

there's a clarity from the league and league owners that says we need to increase the amount of transparency among us."

by Nipun Chopra

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In the second part of our conversation, we focus on the the upcoming changes to the NASL, as well as Brian's own role in catalyzing those changes. **Make sure to check out part one.**

NC – A lot of the weight of expectation is on you. As someone who is the face and executive hand of a tricky project, have there been limitations placed on you by the league?

BH – Good question. The beauty of the NASL is that the different clubs own the league equally. There are no connections between the league and the club or any club with Traffic Sports. So, right now, every club has one share in the league. There hasn't been a situation where I've said that I needed something and the other clubs have said it was a terrible idea. I think there are times we do things that make sense for our market, which wouldn't make sense for other markets. But, so far, in terms of what we've been wanting to do, we've been able to have conversations with other members of the league, talk through it, and they've said 'yup, that makes sense.'

NC – Has the league ever — since everything went down — shared with you a list of things that the league feels cannot happen again, particularly financially?

BH – To be honest with you, it's the other way around. The clubs have said 'we're going to make sure the following doesn't happen again.' So, it wasn't league driven, more club driven. You can probably guess what were the things I cared about most.

Things like collaboration, transparency are things that you'll see more of. I truly care about being open and honest — with external parties and other clubs. Because, we are business partners: our decisions affect each other. I won't be perfect, ask my wife. I make at least one mistake a day. The point is we're doing everything with the best of intentions. We're really pushing the concept of Bay Area Futbol.

NC – Could you give me some examples?

BH – For our open tryouts we spoke to a lot of owners in different leagues, and found out that the average pro California team charges about \$200 for trialists. Yet, owners told me that they almost never find any players through tryouts. And I was wondering 'if you're not finding them, that doesn't make sense to do them or to charge them.' So we charged \$75, just to break even.

I had multiple players come thank me for making it affordable. We had 300 guys show up from all over the world. We chose the top 30 and gave them all their money back. Of those top 30, we chose four to come to a **preseason training camp**. Out of those four, we signed one — he's from Richmond, California, his name is Salih Muhammad.

We invited every single professional and amateur club to come to our tryout for free. The same scouting sheet that Marc and our technical staff had was the exact same sheet everyone else had. I told them if there's someone you're interested in, let me know and I'll put you in touch. Some of the clubs followed through, and I put them in touch that night myself. From my perspective, if I'm interested in a player, and another team signs him, I'll be upset, yes. But it's better for that player and for the sport.

NC – Question from fellow Soc Takes contributor Aaron Gunyon. You brought some ideas to the NASL. Could you share some that were well received and some that were met with trepidation?

BH – The open tryouts: There are many owners who think of tryouts as a revenue opportunity. That's not how I view a tryout.

We want to help give those players chances. We want to promote local clubs. It's why we have the URLs of clubs in the Bay Area: it helps them from a search engine optimization or SEO perspective, because we obviously get lots of traffic. We're doing things like that that I think are the right thing.

You can look around clubs in the league and around the United States, and I think we are the only club that has all the clubs in their region to help promote them.

Here's a funny one that the league adopted. Have you heard of **Doodle**?

NC – Yeah, I've used it to schedule meetings with professors.

BH – Yeah, when I first got to the league and was trying to set up calls, I told them that email is terrible. You know, we don't use email at Deltas. Internally, we use **Slack**. What other technology, other than email do you use that is over 20 years old? Email is terrible for communication, collaboration and coordination. Now they (the league) use Doodle to set up meetings which makes me chuckle every time I see it.

NC – I'm glad you're dragging NASL out of the old era, which brings me to my next question: As someone who loves this league and loves this sport, I'm sitting here and listening to you, and you sound like the prototype of what this league needs — a soccer guy who gets the business side. The problem, however, is what you said earlier — sometimes things are out of your control. So what is your contingency plan? When you're talking to investors or sponsors, and you tell them that things are out of your control, you're not going to get any funding, how do you convince them this is a viable investment, in a viable team, in a viable league?

BH – Great question. I think that is the question that I wish you could ask all the teams in all three leagues. Were it asked, one of the things that would emerge is: When teams aren't looking at the collaborative perspective, they'll always be thinking of self-preservation. 'I want to make sure our team doesn't die' is not a good place for the league or the sport to be in. So I think that question is spot on.

Since 12 months ago, things have changed dramatically. So, what's going to happen in the next 12 months is hard to predict. I can definitely say that from my perspective, last season, as there was turbulence at the league level, I was focused on making sure that I gave Deltas a chance. But I don't have a good answer to your question because, like I said, I am all about transparency.

NC – My number one complaint was regarding the overspending. Is there a plan in place that every single front office member and every single player at Deltas will get paid through 2017? And, of course, this ties into a tweet of mine that you corrected — which I appreciate — about Deltas spending \$5 million on players.

BH – Yes, that for me is quintessential. We cannot have some of those situations happen again. We've already instituted some measures at the league level to increase transparency. I met with people involved with the NBA, and one of them was adamant about everyone seeing everyone else's numbers. That switch is difficult for people who are used to 'wait, I'm trying to beat you.'

The second piece is associated with controlling expenses. We put in a measure to make sure spending doesn't get out of whack, but it's hard to do because we need to find the balance between financial prudence and flexibility.

For example, why did you think our budget was \$5-\$6 million?

NC – The way it was explained to me was, given the high cost of living in the Bay Area, and that the team would likely subsidize housing for the players, adding salaries would easily drive the spending on players to that amount.

BH – So, we're going to spend \$1.2 million on our budget. We'll probably spend around \$500-\$600K on housing.

NC – So it's actually less than 2 million combined?

BH – On player salary and housing, yes. We need to sell a lot of tickets to make it all a success!

NC – Going back to the question about the transparency in the NBA, will something like that happen with the NASL this year?

BH – Yeah, that was one of the suggestions we spoke about last year. That's exactly right. Just this week, we got an email from the league — let's report actual information from last year and budget from this year, in a lot more detail than what was required in the past.

NC – Can you be more specific?

BH – The answer is yes. I can't share details, but there's a clarity from the league and league owners that says we need to increase the amount of transparency among us. My hope is that we start sharing actual information with each other, at least on a quarterly basis. Ideally, even a monthly basis. I'm not sure, but I understand a lot of this is real-time in the NBA. You can look up how many people showed up at their arenas.

NC – So, are you talking about financial transparency or ticket numbers?

BH – In my perfect world, we'd be able to see everything because we're business partners. Of course, we don't need to show each other exactly how much we are paying because there are competitive reasons to not do that, but enough granularity to allow financial prudence and also from a competitive, best practices basis. So if I see that a team got a lot more in merchandise or concessions than we did, I'd want to talk to them and hopefully learn how we can improve. We can all benefit from that transparency.

NC – And the league is interested in that? As you know, that sort of transparency wasn't a priority in previous years.

BH – That is correct. And, Nipun, to clarify — remember, *we* are the league. We tell the league what we want. So it's really up to us.

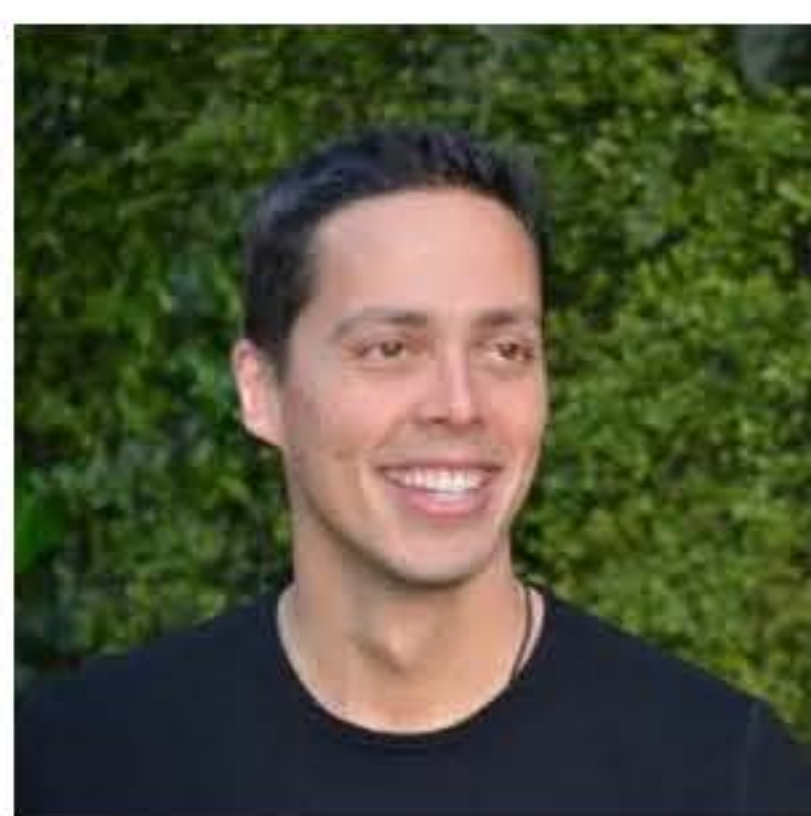
NC – From my understanding, you have more of an executive role within the league, in terms of vetting future franchises. Can you comment/clarify that?

BH – Yes. At last year's summit, we decided we needed an expansion committee: we need a true vetting process. So, the people on the expansion committee are San Francisco, NY Cosmos and Miami. So we have very active conversations with different opportunities we're talking to.

NC – Brian, I really appreciate chatting with you.

BH – It was fun, see you in SF maybe!

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Brian Andres Helmick. Credit: SF Deltas

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