

My View

A great leap forward?



BY RIDGE MAHONEY

Regardless of how many teams remain and how many of them are run by Phil Anschutz, Major League Soccer will be markedly different in 2002.

MLS is finally taking itself seriously enough to move into the ring with true heavyweights.

Nearly lost amid the hubbub triggered by official announcement of the MLS/ESPN/ESPN2/ABC/World Cup TV deal was the other player, the as-yet unnamed company created to acquire, manage and market soccer properties.

Some major players have jumped aboard: MLS minority investor Dentsu, Inc., which just acquired 2006 World Cup marketing rights for Asia; Envision, a branch of the AEG empire; league operator-investor Hunt Sports Group; and Worldwide Momentum, headed by CEO Harlan Stone.

Noticeable by its absence — at least currently — is Kraft Soccer Properties, the Revs' operator-investor.

Says Hunt Sports Group president John Wagner: "Soccer in America continues to need integration and strategic management."

Does it ever.

Stadiums, a better caliber of play, innovative and productive marketing strategies, larger attendances — all these are vital to MLS success.

But without an integrated plan for MLS and the sport backed by resources and business acumen, MLS may survive but it can never thrive.

Is this a good move for MLS? Harken to the words of agent Cory Clemetson, who has belittled MLS and its single-entity structure while representing Cobi Jones and Raul Diaz Arce, among others.

"Harlan Stone is excellent," said Clemetson. "Getting him involved has to help the league. He has as deep corporate connections as anyone in America. If anyone can open those doors for MLS, it will be Harlan Stone."

Many fans and journalists tend to nod off when business models and bottom lines are brought up. They prefer players to PNLs (profit-and-loss statements). But players are assets.

Properties are assets, too. They have to be marketed shrewdly with a focus on profit.

And so does MLS.

— Ridge Mahoney