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FALL FEVER HITS MLS



Major League Soccer concluded the regular season with the most exciting finish in the league's history. Fans responded as weekend attendance the last two weeks averaged 21,941.

For the second straight year, MLS average attendance increased. The 2002 regular-season campaign averaged 15,822, a six percent improvement over 2001's average of 14,961.

One factor was contraction. Among the 10 returning teams, the 2002 average was down slightly over 2001.

World Cup fever did not immediately spill over to MLS, but the most positive development was the excellent turnout late in the season. MLS was helped by an exciting playoff race. Big

crowds turned out in Los Angeles (32,874) and San Jose (26,229) to watch the Galaxy and Quakes battle for the Western Conference title. Colorado drew 25,614 for a Friday night game. Chicago had a four straight sellouts at its new home (pictured) in Naperville, Ill.

General managers around the league credited their increasing ability to attract fans in their local youth communities.

The September crowds prompted MLS to extend next year's regular season until Oct. 26 (30 games instead of 28) and shorten the playoffs, which drew poorly except for the final, to four weeks (a maximum of four games instead of seven).

If there was one note of concern, it was the poor walkup figures in many cities. With a small base of hard-core fans, MLS still struggles with drawing fans on short notice.