

# Still no 'Victory' on Crew's

Storylines out of Columbus have been full of off-field accolades, but the Crew is still awaiting a Hollywood ending after five seasons of good but frustrating performances.

**BY CRAIG MERZ**  
in Columbus, Ohio

Columbus has a supporting role in "Traffic." Portions of the Oscar-nominated drama were filmed at the county courthouse to lend a sense of realism. Actor Michael Douglas spent several days in the city, although his wife, Catherine Zeta-Jones, didn't make the trip.



Surprised that Hollywood would overlook bigger cities in favor of Ohio's capital?

It's the same reaction many in the soccer community had on June 15, 1994, when MLS announced Columbus as one of its 10 charter members. They wondered how a city without major-league experience would survive.

Very well, thank you. From an average attendance of 18,950 in the inaugural 1996 season to becoming the season-ticket league leader in its sparkling stadium, Columbus has been a flagship for MLS.

But the on-field product has been good but frustrating. Although the Crew reached the Eastern Conference finals three straight years, its all-time record is 75-80-5 (.485), and the Crew has finished with a losing record in all but one season. It missed the playoffs for the first time in 2000.

"We're not going to be satisfied until we win a championship," General Manager Jim Smith said.

The envelope, please. In keeping with Columbus' newfound fascination with the Academy Awards, we look at cinematic ventures and how they would fit into Crew history:

**AMERICAN BEAUTY.**

**Starring:** Brian McBride.

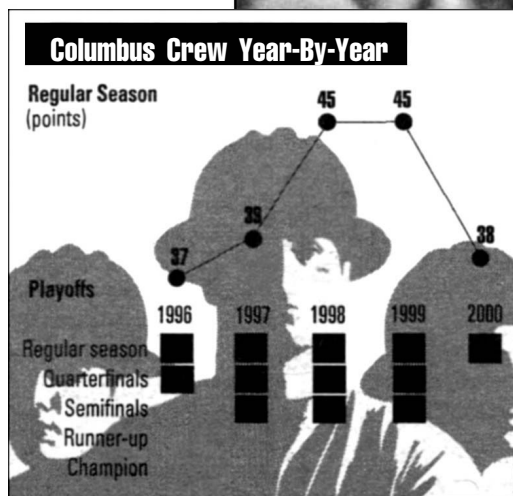
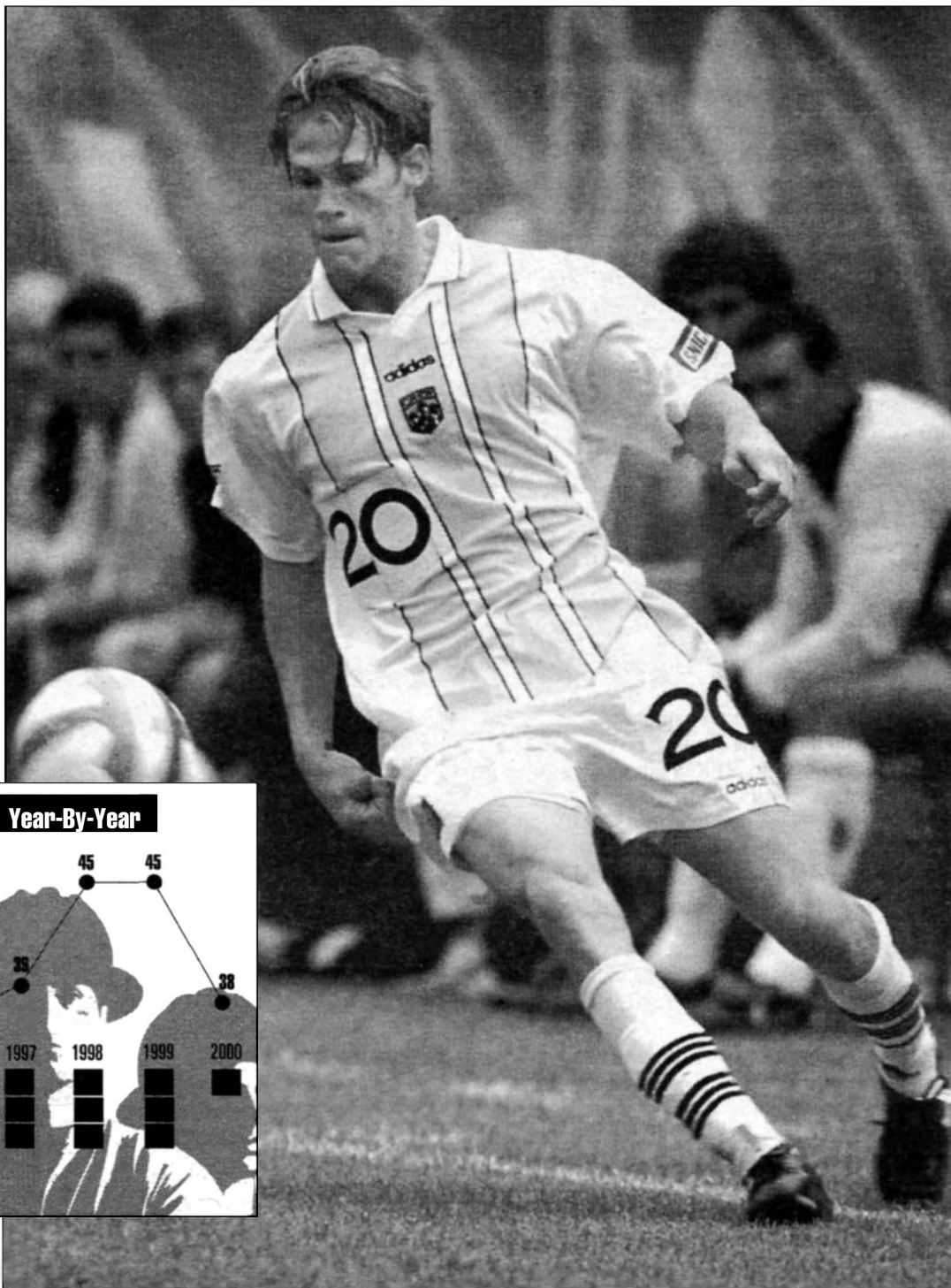
**Plot:** MLS gave Columbus the No. 1 pick in the first draft to compensate for the fact that *no* big-name stars wanted to play there.

Columbus wisely chose a photogenic, athletic kid from St. Louis.

McBride was called the "future of American soccer" on draft day, by then-GM Jamey Rootes.

He was right in choosing McBride and just as correct in his prediction. McBride scored twice in the Crew's debut and catapulted himself to the forefront of the national team. He has not come close to the 17 goals he scored in 1996 but remains coveted by teams on two continents.

**GROUNDHOG DAY.** **Starring:** Timo Liekoski, Tom Fitzgerald.



**Brian McBride, the No. 1 pick in the first MLS draft, had his best season in Year 1, hammering home 17 goals.**

**Plot:** After struggling through a 6-16 mark in the first season, the Crew brass decided to make a change. What better time than team-picture day? After all, who wants a photo with the soon-to-be fired coach sitting there with an "everything's-all-right" grin?

So it wasn't Feb. 2. It was Aug. 2, 1996, and Rootes saw six more weeks of bad soccer unless a change was made. Goodbye, Timo. Hello, Fitz.

"I'm not prepared to give up on the inaugural season," Rootes stated at the time.

He was less certain about extending the contract of Fitzgerald past the end of the season.

"If he goes 0-10, it's pretty clear he won't get the job," Rootes said. "If he goes 10-0, it's pretty clear he will."

Today, Fitzgerald has the longest tenure with one team because he engineered what is still the most remarkable in-season turnaround in MLS history. The motley Crew suddenly began singing a different tune. It won Fitzgerald's debut with a shootout win at Los Angeles. Before the next game, Columbus acquired goalkeeper Brad Friedel.

The Crew went 9-1 under Fitzgerald, including a dramatic 1-0 win in New England before a crowd of 38,633 in the last game of the season to

# marquee

edge the Revolution for the final playoff spot.

Midnight struck for Cinderella when Tampa Bay won the first-round series.

**FIELD OF DREAMS. Starring:** Lamar Hunt.

**Plot:** It wasn't a whisper from an Iowa cornfield, but nonetheless the Crew owner did build it, and they did come.

After voters rejected two tax issues to fund soccer-specific stadiums, Hunt believed enough in the market to erect a \$28 million stadium. The facility opened to rave reviews on May 15, 1999, before an overflow crowd of 24,741.

Crew forward Jeff Cunningham scored the first goal in 2-0 victory.

Hunt also built a training center in suburban Columbus in 1997. Crew Stadium is the jewel of American soccer. It has played host to two women's national team games, the 2000 MLS All-Star Game, the 1999 Lamar Hunt U.S. Open Cup final and the World Cup qualifier against Costa Rica last October.

This year will be even better. Final-round qualifying for 2002 opens Feb. 28 when Mexico visits.

The stadium also will be the site for the MLS Cup on Oct. 21 and the College Cup (men's Division I championship) Dec. 14-16.

**INDEPENDENCE DAY. Starring:** Richie Williams, Miles Joseph.

**Plot:** Remember the scene in the movie when aliens blow up the White House? That's what the Crew wanted to do to RFK Stadium following losses in its first 13 trips there.

All the misery evaporated on May 3, 2000, when D.C.'s Williams headed the ball into his own goal in the 88th minute for a 2-1 Crew victory.

Joseph, the midfielder who was obtained from the MetroStars less than 24 hours earlier, entered play as a substitute for Brian West as the Crew tallied its second goal.

"I was celebrating when I stepped on the field," Joseph said.

"His plus-minus must be unbelievable," McBride said.

The diminutive Williams, derisively referred to as the "Lawn Gnome" by Crew fans, received a standing ovation in Crew Stadium during the pre-game introductions a month later.

**DAMN YANKEES. Starring:** The Crew.

**Plot:** Columbus has not been a friendly spot for foreign teams planning on a nice, little exhibition. The Crew is 2-0-1 against international clubs. It took a 3-1 decision over Leeds United in Ohio Stadium in 1997, routed Hamburg SV, 4-1, in May 2000 and two months later tied Newcastle United, 2-2.

**CATCH A RISING STAR. Starring:** Stern John.

**Plot:** "Hey, I've got this cousin who's pretty good."

How many coaches have heard that line? In this case, Crew midfielder Ansil Elcock was speaking the truth.

His younger cousin is John. All he did in two seasons (1998-99) was score 52 goals in 65 regular-season and playoff games before scampering to England.

The Crew hasn't recovered from his loss.

(Craig Merz covers the Crew for the Columbus Dispatch.)

## All Time Crew XI

### GOALKEEPER

**Brad Friedel.** Rock-solid Ohio native had 12 shutouts in 38 games in 1996-97.

### DEFENDERS

**Mike Clark.** Hard-nosed marking back. The Midwestern boy fit the Crew's image.

**Thomas Dooley.** Falling out with Tom Fitzgerald can't diminish his contributions over three seasons.

**Mike Lapper.** Returned from knee injury in 1998 to become captain and solidify defense.

**Ricardo Iribarren.** Always a treat to watch the fiery Argentine.

### MIDFIELDERS

**Robert Warzycha.** Right flank or in the middle, the Pole had career year in 2000; ranks fifth all-time in MLS with 57 assists.

**Brian Maisonneuve.** Playmaker at times but has been consummate defensive-first player.

**Marcelo Carrera.** "Maestro" was invaluable leader; helped Hispanic players get acclimated to Columbus.

**Ansil Elcock.** Running the left flank since 1997.

### FORWARDS

**Stern John.** Scored 44 goals in 55 regular-season games.