

A new-look MLS ready to kick off

by Mark Zeigler

Mention Major League Soccer and you think of one name: David Beckham.

Or maybe two: David Beckham and Victoria Beckham.

The blockbuster signing in January instantly elevated the league's profile among average Americans, but it also cast a mountainous shadow over what was the league's busiest and arguably its most productive offseason. There are several other big-name player signings, one new team, two new stadiums, a new landmark television deal, new sponsorship deals, new full-time referees, even a new league anthem.

"We in the league office never intended it to be the only story of the offseason," MLS Commissioner Don Garber says of Beckham's nine-figure deal with the Los Angeles Galaxy. "It really, truly garnered more attention than we expected. I think it speaks to the increasing credibility of the league."

A newfound credibility Garber is not afraid to speak about, and speak about boldly.

"I have no doubt that Major League Soccer will be a dominant league in this country," he said on a national media teleconference Monday. "It's not a matter of if, it's a matter of when."

While we're waiting, here are a few things to keep an eye on this season, which opens Saturday.

ANTICIPATION FC

"Without doubt," Garber says, "there is more buzz and anticipation around the Toronto team than any other (expansion franchise) in our history."

It's tough to argue with that. Toronto FC begins play at a new soccer-specific stadium, and the club sold out its season-ticket allotment of 14,000 two months before the home opener. Now comes the hard part: delivering to sophisticated soccer fans who haven't been exposed to MLS and are used to watching the English Premier League and Italy's Serie A on television.

"It is going to be the most entertaining soccer they can see live in Toronto," Garber says. "It's not the Premier League and it's not the (German) Bundesliga, but it's a very high-level product. I think people are going to be very, very pleasantly surprised."

THE JERSEYS

No, the Los Angeles Galaxy has not changed its name to the Los Angeles Herbalife. The club just sold its jersey front to the weight-loss company for about \$4 million per year.

European clubs have been doing it for years (explaining why the jersey front of English club Arsenal reads, "Fly Emirates") and the lucrative advertising practice is only now coming to the States. Real Salt Lake has XanGo, a mangosteen juice company, and the new Toronto franchise has BMO - for Canadian-based BMO (pronounced bee-mo) Financial Group.

There's also Red Bull New York, which has a modified version of the energy drink's logo on its jersey front.

Garber says he expects "more announcements on the jersey front in the next couple of weeks."

AN ANTHEM?

As part of the league's "Game First" initiatives for this season, teams will line up and march onto the field as they would for international matches. And an official MLS anthem will be played.

It was recorded by an orchestra in the Czech Republic with an American conductor and was unveiled Friday on the league's Web site (www.mlsnet.com).

"We're really excited about it," deputy commissioner Ivan Gazidis says. "It speaks directly to the tradition of soccer."

The "Game First" initiatives also include "guidelines for field maintenance," so that grass will be cut to the same height ... with the same mowing patterns ... and the same prematch watering schedules.

NEW FACES

Four to follow:

1. David Beckham (L.A. Galaxy): Coach Frank Yallop has hinted that Beckham will play in the central midfield when he joins the Galaxy in mid-July instead of his usual spot on the right wing. Will it work?
2. Cuauhtemoc Blanco (Chicago Fire): Ticket sales at Toyota Park were a disappointment last year, and Blanco should help that. Less certain is how much of an impact the 34-year-old Mexican star will make on the field.
3. Claudio Reyna (Red Bull New York): What makes sense: joining former college and national-team coach Bruce Arena. What doesn't: an aging, injury-prone midfielder playing on artificial turf at Giants Stadium.
4. Fred (D.C. United): Freddy Adu is out, Fred is in. He's not to be confused with the Fred who stars for French club Lyon and was a member of Brazil's 2006 World Cup roster. This Fred was co-MVP of Australia's A-League last season playing for the Melbourne Victory. He'll be joined at D.C. United by fellow Brazilian Luciano Emilio.

ATTENDANCE

MLS doesn't release paid attendance numbers, but internal league documents indicate the needle has barely moved since the inaugural season of 1996 - hovering in the neighborhood of 10,000 per game (not counting international doubleheaders).

That could change this year with the high-profile signings, along with the enthusiastic response to Toronto FC. Figure any game with Beckham or at Toronto's BMO Field will be a sellout, and Blanco could account for a per-game bump of 3,000 or 4,000 once he joins Chicago in July.

But a more interesting question is whether there will be any sort of residual effect on other games. Or put another way: Will anyone show up for a Wednesday match between Kansas City and Columbus?

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