

Beckham's teammates are in different payroll galaxy

by Mark Zeigler

Let's do the math.

LANCE FRIESZ - Lance Friesz is the Galaxy's No. 3 'keeper.' Los Angeles Galaxy photo.
MICHAEL CASO - Michael Caso recently signed with L.A. Los Angeles Galaxy photo. Let's say David Beckham plays in 17 games with the Los Angeles Galaxy this season, not counting playoffs and not counting games he is expected to miss while on national-team duty with England. Let's say he plays 1,500 total minutes. With a \$6.5 million annual salary from the Galaxy, that works out to roughly \$4,300 per minute.

Or put another way: Beckham will make as much in three minutes on the field as teammates Lance Friesz and Michael Caso will make all year. Friesz laughs and says, "Wow. Is that true?"

But Friesz and Caso aren't about to grab "Shame on the Galaxy" signs and start picketing outside The Home Depot Center for unfair labor practices. They are what Major League Soccer calls "developmental players," which is a politically correct way of saying they make the equivalent of \$6.20 an hour to be professional soccer players.

Each also is this, though: David Beckham's teammate. How many people can say that?

Consider that less than a year ago, they were at the University of San Diego riding buses around the Pacific

Northwest to play college soccer matches on soggy fields in freezing rain in front of crowds that numbered in the dozens.

And that on Sunday night they were in the Geffen wing of the Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles, walking down the red carpet as paparazzi snapped photos, mingling inside with A-list Hollywood celebrities invited to the Beckhams' private welcoming party thrown by Tom Cruise and Will Smith.

Caso met basketball stars LeBron James and Carmelo Anthony, who flew in just for the party. Friesz chatted with Cruise and Smith and their wives, thanking them for throwing the shindig. Then he went to hear the evening's musical entertainment by ... is that ... yes it is ... Stevie Wonder.

"Pretty unbelievable," Friesz says. "I've never experienced anything like that."

Neither Friesz nor Caso was taken in the three-round MLS draft in January, and as the season approached both admit they figured their pro soccer careers might be over before they started. Friesz caught on with the Galaxy first, signing a developmental contract in March to be the club's No. 3 goalkeeper. Caso, a central midfielder who also can play up top, first tried out with the Portland Timbers of the United Soccer Leagues and didn't sign with the Galaxy until two weeks ago.

Caso had just arrived in Las Vegas to celebrate his 23rd birthday when he got the call. He hopped on a flight back to Los Angeles a few hours later - to accept a job that pays \$248 a week.

"I'll always be able to say I played with David Beckham and be around for this whole experience," Caso says. "He's been one of the better players in the world for years. I've watched him, like everybody else, in England and in the English Premier League."

Developmental players and their paltry salaries have become a sore point for the league and its players union. The idea was to expand rosters and give more players a better chance at making senior rosters, but suddenly having a guy making 500 times more than his teammates has accentuated the issue.

Most developmental players need help from their parents. Friesz, who has a degree in business administration from USD, still lives at home in Laguna Niguel and commutes to Carson. Other players have talked of eating at McDonald's, sleeping on couches, needing rides to practice because they can't afford a car. Beckham lives in a \$22 million mansion in Beverley Hills and has a fleet of luxury cars.

Caso and Friesz, the lowest-paid players on the Galaxy roster, commiserate with their developmental brethren across the league. They also know their \$12,900 comes with a priceless bonus.

"There's no other team right now that has the exposure that we're going to get," Friesz says. "There's Japanese TV covering our practices right now. It's crazy. ... You can't put a price tag on that."

Developmental players generally ply their trade in anonymity, practicing with the first team but rarely seeing action in anything but reserve games attended by fewer fans than watched them in college. But Beckham changes everything, starting with the slew of televised exhibition games scheduled for no other reason than to give fans in other locales a chance to see him. And who knows which scouts might be watching.

"We have a bunch of exhibition games, and sometimes they might throw one of us in there," Caso said. "You never know, you might get an opportunity to play, and hopefully you do well."

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