has just been a world champion with Argentina.

Ali, you have seen this game from every angle as a player, as a member of a league office staff, as a GM of a couple of clubs. Now you're in a very important role in MLS NEXT Pro. Can you talk about the evolution you've seen on the field?

ALI CURTIS: Yeah, I thought Todd did a great job of articulating a lot of the growth, a lot of the investment from an infrastructure perspective. I think on the field when we're talking about players you talk about there's more. They're better. They're different from an on field perspective. Off the field they're more outspoken. They're sophisticated. They're thoughtful.

You know, I remember when I was a player, I played with the Eddie Popes and the Ben Olsons and then my first home grown signing was Tyler Adams, who is the captain of the National Team, just turned 23 the other day.

When you think about just all the different aspects of this league and how it's helped evolve and grow the sport, the infrastructure, I remember the story of when I was on the field playing Columbus Crew and thinking that this was, you know, the first time I felt like a true professional.

Now we have unbelievable stadiums, unbelievable training facilities. What's happening in St. Louis is unbelievable and incredible, and I know we all can't wait for that to happen. So there's been a tremendous amount of growth and investment and analysis that has gone into helping evolve and grow this game.

And then when you think about the partner that Apple is and the relationship that we have and the role that technology can play over the next five to ten years, not just in this game and in this league, but also just how it's influencing all different industries, it's amazing in terms of how we can identify players, how we can help coach and scout and develop them. So there's a lot of things to be excited about.

TONY CHERCHI: I think it's been talked a lot about the development of players through MLS NEXT Pro, but also, this league provides an opportunity for coaches, executives, and other people involved in other areas of the



game to get in the industry, to get better into the industry, right?

ALI CURTIS: Yeah. You know, I've never had a black coach in my life, a black head coach in my life. I've been playing the game since I was a kid at all different levels, and, you know, we all go through this journey, and soccer is no different. It's a team sport.

You go from A to B to C, but you need people along the way. Through all of our journeys, you have a good teacher or maybe you have a mentor, maybe you have a role model. In soccer you have a coach, and it's amazing the impact that a good coach can have not just on your sporting career, but on your life. So diversity is so important in the men's game and the women's game. Diversity of thought, but also we need to see people that look like us that are on the field.

It's amazing when you see and you look at the U.S. National Team and how they performed at this World Cup, when you looked at Canada as well. You know, I'm really proud and excited about the direction that things are going and where they are. We still have work to do, and it's growing and it's evolving, but it's exciting.

MLS NEXT Pro, we had a great first year, but there's still a lot of work to do. But when you look at the data, but when you look at also the ground work and what's happening and the people and the good work, it's very exciting. I'm happy to be part of it.

You know, I was watching this documentary on Bill Russell the other day, and he said it's not important about who is first or who is last. It's about how many.

So I'm excited to be a part of this league. I'm excited about what's happening, and we've got a lot of good work to do.

TONY CHERCHI: Ernst, I know you are also here to talk about player development, but as a Philadelphia Union Sporting Director, I have to ask you. For us that MLS Cup was a roller coaster of emotions. I need to have your perspective about it, how you felt.

ERNST TANNER: It was not only like for you a roller coaster, right, but also for me. One of the most nerve wracking situations I've ever experienced in my whole soccer life.

But the fact that are still speaking about the game makes me happy, and it also shows how big of an advertisement that game was for our league. Not only inside our country but also globally. Everywhere I go people are talking about it.

TONY CHERCHI: Yes, that was one of the greatest finals in the league history. So talking about player development, the Philadelphia Union Academy has been a leader in player development across MLS and has produced world class stars. We've also seen some high profile transfers of academy players abroad. Can you speak to your philosophy in that matter of player development?

ERNST TANNER: It's not only my philosophy, but we always develop for the needs of the game. First and foremost, of course, how we see the game from our club's perspective and if you are doing a good job on that, then we also develop for the transfer market. That's pretty clear.

But it has also shifted over the last decade as we all know that the game and in particular the speed of the game tremendously increased, so when I look back in the early days, we were mainly focused on the basics in terms of technical items and what we do on the position and how we need it for the positions, and that has shifted to the more cognitive part of the game now, and that's what we needed to implement in our methodology.

TONY CHERCHI: You have acquired talent from across the world to build an incredible roster, but you have also done so within the MLS. For instance, it comes to mind Julian Carranza, one of your designated players. How is the overall level of talent recent in MLS since you got here almost five years assist?

ERNST TANNER: We all know that the level of play really increased here. And, honestly, in the beginning we mainly focused on our academy and players from outside of the country, but now we need to really look into our league and use the possibilities the whole development is giving us.

I think all these measurements like Academy System, like the Under 22 Initiative, like MLS NEXT Pro now, they have massively contributed to that, and it helps us.

TONY CHERCHI: Thank you, Ernst, and also congratulations for that great last season.

So thank you to all of our panelists for your input today. The countdown is on to see all of the teams kick off this Saturday. And, next, I want to direct your attention to the screen that you guys have behind you because we're going to get a little taste of what is to come with Major League soccer's newest club, St. Louis CITY SC.

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