

# Evan Ream: New pro team in San Francisco hopes to build the game in NorCal

By [Evan Ream](#)

The first time I became aware Brian Andres Helmick — his family and close friends call him Andres — was through his new soccer startup, the San Francisco Deltas.

Professional soccer in San Francisco has come and gone more times than even seems possible, with each new team failing in more dubious fashion than the previous.



Soccer, quite simply, doesn't work in San Francisco. Or so I hypothesized.

Furthering my doubts, the team's logo resembled its Delta Airlines counterpart and its publicity stunts including playing "pranks" on future potential fans.

Helmick's lavish and expensive marketing plans and entry into the second-division North American Soccer League prompted thoughts of delusions of grandeur from yours truly, leading to me writing a column for SB Nation putting him in the "Tyson Zone." That's the area named after former boxer Mike Tyson in which one person or entity exists where you're so unsure what their next move is that you'd literally believe any story you heard about them.

It was his response that made me believe in Helmick and the future of soccer in San Francisco, where the Deltas will kick off in 2017.

Helmick and the Deltas sent me a signed, framed photo of Mike Tyson cradling a tiger ("Watch out for your ears," read one inscription) and invited me to chat about his club and how he hopes to win over fans in Northern California.

Sitting in the stands at Bonney Field before Sacramento Republic FC's 0-0 draw last Saturday, I found it hard not to like Helmick, a self-made Colombia native who wants people from every religion, ethnicity or gender to buy into his community-oriented vision.

For 45 minutes, I sat and listened to him speak with an ear-to-ear grin on his face about his plans, while he made me feel like the only person in the 11,569-capacity stadium by never breaking eye contact and drawing me in with friendly and expressive hand gestures.

For many sports executives, a big issue is exclusivity in markets. For example, the San Jose Earthquakes (for now) own the MLS rights to the Sacramento area, meaning that if Sacramento was to garner an expansion slot in the league, it would have to negotiate a buyout with San Jose.

Helmick laughed this notion off, telling me that he's already working with other clubs in the Bay Area to make sure San Francisco isn't monopolized by the Deltas.

"Because our success ... is tied to bringing other clubs with us ... I think it's nuts to ever think that we're going to have a stadium just for us," Helmick said. "I want to have multiple men's, women's teams. And think about it, all of a sudden if we have a stadium that multiple teams are sharing, guess what happens? We can charge less money to fans."

Wait, charge *less* money?

Yup, Helmick's current business model — without other teams sharing a renovated Kezar Stadium — calls for a multitude of free and discounted tickets for each game for lower-income fans.

"That's my big thing, the thing I really focus on, maybe because I don't come from money," Helmick said. "It's gotta be something that other people can go to, people of all socioeconomic levels. The discounted ticket thing is super-important for me. The free tickets are super-important for me. I'd be sad if our stadium, because we're in the most expensive city in the United States, is filled with people who can really afford the tickets.

"In Colombia, really, really poor people can go watch the same game that really, really rich people can. I, in my humble opinion, believe that's not the case in professional sports in the United States and I get it. If you just (spent) a billion and a half on a stadium, you've got to charge, whatever, 50 bucks a beer to make the math work."

Ironically, the club Helmick supports in Colombia is the Bogota-based "Millonarios," the "Millionaires," which he laughs would have been a terrible name for a team in San Francisco.

But it's his understanding of such issues that leads me to believe in him.

Part of the biggest debate in professional soccer in the United States right now is that over the second-division NASL and third-division USL (the league in which the Republic plays) and the differing philosophies in a pair of leagues that used to be the same entity, but split in 2010 over said differences.

Rather than operate in direct competition, Helmick ideally would have the leagues work together along with the first-division MLS that has an affiliation with the USL.

While he says it's unrealistic until probably 2018 at the earliest, Helmick wishes to install a Northern California "Open Cup" knock-out tournament involving all the professional and amateur teams in the area, including the Republic and the Earthquakes.

He says the Deltas already will play annual preseason games between both clubs, so why not make it into more of a friendly competition that could possibly start the institution of promotion and relegation — a system that exists in most countries in which the best teams each year are promoted to a higher division and the worst teams are relegated to a lower one.

The idea of promotion and relegation would give any club — even a hypothetical one in a city like Davis — the opportunity to rise to the top of soccer in the country.

With the amount that MLS owners have spent on expansion fees, this is unlikely to happen anytime soon, but Helmick is a dreamer.

"I don't want to talk about all the reasons why we shouldn't do something," he said. "I want to talk about all the reasons why we should do something and then how we can make that happen.

"And I could be wrong. ... The primary message that I think we tell our fans all the time is, we're going to make mistakes. But just know that every time we're going to be doing something ... it's to try to make things better.

"I love mistakes. All I ask is that they be new mistakes. If they're the same mistake, I get pissed, but if they're new mistakes, what that tells me is we're trying new things, we're innovating, we're pushing the envelope."

Talk to any Republic employee, and you'll get a nearly carbon-copy answer of the above quote from Helmick.

And just look how successful that club has been.

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