Making Soccer “Major League” in the USA and Beyond: Major League Soccer’s First Decade

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By 2006, following its first decade, Major League Soccer (MLS) appeared to have proven American skeptics wrong about the potential for success and the likely fate of the league. Success, however, is very much a relative term. One must concede that MLS has helped bring professional soccer attention in the United States, played a role in the growth of the sport among America’s youth and experienced significant progress as a league since its inaugural season of 1996. However, the deficiencies of MLS were its struggle to compete nationally with the Big Four North American sports of baseball, American football, basketball, and ice hockey, and the inability to convince the rest of the world that it offers a comparable, first-class brand of “football,” when measured against the “Big 5” European leagues. Despite its recent strategies, which include luring international premier players to the USA as well as the development of intimate soccer-specific stadiums, MLS continues to be stigmatized as being inferior to the other major professional sport leagues in the United States as well as the high-profile soccer leagues of Europe.

Many Europeans equate MLS to its U.S. predecessor, the North American Soccer League (NASL), which was often referred to as a “retirement league,” known for attracting famous foreign players whose best playing days had passed by offering easy money. Early in the league’s existence, MLS experimented with this strategy and then opted to pursue mostly young prospects from the CONCA-CAF region in the Americas after the “hyped” veteran players failed to live up to the promotion of their arrival.1 While the adoption of the “Beckham Rule” in 2007 rekindled this strategy,2 MLS still draws the vast majority its players from North, Central, and South America. Unfortunately, negative connotations followed MLS to many parts of the globe, particularly in comparison to four of the most renowned professional soccer leagues in existence: the Premier League in England, the German Bundesliga, Spain’s La Liga, and Italy’s Lega Nazionale Professionisti. Even the
leading American players of the early and mid-2000s, including Freddy Adu, Tim Howard, and DeMarcus Beasley, left MLS to pursue what were perceived to be better financial and developmental opportunities in Europe, joining other American players already plying their trade across the Continent.

The flight of young talent from MLS mirrored the situation of the domestically successful Dutch and Belgian clubs who have failed to market themselves in the international market, missed out on star players, and therefore have been unable to raise their leagues to the level of international prestige that the top leagues enjoy. Ajax Amsterdam may be the most recognizable club in the Dutch league, but due to a lack of star power on its roster, investors have not been interested in a venture that would create revenue and advance the team globally. As a result, Ajax remains competitively and financially inferior to the elite clubs of England, Germany, Spain, and Italy. In its first decade of operation, MLS was faced with a similar scenario in which it needed to procure some of the world’s best players while they were still in their prime—not veterans nearing retirement—in order to capitalize on the publicity and the interested investors that were likely to follow. Further, the key for the league was to devise a strategy to do this while retaining the best domestic talent.

Establishing a Plan for Stability and Growth

Throughout its first decade, MLS faced a number of obstacles on American soil. These included acquiring the services of passionate and motivated investors, reaching out to a more ethnically diverse market, and emphasizing that soccer has the largest following of any sport in the world. Taking into account the unique intricacies of MLS and its need to avoid the errors of the defunct North American Soccer League (NASL), the league adopted a more globalized approach to its professional soccer structure by establishing the Project-40 player development program. MLS hoped this program would develop a deeper pool of players with which it could draw talent from to help increase the level of play and improve the league’s image and appeal for investors both nationally and internationally.

With respect to its marketing strategy, MLS focused on four primary interests: the construction of soccer-specific stadiums, catering to the Hispanic population, encouraging the youth of America to become spectators of the sport as well as participants, and the recruitment of new investors to the League. Secondary considerations related to increasing sponsorship, the establishment of team rivalries, league expansion, the inclusion of a healthy mix of domestic and foreign players, changing and/or developing team identities to resonate with fans, participation in national and international tournaments, and the hosting of international exhibitions.

It is apparent that MLS also explored adopting or modifying several of the techniques that bolstered the reputations of professional leagues overseas and highlighted the global charm of some of their clubs. Primarily, the placement strategies and marketing models used by the thriving English, German, Spanish, and Italian soccer leagues differed from those being used in the U.S and had a track record of success. Specifically, these leagues and their leading clubs efficiently and successfully tapped into foreign markets (including Asia and the sizable U.S. market), established strategic alliances with global media outlets (i.e., media mogul Rupert Murdoch) to generate revenue and enter the global arena, and sold clubs as popular international brands with appealing identities. Also, the creation and development