

Rhino stars bolt for a bigger stage

Departed Rhinos

YARI ALLNUTT

Age: 31. **Position:** Midfielder. **Ht:** 5-11. **Wt:** 170. **Country:** USA. **College:** University of Portland. **Clubs:** Carolina Dynamo (1996-97), Kansas City Wiz (1996), Rochester Rhinos (1998-2000), New England Revolution (2001). **Notable:** Played all three games for the United States in 1992 Olympics.

CRAIG DEMMIN

Age: 29. **Position:** Defender. **Ht:** 6-2. **Wt:** 200. **Country:** Trinidad & Tobago. **College:** Belhaven College. **Clubs:** Jackson Chargers (1997), Rochester Rhinos (1998-2000), Tampa Bay Mutiny (2001). **Notable:** Worked as a youth coach in Jackson, Miss., before moving up to the Rhinos in 1998.

ONANDI LOWE

Age: 26. **Position:** Striker. **Ht:** 6-3. **Wt:** 195. **Country:** Jamaica. **Clubs:** Montreal Impact (1996-98), Harbour View (1998), Richmond Kickers (1999), Rochester Rhinos (2000), Arnett Gardens (1999-2001), Port Vale (2001, on loan). **Notable:** Scored the winning goal in Jamaica's first three games and tallied in the first four games during 2002 World Cup qualifying.

Rochester management has always shown an eye for talent. The Rhinos will need to utilize that expertise following the loss of stars Yuri Allnutt, Craig Demmin and Onandi Lowe.

BY JEFF DIVERONICA
in Rochester, N.Y.

With 63 wins, two A-League championships and the 1999 U.S. Open Cup title, the Rochester Rhinos have been North America's winningest pro team over the past three years.

But are they about to fall back to the pack, a victim of their own success, better offers from Major League Soccer teams and the uncertainty of whether Rochester will ever join MLS?

"The nucleus of this team is still here," Rhinos general manager Chris Economides said.



In the offseason, though, the defending league champions have lost three of the best players to wear a Rhinos jersey in their five-year history.

Continuing his quest to play at a higher level, Jamaican national team striker Onandi Lowe requested and received a loan to Port Vale of England's Second Division, and A-League first-team all-stars Yuri Allnutt, 31, and Craig Demmin, 29, opted to sign with MLS.

Allnutt, a midfield workhorse who amassed more goals (30) and gamewinners (14) than any Rhino the past three seasons, was taken in the fourth round (42nd overall) of the MLS Super Draft by New England.

Demmin, a three-time Rhinos MVP and anchor of a rock-solid defense, was selected sixth overall by Tampa Bay.

"Now, he'll get a bigger stage to show he is one of the best defenders in the country," said Tampa general manager Bill Manning. "Demmin had done almost everything he could in Rochester."

Same goes for Allnutt.

NEW CHALLENGES. With nothing left to prove in the A-League, Lowe, Allnutt and Demmin went looking for new challenges.

Now Economides and head coach Pat Ercoli's challenge is to replace three all-stars.

Midfielder Yuri Allnutt, who was drafted by the New England Revolution, wants new challenges after sensing he accomplished all he could with Rochester.

"We're not going to sit idly by," Economides said. "There are guys out there."

Some free agents have already opted for MLS or other A-League clubs. The Rhinos offered contracts to Canadian international Dwayne DeRosario (15 goals with Richmond last year) and Jamaican-born forward Greg Simmonds (16 with Hershey), but they signed with MLS's San Jose and Miami, respectively.

Former Columbus Crew midfielder Jason Farrell (Seattle), Darren Sawatzky (expansion Portland) and Giuliano Oliviero (Montreal) also were offered deals by Rochester but went to other A-League clubs. "We're losing out to factors we have no control over," Economides said.

In Farrell's case, he and his wife wanted to return to their hometown, Economides said.

LARGER OFFERS. Lowe's and Demmin's departures were expected, but Allnutt's was a surprise. Because he didn't sign with MLS until 48 hours before the draft, the Rhinos say they didn't go after other free agents as hard as they could have.

"We would have made larger offers," Ercoli said.

Better offers by MLS to young players such as DeRosario and Simmonds affected Rochester, which also can no longer dangle the carrot of joining MLS as easily as it did in 1997. That's when it lured Allnutt, Demmin, goalie Pat Onstad and forward Darren Tilley — now all ex-Rhinos.

If MLS doesn't budge on a projected \$25 million expansion fee, the Rhinos won't go to MLS — no matter how many fans they draw at Frontier Field or \$48 million PaeTec Park, which has pushed back its scheduled opening to 2003.

"If we knew we'd be in MLS next year, don't you think [Demmin and Allnutt] would have stayed?" Ercoli said.

BIGGEST CONCERN. The biggest concern is at forward. The Rhinos don't seem content with Jimmy Glenn, Cuban Eduardo Sebrango and Nigerian Ernest Inneh, and Dan Stebbins, a catalyst in last year's title run, remains undecided on returning or running his business in Milwaukee.

"I don't know if [the departures] change my decision," Stebbins said. "I don't want them to not make any moves thinking I'll be back. But if things fall a certain way, I might be able to."

Andrew Restrepo, Demmin's backup, is a more than capable replacement, and Nate Daligcon could slide into Allnutt's spot. Canadian national-teamer Martin Nash is one of Rochester's best and most versatile players, and the Rhinos remain high on youngster Gabriel Gervais.

"Pat and Chris have a challenge on their hands," said Manning, the former GM of the Minnesota Thunder, which met Rochester in the last three league title games. "But they've shown in the past they have an eye for talent, and they have the resources to sign players."

(Jeff DiVeronica covers soccer for the Rochester Democrat & Chronicle.)



JAMES D. LATHROP