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Soccer is growing fast in the United States and the 'best days are still ahead' for MLS

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By Jamie Goldberg

In November of 2001, [Major League Soccer](#) owner Lamar Hunt and his two sons, Dan and Clark, sat around a table inside Arrowhead Stadium in Kansas City listening intently on a conference call as other owners talked ominously about the state of their fledging league.

MLS had [lost \\$250 million](#) since its inception in 1996. Two of the league's 12 franchises were in such sorry shape that they [would need to fold](#).

By the end of the discouraging 15-minute conference call, the majority of the owners were in agreement: It was time to call the bankruptcy lawyers. The MLS experiment had failed.

Over the next 48 hours, Hunt called each owner to convince them to give the league another shot. Ultimately, three owners - Hunt, Philip Anschutz and Robert Kraft - shelled out the necessary money to take over the remaining 10 teams and keep MLS afloat.

"My dad always thought that MLS could be one of the most successful leagues in America," said Dan Hunt, president of FC Dallas, speaking of his father who died 10 years ago.

"He knew it was going to take time, but he saw a really bright future for the league."

Now, 15 years after it nearly folded, MLS is thriving.

The league is attracting more fans than ever before and recently signed a historic eight-year TV deal with ESPN, Fox Sports and Univision. And throughout the United States, more and more fans are embracing soccer, a strong indication that MLS has even greater potential.

"We feel empowered by some of that success, but moving forward, we still see enormous growth," MLS Commissioner [Don Garber](#) said. "There is a real view that our best days are still ahead."

The first real indication that Americans might be ready to embrace soccer came in 1994 when the United States hosted the World Cup.

An incredible [3.6 million fans attended the tournament and 11 million viewers](#) in the U.S. tuned in to watch the USA face Brazil in the Round of 16.

Two years after the World Cup, MLS was born.

"I think with soccer - no disrespect to the huge impact the NASL had - you sort of have to start the clock in 1994," Fox play-by-play announcer [John Strong](#) said. "There was this whole generation watching the 1994 World Cup at an impressionable age before their sporting tastes were set in stone and that was the first time that most Americans really saw soccer for the global game that it is."

While the 1994 World Cup was the impetus for the creation of MLS and interest in the sport was again piqued eight years later when the United States made a surprise run to the quarterfinals of the 2002 World Cup, the league didn't really start to take off until 2007.

Toronto FC joined the league that year with a perfectly located downtown stadium, setting a standard for expansion teams to come into MLS with soccer-specific, downtown venues. MLS also agreed to an eight-year TV deal with ESPN starting in 2007. The deal, worth [roughly \\$8 million](#) annually, was the first national TV rights-fee paying agreement signed by MLS. And maybe most importantly, English legend David Beckham joined the LA Galaxy in 2007, forcing MLS to create the designated player rule and setting the stage for more and more international stars to join the league.

"When the league was in its early phases, our first task was to grow and try to prove to investors and municipalities and to fans that our country and North America overall could really support a top-flight professional soccer league," Garber said. "It has taken many years for us to prove that the United States can truly be a soccer nation."

Twenty years after the birth of MLS and nine years after the arrival of Beckham, there are still plenty of indications that the league is on the rise.

MLS averaged [21,574 fans per game](#) in 2015, a 12.7 percent increase from the previous year and more than either the NBA or NHL. In 2015, the league's new eight-year TV deal with ESPN, Fox Sports and Univision, [worth \\$720 million](#), also went into effect. Additionally, the league has announced TV deals around the world and is now broadcast in 140 countries.

Though its TV ratings have continued to lag behind, MLS has seen immense growth in engagement on social media in recent years, and the league is optimistic that their younger fans will continue to stick with the sport as they get older. A 2014 ESPN poll [found that MLS was just as popular as MLB](#) for adolescents between the ages of 12 and 17.

"That younger demographic is going to help MLS shift into a very popular sport and a very lucrative sport," said Michael Colangelo, Assistant Director at the USC Sports Business Institute. "In 5-10 years, that demographic that's shifting up will have a larger purchasing power. That creates a bright future for the league."

But MLS still faces some significant challenges.

From the beginning, MLS has attempted to grow in a slow and sustainable manner by using a single-entity structure and employing a modest salary cap. Still, in 2014, Garber said that the league's franchises were combining to [lose \\$100 million annually](#). He admitted that it is important for the league to find a path toward profitability in the long-term.

But Colangelo said that the league could actually lose more money in the short-term as it continues to expand. MLS now has 20 teams and there are numerous markets interested in joining the growing league. Garber has said that MLS plans to expand to 28 teams.

Atlanta and Minnesota will join MLS in 2017, while LAFC is set to join the league in the next few years as well. The league has promised Beckham a franchise in Miami, though it has hit a number of snags in trying to build a stadium. A slew of other cities - including Sacramento and St. Louis - have made the case to be included in the next round of MLS expansion.

"They are still expanding and they're moving into newer markets," Colangelo said. "Eventually, it's going to need to become profitable, but right now it's still growing. It's going to continue to take hold more and more in the U.S., just like you've seen with other sports."

The growing interest in soccer within the U.S. goes far beyond the confines of MLS.

The U.S. set records when it hosted the Copa America Centenario in June. Nearly [1.5 million fans](#) attended the 32-game tournament, with 81,000 supporters attending the final between Argentina and Chile. The semifinal match between the U.S. and Argentina [drew 3.29 million viewers](#) on Fox Sports 1, becoming the most-watched men's soccer game in the history of the network.

The success of the Copa America didn't come as a huge surprise, given the massive droves of fans that have tuned in to watch the U.S. national teams in recent years. Last summer, the women's victory over Japan in the final of the 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup [drew 25.4 million viewers](#) on Fox, becoming the most-viewed soccer game in U.S. history. The previous most-viewed game was the men's group stage match against Portugal in the 2014 World Cup, [which drew 18.7 million viewers](#) to ESPN.

"The locomotive is always the national team because it's obviously televised throughout the country and that's what people want to see," U.S. National Team coach Jurgen Klinsmann said.

Along with watching the national team, many soccer fans in the United States are avid supporters of international leagues, where they can watch the best soccer worldwide. Many of the top leagues and tournaments are now broadcast nationally in the U.S.

Mexico's Liga MX - not MLS - is actually the most popular soccer league in the U.S. in terms of television viewership. Liga MX games on Univision are [averaging 1.1 million viewers](#).

Behind Liga MX, the English Premier League also draws large numbers of television viewers in the U.S., with a [total of 36 million viewers](#) tuning into NBC last season.

"Soccer is a global game," Strong said. "That's what does separate it. Soccer is not an American sport. The best is not necessarily in the United States and it is not contained in the U.S. in the same way that professional football is or the way we sometimes think that basketball and baseball are."

The international nature of soccer makes it difficult to determine where MLS fits - or can fit - in the American sports landscape.

Unlike the NBA, NFL, NHL or MLB - which feature the best athletes in the world - the top soccer players worldwide do not play in MLS. In the last few years, MLS has been ranked anywhere from 7th to 49th worldwide based on strength of the league. And the massive support behind national teams and international competitions is unique to soccer.

But Garber sees the global nature of the game as a benefit to MLS. As more and more Americans embrace international soccer, they are also taking a greater interest in MLS.

"The U.S. represents the largest license fee-paying country for the World Cup," Garber said. "We see the global soccer leagues spending more and more time and effort engaging in the U.S. and Canadian markets. That will raise the overall water level for the sport of soccer and, in that MLS has the most boats on that rising tide, we expect that we'll see even more growth in the years ahead."

Even as MLS deals with challenges, there is no question that it has made remarkable strides in the last 20 years.

The sports landscape in the United States has always been fluid. There was even a time when both the NFL and NBA were not among the most popular sports in America.

Where MLS and soccer will ultimately fit within the American sports landscape 20 years down the road is still unknown, but it is clearly gaining popularity.

"I think it's incredibly unlikely that soccer ever has the hegemonic domination of the sports market in this country that it has other places," Strong said. "But I don't think there's any question that it's going to continue to grow."

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