

Tampa Bay and Miami both have histories of stumbles

Floundering in Florida

By Ridge Mahoney

As talk of cutting back expenses and cutting loose teams grew more strident, gloom and darkness enveloped the two MLS teams sited in the Sunshine State.

Tampa Bay and Miami, which MLS now refers to as Fusion FC, emerged as the prime candidates to be contracted — which itself emerged last year as the sports euphemism for folding — during discussions of how MLS can best proceed into Year Seven.

Their track records are among the bleakest in MLS when performance on and off the field are combined: Tampa Bay and Miami have only four (of 10) winning seasons between them and two of the three worst all-time attendance marks.

Both teams stumbled after some initial success, and neither has regained its stride. In different seasons, they led the league in wins but failed to reach MLS Cup.

One has never been graced by the largesse of an operator-investor. The other has in charge the poor man of MLS who struggles each season to come up with the

Fans have been few and far between in Tampa Bay despite four playoff seasons. Carlos Valderrama began his MLS career in Tampa Bay, moved to Miami in 1998, but was back with the Mutiny the next year.



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funds to bankroll league losses as well as that of his own team.

Like most MLS teams, neither has come close to breaking even. But it is their presumably grim futures, tied inexorably to star-crossed pasts, that led them to the brink of extinction.

FUSION STARTS FAST. Fusion operator-investor Ken Horowitz inadvertently sounded an alarm March 15, 1998, when he crowed triumphantly, "I always knew soccer would make it here. When people see how fan-friendly the stadium is and the atmosphere it creates, they'll be coming back."

A sellout crowd of 20,450 had packed Lockhart Stadium for the Fusion's inaugural game in 1998. But that euphoria quickly dissipated. MLS has yet to make it in South Florida.

Lockhart and Fort Lauderdale were emergency replacements for the Miami's Orange Bowl. Former league commissioner Doug Logan was unable to work the political levers to get a suitable lease, and when the team fled Miami, few corporate sponsors followed it.

Cozy Lockhart features amenities best described as minimalist. The Fusion docs little print or broadcast advertising.

As a consequence, Miami ranks last in just about every business category: sea-

son-ticket sales, local sponsorships, regular-season regional telecasts — and all-time attendance.

TAMPA'S TRAVAILS. The Mutiny won the Eastern Conference title in the inaugural 1996 MLS season with Carlos Valderrama and Roy Lassiter. It led the league in goals but still ranked ninth — of 10 teams — in attendance at Houlihan's Stadium.

That first season was marred by an embezzlement scandal. An employee spirited away more than \$100,000, and General Manager Farrukh Quraishi — a former Tampa Bay Rowdie who was one of the few MLS links to the NASL — eventually was fired.

After the season, Coach of the Year Thomas Rongen bolted for much better money. The league-run Mutiny could afford only a reported \$70,000 for its head coach.

Tampa Bay averaged 13,106 fans in 1999 but still lost nearly \$3 million. Its coaching woes resurfaced late in 2000 when GM Bill Manning jettisoned Tim Hankinson, who had coached the team to a 16-12-4 record yet failed to advance past the first round of the playoffs.

Under Alfonso Mondelo and then Perry Van Der Beck, the Mutiny posted a 4-21-4 record last year, recording the fewest wins in MLS history.

ENTANGLED FATES. Valderrama has bounced between the Florida teams.

MLS sent him to Miami after the first two MLS seasons to help kick-start the Fusion. Logan "re-allocated" him to the Mutiny in 1999 after he and then-coach Ivo Wortmann reached an impasse.

The teams' two meetings last year drew crowds of 12,412 and 12,988 — OK by MLS standards but nothing like the NASL days and the I-75 series between the Rowdies and Strikers.

Dreams of a real rivalry and Florida derbies have yet to be fulfilled. ■

THE FLORIDA YEARS

(Average Attendance)

Year	Tampa Bay	Miami	MLS
1996	11,679 (9th)	—	17,406
1997	11,333 (10th)	—	14,619
1998	10,312 (10th)	10,284 (11th)	14,312
1999	13,106 (9th)	8,689 (11th)	14,282
2000	9,452 (10th)	7,460 (12th)	13,756
2001	10,479 (11th)	11,177 (9th)	14,961
All-time	11,072 (10th)	9,345 (12th)	14,819

In parentheses is the ranking among MLS teams in average attendance.