



The San Francisco Deltas have been solid on the field, but they need more fans to consistently show up to ensure their survival. (Courtesy Trevor Will/S.F. Deltas)

Soccer in SF searches for financial footing

DAN BERNSTEIN / Aug. 10, 2017 12:00 a.m. / SPORTS



In the fourth round of the U.S. Open Cup, San Francisco Deltas fans huddled in the upper southwest corner of Avaya Stadium to take in a match against the San Jose Earthquakes. They wore red, banged drums and chanted through a 2-0 defeat.

With underwhelming home attendance at Kezar Stadium to that point, coach Marc Dos Santos believed the support on the road could spark a turnaround.

"Hopefully it's going to create awareness and hopefully people are going to realize more and more that there's a professional soccer team in San Francisco," Dos Santos said at the time.

But on July 27 — more than a month after the game in San Jose — Deltas CEO Brian Andrés Helmick published a Medium post, outlining his team's continued attendance shortcomings.

He wrote the club couldn't survive without increased turnout.

Despite the high-profile contest against the Earthquakes and a second-place finish in the North American Soccer League spring season, the Deltas have struggled to fill Kezar, which seats 10,000 people.

"If you don't talk about bad things, it doesn't end well," Helmick said of his decision to write the post in an interview with the Examiner. "Hopefully it starts a dialogue."

The Deltas average 2,524 fans per game. They've failed to reach the 2,000 mark four times. While the Deltas seated 3,369 people on Saturday against the New York Cosmos — their largest turnout since April — the team ranks last in NASL attendance.

Helmick offered several explanations. Cold weather and biting winds at Kezar remain a barrier, even with start times moved up to 5 p.m. for the fall campaign. Competition with popular entertainment options in San Francisco is unavoidable, and more than 80 percent of fans have gone to one game and not returned despite overwhelmingly positive assessments of their experience.

The Deltas are starting from scratch this season — their brand is not ingrained in the culture of The City like the Giants or even the 49ers. The club doesn't have decades-long ties to generations of fans. And given the prohibitive costs of running a team in this region, there isn't time to wait around for those roots to take hold.

Helmick did not provide a specific timeframe for when attendance must improve in order to keep the club running, but he claimed no future season is a guarantee.

"It's not like I have a deadline, like it has to be this number by this date," Helmick said. "But you can't wait until your kids are used to doing it and now they go for more games [with their kids] because the costs of operating here are just too high."

The Deltas hope a high-profile Bay Area investor backs them or that they partner with a local sports team to help draw increased crowds. But more realistically, they know they must grow their core support.

There are signs of an emerging soccer culture.

In San Jose, the small band of San Francisco fans in the corner of the stadium could be heard over an announced crowd of 12,524. After home games, kids swarm the edge of the field shouting players' names in search of autographs. When that's done, the Deltas head to a local pub to hang out with fans.

San Francisco's on-field product is better than expected. Following an impressive spring season, the Deltas are unbeaten in two fall games. They are on track for a playoff spot. On Saturday, newly signed Brazilian legend Dagoberito made his first start, providing an assist from a free kick.

"It would've been worse if we were in last place and losing a lot of games," Dos Santos said. "This team is good, this team is competitive. So San Francisco has to read that and be very proud of what we're trying to do."

But until Kezar is filled on a regular basis, those positives are secondary. The bottom line is clear: The Deltas must find a way to fill seats soon.

Their long-term future depends on it.

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