

My View

Late start hinders MLS



BY RIDGE MAHONEY

MLS will be a more fiercely contested, entertaining league in 2002.

Too many good players have strengthened too many teams for play to not improve. MLS games are often competitive af-

fairs in which affray subsumes artistry.

With Preki back in K.C., Diego Serna in the Big Apple and Steve Ralston and Alex Pineda Chacon serving up Big Mama for the Revs, the average MLS match should be above average.

But that may not be enough for MLS to register gains in other areas.

Weeks of contraction talk has poisoned segments of the business community and paralyzed several teams' front offices during a most critical period.

This will be a difficult year on the business front.

The World Cup will distract fans and divert media attention. Office staff has been cut at MLS headquarters.

The formation of a new marketing agency will pay off down the road, but it needs time to take effect.

Late starts? As of Jan. 18, MLS hadn't released its schedule — nine weeks before the projected starting date of March 23. How can you sell tickets without dates?

For the 2001 season, MLS released its schedule in early December. A league that has enough trouble selling season tickets and hammering out sponsorship deals and lining up local broadcast arrangements is already way behind.

By dragging its feet on contraction, the league again demonstrated one of its critical flaws. If the right decisions are made—only time will tell if contraction was the right one — they take far too long.

Bad decisions have stained the image of MLS. Fusion operator-investor Ken Horowitz was a disaster from day one. It took two years too long for his partners to get rid of him.

At least the league has put off further expansion until it can get its house in order, somewhat. That's a smart decision.

Unless the league makes a lot more of those decisions, Serna screamers and Preki cutbacks won't save it.