

Slow and steady hasn't won



There's a lot to admire about the Dallas Burn's consistency, but its failure to reach the MLS Cup cost Coach David Dir his job after five playoff appearances.

still had a record seven players from its original roster. Moreover, Jason Kreis, Jorge Rodriguez, Eric Dade, Matt Jordan, Richard Fairer, Chad Deering and Mark Santel made up the core of the team since 1998.

The performance: Dir took his team to the playoffs all five years — and to the 1997 Open Cup title — but lost his job because he couldn't get the talented group he assembled to bust the seal on the MLS Cup.

Attendance? Nothing to scream about, but it climbed steadily after a sophomore slump. Average crowd counts (13,102 last year) and corporate sponsorships have risen each season since as the Burn has quietly developed into a model for slow, steady growth.

And if you've ever sat in the surprisingly cramped Cotton Bowl seats on a stifling Texas summer day, you know why the league office is quite pleased to generally leave the Burn alone and allow the club's dedicated young staff to keep the ship headed straight while awaiting an owner-operator.

THE STEAL. The league's biggest gift to the Burn came in the form of Mexican legend Hugo Sanchez. Though 38, he garnered major publicity for the team, had some good outings and scored six goals.

But what a steal Dir made the first day of the original MLS player draft in 1996: He snatched Jason Kreis, the team's all-time leading scorer and the 1999 league MVP, in the fifth round, No. 43 overall.

Kreis scored the first goal in Burn history and stands fourth in all-time MLS scoring with 165 points (59 goals and 47 assists).

THE BUSTS. For all its stability, the Burn couldn't avoid its share of foreign acquisition boo-boos. Washington Rodriguez, the rail-thin Uruguayan, demanded more money at triple the rate of his goal production. He was gone halfway through the inaugural season.

There was Argentine Daniel Peinado, who was hailed as the next Lionel Alvarez.

He was no Lionel Alvarez.

Peinado and his near-max salary were quietly discarded after one ineffective season.

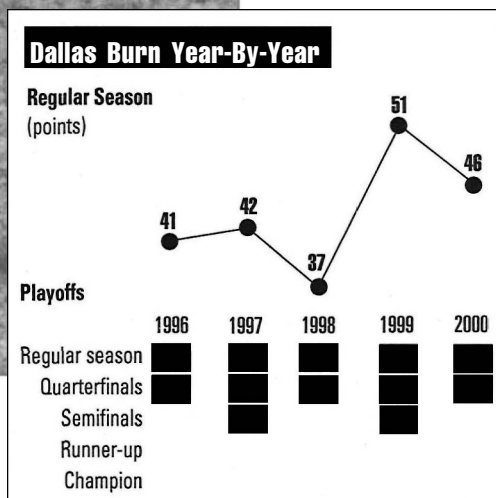
There was Colombian John Jairo Trellez. Never heard of him? Enough said.

Talented Argentine Diego Sonora was popular in the locker room. He left the team in mid-season of 1997 in search of more loot.

Damian (or Damian Alvarez, before he ascended to one-name status in his own mind) was lower than dial-up Internet access.

THE GUTS. Gone almost two years now, Lionel Alvarez continues to impact the team.

The hard-tackling midfielder became Kreis' mentor, showing the young college All-American



Dallas doesn't have an MLS Cup appearance, but it has an identity created by stalwarts such as Jason Kreis (left).

TOM KNUTSEN

BY STEVE DAVIS
in Dallas

Let's be honest. Dallas grabbed the final chair when the music stopped as the charter MLS franchises were assigned in 1995.

And the club, without an owner-operator to champion its livelihood, was probably granted its place in the original league lineup because of a sweetheart deal with a stadium that had seen better days and needed a primary tenant.

So, as MLS peeks back on its first five years, it may be surprising that one of the clubs with enviable stability was that same last little duck-

ling on the boat.

Indeed, it's been mostly steady-eddy for the Burn.

The coaches? Well, that was coach — singular — until Dave Dir was let go in November. He held on longer than any original MLS coach.

The front office? Three of the organization's top five officials have been there from Game 1, when 27,779 saw the Burn prevail in its debut. That list includes Andy Swift, who was promoted after XFL lured original GM Billy Hicks.

The players? As MLS entered Year 5, the Burn

the race

the ways of a player dedicated to training, fitness, locker-room solidarity and passion on the field.

"Just his constant composure on the ball, and his dedication to the game, that taught me so much," Kreis said. "I learned so much just watching his professionalism every day in training and the way he approached every game."

Alvarez had similar influence on the team's other young players. He left the team after the 1996 season for more money in Mexico, then returned in 1998. He was traded in 1999 to New England for Ariel Graziani.

THE HOLE. A serious Burn bane was the team's training situation. A pair of heavy-duty trailers located on a high school parking lot served as the team's locker room/meeting room/treatment room. (The team just moved to a more permanent training site.)

They shared a field with a girls field hockey team — and generally lost out on scheduling conflicts.

The practice field was decent but nothing special. The Burn was on the field early in 1998 when Alain Sutter, the team's all-too-delicate midfielder, stepped awkwardly in a hole.

Sadly, Sutter's hip injury was much more serious than first thought, and the former Swiss international with some good years still ahead saw his career end that day.

THE HIGHLIGHT. The Burn made the playoffs each season, reaching the semis in 1997 and 1999. The 1999 opening series against Chicago was among the all-time MLS highlights. The Burn rallied in Game 3 from a 2-0 halftime deficit on a Chad Deering header and a Jorge Rodriguez 84th-minute penalty kick. Graziani's 86th-minute one-timer sent the Fire home for good.

The Burn's 19-13 record that season was its best to date. The club also set its record that year for fewest goals allowed (35).

THE CHEMISTRY. Dir, who was almost always the youngest coach in the league, will tell you he's a better coach now than when he started, at age 36, in 1996. But one thing he kept in check from Day 1: Dir recognized the critical value of locker-room harmony. Placing a priority on character, he'd ship away a player at the first sign of potential discord.

While some players questioned Dir's ability to elevate the team past "average" status (Dir went 81-75-4), few disliked him personally.

Ultimately, Swift said Dir's win-loss ledger wasn't good enough.

"After five years, to get to the next level, we had to make a change," Swift said.

(Steve Davis is a sportswriter for the Dallas Morning News.)

All Time Burn XI

GOALKEEPER

Marie Dodd. Injuries interrupted three-year starter's career. GK of the Year in 1996.

DEFENDERS

Jorge Rodriguez. Adept as a marker or sweeper (or even MF) who finds ways to get forward.

Richard Farrer. A versatile, steadying influence and part-time team captain.

Eric Dade. Successful indoor convert developed into tough, physical presence.

MIDFIELDERS

Mark Santel. Seldom dominating but always dangerous and dependable.

Leonel Alvarez. The club's best all-around player, an enforcer, passionate leader and consummate pro.

Chad Deering. A technically gifted distributor and clinical finisher.

Alain Sutter. A hip injury cut short the nimble playmaker's career.

Diego Sonora. Crafty, gritty, versatile and valuable — until he abruptly abandoned ship.

FORWARDS

Jason Kreis. The league's only 15-15 scorer yet.

Ariel Graziani. New England didn't want this guy? Made his name in 1999 playoffs.