



The Colorado Rush has taken the super-club concept to a new level by merging with a Virginia organization.

southeastern Virginia city, ran 35 competitive teams, with 500 players.

A year ago, no one in Virginia was thinking of forming a new Rush club. Virginia Beach SC officials first approached Tim Schulz, Colorado Rush president, with an offer to be VBSC director of coaching. After several months of negotiations Schulz said that he was happy in Colorado but was eager to help his Eastern counterparts. He proposed a transcontinental merger. Both boards agreed.

Atlantic SC joined, and soon other Virginia Beach-area clubs wanted in as well. Lafayette and Bay Rivers, an hour north, signed on with the new Virginia Rush. Talks are currently underway with several other clubs, including Hampton, Portsmouth, Chesapeake and Colonial, along with the Hampton Roads Piranhas W-League team.

The main effect of the merger is to share "intellectual property," Schulz said. That includes training manuals, documents, paperwork, brochures, licensed trademarks and philosophies and ideas. "Front-office operations" should be fully integrated by May 1.

Schulz bears major responsibility for handling the Rush brand. He is in charge of continuity and quality control for both sides. That includes not only ensuring that intellectual property and logos are used properly, but that Virginia Rush players dress, warm up and handle halftime exactly as their Colorado counterparts do. Even the size and font of training manuals are expected to be maintained "the Rush way."

Employees will be shared as well. On Feb. 1, Colorado Rush Academy director of coaching Dave Dengerink will relocate

Giant Rush grows even larger

To some people, the Colorado Rush exemplifies all that is good with youth soccer. The organization, formed four years ago through the merger of Club Columbine and Lakewood United, registers more than 1,400 advanced and academy youth players, 4,100 recreational boys and girls, and 1,000 adults. With a budget of \$1.8 million, the Rush employs nine full-time coaches and six full-time administrators, including a grant writer.

Elite Rush teams have won 10 U.S. Youth Soccer national championships. Their tech-

nical methodology — and the control they exert over it — is considered a model of youth soccer success.

To other people, a club with such size and power is troubling. They fear that the Rush — and other clubs like it — might, in their drive to get bigger and better, crush or swallow smaller clubs that stand in the way.

Both sides had reason to reflect on their positions after a recent announcement that the Colorado Rush has engineered a cross-country merger with another club: the Virginia Rush.

Unlike its Rocky Mountain counterpart, the Virginia Rush was not an existing soccer organization. The Virginia Rush was created only last August, when the Virginia Beach and Atlantic soccer clubs banded together to form the state's largest youth soccer club. The merger came about so that the groups could affiliate with the Colorado Rush.

Prior to the consolidation, the Virginia Beach SC fielded 4,000 boys and girls, ages 4 to 19, playing on more than 300 recreational and five competitive teams. The Atlantic Soccer Club, based in the same

The Colorado Rush's U-16 girls team added a pair of Virginia-based players for a tournament in North Carolina.

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BY DAN WOOG

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"Locally, here in Colorado, we're already kind of the bad guy. We attract the best players, so other clubs have a bit of animosity toward us. We don't want it that way, but that's the nature of the beast."

— Tim Schulz,
Colorado Rush president



to Virginia. Schulz likens the move to a corporate transfer.

The merger may be the first of several. Already, a half-dozen other clubs have asked to join with the Colorado Rush. Schulz speculated that a consolidated Rush team could earn A-League, WUSA or even MLS membership.

Schulz — who is adding the title of Virginia Rush technical director to his resume — ticked off several advantages to the Colorado-Virginia merger. A grant writer can be used more efficiently, he said; corporate sponsors can achieve economies of scale; the coaching staff can have more opportunities to interact with more players, and players and coaches can benefit from exchanges.

The first exchange took place in late fall. The Colorado Rush U-16 girls team traveled to the Raleigh (N.C.) Shootout without four top players, all involved in a regional ODP event. So two Virginia Rush players were invited to join. The girls bonded quickly and added talent to the Colorado side. The Virginia coach also worked with the Colorado staff, in training and scouting.

As for the Virginia Rush, the new club gets "proven leadership," said Marcie Laumann, the East Coast organization's director of marketing and community relations. "We have affiliated with a club that has proven itself time and time again in both the coaching and administrative branches. Their system of development works. We get 21 years of soccer coaching and management experience with Tim Schulz — everything from the national team level down the ranks — and that's not too shabby. The Rush way has proven that the game is bigger than any one of us. It transcends the politics of youth soccer, and exemplifies just how far you can go when you put petty differences aside."

Schulz acknowledged several potential pitfalls. For example, maintaining and controlling the Rush "brand identity" may be difficult.

"This isn't like two local clubs joining forces," he noted. "The Colorado Rush is a well-run, professional organization. We can't afford to miss a beat."

To maintain quality, the Colorado Rush

immediately replaced Dengerink with a pair of noted coaches: Rapids assistant Paul Bravo and former national team player Steve Trittschuh, most recently with the Tampa Bay Black Watch. Schulz also cautioned against the Rush adding too many clubs too quickly.

Schulz claims that there was no opposition to the merger from the Colorado Rush board.

"They're forward-thinking pioneers," he said. "They always like to take on exciting new challenges."

Virginia was a different story, he acknowledged.

"Other local clubs are concerned about their own identity," said Schulz. "We addressed that by inviting everyone within a 60-mile radius to join us. Some are coming on board, and others are keeping an eye on things. This is free enterprise. It helps our country grow if a good

Colorado Rush teams have won 10 national championships, with its U-19 team (in white) capturing a title in 2001.

product is out there, because competitors have to work to keep up."

Schulz said that while state and regional ODP players in Virginia are excited about the new Rush club, the impact out west has been minimal.

"Locally, here in Colorado, we're already kind of the bad guy," he said. "We attract the best players, so other clubs have a bit of animosity toward us. We don't want it that way, but that's the nature of the beast."

Other areas of the country, he said, have shown great interest in the merger. Club administrators and college coaches have applauded the Colorado Rush for taking their club to a new level, Schulz said.

Looking ahead four or five years, he foresees the possibility of a Colorado Rush-affiliated club in every USSF region. In fact, he said, the Rush is talking with a club in Texas. That news is bound to make youth soccer leaders applaud — or shiver. ■



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