

Not Just for Kicks

THE TECH-BACKED DELTAS ARE SAN FRANCISCO'S NEWEST PRO SOCCER TEAM. CAN THEIR MONEY BUY LOCAL FANS' LOVE? (SAN FRANCISCO MAGAZINE)

CURRENTS



San Francisco Deltas players (from left) Pablo Dyego, Saah Muhammad, and Romuald Pokor at their new home field, Kezar Stadium.

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With the San Francisco Deltas getting ready to kick off their inaugural season

in the North American Soccer League on March 25, the city once again has a professional, if second-division, soccer team to cheer. And one that—should it be touched from the heavens and win the eight-team NASL, then sweep its way through the U.S. Open Cup against larger and better-funded squads, then advance through the CONCACAF Champions League—yes, technically, could qualify for the Club World Cup.

Leite isn't the only one dreaming big here. The party, organized by the Deltas' fan-run supporters' club, newly christened as the Delta Force, includes a question-and-answer session between those in attendance and the team's new coach, Marc Dos Santos. Fans pepper him with questions about defensive alignments and playoff prognostications, though there are conspicuously few

questions about whether this incarnation of a soccer team can last longer than every other squad that's tried to call the city home. Dos Santos seems to recognize the need to put the horse before the cart. "We could give it everything as players and coaches," he tells the crowd, "but at the end of the day, we're going to need people in the stadium."

Evidence seems to suggest that the city is ready to show up for a soccer club. Close to 35 percent of the city's population is foreign-born, and at least 500 youth soccer club teams already exist, not counting school teams and church leagues. Bars showing European soccer on TV abound, and coverage of the sport on television and online is more prevalent now than it's ever been before. Plus—and this is important—the Bay's biggest soccer team, the San Jose Earthquakes of Major League Soccer, have never really inspired a loyal following in the city, leaving room for a true San Francisco squad. (The next time you see a kid here wearing a Quakes jersey, let me know: It'll be the first I've ever heard of it.)

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year or two before folding or going bankrupt. Most recently, the California Victory joined the United Soccer League in 2007, but lasted only a year (and drew only about 1,500 fans per game) before the Spanish club sponsoring them pulled its support.

Part of that has to do with soccer's hierarchy. Whereas the Quakes are part of the first-division MLS, the Deltas' NASL and the Victory's USL are considered second-division leagues. The difference is more than semantic. The average MLS player's salary is over \$300,000; NASL players' contracts are more like a tenth of that. Both leagues are professional, but the NASL carries the stigma of being considered a minor league.

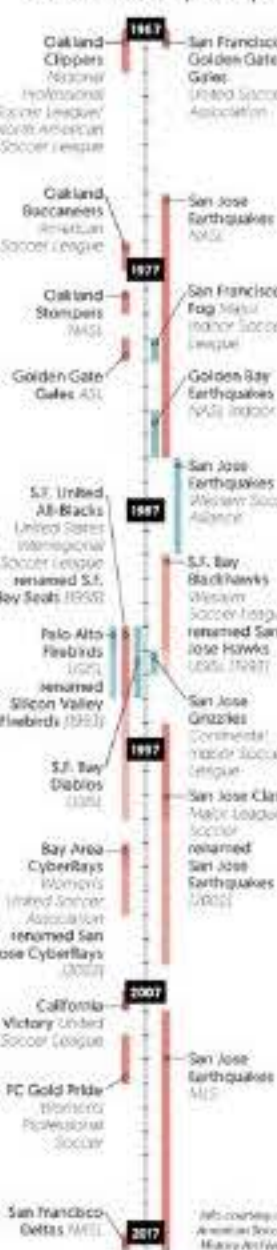
This isn't news to Deltas cofounder and CEO Brian Andrés Helmick, though, who sees in the NASL an opportunity to grow and experiment in ways the white-shoe teams in the MLS can't, or won't.

That starts with the one thing the Deltas have going for them that previous second-tier squads didn't: money. The team has attracted funding from 19 investors with ties to tech outfits including PayPal, Yahoo, Facebook, Apple, and Twitter—connections made largely through Helmick, who in 2014 sold his software company, Algentic, to Hub International. (Helmick declines to disclose the team's operating budget, other than to say they're talking about tens of millions of dollars over the first few seasons.)

As part of its lease agreement, the team promised to make a half million dollars in upgrades to Kezar Stadium, where it will play its 18 home games, some of which can be used as rent credits. Helmick says the team has already doubled that investment—including new lights, renovated locker rooms, and the installation of 4,000 red stadium seats he managed to salvage from Candlestick Park. Plus there's the elbow-grease quotient: When we first met this winter, Helmick was among the half dozen team staffers spray-painting stenciled numbers

GOAL INTERRUPTED

A half century of short-lived pro football franchises by the Bay.



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onto the bleachers, a DIY effort he says saved the team more than \$30,000 in wages. That's not to say the Deltas are penny-pinching. Of the Candlestick seats, which were being held by a company in Indiana that charged an arm and a leg to ship them back to San Francisco, Helmick tells me, "Sometimes you have to make the wrong financial decision because it's really the right decision."

Helmick is also betting big on the team's tech aspirations. Innovations include an artificial-intelligence ticketing app from Eventbrite, with whom the team is partnering, that can group like-minded fans together (say, families with kids in one section; college kids in another). Fans will also be able to vote on food trucks that they want to see at home games.

But Helmick and especially Dos Santos say that fielding a winning team will be the lure to draw in San Francisco's soccer-curious. The Deltas already have one arrow in that quiver, having beaten the Quakes 1-0 in an exhibition game—a scrimmage played against mostly backups, but one that gave the new team an instant jolt of cred.

To that end, the team has signed players with significant pro experience, rather than youngsters straight out of college. Karl Ouimette, a defender, is one of three Deltas from the Canadian national team and played in the MLS from 2012 to 2016. Michael Stephens, a midfielder, was Major League Soccer's No. 16 draft pick in 2010 and played in Norway's top league. Midfielder Kyle Bekker, another Canadian national teamer, was the No. 3 pick in the MLS draft in 2013.

Then there's Saah Muhammad. At 21, he's among the team's youngest players, and the only one without any professional experience. Having grown up in Richmond, he's also one of only two locals. After bouncing around lower-division leagues in Croatia and feeder teams for MLS clubs, he returned home to Pinole and attended an open try-out for the Deltas along with more than 300 other players. Four were granted invitations to preseason workouts. Only Muhammad was offered a contract.

For him, the questions swirling around the Deltas' long-term feasibility are moot. He's playing for his hometown professional soccer team—at any level, a dream come true. When I catch up with him after a practice at the Beach Chalet Fields in Golden Gate Park, where the team trains on rainy days, he doesn't do a lot of qualifying.

"There's a solid, pro team in San Francisco, in a good league," he says. "I can't see it not doing well." ■

MARCH 24, 2017 — Reported feature on a start-up pro soccer team in San Francisco—and the long and not-exactly-distinguished history of just such failures. (Including a sidebar seen above detailing every single pro soccer team, which was a trip to put together.)



GAMETHEORY

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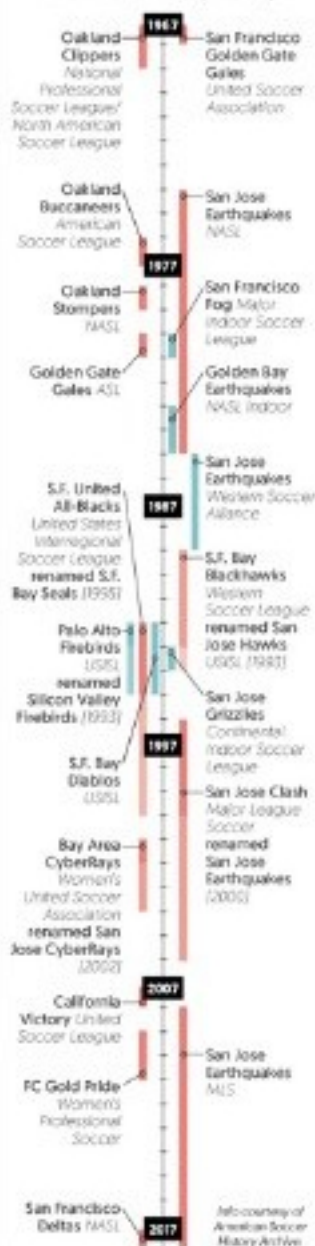
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