

# Won and done: San Francisco Deltas 'soccer startup' folds after 1 year

By Douglas Zimmerman, SFGATE Updated 2:43 pm PST, Friday, November 24, 2017

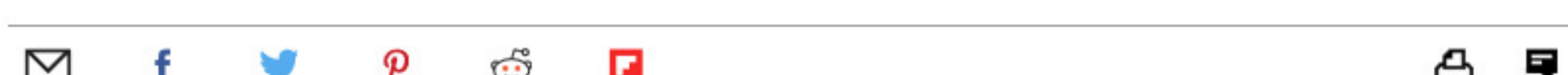


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IMAGE 1 OF 7

Tommy Heinemann (center) and Reiner Ferreira (right) celebrate the San Francisco Deltas defeating the New York Cosmos to win the NASL Championship on November 12, 2017 at Kezar Stadium in Golden Gate Park in ... [more](#)

The San Francisco Deltas recently completed a fairytale expansion year with a North American Soccer League championship. Unfortunately, the team's success on the pitch could not overcome its struggles off the field.

"We are closing down the San Francisco Deltas," CEO Brian Andres Helmick announced in a blog post Friday morning after the team reportedly lost several million dollars and had trouble finding its niche in the crowded Bay Area sports market.

"As many of you have said, this journey that started in 2015 has the makings of a movie with character-defining struggles, heroic moments, painful defeats, and overcoming seemingly impossible hurdles all culminating in a dream come true on Sunday, November 12th when the SF Deltas were crowned the national champions after defeating the New York Cosmos - arguably the most storied brand in U.S. Soccer history," Helmick post continued. "I'll never forget the scene of thousands of fans storming the field. Now that the celebration has come to an end, players and coaches have been released from their contracts."

A former tech company CEO, Helmick tried to combine the best practices of the Bay Area startup tech industry with a community-first vision for the club. The Deltas planned to bring tech-inspired innovations to its games, including a virtual-reality fan experience and Artificial Intelligence (AI) ticketing that was never fully realized.

"For me, this has always been a soccer club first, but I do believe that any club can benefit from the startup mentality of being lean, transparent and always being willing to listen to its fans," Helmick explained.

To spread the word in the Bay Area, the team decided against an extensive marketing campaign and instead decided for a pound the pavement approach by reaching out to the potential fans one at a time.


"You need to go out there, touch them, hug them, drink a beer with them and really listen to them to make sure we are doing things that they want us to do," Helmick **said in 2016**.


Despite the team's outreach and ambitions, they struggled out of the gate. After 4,400 fans attended the opening match at Kezar Stadium, the team went through a period of games averaging just over 2000 fans through the first half of the season. Helmick wrote a mid-season blog post warning about the team's financial issues and challenged fans to help fix the team's problems with attendance as well as possibly attract more outside investment.

"The analogy I think of is 'If I'm drowning, and I don't tell you I'm drowning, you're not going to jump into the pool to save me,'" Helmick **told SFGate in July**.

He blamed a combination of factors for the club's problems, including the plethora of entertainment options in San Francisco. On social media, most complaints about the Deltas centered on the cold weather, the location of Kezar Stadium, parking and ticket prices. Tickets for most home games ranged from \$19 to \$124 for VIP seats.

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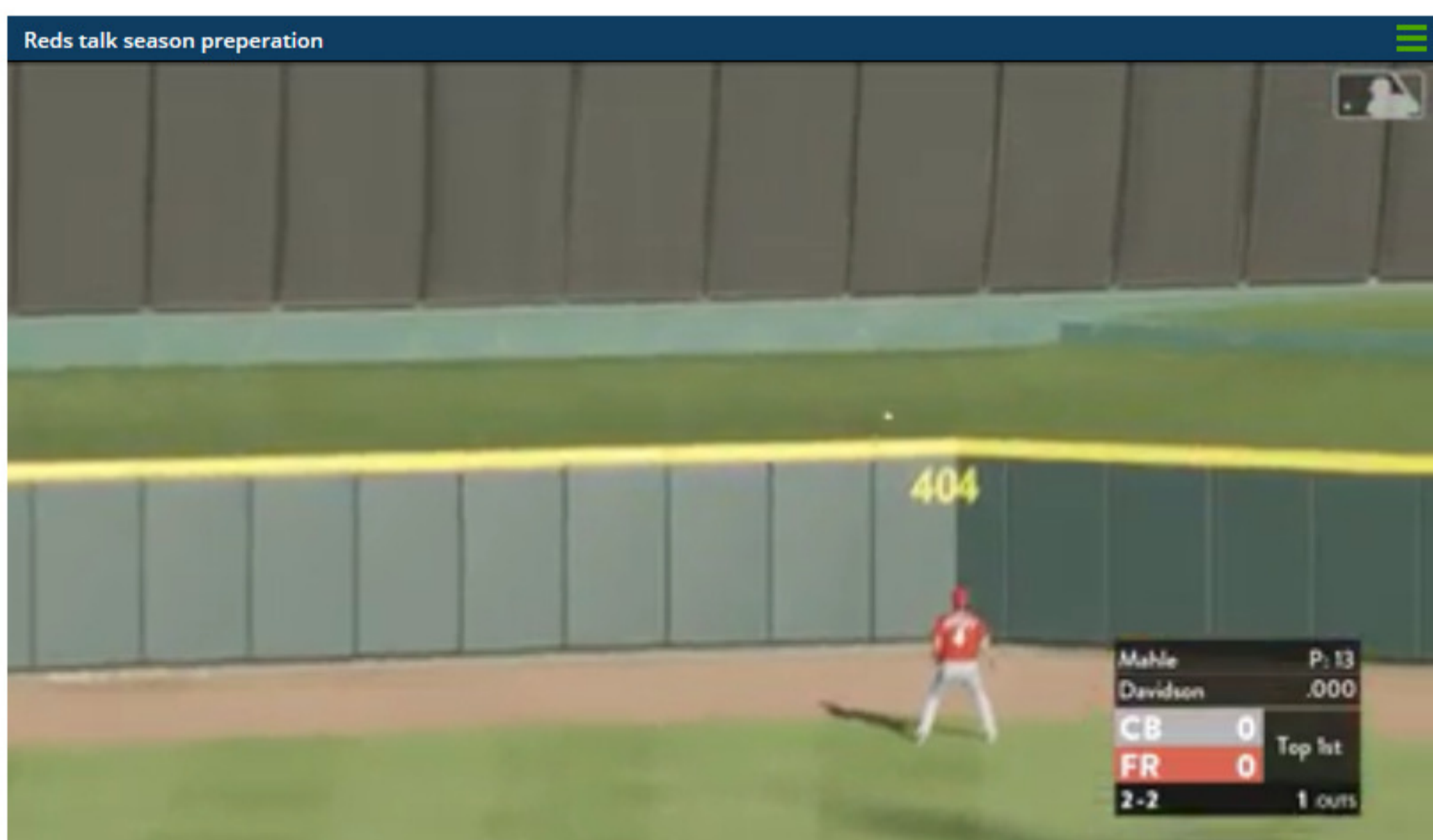
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Despite the team developing a small group of committed supporters they only recorded a modest uptick in total ticket sales after Helmick's midseason challenge. With financial losses mounting they traded away player Danny Cruz in August, and members of the SF Deltas front office started to leave beginning in September.

"I strived to be honest with them and to always treat them with respect, so I hope that eased hearing facts that may have been hard to accept," Helmick said. "We started the Deltas with a three to five-year plan, but the reality is that future seasons are never guaranteed in professional sports. In any business, startup or otherwise, it's important to evaluate the viability of the enterprise and be ready to make the difficult decision to change the original plan."

Helmick pledged that the team will pay all its bills, including what's owed players, coaches, staff, partners, and vendors despite closing its doors. "I consider all of them family, and it was very important that I keep the promises I made to them," he said.

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With all the uncertainty off the field, Deltas head coach Marc Dos Santos did a brilliant job keeping the team focused on the pitch. San Francisco lost only two of their final 16 regular season games, including going undefeated during a brutal stretch of seven games in 21 days in October. The team's hard work earned the Deltas a second place finish in the NASL and a home match in the playoffs.

The Deltas defeated North Carolina 1-0 in the semifinal game. The New York Cosmos upset first-place Miami FC to set up a championship match before a sold-out crowd at Kezar.

San Francisco rode an early penalty kick goal by Tommy Heinemann, and a clinching score from Devon Sandoval as the clock expired to defeat the Cosmos 2-0. At the end of the game, the team's fans stormed the pitch to celebrate the title.

The demise of the Deltas continues San Francisco's checkered history of professional soccer. The city's previous team, the second-division California Victory, survived only one season as well in 2007. The San Francisco Seals also ran a minor league soccer team that folded in 1999.

"We remain a big believer in the market, as evidenced by the atmosphere and crowd at The Championship Final earlier this month, and we still believe that the city deserves a professional soccer team," **NASL interim commissioner Rishi Sehgal said** after the Deltas' announcement. "We are in active discussions with potential ownership groups and we want to keep professional soccer in San Francisco in the future."

Helmick plans to share the lessons he learned running the Deltas in the upcoming months. He hopes they will benefit other fledgling pro soccer teams in the Bay Area or elsewhere.

"This experience did not sour me on soccer," he said. "It gave me memories I'll have forever, but it did teach me that we need greater transparency and collaboration at all levels if we want to improve the sport we all love."