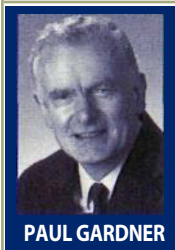


MLS picks wrong place to cut



PAUL GARDNER

NEW YORK — You'll have to decide for yourself: Has MLS contracted or has it consolidated? Is it weaker than it was last season or is it stronger?

The view from here is that the league is weaker. Not because it is smaller. The argument that MLS — or any organization for that matter — can function more efficiently by shedding dead wood has some merit.

In the overall picture of American pro sports, the failure of a couple of franchises can hardly be seen as either unique or as an inevitable portent of disaster.

No, it is not the mathematics, not the 12-minus-2-equals-10 bit, that concerns me. Rather it is the identity of the two abandoned clubs that worries.

To walk out on Miami and Tampa while retaining Colorado or Kansas City or Columbus — yes, that does give the impression that the MLS bosses have lost their marbles.

May I ask the business people — those wonderful guys who have been telling us for some 40 years that "it's a business" and that therefore they, and they alone, must be allowed to make all the important decisions — may I ask them to shut up for a moment, and just simply *listen* to an alternative view before they start brandishing their calculators and waving their balance sheets?

MLS has been unable to make a go of soccer in what was, during the days of the NASL, the liveliest area of soccer interest in the country. The sport, it seems



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Miami soccer fans won't be able to see Pablo Mastroeni (right, battling San Jose's Dwayne DeRosario) and the Fusion because of MLS's short-sighted decision to contract.

has a greater future in Columbus or in Kansas City.

It is possible that the calculators and the balance sheets may prove that. We have to look at the bottom line, which means listening to the accounting people. Hah! How unfortunate for the MLS bottom-liners that their hard-business decision was quickly followed by the Enron affair.

An affair in which the vast majority of knowledgeable business people got things spectacularly and calamitously wrong. The heaps of money involved in the Enron affair make the alleged MLS losses of \$250 million look like peanuts.

True enough — \$250 million is peanuts in the world of big business. But it is a big enough figure to cloud the judgment of the MLS business guys and to seduce them into yet another lousy decision, the sort of misguided move that has bedeviled the insecure world of pro soccer for as long as I can remember.

In a stupefyingly short-term and short-sighted move, MLS has decided that

it can save some mini-peanut amount of cash by shutting out the sunshine of Florida and investing instead in soccer-somnolent areas of the Midwest.

In doing this, MLS is repeating and underlining at the pro level the major mistake of soccer leadership in this country.

To wit: an utter failure of vision, a crass inability to see the enormous, exciting potential that the rapidly growing Latin community can bring to American soccer.

This is a failure, an abject failure, that runs right through our sport. It was massively in evidence at the recent NSCAA coaches' convention, a relentlessly white, Anglo, middle-class, pro-European and — inevitably — unimaginative gathering. A gathering in which the business side of things — as represented by the massive list of exhibitors — has taken over.

Everything in the previous paragraph also applies to MLS. Its attempts, if that's what they are, to enroll the support of the Hispanic fans far too often look like

promotional exercises — short-term campaigns to sell tickets.

In Los Angeles, the Galaxy sits in the middle of an enormous and passionate community of Latino — mostly Mexican — fans. Does MLS really believe that Sigi Schmid's attempt to populate the Galaxy entirely with non-Hispanic ex-UCLA players has any chance whatever of attracting Hispanic fans?

How long will it be before the Galaxy will be "consolidated" out of existence because the fans fail to turn up? Blaming the fans is convenient, but it obscures — is designed to obscure — the failures of MLS leadership and management.

Starkly put, MLS has abandoned largely Hispanic Florida in favor of largely Anglo Midwest. I was in Columbus recently for the College Cup. The country's only custom-built pro-soccer stadium was virtually deserted and the community interest non-existent.

Nothing more needs to be said. Columbus is not a soccer

I find myself increasingly and despairingly critical of these non-soccer decisions made by non-soccer people. The idea seems to be that you can turn a rotten decision into a good one by intoning the magic words, "It's a business." At that point, no objection need be considered.

My problem with the guys making the rotten decisions is not so much that they are soccer-ignorant. Most of them grew up in a non-soccer culture, so it is hardly their fault. The problem is that they evidently find it impossible to admit that anything they don't know can be of any importance.

That attitude provides the rationale for not seeking advice on soccer matters. Downplaying the importance of the sport itself is bad enough — but my 40-year experience tells me that downplaying is the least of it. The sport is too often treated with a lack of respect, and the people who advocate its importance are patronized as naive romantics.



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town. But MLS prefers to have a franchise there than among the Hispanics in Florida.

The gentlemen who make that sort of decision are Anglo businessmen. Short-sighted Anglo-businessmen whose myopia will not allow them to see that a soccer league might occasionally need decisions to be made for soccer, rather than financial, reasons. And that such a soccer decision could end up making more economic sense than the strictly financial one.

What that adds up to, in a word, is arrogance. And what it results in is the sort of decision that will abandon Miami and Tampa in favor of Kansas City and Columbus.

The mere fact that this is labeled a *business* decision does not automatically make it correct, nor logical, nor intelligent. From the soccer point of view, it is an awful decision. It can be defended only by deliberately ignoring the interests of the sport. ■