

Sutton Impact

World Cup, Sounders' success creates perfect storm for MLS

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**BILL
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Anyone who knows me will be shocked by the sentiments expressed in this column. I have never enjoyed playing, watching or attending soccer matches. In fact, I had tickets to some of the 1994 World Cup matches and gave them away, and last year, when in Milan, I passed on tickets to a Milan vs. Inter Milan match.

Nonetheless, I find myself preparing to watch matches on ESPN this year along with a projected television audience on ESPN and Univision of 200 million. Why? Because soccer will become, due in large part to the World Cup and ESPN, a major player in American homes this year, and in the hearts and minds of the American public (sponsorship alert!) for at least the next several years depending upon what the

Seattle Sounders and the rest of MLS can do to capture our imaginations, eyeballs and wallets going forward.

It is my belief that ESPN is going to use the approach of Albert Spalding's "eduselling" of baseball to acclimate us to soccer. My colleagues and I coined the term "eduselling" in the early 1990s to describe marketing, promotional and sales activities designed to teach us about what we are going to buy and how best to enjoy that purchase.

Spalding accomplished this in baseball through instructional materials, tours and clinics, with the goal being to increase participation and thus the need for baseball equipment. ESPN is doing it through daily features about different teams introduced by the personalities who will be involved in the telecasts and, in case you haven't noticed, an increased number of soccer highlights in the Top 10 Plays of the Day. The more you know, the easier it is for you to become interested. Being interested leads to being involved, and ESPN is a master at creating awareness and interest.

The World Cup is also creating lots of attention and making noise through merchandising with global partner Adidas and retail partner Dick's Sporting Goods. Coca-Cola is planning more activation around the 2010 World Cup than it did in the previous Olympic Games.

National pride is providing even more push as America is at least in the conversation, and playing perennial power England in the first round adds even more to the hype and the conversation. What if ... dare we even say the words?

Can MLS capitalize?

MLS has waited for this type of window for a number of years and has a break in regular-season play for the opening two weeks of the World Cup. Is this the catalyst that carries the sport into the mainstream of American sport consciousness in terms of attendance, viewership, sponsorship revenue and merchandise sales?

Last year, the Seattle Sounders became a success story much the way of the Durham Bulls of the



story, much the way of the Dartmouth fans of the 1990s and NASCAR and big-time college sport programs like Notre Dame, Duke and Nebraska: through an organic, visible and emotional sense of community. This is very difficult to re-create not only because of the organic, fan-driven response, but also because that organic element conveys authenticity — and authenticity in the minds of U.S. soccer fans is the English Premier League and the history of the sport in the respective participating countries lucky enough to have qualified for the Cup. Nevertheless, the Sounders captured the attention and interest of not only the other MLS teams, but also teams from all American sports that would love to replicate the passion, feeling and loyalty of those fans.



GETTY IMAGES

The passion of Seattle Sounders FC fans has the attention of MLS and teams in other U.S. leagues.

So what should we expect from MLS to capitalize on this opportunity?

- Ticket plans highlighting teams that feature World Cup participants.
- Increased ethnic marketing activities directed to target populations with a history of soccer involvement.
- Merchandising, food and beverage, and promotional activities based upon the two previous points.
- More clinics and instruction to create fans and viewers, possibly incorporated with watch parties at their venues.
- Better community-relations programs targeted to elementary-age youth.
- Continued establishment of instructional and developmental opportunities for participation as being part of the “club.”
- More interaction with players and reciprocity from the club toward these new fans providing the identification and sense of community that is sadly escaping the Big Four sports in the United States.
- An approach to sponsorship by providing more value, co-development and true partnership.
- An attempt to create an esprit de corps feeling of “my club.”

Tipping point

If you capture the hearts, minds and the imaginations of the American public as companies such as Apple have done, the eyeballs and wallets will follow in short order. If, however, you miss — and herein lies the challenge for MLS — it may be a long time before such a perfect storm materializes again to create the soccer tsunami that is about to hit our shores.

With our overcrowded sports landscape and the general disappearance of the entertainment dollar (now there is just a dollar), the World Cup could cause an adjustment among all the current big four leagues and should give us pause when thinking about lockouts, fan affordability and emotional connections. Everything I listed for MLS could be done by baseball and basketball, and maybe should be done.

According to Mike Humes, senior vice president of sales and marketing for the MLS Chicago Fire, "From the day I arrived at the Chicago Fire in February of 2009, I have witnessed palpable growth in awareness and consumer connections around soccer on a daily basis. We will look back a decade from now and be able to clearly identify that 2010 was the tipping point for the game of soccer in the United States."

So, to my former students David Wright, Chase Jones, Will Johnson and Bryan Collier, who have always tried to convert me; to my former student and graduate assistant Jez Ratliff, who was patient with my ignorance; and to my dear friends and co-authors Steve Hardy and Bernie Mullin, I am anxiously awaiting my first soccer, er football (or is it futbol?), scarf.

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