

# Valderrama wants MLS Cup

Carlos Valderrama, the Mutiny's heart and soul, turns 40 this season and has a contract through 2002. Desire for an MLS title keeps him hungry.



BILL BARRETT

Colombian legend Carlos Valderrama played in every Tampa Bay game of 2000 and led MLS in assists.

**BY BILL WARD**  
in Tampa

**T**he early history of the Tampa Bay Mutiny has to focus on one man: Carlos Valderrama.

Sure, he made a slight digression and played one season (1998) for the Miami Fusion. But Tampa is where the colorful Colombian star has called his home since he signed a MLS contract more than five years ago.

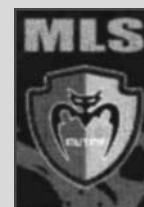
Tampa is where he and his wife, Claribeth, own a house. It's where they have raised three sons, Kenny, Alan and Carlos, and where they go to school.

And, at age 39, Valderrama knows Tampa is where he will live after his retirement — whenever that might be.

He turns 40 on Sept. 2, but "El Pibe" (The Kid) just signed a deal that will allow him to play through 2002, if he so desires. Right now, Valderrama says he has plenty of desire.

**YOUNG AT HEART.** "I still play with the same enthusiasm, the same ideas and principles that I did when I was 20," said Valderrama, recently voted Colombian Player of the Century. "It's still a pleasure for me to be playing. I have always taken care of myself and was prepared, both mentally and physically, to play at this age."

Valderrama says he still feels some of remorse that his Miami stint didn't work out, a result of philosophical differences with former Fusion coach Ivo Wortmann. But Valderrama believes it was for the best. His family is happier in Tampa. And despite the distance from



relatives in his hometown of Santa Marta, Colombia, there is a certain comfort level in Tampa his family never had in South Florida.

Valderrama says part of the reason he has hung around MLS this long is his continued desire to win a championship. The closest he came was the inaugu-

ral season in 1996, when the Mutiny reached the Eastern Conference finals against eventual champion D.C. United. Since then, he has experienced four first-round playoff exits.

**HOW HE LIKES IT.** As always, the Mutiny's midfield magician believes the team has the potential to reach MLS's title game. But he is quite specific when he describes what the team needs most to get there in 2001: another forward.

Last year, Valderrama played all 32 games of the regular season and led MLS in assists by threading 26 passes that created goals, most of them by Senegalese striker Mamadou Diallo. But after a while, Diallo began attracting a lot of defensive attention in the Mutiny's 4-5-1 formation, leaving Valderrama few alternatives to create other scoring chances.

With the addition of Duke's Ali Curtis and 17-year-old Devin Barclay of Pro-40 from the MLS SuperDraft — plus a healthy Amos Magee — the Mutiny has options for a Diallo partner.

But Valderrama knows the team's ultimate success — and failure — still depends greatly on him. No problem, says El Pibe, it's been that way everywhere he's played.

"I like it that way," Valderrama says with a laugh.

(Bill Ward covers the Mutiny for the Tampa Tribune.)