

Bringing soccer to the Bay Area: San Francisco Deltas founder Brian Helmick

In bringing a North American Soccer League team to the heart of California's tech region, San Francisco Deltas founder and chief executive Brian Helmick hopes to harness the Bay Area spirit.

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San Francisco's Bay Area carries with it a wealth of connotations. At its heart, Silicon Valley is unquestionably synonymous with the technological revolution that has swept the world in the past 20 years and more. As the crucible that fostered world-changing companies like Apple, Google and Facebook, among countless others, the area is at the forefront of the modern world, and is second to none as a centre for innovation.

This startup culture has, however, failed to penetrate the city's sports teams. Only the much dramatised story of Billy Beane's statistically driven 2002 Oakland Athletics side in Major League Baseball (MLB) has been truly redolent of its surroundings. However, the San Francisco Deltas, the North American Soccer League's (NASL) newest team, are aiming to deliver Silicon Valley's innovative spirit on the pitch.

Here, founder and chief executive Brian Helmick talks to SportsPro about setting up a new team, and the journey that the Deltas have been on.

Tell us about the journey San Francisco Deltas have been on.

It's been absolutely a dream come true.

In February 2015, we began conversations with the league and realised that there was a huge opportunity to bring a professional soccer team to San Francisco. We got excited. After six months of speaking with San Francisco soccer fans, league representatives and city officials, we knew it was time to move forward. A legal entity was formed and the real work began.

In November 2015 we launched our alpha site, which started to spur some interest among fans and media. I officially introduced the venture in December and we had our first fan event. Soon after we released our beta site and also decided to reveal our logo to our most loyal fans – so we only revealed the logo to those registered on our site. We revealed our team name, SF Deltas, by marching through Super Bowl City.

On the week of 29th March, we officially announced the professional soccer was coming to San Francisco and that we're the first West Coast team in the North American Soccer League (NASL). It's been incredible.

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What was the inspiration for the team?

In early 2015, a good friend of mine and former investor reached out to invite me to build a professional soccer team with him. I had to put aside my love for the sport, because if you love something too much, it can blind you. I had to look at it to see if it could make sense as a business.

I'm doing this venture because I want to grow soccer at all levels and want to share my passion for the world's game with the people of San Francisco. I've called this city home for 13 years and believe we can do something very special here.

Realistically, how hard is it to set up a new soccer team? How did you make it happen?

When evaluating this opportunity, first, I met with every single NASL team owner, president and GM to understand their vision, get to know them as people, hear about mistakes that they made so we could learn some best practices from them.

Then I looked at the Bay Area. I spent a lot of time looking at the teams that failed to understand why they failed, so we could learn from their mistakes. I spent even more time listening to fans to not only gauge if there was demand for a professional team but, specifically, what they would like to see in order for them to support a professional team.

Then we started building out the operations side. The first hire was a director of community outreach. We believe in building a fanbase one fan at a time. We meet fans where they are – at the pubs, at pickup games, at adult recreation and competitive games, at soccer non-profits, at youth soccer – just being out there and talking to people.

As with any entrepreneurial venture, a lot of hard work, energy and passion is required. I encourage my team to not be afraid to take risks. Don't be afraid to fail. Experiment as much as possible.

- [NASL announce new San Francisco expansion team](#)

How important have your investors been? Not just financially but in building a vision around the club?

Part of the criteria for investors was they have to be smart and have to add value to the project. Collectively, our investors are a diverse group of entrepreneurs from Brazil and the US, including individuals from companies such as Apple, Facebook, Google, PayPal, Twitter, Yahoo, plus venture firms – DFJ, Felicis, and Precursor.

They are all passionate soccer fans and believe in the tremendous opportunity to do something special for the San Fran community. We've tapped into the expertise and network of our investor group as we've built the organization and will continue to do so as we grow.

In the long run, innovation from them is really going to be key.

Do you have aspirations to become an MLS team?

A lot can happen in the long run, as you've seen in all other major sports in the US, multiple leagues compete with each other and at one point they come together.

Our focus right now is on the near term, which is to bring together an incredible team - on and off the field - and to sell out our initial stadium, which only has capacity for approximately 10,000 fans. We expect to hire our head coach by September and begin recruiting players in October.

What would you like to achieve internationally?

Soccer is the world's game. As such, we are a member of that global community and want to find ways we can help improve the ecosystem. Innovation and technology is a key area where we plan on helping clubs.

San Francisco is an internationally known city and we are blessed to have a higher profile because of that. We've received international attention already and have had fans from many countries express their excitement. We've got a lot to do locally first, but are excited about what role we will play internationally.

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