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1. Major League Soccer remains unpopular

By: Stefan Bondy

Herald News

June 2, 2008

Kickoff on a hot evening in Houston: One touch, turnover. One touch, out of bounds. Two touches, turnover. Three touches, long ball to nobody in particular, turnover. One touch, turnover (an actual sequence in the opening minute). ...

If anybody was wondering why the MLS isn't popular in a country that demands athletic superiority, Saturday's game between the Red Bulls and the Houston Dynamo was a perfect example.

The three highest paid players on either team – Claudio Reyna, Juan Pablo Angel and Dwayne De Rosario – did not play. Seven combined starters were unavailable. The replacements, particularly on the Red Bulls' side, were no-name newbies, a collection of rookies and career substitutes who weren't ready to start on a professional club. The result was an ugly, sloppy affair that HDNet broadcaster Glenn Davis couldn't sugarcoat.

"It really has been an uneventful game," Davis said. "We're really struggling to get a little personality here."

While Reyna and Angel were out because of an injury and an illness (a combined six missed games between them this season), De Rosario was absent for a reason far too common in the MLS - international duty. The striker was one of two Houston players traveling with the Canadian National Team (goalie Pat Unstad was also called up).
The International Fixture

European leagues conclude their seasons in May, but the MLS runs through the summer and through most international competitions. It is a mess during the World Cup, when the league has tried to slow down its schedule to accommodate mass departures but couldn't due to a lack of a stadium availability. Any player competing in next month's European Championships, for instance, would miss all of June.

It rarely makes sense for players to join the MLS, or for the team paying big bucks for a star who will leave at every call-up.

The effects could be devastating in Los Angeles, where David Beckham is expected to miss games because of obligations to the English National Team. On Saturday, he was preparing for a friendly against Trinidad & Tobago while the Galaxy lost to Toronto, a game that was also played without Carl Robinson (Wales), Amado Guevara (Honduras) and Landon Donovan, who was injured but would normally play for the U.S.

This is a problem the league needs to rectify, especially as teams are getting their own stadiums and won't have to deal with availability conflicts. The league is only as good as its players, and the best players are going to compete internationally.

"It's only when (the MLS) has their own stadiums that they can reorganize their league to offer the world of football places or jobs to play," FIFA President Slep Blatter told the London Free Press of Ontario last year. "Nowadays it will be difficult for good players from South America, from Europe, from Africa to come here because they are used to playing all year round.

"American sports organizations and sports leagues are based on stars," Blatter added. "And in the MLS, they haven't had so many stars."

Nobody wants to watch what amounted to a reserve match like Red Bulls-Houston, a game that any casual soccer fan would have simplified to Brian Ching versus Jozy Altidore. Ching was the winner, scoring in the 68th minute in the Dynamo's 1-0 victory.

2. Stover: Main job is new stadium

By: Stefan Bondy
Herald News
June 2, 2008

Red Bulls' new director will leave on-field decisions to Osorio, Agoos

Red Bull Park will open in 2009, though not until the last two months of the MLS season, and it will be the center of the company's global effort to raise the level of soccer in the United States.

That is the stated mission of Erik Stover, the Red Bulls' newly-hired managing director, who spoke to reporters Monday on topics that ranged from stadium infrastructure to his inexperience running a professional sports team.

Stover made it clear that his main job is to oversee the opening of Red Bull Park in Harrison, not to meddle in player trades and acquisitions.

"Red Bull Park is the most important thing, and it was important to bring someone in like me because we don't have the luxury of screwing it up when we open it," he said. "You can't spend all this money, build this beautiful building, a building that is going to be the nicest building in North America for soccer, and screw it up operationally."

Stover would not commit on an opening date for Red Bull Park, which is still mounds of debris and dirt after two years of construction, but said "it will be ready end of summer or early fall."

The goal is to move the team from Giants Stadium to Red Bull Park in the middle of the 2009 season, he said, bringing along season-ticket holders while developing a new fan base with easy access from the PATH train system.

The Red Bulls are averaging 13,746 fans this season, well below teams with soccer-specific stadiums in Los Angeles, Salt Lake and Toronto.

Red Bull Park's seating capacity will be approximately 25,000.

"We've seen the difference between a team playing in an NFL stadium and a team that gets its own soccer-specific stadium and what it means for business," Stover said. "Our success is completely tied to Red Bull Park and its construction."

Stover admitted there is a disconnect between Red Bull fans and the team's Austrian owners, a problem he hopes to fix by "being very open and accessible to the public," including taking phone calls from disgruntled season-ticket holders.

He said the Red Bulls are building a community relationship with their development academy, a top youth soccer program with schools in Hoboken, Ramapo and New York City.

Red Bull has similar academies in Brazil and Ghana, hoping to develop homegrown professional players for RBNY or the company's other professional club, FC Salzburg in Austria.

"It's really about raising the soccer level in the United States," Stover said. "They're putting a tremendous amount of money into the academies and that's something nobody else is committed to in this league and on this level.

"We are going to bring them up from a very young age, and they are going to be first team players eventually. We see that successful operation around Europe and the rest of the world."

Stover said ownership is happy with the direction of the Red Bulls (3-3-3), but "we are not where we want to be." Without all the injuries, he says, this team could compete for the MLS Cup.

But Stover doesn't pretend to be a soccer expert. The Penn State graduate, who was hired five days ago to replace Marc de Grandpre, was the general manager for Qualcomm Stadium (home of the San Diego Chargers) since 2005 and never played the sport, nor has he ever run a professional team.

He will leave the on-field decisions to those who are paid to earn victories, not run a business.

"We're structured so that the managing director is not intended to make player personnel decisions. That's up to (coach) Juan Carlos Osorio and (general manager) Jeff Agoos," Stover said. "It's up to Jeff and Juan Carlos to deliver. My job is to be the conduit to the owner and all of our other constituents

3. Stover to be more visible with Red Bulls

By: Brian Trusdell

Associated Press (in USA Today)

June 2, 2008

SECAUCUS, N.J. — Don't expect new Red Bulls managing director Erik Stover to be the next Mark Cuban. Yet, he's already promising to be more visible than his predecessor.

Less than a week after taking over New York's Major League Soccer entry, Stover promised to be more of a public presence than Marc de Grandpre, who resigned in April for another job outside of Red Bull and sports.

"Mark is a different personality than I am," Stover said. "He didn't like being out in front of things very much. Red Bull as a corporation is an 'out-in-front' of things.

"The drink is what you recognize and you don't know who the owner is. Which isn't wrong, but in a sports environment I think we have to be a little more open. Not that I want my name out there a lot, but just so you understand our point of view."

An admitted "baseball, football, basketball guy" Stover apparently doesn't plan to be on the touchline waving his hands, berating referees and constantly waxing philosophic to reporters like the demonstrative Cuban is with his Dallas Mavericks.

4. Red Bulls close in on Jorge Rojas

By: Ives Galarcep
Soccer by Ives Blog
June 2, 2008

The New York Red Bulls are close to finalizing a deal for Venezuelan winger Jorge Rojas, a source with knowledge of the negotiations told SBI on Monday.

Various reports had a deal already being finalized between Rojas and the Red Bulls, but no deal has been completed yet.

If Rojas does reach a deal with the Red Bulls, he would not be able to join the team until July 15, when the MLS transfer window opened. MLS Communications confirmed on Monday that the MLS transfer window does not open until July 15.

Rojas, a Venezuelan national team veteran SBI first told you about in April, would give the Red Bulls some sorely needed attacking quality as well as versatility. A left winger by trade, Rojas can also play in an attacking midfield role, as well as left back if needed (though not likely at this point in his career).

Rojas, 31, is one of three players Red Bulls head coach Juan Carlos Osorio has targeted for the upcoming summer transfer window. Fellow Venezuelan Gabriel Cichero is another player with strong ties to the club. The Venezuelan national team defender could fulfill Osorio's lengthy search for a left-footed central defender.

What do you think of the possibility of Rojas joining the Red Bulls? Share your thoughts below.

5. Red Bulls closing in on Jorge "Zurdo" Rojas

By: Brian Lewis
NY Post Blog
June 2, 2008

Midfielder Jorge "Zurdo" Rojas has been a Red Bull target for months, with the Post reporting the club's interest in him in April. And now the second-most capped player in Venezuelan history is close to being signed, sealed and delivered for the July 15 transfer window.

We have not finalized anything yet, but we're doing our best to sign him, and it's very close. That's where it is with us. We're getting close. If we manage to do that, it would be great," said coach Juan Carlos Osorio, who has been tracking the star for years. "I have been at (Millonarios) very interested in signing him. He's a good player. Hopefully we will do it."

It's easy to see why he's so interested. Check out the run and perfectly-weighted pass at the 3:15 mark of this clip, and picture Jozy Altidore or Juan Pablo Angel with this kind of service. That's what Rojas could provide.

The 31-year-old winger said in an interview that he and the club are close to signing a contract, with only minor details to be cleared up before he comes to New York. Here are some of the Post's reports of the team's pursuit.

As his nickname means lefty, not surprisingly, he's a left-winger who has also played left fullback. But Osorio views him as an attacking midfielder, either on the flank or as a central midfielder. And he's a proven Copa Libertadores performer.

After winning four Venezuelan championships with Caracas and another Colombian title with Atletico Nacional in Colombia, he moved on to Union Atletico Maracaibo, a government-run team in Venezuela.

Osorio came close to prying him away from Maracaibo this preseason, but the team held on to him as they were playing in Copa Libertadores, and the player decided to stay.

It turned out to be a bad decision, because the cash-strapped club couldn't afford to pay his wages or his rent. He agreed to take a fraction of what they owed him in return for them letting him go on a free transfer. Red Bull has received the paperwork ensuring no transfer fee will be required, so now all that remains is to agree to terms with El Zurdo.

"He was playing with another team, fighting for a chance go into Copa Libertadores again, which they didn't do. That opened up an opportunity for him to call me again, which he did," Osorio said. "Once they gave him that paper, I said to him I still want to bring him here."

Giovanni Savarese was in Ft. Lauderdale last Saturday, watching his Venezuelan countryman excel against Honduras. Before that tilt, Rojas had told media he was in negotiations with Red Bull and that his deal with Maracaibo had been ripped up.

Univision and ESPN Deportes have both picked up on the story. Now Rojas will suit up against for Venezuela against powerhouse Brazil Friday in Foxboro.

He's hasn't been a prolific scorer with only two goals in his 80 caps. He tallied in a 3-2 loss at Spain in 2004 and this nice give-and-go this past Feb. 2 against Haiti. You can see he's active, all over this video _ he's No. 17 _ and has a cannon left-foot, evidenced here in this golazo for Nacional.

But he's more of a playmaker, setting up another score against Haiti in a seperately friendly just four days later with as pinpoint cross onto the head of Alexander Rondon at the 3:30 mark of this video.

Rojas is one of three targets that the Post reported Osorio is chasing. Young Venezuelan fullback Gabriel Cichero is a player Osorio likes, but he ISN'T one of those three, because the 24-year-old is too expensive.

Diego Jimenez is still holding a contract offer from Red Bull, and left to handle a family matter. But he has to make a decision this week, because Osorio is prepared to dip into the Argentinean market for another defender at least as good as the Mexican.

Buzz up!

6. Bulls close to adding Venezuelan captain

By: Michael Lewis

New York Daily News

June 3, 2008

The Red Bulls are zeroing in on signing Venezuelan national team captain and midfielder Jorge Rojas, according to sources close to the team.

Rojas, a 31-year-old attacking left-sided midfielder with Union Atletico Maracaibo, has made the second-most international appearances by a Venezuelan player.

"He's definitely a player they've been interested in for a long time," a source said Monday. "Everything is working toward it close to being done. Hopefully, within the next few days or the next week, but it's practically done."

Bulls technical director Jeff Agoos said the MLS club "definitely has not signed" any new player.

Rojas has been linked with teams Red Bulls coach Juan Carlos Osorio has directed in the past. "I can only say he is a good player," Osorio said. "Obviously, being a captain of the national team says a lot as a player."

Osorio said he tried to acquire Rojas when he coached Millonarios in Colombia. Rojas can play three positions - left-sided midfielder, playmaker and as a left fullback.

"If we manage to bring a player of his quality, that would be good," he said. "He brings versatility. Especially in this league, that is a good asset to have."

Rojas and the Venezuelan national team will play Brazil in Foxborough on Friday.

7. Red Bulls Update: Back problems strike again, this time Reyna

By: Ives Galarcep

Soccer by Ives

June 3, 2008

The rash of back injuries plaguing the Red Bulls has claimed a new victim, Claudio Reyna. The Red Bulls captain has been diagnosed with disk herniation in his back that has contributed to the hamstring strain that kept him out of last week's game against Houston and will keep him out of Thursday's match against Chivas USA.

Reyna is the third key Red Bulls player to deal with back problems this season. Forward Juan Pablo Angel is still dealing with a nerve condition in his lower back that has caused problems in his hamstring while midfielder Seth Stammler was also sidelined for two matches with back issues.

Red Bulls head coach Juan Carlos Osorio was at a loss for a direct explanation for the rash of injuries, but believed that the hardness of the grass field at the Red Bulls practice facility could be playing a role.

It is unclear when Reyna will return to action, but won't return to training until next week, at the earliest.

Jozy Altidore and Jeff Parke sat out training on Tuesday with ankle injuries, but both are expected to train on Wednesday and play on Thursday night. Midfielder Luke Sassano is more of a question mark. He has been listed as questionable for Thursday with a toe injury.

Juan Pablo Angel trained fully on Tuesday and looked sharp.

Colombian forward Oscar Echeverry also trained on Tuesday, but lingering pain in his knee will likely keep him out of Thursday's match.

Midfielder Dave Van Den Bergh did not train on Tuesday. He was with his wife, who gave birth to the couple's second son on Monday night. Van Den Bergh, who trained on Monday, is expected to start on Thursday. Osorio did admit that he liked what he saw from Van Den Bergh in an attacking midfield role against KC and we could see him there again on Thursday.

So what should the lineup look like on Thursday night? Here is a possibility:

——Angel——Altidore——

Borman——Van Den Bergh——Richards

——Stammler——Sassano——

Goldthwaite——Parke——Leitch

——Conway——

What lineup would you like to see on Thursday against Chivas USA? Share your thoughts on these developments below.

8. SBI at Red Bulls training

By: Ives Galarcep
Soccer by Ives Blog
June 3, 2008

Good morning folks. I'm coming to you from Red Bulls practice at Montclair State, where the Red Bulls are about to kick off training.

It looks like the entire team is training except for Claudio Reyna and Jozy Altidore. Reyna is still out with a hamstring injury while Altidore looks to be out with an ankle injury suffered in training on Monday. No word yet on the severity of the injury.

Among the players training today include Oscar Echeverry and David Roth. I will give you some updates throughout the session so check for updates below:

11:31am- Looks like we're done for the day. No real idea of what the lineup will be for Thursday.

11:28am- No full-field, just finishing drills.

11:26am- So here is an interesting tidbit I just heard regarding Red Bulls transfer target Gabriel Cichero, who sources tell me is one of Juan Carlos Osorio's targets. According to one source, Cichero spent part of 2007 pre-season training camp with the Red Bulls. No word on how it went or why he wasn't signed.

11:17am- The sun's out and it's starting to heat up. We're about to go to a full-field practice session.

11:12am- Goldthwaite taps home a rebounded shot after a nice run forward.

11:09am- A nice battle between Seth Stampler and Matt Kassel, could that be a glimpse of the 2009 Red Bulls?

11:07am- Wolyniec with a header goal.

11:02am- Magee, sporting a new short haircut, just finished off a nice goal.

10:59am- One player who looks very quick today is David Roth. It is easily forgotten than before Roth hurt his knee it was Roth and not Danleigh Borman or Luke Sassano who was the Red Bulls most impressive rookie in pre-season training. He is definitely going to push Borman for time once he is fully fit.

10:57am- Some nice passing and good ball pressure in a lively 10v10. Dane Richards just finished off a nice shot for a goal.

10:55am- Jeff Parke is not training, he's off to the side some some light passing. No word yet on the injury.

10:46am- Danleigh Borman and Chris Leitch are having a pretty good battle today. Leitch has the edge so far. One player who is showing some of his moves today os Echevery, who has been on the shelf for almost two months.

10:45am- Altidore has shown up and is now riding a treadmill. No word on whether he will train today. Dave Van Den Bergh isn't here either. I don't think his wife has gone in to labor yet so today may be the day.

10:38- Also training today is Gordon Kljestan and Matt Kassel. Kljestan, brother of Chivas USA midfielder Sacha Kljestan, last played for the MISL Ironmen. He could be a candidate for the vacant developmental slot.

9. Red Bulls' Claudio Reyna likely out again

By: Brian Lewis

NY Post Blog

June 3, 2008

Claudio Reyna is all but out for Thursday's game against Chivas USA. As a matter of fact, with a disc injury in his back, one that has caused a hamstring problem, he's not even sure if he'll be training by next week.

Forward Jozy Altidore (ankle injury yesterday in practice) and defender Jeff Parke (right ankle sprain) are probable for Thursday, while forward Juan Pablo Angel and Dave van den Bergh should both be back.

Angel is still suffering from his back injury, but he practiced Monday and today, while van den Bergh's wife delivered a baby boy last night.

So let's count the back injuries: Angel, Juan Carlos Osorio, Seth Stammers and Reyna. Maybe somebody in Chicago is using voodoo dolls.

"Probably next week some time," Reyna said when asked about returning to practice. "I'll get (an answer). I'll get probably some answers whether I'll be training next week or what I'll have to do."

An MRI yesterday turned up a back problem similar, but not identical, to Angel's arthritic condition.

"They checked the back, and there some disc problems," Reyna said. "The doctors are going to call some back specialists to see where this takes us, what they see. It's still kind of early. To see what to do these next few days, the fastest way to deal with this thing."

10. Dead ball situations ... are killing the Red Bulls in close games

By: Michael Lewis
Big Apple Soccer
June 3, 2008

MLS games can be so close and so tight that one play – a set piece – can determine whether you leave the stadium with one point, three points or nothing in your pocket.

And no team is paying more these days than the Red Bulls.

The Red Bulls enter Thursday's 7:30 p.m. against Chivas USA as the fifth-place team in the Eastern Conference with a 3-3-3 record and 12 points. If they were better defending free or corner kicks, they would undoubtedly be higher in the standings.

They've given up 12 goals this season and five have come off of free kicks, corner kicks or penalty kicks. There are no absolute statistics about this in soccer, but the prevailing thought is that about a third of the goals are scored from dead ball situations.

"The play stops and people kind of tune out a little bit," goalkeeper Jon Conway said after practice at Montclair State Monday.

"It's a lack of concentration," Red Bulls coach Juan Carlos Osorio said.

* The New England Revolution's only goal in its 1-1 home draw with the Red Bulls came off a Jeff Larentowicz free kick in the 56th minute April 19.

* Toronto FC's score in its 1-1 away tie with the Red Bulls came via a free kick by Laurent Robert, who found Marco Velez in the 22nd minute May 1.

* The Kansas City Wizards' goal in its 1-1 home draw with New York came from a corner kick that defender Jimmy Conrad headed into the net off a Carlos Marinelli corner kick in the 20th minute May 17.

* One of the Chicago Fire's goals in their 5-1 triumph May 25 was a penalty kick by Cuauhtemoc Blanco in the 55th minute at Giants Stadium.

* And the Houston Dynamo's lone goal in the 1-0 Red Bulls road loss Saturday was started off a free kick. Brian Ching scored what proved to be the winning goal.

The Dynamo had a free kick at midfield that started the scoring play. Osorio wouldn't say which player was supposed to get in the way of the set piece by Geoff Cameron. Cameron sent the ball to Stuart Holden, who fed Ching in the 68th minute.

"A very inexperienced player, the closest guy to the ball, instead of blocking the passing lane, he just starts walking towards one of the players behind the ball," he said. "He (the Houston player) just played it forward and the cross came early and Kevin (Goldthwaite, the Red Bulls defender) couldn't block the cross and they scored.

"This time around I have to say it was inexperience. Other times it's lack of concentration. The more we work on it, we can only become better because we have good headers on the ball here. We have guys who can compete in the air. We probably miss Juan (Pablo Angel) for that particular reason. In general, we have to do a better job. We can only keep working on it and get the benefit on all of the hard work."

Conway can see the set up and play forming in front of him, but there is only so much in what he can do.

"I can yell as much until I am blue in the face," he said. "Unless they're tuned into the situation, it's just hot air. I'm not out there in the mix able to dictate where players are going and what's going on. I'm behind them. I see. I give them information. It's their job to process that information and make the decisions."