

Close to the vest

An entire first round of Project-40 picks? It seems unlikely, but if it ever were to happen, this would be the year.

The 2003 Draft is the most difficult to predict in recent years. The talent available is short on blue-chip prospects, but deep — especially in protected players. Heading into the Jan. 17 draft in Kansas City, MLS had inked 11 players to Project-40 contracts and was still considering more.

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The trickle-down effect of contraction will probably impact this year's draft even more than it did last year's, when the wounds were still fresh. Now that teams have had an entire season to incorporate the Tampa and Miami castoffs and streamline their rosters into 18 essential players, spots for newcomers are very scarce.

Two factors, however, work in draftees' favor. Most MLS teams are also struggling to meet their salary budget, so replacing "overpaid" veterans with inexpensive youngsters will happen. Chicago trading Dema Kovalenko to D.C. United for 18-year-old Justin Mapp underlined the value of Project-40 players.

The number of "developmental" roster spots has been expanded from four to six for each team. These players will earn about \$850 a month. For the first time, second-year players are also eligible for developmental con-

tracts at a slightly higher salary than rookies.

D.C. United sat in the driver's seat holding the No. 1 and No. 5 picks overall. United coach Ray Hudson was keeping things murky by leaking mixed reviews about Virginia striker Alecko Eskandarian, considered by many to be the top player available. Other teams are following suit.

"I think what you're seeing this year is teams really refusing to show their hand," MetroStars coach Bob Bradley said. "The players out there are so even that nobody wants to give away who's their favorite."

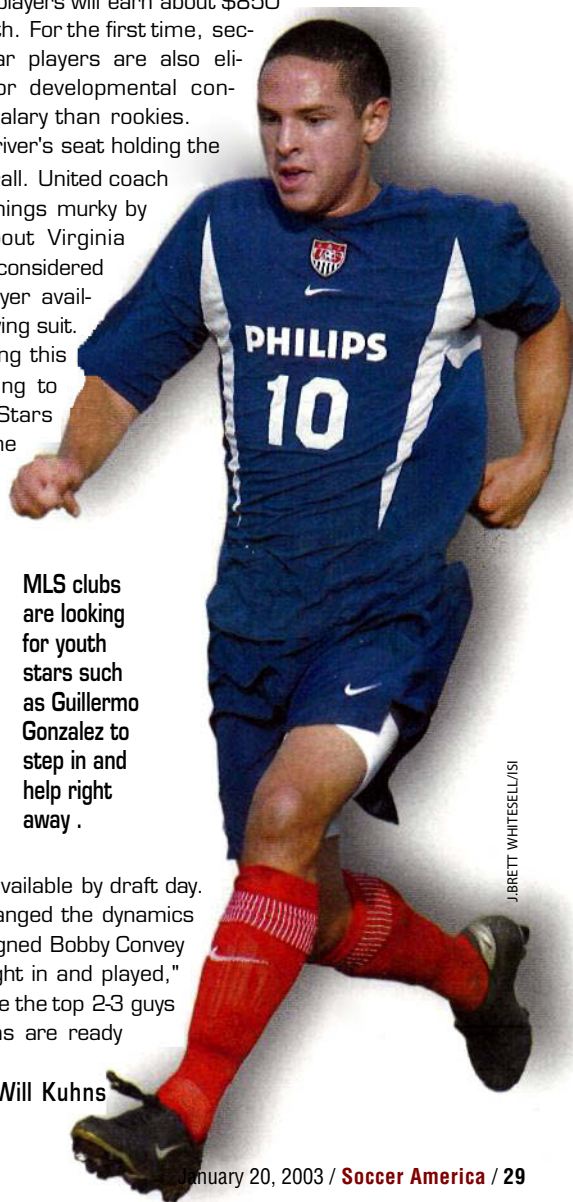
Another major change this year is that no players from the United Soccer Leagues will be available. The agreement between the leagues has expired.

Todd Durbin, MLS senior vice president for player personnel, said the league might have as many as 14 Project-40 players available by draft day.

"The thing that really changed the dynamics of the draft was when we signed Bobby Convey [in 2000], and he came right in and played," Durbin said. "Now it looks like the top 2-3 guys on our youth national teams are ready to step in."

MLS clubs are looking for youth stars such as Guillermo Gonzalez to step in and help right away.

— Will Kuhns



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