

JoeBush.net Presents:

THE SOUNDER TRIPTYCH

A Three- Screed on the Ramifications of the Seattle Sounders' 2022
Concacaf Champions League Victory That I Will Fully Admit I Got Kind
of Carried Away With

PART ONE: SEATTLE WINNING THE CONCACAF CHAMPIONS LEAGUE IS A BIG DEAL FOR MLS GOING FORWARD...

What struck me about Seattle winning the Concacaf Champions League final on Wednesday night was how dramatic it wasn't. I can't say I personally had any fantastic visions of what it was going to look like when a Major League Soccer team finally got over the hump of winning the Concacaf Champions League, but I just figured it'd be more difficult for that theoretical team than it turned out to be for the actual Sounders team that dominated Pumas 3-0 on Wednesday.



It very rarely turns out to be easy for North American soccer teams in international competitions, be they MLS teams or US/Canadian international teams - They're supposed to escape by the skin of their teeth. They're supposed to just barely get by as the underdog, survive off of some bullshit late-match magic if they win, and they rarely do that. I always figured the first MLS team to breakthrough and win CCL would have a run somewhere between the 2015 Montreal run and the 2018 Toronto run - A good team that got a lot of lucky breaks that would take whichever side they faced in the final to extra time, maybe win on a late goal, maybe win in penalties, but I never thought we'd have a relatively comfortable understanding of the result of the first Concacaf Champions League final with ten minutes left to go.

Let me put it this way: The game kicked off at 9pm Central. I try to go to bed by 11pm at the latest on Wednesdays because I have to get up by 6:30am for my job. I didn't expect to see Seattle lift the trophy live last night - Either I would be in bed because they won on penalties or found a goal deep into extra time, or Pumas would've won in regular time. Instead, the last thing that I saw consciously on Wednesday night was Seattle lifting the Concacaf Champions League trophy.

Immediately after the first leg of the match ended last week, with Seattle escaping Mexico City with a 2-2 draw headed back home, the painful memories of CCLs past flooded in to dampen any overly-arrogant expectations of a Sounders home triumph. It's happened twice before - Real Salt Lake drew 2-2 in Monterrey for the first leg in 2012, and they lost 1-0 at home in the second. Montreal drew 2-2 in Mexico City against America in the first leg in 2015, and they lost 4-2 at home in the second. I personally expected more of the same to transpire on Wednesday, even with the reality that so much was stacked in Seattle's favor (Pumas had worse injury luck than Seattle, they had to play hard in their league match on Sunday and then travel all the way to Seattle) I just expect MLS teams to wilt down the stretch against Mexican teams, it's what always seems to happen. It happened to Seattle last year against Leon and LAFC the year prior against Tigres as well.

In all of those emotional and spiritual senses, Seattle just did not play like a Major League Soccer team in this year's Concacaf Champions League. If I stripped the club and league names from the stories of both Seattle and UNAM in CCL this year, I think I would assume the roles were reversed:

Team 1 won their first round by getting a scoreless draw on the road in Central America and winning five-nil at home. They opened up a three-goal lead at home in the first leg of the quarterfinals against a team they'd played in the Leagues Cup final the year before and held on in the second leg on the road to win on aggregate 4-1. They did the same in the semifinal - Beating a team from their own league 3-1 at home, then holding on 1-1 in the second leg on the road.

Team 1 controlled seemingly every leg of every round, never panicked, never shirked from the biggest of moments, and looked like the superior team in every match.

Team 2 won their first round by getting a 2-2 draw on the road in Central America, then finished the job 4-1 at home in the second leg. They fell behind 3-0 on the road in the second leg, braving the elements and managing barely to keep the score at a level they could even feasibly come back from because the other team missed key chances late on, then in the second leg they managed a miraculous comeback to bring themselves even on aggregate and send the match to a shootout that they won. They managed a 2-1 victory in the first leg of the semifinals at home, then on the road they managed to hold on for dear life and keep the second leg 0-0 to advance to the finals. Team 2 overcame deficits of multiple goals and beat teams that they weren't supposed to beat throughout their run to the final, their run looked miraculous, rather than dominant.

Then, in the final, because Team 2 had scraped by in the semifinals while Team 1 had dominated, Team 2 hosted the first leg of the final. Team 2 went up by two surprising goals in the first half - The first a penalty, which was initially saved but called back by the referee noting the keeper was off of his line, then retaken and converted, the second off of a cross that found a striker in the absolute perfect position to head home, all the while Team 1 had many excellent chances they failed to convert - Until Team 1 managed to draw two unlikely penalties in the second half, the second of which involved a player writhing around on the ground in order to get the VAR to make a technical call well into injury time. Team 2 had watched their home lead evaporate heading to the second leg.

Team 1 then dominated Team 2 in the second leg at home - A home leg where the crowd size nearly doubled what Team 1 had managed in the first, with unusual field conditions that Team 2 wasn't used to (I know that's sort of a stretch). They controlled the entire game, scored off of a surprising bounce in the first half, but never allowed Team 2 to convert before shutting the door in the 80th minute.

Team 1 reads like the typical dominant Liga MX side and Team 2 reads like the typical miracle-run MLS side, don't they? How did that script manage to flip this year?

It feels like we skipped a chapter. One of those runs, be it in 2011, 2015, 2018 (which I acknowledge felt different from the other three), or 2020 was supposed to have culminated in an MLS team getting the

monkey off of the back of the league collectively through some incredible, dramatic fashion, then runs like this where one MLS team just dominated their way through the tournament could become a normal occurrence. Seattle didn't win this like the first MLS team to break through was supposed to, they won it like the second or third MLS team to break through was supposed to.

Really, that's what surprises me about Seattle's whole run - No single part of it surprised me at all. I remember looking at Seattle's Starting XI during the pregame show before the first leg on FS1 and thinking "Yeah, that's probably the best MLS Starting XI I've ever seen. That team should win Concacaf." And they are, and they did. I kept waiting to be shocked, to be amazed that an MLS team had finally pulled it off, but I never was. I watched this Seattle team beat both Tigres and Santos Laguna last year, keep basically everybody but Brad Smith around, and then add Albert Rusnak in the offseason - Of course they were good enough to win this year. And congratulations to them - This is a big deal, even if their dominance made it feel like a normal-sized deal at some points.

I don't know what this makes me think about the future of Major League Soccer teams in Concacaf. It's definitely a good thing, long-term, that this has finally happened. Every year that the number in the phrase "An American team hasn't won Concacaf in [blank] years" grew, the pressure and anxiety seemed to grow alongside it (and it would've been funny if either Toronto or Montreal had won their finals so that statement could continue to be true about American teams).

For example - The Beloved Jayhawks of Football had an infamous streak of nearly a decade between wins on the road, (2009 to 2018) and every road loss with which it grew seemed to make the prospect of finally getting over that hump seem more impossible, like there was a mental block. And when the streak finally ended with a mostly unremarkable blowout in Mount Pleasant, Michigan in 2018, I was more relieved than happy. I remember thinking two things - The first was a sort of schadenfreude that sportswriters would have to think up an entire new sentence to put in their game recaps where "Kansas hasn't won a road game since beating UTEP in 2009", and the second was the hope that finally getting the monkey off of their back would

make future road wins more likely. This has indeed panned out, The Beloved Jayhawks of Football have now won road games in three of the past four seasons.

I am inclined to think that the future will probably reflect that for MLS teams in Concacaf as well. I don't think it'll be 20+ years of MLS dominance from now on, not by any measure - But Major League Soccer teams winning the CCL shouldn't be that surprising of an occurrence from now on. I don't think we'll have league media members popping champagne after an MLS team wins CCL the next time that it happens, and I definitely don't think we'll have the whole league's fan communities coming together to support a specific MLS side making a run, either.

That is surprising to me, that so many MLS fans celebrated Seattle winning this. I didn't think it meant that much to the league community as a whole that a team generally considered a villain, the one with the #ACES hashtag, would get the league as a whole (Maybe save for their rivals - Certainly Portland and Vancouver, probably the LA teams and Toronto as well) to support them. I don't know what that says about the state of MLS fan culture.

As much as fans of MLS teams might get ridiculed for saying "The Gap is Closing" year in and year out... The Gap is Closing. And I'm not just talking about the one in the mall I used to go to. There has been obvious progress that felt dumb to point to when nobody from MLS had won CCL even once, but it has happened - After the Galaxy's win in the prior Concacaf Champions Cup in 2000, there were ten straight tournaments (2001-2010) where MLS teams couldn't even reach the final. MLS teams appeared in four of the next ten (2011-2020), including three of the last five. It used to be a surprise if an MLS team made the semis, and there has been an MLS team in the semis each of the past six. The league has stapled on more and more arcane roster rules in the past few years which, if used right (and Seattle has used them very well, which I'll get to in a little bit), have helped these teams acquire and develop the depth of talent in their rosters that is necessary for success in a tournament such as this. Well-run, successful Major League Soccer teams like the Sounders should be able to have deep runs in Concacaf Champions League through the rest of the twenties and beyond.

PART 2: BUT I SHOULD QUALIFY THAT THE SOUNDERS ARE A UNIQUE TEAM

I should qualify that Seattle is a unique Major League Soccer team. To quote the rhetorician Scott Steiner - ["They're a genetic freak, and they're not normal."](#)



There's financial investment in their club that many other clubs haven't matched, and even those that do match them haven't necessarily been able to turn it into sustained success. They've had success in building their roster through seemingly every possible manner that one can build - Two Designated Players in Lodeiro and Ruidiaz that have stuck around for the long haul, players like Arreaga and Joao Paulo who they've been able to negotiate down from Designated Player money while keeping them on the roster, homegrown talent like Jordan Morris and Obed Vargas, players scouted from outside of the United States like Nouhou Tolo, drafted talent like the Roldan brothers - They even managed to succeed under the new free agency regulations last year when they signed Albert Rusnak from Salt Lake.

More so than that, Seattle has a cultural cachet unmatched by nearly anybody else in American Soccer. Very few soccer franchises in the United States have been around as long as Seattle has, one of either three or four (depending upon how you connect the current franchise in Minnesota to the original Thunder) current MLS teams older than

the league itself, and while I cannot speak from experience, only from hearsay, very few others have the presence within their city's sports hierarchy that the Sounders hold - and that's worked out to their advantage. Famously (or infamously) Jordan Morris was between signing either for Seattle or Germany's Werder Bremen in 2016 and chose Seattle because it meant something to him emotionally to be a Sounder. I think that you can look at depth pieces as exemplary of this, too - like Kellyn Rowe, originally from Seattle, who came back home in 2021 and played significant minutes in the CCL final, and Fredy Montero, a club veteran who returned home to Seattle in 2021 after seven seasons playing elsewhere (and has taken on a relatively low salary in doing so). Having that sort of cachet has helped them attract and hold on to good players, which has led to a maintained level of success within the league. They've built a winning culture that definitely helped them in this tournament.

For instance - when they met Leon in the second round, they met a team they'd competed with and nearly defeated in the 2021 Leagues Cup. I have to believe that the experience of getting so close in 2021 helped their mentality in 2022. They're well-versed with playing Mexican teams in general, as well: Since their first Concacaf appearance under Brian Schmetzer, Seattle has played six knockout round ties against Mexican opposition, winning four and losing two (Beating Tigres and Santos Laguna in the 2021 Leagues Cup plus Club Leon and Pumas in 2022, losing to Chivas in the 2018 CCL and Leon in the 2021 Leagues Cup Final), and when broken into the nine individual matches played, they've had five wins, two draws, and two losses. No other MLS team has won that many competitive matches against Liga MX competition in that time frame. The only other club to have played that many competitive matches against Liga MX teams is Toronto, who has been 3-3 in competitive series with four wins, two draws, and five losses broken into the eleven individual matches they've played (I am counting the 2019 Campeones Cup as a competition, for the record). Seattle had the experience to keep themselves from getting intimidated by the Liga MX competition they faced in this Champions League run, and as a result they could focus on just playing great, dominant soccer, which they did to great effect in this run.

And, for the record, since I've done the research - Other MLS teams who have played multiple rounds against Liga MX Competition since 2018 are:

Atlanta - 1-1 in 2 rounds played, 2-1 in 3 total matches
LAFC - 3-1 in 4 rounds played, 3-0-2 in 5 total matches
RBNY - 1-2 in 3 rounds played, 2-1-3 in 6 total matches
NYCFC - 0-2 in 2 rounds played, 0-0-3 in 3 total matches
SKC - 1-2 in 3 rounds played, 2-0-3 in 3 total matches
Columbus - 1-1 in 2 rounds played, 1-1-1 in 3 total matches

This culture extends outside of what's within the club. Seattle set a Concacaf Champions League record for attendance on Wednesday, with 68,000+ fans in attendance (a chunk of whom were Pumas supporters, though it appeared like the fans in green well outnumbered the fans in gold). Only two other teams in MLS (Atlanta and Charlotte) have ever drawn more than that to a standalone competitive match, which are the only two clubs to currently reside in facilities which can hold that many spectators. They are unique in the manner with which they are treated as a professional sports team in their market, on even footing with the Seahawks and Mariners in a way that very few other MLS teams can say that they are.

This is obviously a subjective statement, but one barometer I use to judge cultural impact within a city is whether an MLS Cup winner ends up hosting a championship parade in their city to celebrate. The Sounders did in 2016 and '19. Portland did in 2015, Toronto did in 2017, Atlanta did in 2018 as well. New York City FC did not host a parade in 2021 and the LA Galaxy did not in 2014. I don't read very far into the fact that Columbus didn't host one in 2020 for obvious reasons.

That supporter culture was built over time. This iteration of the Seattle Sounders (and yes, I know, whoever wants to jump in and remind me: *Technically* this iteration of the Seattle Sounders started play in 2009 when they joined MLS - but UNESCO declared this website a *NO PEDANTRY ZONE* long ago, and I'm about to make a more tenuous connection between a club and its predecessors in the next parenthetical) is currently playing in its twenty-ninth season. They are one of the only clubs in Major League Soccer whose continuous existence predates the league itself (The others being Montreal, who joined the APSL a year before Seattle in 1993, Vancouver, whose existence can be traced back to the Vancouver '86ers that joined the Canadian Soccer League in 1986, and they even trace it as far back as the original NASL Whitecaps, who started in the NASL in 1974. If you subscribe to that school of thought which connects these Whitecaps to

the original Whitecaps via the '86ers continuity with the last iteration of the NASL Whitecaps from 1984... you can also easily make the leap to consider Minnesota United FC to be older than MLS, due to the continuity the 2010 NSC Minnesota Stars kept with the 2009 Minnesota Thunder team a franchise that was originally founded in 1990. I do make that leap, just for fun, and I invite you to do so as well.)

Sorry about that. Anyway - In those twenty-nine seasons, the Sounders have won fifteen trophies of some sort: Four A-League/USL postseason championships, three A-League/USL regular season championships, four US Open Cups, two MLS Cups, an MLS Supporter's Shield, and now the Concacaf Champions League. The Sounders could credibly claim to be the most successful franchise in the American major team sports leagues, especially if we just consider their time in MLS since 2009, during which they've won eight major trophies. Nearly nobody else has been that good, and the only MLS club with more trophies won in that time, Toronto FC (9), won seven of them through the Canadian Championship, a tournament in which they routinely only had to win two matches to earn the trophy for the bulk of that period.

They never missed the playoffs in their first thirteen seasons in MLS (though they'll have to make up the points they've dropped early in this season in order to do it again this year). The only others who have come close even to that in that time frame are the New York Red Bulls (12, with 3 Supporters Shields to show for them) and Sporting Kansas City (9, with one MLS Cup and 3 US Open Cups to show for them). Some post-2009 expansion clubs have come relatively close to matching that success in a shorter timeframe (NYCFC, Atlanta, and LAFC, for example), but time will tell if they can sustain that. You need time and history to build that up, and a lot of effort, good decisions, and a strong culture to sustain it once its been built..

Not many other MLS teams have that sort of culture, where players will turn down potentially better career and financial opportunities to be there. Not many MLS clubs put themselves in the position to get experience against Mexican competition the way that Seattle has. Not many MLS clubs could attract 68,000 people to a match. Not many MLS clubs have the length of history that Seattle's had, let alone the success within. The combination of those aspects have made Seattle a uniquely successful club in MLS, and set them up to dominate in CCL in 2022. They are a model franchise in MLS, and future success for Major League

Soccer teams in Concacaf will rely on those teams being able to succeed in those same senses.

PART 3: AND THE REST OF THE LEAGUE CAN LEARN SOME THINGS FROM THEM

I categorized what Seattle's had unique success with in four categories - Financial ambition, competitive ambition, community significance, and club history. While some MLS franchises have hit on some of these, nobody has hit on all four the way that Seattle has, and in the future some degree of hitting on all four should be what Major League Soccer franchises strive for if they intend to emulate the success of the Seattle Sounders. I will break down what these aspects may look like in the near future and connect them to teams I feel are currently doing well in these regards, and which need some work.



Financial Ambition

Let's just break down how Seattle ended up with the sixteen players that saw the field for them last Wednesday:

WARNING - I AM GOING TO USE THE JARGON AND EXPLAIN NONE OF IT (I HAVE ALREADY TYPED SO MUCH). [CHARLOTTE FC PUT OUT A HELPFUL GUIDE EXPLAINING THE JARGON LAST YEAR THAT YOU CAN CONSULT FOR INFORMATION](#)

Signed From Outside of MLS on Designated Player Contracts: Raul Ruidiaz, Nicolas Lodeiro, Joao Paulo, Xavier Arreaga (Joao Paulo and Arreaga are no longer on DP deals, probably on TAM contracts now though since the players' salaries for 2022 are not yet available)

Signed From Outside of MLS on GAM Contracts: Yeimar Gomez Andrade, Nouhou Tolo

Signed From Within MLS Through Free Agency: Albert Rusnak (currently on a DP contract), Fredy Monteiro, Kelyn Rowe

Signed From Within MLS Through Some Other League

Mechanism: Stefan Frei (Traded for Draft Pick in 2013), Will Bruin (Traded for GAM in 2016)

Signed From MLS Superdraft: Cristian Roldan, Alex Roldan

Homegrown Signings: Jordan Morris, Jackson Ragen, Obed Vargas

What you'll notice if you're insane like I am is that they didn't play anyone on either a Young DP or a U22 (YoungMoney™) Initiative contract. So there is more space to add good talent on this roster! (They only have one of their three U22 slots in use, on midfielder Leo Chu)

What I think this shows is that this roster is not the theoretical peak of what an MLS roster can be. Even with the [anatidaeyonic](#) nature of MLS roster regulations, excellent, deep teams can be built at this point in time.

But I feel that there is more that the league can allow for teams to do. There are team owners in this league that are willing to spend their money on acquiring and keeping good players (Adrian Hanauer being one of them) and we are 27 years into the league's existence - The financial conservatism of early Major League Soccer was a necessity and one that I find to have been a good move to have kept the league from seeing the fate of the NASL wherein its richest teams well outspent the rest of the league and destabilized it - But we are past those days. MLS is here to stay, and has been for a while now, and I think it would benefit the league to build rosters like any other professional league does. This would allow for a higher caliber of player to be signed at all levels, primarily regarding depth pieces.

For all the excellent work they have done, Seattle has also been fortunate. One good example is that of their American stalwarts Jordan Morris and Cristian Roldan, two high-quality players who wanted to

have great careers in Major League Soccer. [Garth Lagerway said as much on the postgame show hosted by the league from last Wednesday.](#) Morbid as it is to say (and of course I do not mean to say that anyone involved with the club were happy with the way that it went, just that it went in a manner that helped them competitively), they are fortunate that Jordan Morris' loan spell with Swansea in 2021 ended in a manner that had him come back to Seattle. Had he not been injured and if he'd played well, they might have transferred him to a European club like Orlando did with Daryl Dike last year after his successful loan with Barnsley.

They were fortunate that they didn't really have significant injuries until the final match, when Nouhou and Joao Paulo went out early, they were fortunate that they've been able to hold on to their best players (in particular Lodeiro and Ruidiaz) for as long as they have. This is not to diminish what they've done - In particular, their culture and their support has helped them keep those good players around - but to say that future MLS teams will need to have good fortune if they wish to emulate the Sounders' success.

Allowing for more spending will help teams cope when fortune turns against them. For example: Atlanta probably made a mistake with spending so much money on Pity Martinez and Ezequiel Barco in the past few years given the relatively poor return they got from them, but worse than signing disappointing players was the fact that, a missed DP signing meant that they only had the opportunity to sign two other players (and in practice only one more given that one slot was already dedicated to the well-deserving Josef Martinez) at a rate over a million or so. Sporting Kansas City got positively fucked over this year when two of their three designated player signings missed the entire season with injuries. They just can't make up those two slots, theoretically (and accurately in this case) taken up by two of the team's best players. I don't know that they wanted to sign any more players at that rate- but if they had wanted to, they couldn't have.

Three designated players is a completely arbitrary number, and there are teams who want to have more - Some owners have said they would do more if they could, and at least one did until he got caught. Increasing unrestricted spending on personnel is something that can (and I expect will to some extent, given the poorer-than-previously-assumed TV deal to come this year and the 2026 World Cup incoming)

change in the coming years, that would help ambitious MLS teams in continental competitions.

Who is doing well?

It's hard to list who's doing well in this regard because I think that a good chunk of the league is doing a lot well in building rosters. NYCFC has probably done the best in terms of putting everything together (especially in the post-Villa/Pirlo/Lampard era) and they're getting such good play from their academy players. Toronto has been just as ambitious even if last season was a bust for them, signing a player like Lorenzo Insigne at this point in his career is significant. Atlanta is doing everything that they can but they've had poor luck with some of their big signings and with injuries. LAFC keeps putting together good rosters through so many different methods, but they haven't drawn much from their academy quite yet. Each of the recent expansion clubs - Austin, Nashville, Miami, and Cincinnati - have been ambitious in making signings, and it panned out better for some than others at this point.

Those teams that have entered the league recently are the ones pushing the league forward - But this does not mean necessarily that lethargy among the older teams is a given. You can already see it with Sporting Kansas City, FC Dallas (Who has quietly been making good use of the money they've made off of transferring the talent that has come from their academy system), and obviously the LA Galaxy as well. What's more interesting to me are the older teams - those ridiculed for years for not having the ambition of the newer teams - in particular the New England Revolution since Bruce Arena came to the club in 2018 and the Columbus Crew under the Haslams, plus now Chicago and Salt Lake under their new owners.

What I am saying is that there are a lot of teams trying in this regard, and some of them are seeing it come to fruition. (I couldn't find a good way to slip in teams like Vancouver, Portland, Orlando, and Houston who I think deserve praise for effort as well, also)

Who Could Do Better:

While the team seeing the most criticism for lethargy at the moment is San Jose, I think I have more criticism for two teams who have

performed relatively well in the past few seasons - the Colorado Rapids and the Philadelphia Union. Both teams have been highly successful as of recent: Colorado finished first in the West in 2021, Philadelphia won a Supporters Shield in 2020, made the CCL semifinals in 2021, was a slate of COVID cases away from hosting the 2021 MLS final, and they've done it without spending a lot of money. Philadelphia has only one player on a Designated Player contract right now. Colorado didn't have any until they traded within the league for Gyasi Zardes a few weeks ago. Philadelphia hasn't used a U22 slot yet, Colorado has only used one. These are both good teams that aren't making use of the pathways available to build better, deeper teams.

For the record I also think the Red Bulls and DC United both could do more, though they've both been working at it. The pressure should be on those teams' ownerships to make those changes in the future, they're already very good, but it will take ambition to be great (and some looser purse strings) to get them to the next level.

Competitive Ambition

One thing I touched on earlier that I feel played a significant role for Seattle in this tournament was their experience with Mexican teams in continental competition. Only one team, Toronto, has played as many matches against Mexican teams since Seattle's first CCL appearance under Brian Schmetzer in 2018.

Lost in the hype (and naturally so) of Seattle's run was that New York City FC had their longest Concacaf Champions League run to date as well in 2022. That those two were the teams to make those runs is not surprising given their performances in the 2021 Leagues Cup. While Seattle ran all the way to the final before losing to León, NYCFC put up an admirable performance in their first round match with Pumas despite losing in penalties. I obviously don't know for sure, but I have to imagine that those good performances in the 2021 Leagues Cup gave both of those clubs some confidence, some evidence that shows that they can compete against quality Liga MX teams.

The new iteration of the Leagues Cup coming in 2023 will give every MLS team the opportunity to measure itself up against Liga MX

competition. The new Champions League format will give even more opportunities to face international competition as well - Starting in 2024, there will be five MLS Clubs guaranteed slots (up from three currently), and up to ten MLS clubs total, counting slots for the US Open Cup winner, Canadian Championship winner, and the top three finishers in the Leagues Cup. In practice, I would guess that this will probably amount to around eight MLS clubs making the CCL each year, up from the current five that typically do. This should increase MLS teams' familiarity with Liga MX teams (and vice versa), which should help them with the intimidation factor that plagues MLS teams in continental competition, and also push MLS teams to be more ambitious because they're playing matches with such high stakes so commonly.

As it stands, not many MLS teams have recent experience in competitive matches against Liga MX teams. I only counted eight clubs as having played more than a single competitive round against Liga MX competition since 2018 when I did that math during the second part. The New England Revolution's quarterfinal matchup with Pumas in 2022, for example, was their first competitive match against a Mexican team since playing Monarcas Morelia in the 2010 SuperLiga final. The Colorado Rapids, who didn't play a Liga MX side in this tournament, losing out to Comunicaciones of Guatemala, have not played a competitive match against a Liga MX team since the 2011 CCL group stage, where they played against Santos Laguna.

This will not be the case in the coming years. Everyone's going to get a match against a side from Liga MX every year for the foreseeable future, and now between two and five more teams each year will be in the Champions League. What MLS will feature by the end of this decade are a spate of teams who are well versed in playing continental competitions. No longer will the quality of Liga MX teams catch MLS teams by surprise - but they will still need to match it.

Who is doing well:

We've had MLS teams defeat Liga MX teams in the Concacaf Champions League in each of the past five tournaments, though Liga MX still holds a significant head-to-head advantage in that time frame. These were: Seattle (Léon and Pumas) in 2022, Toronto FC (Léon) in 2021, LAFC (Léon, Cruz Azul, América) in 2020, Sporting KC (Toluca) in 2019, and

New York Red Bulls (Tijuana) and Toronto FC (Tigres and América) in 2018. Toronto's win over León in 2021, I think is the most interesting of these because TFC ended up being such poor performers in 2021, finishing 26th of 27 teams in MLS, and León ended up being very good in 2021, sixth in the 2021 Clausura and third in the Apertura along with winning the Leagues Cup. Fluke wins and losses happen, but Toronto came into that round with a lot of experience and leaned on that to advance. Toronto has an easier path than most American MLS teams, only needing typically to win two games in order to qualify for the CCL, but in the coming years, when every MLS club is guaranteed a few matches against Liga MX teams in Leagues Cup, that experience will be easier to build up.

Who needs work:

Probably the best example that I can give regarding ambition in this sense was Sporting KC's 2021 Leagues Cup performance, where they more or less admitted defeat and disinterest by putting out a lineup of mostly young, inexperienced academy players against León and lost in embarrassing fashion. At the time, I understood the decision (the roster was already thin with injuries, they were in the midst of a race for the top spot in the Western Conference for the playoffs, if it didn't matter to them to win the Leagues Cup then there was no point in risking injury) but it came with a caveat that I would withhold criticism provided it was accompanied with postseason success (I should clarify also that I was in attendance for that match).

That wasn't what happened, they lost in the conference semifinals, and thus follows my criticism: The future of MLS is going to involve difficult matches, and shying away from one like that (especially when none of the other three MLS teams in Leagues Cup did) does not reflect a healthy competitive mentality. I remember the 10-2 loss on aggregate to Monterrey in 2019 and the poor regular season that followed. As much as, yes, Leagues Cup was a cash grab and a cynical ploy to build up hype for the real tournament when it started officially in 2023, and as much as it probably didn't matter in comparison to the MLS season, and as bad as things would have been had they lost key players to injury (though we lost a key player to injury in that match anyway), the match against León in 2021 offered a chance for Sporting KC to prove that they were a worthy team in Concacaf, much like they had proven

by defeating Toluca in 2019. Instead, they took a less ambitious approach, and I think it affected their competitive mentality.

They really couldn't close matches out in the latter half of 2021, they finished third in the conference despite multiple times down the stretch sitting in first place, and they really just didn't have the competitive intensity in the playoffs, exemplified in the way that they stumbled down the stretch against Salt Lake in the conference semis.

More games like the one against León are coming in the future for Sporting KC. More games against Liga MX teams are coming for everyone in MLS - They have a decision to make - do they want to be ambitious? The other teams in the 2021 Leagues Cup that approached their first round match with an ambitious mentality. New York City used that ambitious mentality to win an MLS Cup. Seattle used that ambitious mentality to win the Champions League. Even Orlando finished the regular season strongly. Taking these opportunities seriously and having a competitive mentality will help MLS teams in many senses.

Community Significance:

I asked the question earlier of how many teams in MLS could get 68,000+ spectators to a match. The Sounders are unique in that regard, only two other clubs in Major League Soccer (Atlanta and Charlotte) have the facilities to host that many people for a match, and Charlotte might be planning to move out of theirs (though don't think they need to). But that is only the current state of things, and that can change for the better in the coming years if other MLS teams do some things well.

The Sounders are currently playing in their 29th season as a professional soccer team between the A-League, USL, and MLS, and they just broke the 68,000 mark for attendance for the first time in their history. But interestingly - You know who else finally broke the 68,000 mark for home attendance in their 29th season? The Seattle Seahawks. Monday Night Football in against the Dallas Cowboys in December 2004 was the first time that they'd ever hosted that many at then QWEST (Now Lumen) Field. The Kingdome could never host that many.

The Seahawks are known for having a large, intensive, and dedicated fanbase, though it wasn't always that way. They struggled to get fan support to their stadium during their lean years in the 1970s and 80s, and even into the 2000s (Their first playoff game hosted at their current stadium didn't break 60,000). They used to get routinely outdrawn by the Washington Huskies college team. It changed over time with success - they built up a winning culture under Mike Holmgren in the 2000s and then with Pete Carroll in the 2010s, and by the time that they won the Super Bowl in 2013, they'd become integral to the cultural fabric of their city.

A lot of big league sports teams that might seem like culturally dominant monoliths today have stories like this. Remember the New England Patriots nearly moved from Boston to St. Louis in the 1990s before Robert Kraft bought the team. NBA teams with great fanbases now like the Dallas Mavericks and Memphis Grizzlies struggled to get attendance in their early years in their current homes. Hockey is a good example of this, there are many cities that, for reasons of climate and culture, might not initially be expected to embrace an NHL team, like Tampa, Nashville, Las Vegas, and Los Angeles - But they have shown themselves to be good cities for professional hockey in recent years. What is so different about soccer?

It takes time (and I'll get into that in the next section), it takes success, and it takes the development of an identity - But Major League Soccer teams will eventually reach a level of cultural relevance that can rival the Sounders.

This has already started to happen around the league. The 2000s saw nearly every MLS team (save for New England) move into smaller arenas from the homes they originally occupied. That was what was necessary at the time - it was less expensive to create a 20,000 seat stadium as compared to a 60,000 seat stadium, and ultimately, it was beneficial for in-game atmospheres. A capacity crowd of 19,000 at Toyota Stadium has a better effect than that same crowd taking up a quarter of the capacity at the Cotton Bowl.

But something interesting has happened since the 2010s came around - We're starting to see MLS teams push up against the boundaries they set for themselves years ago. Portland, Toronto, and the LA Galaxy all increased their stadium capacity. The new stadiums in Cincinnati and

Nashville both have the capacity for more than 25,000 spectators. We're starting to see Major League Soccer teams become pillars in their communities. Like I mentioned earlier, we didn't used to have parades for the MLS Cup winner, but Seattle, Portland, Toronto, and Atlanta all did after their wins in the late 2010s.

This will be the question for MLS teams going forward - Can you make yourself matter in your city? When you host your biggest game in your history, would you be able to draw 68,000 if you had the facility to do so? And when that day comes, would you build a facility with the capacity to do so? It has happened for other teams in other leagues, and it has happened with teams in this league.

I don't know how you build that - Sustained success and years of effort are the easiest answers, but can you find a way to make yourselves matter? How many clubs in MLS could we honestly say could shut down city blocks and host a championship parade after winning the MLS Cup? I think it's probably less than half.

A lot of teams are drawing well, but I think the next step is changing from being a spectacle to a stalwart part of the sports hierarchy. The Sounders did that in a variety of ways - They capitalized on becoming an MLS team right as the Mariners went through a string of lean years and the SuperSonics moved out of the city. They've won - and they've won a lot. They're also unique in being sort of a flagship franchise of Major League Soccer, a team that can command big signings like they did with Clint Dempsey in 2014. Neither the Mariners nor Seahawks really give Seattle that, being a franchise that can pull weight within the league, the way that the Lakers do in the NBA, the Yankees do in MLB, and the Cowboys do in the NFL. Another thing (and I'll get into this further down) is that they've made a point to build soccer in Seattle. That they have so many Seattle-connected players - academy products like Morris, Vargas, and Ragen, college products like the Roldan brothers (Cristian of UW and Alex of the University of Seattle) and Seattle natives like Rowe, I find to be a significant deal and something that MLS teams can work with in order to have a positive impact in their cities.

Who is doing well:

I briefly lived in Ontario, just outside of the Greater Toronto Area, for a period of time in late 2021 and I was struck by how normal of a franchise Toronto FC seemed to be. I saw people wearing their stuff about as much as I did the Raptors or Blue Jays, their players endorse products in TV ads, and while I wasn't in Toronto proper, it seemed like a big deal when they were finally able to host spectators in their stadium in late 2021, even during what was a poor season for them. They felt like a normal, big league sports team. There are a lot of places in MLS (my own city included) that don't have that yet.

I can't speak personally to that feeling in any other places, and there's no way to quantify it, but I think it's just something to be felt. Do you see the team logo on advertisements in liquor stores, flags on the walls in sports bars, do they set the city busses to display statements of support during the playoffs? Do they light up buildings in the city in their colors? Do sports bars have to be asked to put the game on? Does local sports talk radio talk about them? Does local media count the team's championships as significant? Are the people who attend matches watching the away games on TV? Can you feel an anticipation in your city the day of a big playoff game?

Some teams are closer than others, definitely. I think many of the more recent expansion clubs have done this better than some of the older clubs, which is what I'll get into next.

Who needs work:

There is a unique sort of divide in MLS between the new and old clubs in terms of their place within their cities. There is sort of a common conception that Seattle's entry in 2009 pushed the league into a new era - There were the years-old "MLS 1.0" franchises, those founded in the league's first decade or so, and Seattle's entry in 2009 kicked off "MLS 2.0" (Some will say that Toronto in 2007 was the first "MLS 2.0" team). "MLS 2.0" teams, those who came into existence in this period of rapid MLS expansion had active supporter cultures, they drew lots of fans to matches, they traveled well, and their ownerships acted with ambition not just in terms of building a team, but in making an impact on their city's sporting culture as well. These new teams changed the culture, presenting something new and exciting, pushing back in ever

growing numbers against what had become something of a stagnancy from those MLS 1.0 teams.

But what of those 1.0 teams?

I think that there are, in many cases, still scars for many of these clubs left by the memories of the league's early days. Some teams have worked through them and have come out relatively successfully, but there are others really struggling to get positive momentum in terms of community influence. There is a negative cultural memory in many of these places - Memories of the quarter-full stadiums and the gimmicks to sell tickets that accompanied them, memories of times that those teams played in high school football stadiums or minor league baseball parks. In a lot of ways, this history actually presents a detriment to early MLS teams, and some have dealt with it better than others. History, though, does not necessarily have to be a detriment.

Seattle has, as of this year, been in MLS for longer than half of the league. There have been fourteen new expansion teams that have come into MLS since Seattle joined in 2009. Doesn't that feel strange? They've also been a part of MLS for half of the league's existence now - This is their fourteenth season in MLS, which is MLS's twenty-seventh. They're really no longer a 'new' team, and there's nothing left really for them to do for the first time, short of succeeding in the Club World Cup. They've used their history for their own good, and they never really have had a period of stagnation, there's always been ambition, always room to improve. Toronto, who's been in MLS for longer than Seattle, has built a culture in much of the same way, never shying away from their early struggles to do so.

It is easier for the Atlantas and Austins (and yes, Seattles and Torontos) of the world to come in with positive momentum. They don't have to deal with the cultural memory that plagues some of the older franchises, particularly the ones from the 1990s, memory that cemented them in the minds of many in their cities as a minor league team, or as an afterthought, or as a failure. It is easier to build upwards off of a solid foundation than to build out from a hole dug from years of stagnation. But it is not impossible to get out of.

For the sake of the next points I need to make it clear: I am treating the 2008 San Jose expansion team as a continuation of the original San Jose,

while thinking of Houston as a club that started in 2006 for the sake of continuity. Chivas USA and LAFC are different clubs, as fun as it is to pretend they're the same at the annoyance of LAFC fans. I'm defining "1.0" as the first twelve entrants that still exist, counting RSL, even though I recognize the argument that RSL is closer to Seattle and Toronto in municipal significance than the other teams they're grouped with. RIP again to the Fusion and Mutiny. A lot of this is conjecture and hearsay and emotion to follow, I can't really back it up with anything other than "It feels like this".

Of these twelve, I'd say that there's nobody quite on the level of the Sounders in terms of municipal importance. The Galaxy might be the closest, but Los Angeles is a specific sort of beast in terms of its sporting culture. I don't know how many of these clubs would get parades for winning the cup, maybe Columbus and Salt Lake.

Who I'd say is doing the best are: Galaxy, Kansas City, Columbus, Dallas, Salt Lake

Somewhere in-between and getting better: New England, Colorado

Somewhere in-between but I think they are trying: DC, Houston, Chicago

Clearly Stagnant: San Jose, The Red Bull

That is by no means a scientific list. But it feels right, right? The one I'll defend with my life is that FC Dallas seems to have done well in their part of the metroplex. They'll never be the Cowboys, but their position doesn't strike me as that dissimilar from where the Mavericks were in the mid 1990s. It used to be that, even at the peak of the Perea years in 2015 and 16, they couldn't seem to get more than like two thirds of Toyota Stadium to fill up. Every game I watch of theirs in Frisco seems to be well-attended now, and I think their reputation is starting to shift too, with the success of their academy products both in and out of MLS. In the World Cup this fall, we're going to see potentially six or seven former FC Dallas academy players for the US, and that makes them look good. FC Dallas is less and less the team that played at the high school stadium in Southlake and more and more "the team that develops the players for the US Men's National Team."

Everybody needs some work, there is no quick fix short of John Fisher selling the Earthquakes. I don't have an answer short of "Win Consistently" for most of those teams that are already doing fairly well,

and it takes a lot for that to happen, as outlined in the entire post leading up to this, and most of that's going to fall on the ownerships of those teams. I do think that a bad reputation can change, as evidenced by Sporting KC's shift from a punchline in Kansas City in the late 2000s to a relatively large part of the sports hierarchy here, still firmly beneath the Chiefs and Royals but not as far down as they once were, but the longer that you spend in that hole, the worse that negative inertia gets.

One thing that could probably have some effect is putting resources into academy systems, especially through developing local talent. If a club's reputation in their community is one where they're taking local kids and getting them to successful professional careers, that will help endear them to fans, especially if they can hold on to at least a few of them and have them play in front of their community.

If you're a fan that wants what Seattle and Toronto have for your team, there are some things you can do personally. You can wear the shirts and jerseys out in public, talk about matches with your friends like you would any other team, talk about them on social media, try to attend away matches and get involved with your club's supporter group. Maybe if you work at a sports bar you can make a point to put the games on TV or host watch parties. Maybe if you do YouTube videos or blogs or TikToks you could do YouTube videos or blogs or TikToks on your team, or on MLS in general. Outside of that, a lot of that is just unfortunately up to the competence and ambition of the front office, along with the slow march of time - Which is what the next section is about.

History:

My Dad has a commemorative Kansas City Wiz cup that he took home from a game during their first season in 1996 somewhere in the basement. I was a baby at the time, I don't know how he swung the opportunity to get out of the house and attend this soccer match, I doubt he even remembers. I've always found that interesting, though. He liked soccer, he played soccer as a kid and attended Kansas City Comets games in the 1980s, he watched the US national teams on TV. When I was about eleven, in 2006, we went to a Wizards game in

Arrowhead with some of the kids from my community rec-league soccer team (I think we were named the Goblins), and that next season, he bought two season tickets, which we held for a while, up to and through the name change and both stadium moves.

There are two things about this - Firstly that I have an intense dedication to soccer in Kansas City because of this experience. I had a friend ask me last year why I cared so much about what he considered a niche sport and league (not as a ridiculing thing, he was curious because he was interested in a different relatively niche sport) and I pointed to that experience, I grew up alongside Sporting KC, and as I've grown up they've been a sort of point of grounding for me. No matter where I ended up going, California, Canada, wherever, I was always watching their games on TV and following their news, and I know that I still will be wherever I end up next.

The second is that my Dad also went to Royals games in the 1970s and 80s. It was a significant moment when we went to my first Royals game at Kauffman Stadium in around 1999 or 2000, it was a moment when he could pass on an interest in baseball and in the Royals specifically to me - interests he took up in his childhood, that I would later take on myself. The Royals' first season was in 1969, when he was a toddler, so I'm probably on the tail end of the first group of second-generation childhood Royals fans. As a result of that being a part of my upbringing, the Royals are a team that I care about just as well.

He didn't have the chance to do that with an outdoor soccer team from his youth (I suppose the Comets were still around in some form when I was growing up). Outside of Vancouver, this is the case all over MLS - the first kids to grow up with MLS teams would've been born between the mid 1980s to the early 1990s, and they're only now getting to the age where their kids might accompany them. But as time continues to progress at a normal rate, more and more of those cross-generational connections will be made. There's no cure for this but time and effort, and if MLS keeps building and keeps having ambitious teams that push the league forward, that history can and will build.

While I am optimistic about the future of MLS, I am also overwhelmed by its mundanity. It is going to happen. That's not something we really have to question anymore. It used to be, absolutely, but MLS is just as much a part of the sports landscape in this country as any other

American major league. Its presence in the landscape is smaller than the other leagues, but it's there, and it's going to continue to be there, and it'll grow and shift just as well.

All in time.

It's kind of hard to adopt that mindset. MLS has been in a constant state of flux for so much of its existence. It wasn't even like ten years ago that a lot of fans could envision feasible situations in which the entire league would fold, and short of total societal collapse (Which I guess we can't rule out, but I'd rather not go down that rabbit hole in my writing about the 2022 Concacaf Champion Seattle Sounders and you're certainly not here to read about my speculations on it), Major League Soccer is here to stay. I am sixteen years out from my first MLS match in 2006. Sixteen years from now is 2038. MLS is going to exist in 2038. I don't know what it'll look like exactly, and there's no point in trying to work out the specifics of MLS in 2038. But it'll be there.

The great thing about sports is that everything gets recorded. As soon as the final whistle blows, a game becomes history. As long as they keep playing games, there's gonna keep being history. I think about that every now and then, as we're now ten years away from Eddie Johnson missing the final penalty kick in the 2012 Open Cup final, nine from Lovell Palmer doing the same in the 2013 MLS Cup Final, seven from Saad Abdul-Salaam hitting the double post, all moments I watched as they happened, how the moments happening in front of me will become that sort of lore remembered for years to come. Even just last year we had so much - Felipe Mora's goal in the 94th minute of the final, the Union having to play a game missing more than half of their starting lineup for COVID tracing, Muyl and Zimmerman missing the frame entirely in their shootout in Philadelphia, RSL beating Seattle without taking a shot all game... And ten years from now, we'll think "wow, I can't believe that was ten years ago," and there's going to be ten years worth of history in-between.

What happened last Wednesday will one day be that as well, something that we acknowledge was a big step, a first time occurrence, and one part of history. Immortality, as Garth Lagerway put it.

In the meantime? Just keep working, just keep pushing for more, you know. Fight and win.

EPILOGUE: FIGHT AND WIN

There was a moment, I think after the second goal, on the FS1 broadcast, wherein Strong and Holden both went quiet for a solid ninety seconds and let us just listen to the 68,000 people packing Lumen Field. They did that one. You know the one. We all know the one.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=GG-jMjvnua8>

That one. I don't know if they do it after every goal, but I was struck by it in this instance. That video was from 2011. Eleven years ago. That guy, and all the fans with him, got ridiculed to shit by every fucking computer-bound loser with an opinion (like myself) for the crime of having too much fun in front of a video camera. And now the entire crowd was doing it while the other 27 of us sat at home and watched them do something nobody else has been able to.

It hit me at that moment. They had. They had fought and won. They've done so much god damn fighting and winning. A double in 2014, MLS Cups in 2016 and 19, playoffs every year, they've finished top two in the Western Conference in five straight seasons. Great teams come and go, and they do it loudly, and declare themselves foundation-shakers, from the Goonie Earthquakes to Parea's Dallas to second-year Atlanta and LAFC, but the Sounders just keep fucking winning. They are the foundation. They are the league. It couldn't have been anyone else.

I would have loved for it to be someone else, but it just couldn't have been. It had to be Seattle.