

Quirky year for a draft

Contraction has thrown a heavy wrench into this year's MLS Super-

By Will Kuhns

Draft. In what was already labeled a "down year" for draftable college talent, the folding of the Fusion and Mutiny further skewed the picture.

Forty fewer jobs exist in MLS, and all but two teams had full rosters entering February, thereby decreasing the already limited chances of draftees making the cut. Knowing those odds, several high-profile players have elected to stay in school, pursue opportunities overseas or remained undecided. Furthermore, MLS officials were so wrapped up in contraction-related business in December and January that they had signed very few prospects early.

With big-name players strewn about by the Miami-Tampa Bay drafts and the roster shuffling that ensued, the SuperDraft became an afterthought.

"You mean they're having a college draft this year?" one agent quipped.

Teams barely had starting thinking about their draft strategy because they were trying to solve salary-cap issues and get acquainted with their new additions. Even Dallas coach Mike Jeffries, who used an allocation to get the No. 1 overall pick, admitted, "It's difficult, because recently our staff has concentrated less on what to do with the college

players and more on what to do with the team we have."

Other factors contributed to the uncertainty. Connecticut defender Chris Gbandi would be the only draftable player unanimously considered capable of starting in MLS next season except that a torn anterior cruciate ligament in his knee will keep him out until at least midsummer, and he is still pondering his options in Europe.

Another potential No. 1 pick, sophomore Oguchi Onyewu, is likely headed overseas if he decides to leave Clemson. UCLA sophomores Alex Yi and Nelson Akwari, Onyewu's old defensive mates from the U.S. U-17 and U-20 teams, are weighing those same two choices, with MLS a distant third.

Meanwhile, a plethora of first-round materiel from the ranks of the underclassmen have opted to stay in college: SMU's Diego Walsh, Indiana's Pat Noonan, Virginia's Alecko Eskandarian and Stanford's Todd Dunivant. An ever-growing number of top seniors are trying their luck in Europe first: Luchi Gonzalez from SMU, Jeff Matteo and Shalrie Joseph from St. John's, Ian Fuller from Clemson and Dipsy Selolwane from Saint Louis.

Roster-exempt Project-40 players will be highly coveted again. Teams will be allowed to keep four protected players in addition to those players on their 18-man rosters. Colorado was the only team with as many as three entering the draft. A new category of roster exemptions is being created for "developmental" players, designed primarily for local talent willing to join the team for a low salary. ■

SMU's Luchi Gonzalez, the Hermann Trophy winner, and a growing number of college seniors will be assessing their chances overseas before committing to MLS.

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