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Guest Comment

The Magic City needs a pro soccer team

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As Birmingham basks in the glow of another successful Team USA event at Legion Field, the Women's recent 6-0 drubbing of England, it's time to take a long, hard look at bringing professional soccer to the area, a move that would enhance our city's vitality, attractiveness and national exposure.

Birmingham has just as much chance as any city in America to attract a Major League Soccer (or a USL or WUSA) team. But if we "choke," we will miss a golden opportunity to add another jewel to the area's growing array of high-profile sporting attractions.

The timing is right; there is a definite buzz about soccer in the United States.

America's grassroots participation in the sport is finally translating into a viable, sustainable fan base.

Is bringing pro soccer to Birmingham feasible? In theory, at least, yes.

MLS is a baby among pro sport leagues. But now in its eighth season, with all vital signs looking increasingly healthy - attendance, the rise of soccer-specific stadiums and all-important TV contracts - it's safe to say America's top professional soccer circuit is not a flight risk like the short-lived XFL, especially in light of the fantastically deep pockets and sports-business savvy of the league's principal backers, Philip Anschutz and Lamar Hunt.

And MLS is interested in doing business. With a goal of effectively doubling to 20 teams by the next decade, the league unequivocally has stated that it will entertain qualified offers from bidders in markets large and small.

Houston, Philadelphia and Seattle currently are vying for one of two new teams that will be added in 2005. Also seeking expansion clubs are Tulsa, Okla., and Rochester, N.Y. - cities comparable in size to Birmingham.

Columbus, Ohio, a city, like Birmingham, with no major pro sports tradition, was one of the inaugural MLS franchises. Landing the already profitable Columbus Crew has been credited for luring a National Hockey League team to the city.

The price of an MLS team? Ten million dollars - a bargain compared to the going rate for a pro

football, baseball or basketball franchise. And while snaring a pro franchise in one of the traditional big four leagues would represent "catching up" for Birmingham, bringing a pro soccer team to the area, in a symbolic sense, would help the city move forward, given the sport's brand image of being progressive, international and modern.

Can we sustain an MLS operation? Yes, if one looks at the city's economic power according to a recent study published by American City Business Journals, parent company of the Birmingham Business Journal. The study examined 172 markets for their ability to support various types of professional sports teams.

The ACBJ analysis placed Birmingham on an even footing with Houston, Portland and San Diego as a potential home for an MLS soccer club. The study also ranked Birmingham as an equal to Southeastern cities, including Atlanta, Nashville, Richmond and Charlotte, all of which already have United Soccer Leagues teams. The USL is equivalent to baseball's minor league system.

Birmingham has proved it can attract 25,000 fans to watch a Men's National Team event, and the USA-England women's match drew more than 12,000. Those numbers are roughly double the national average.

A home for a professional soccer team is a must, of course, and MLS is keen on eventually having soccer-specific stadiums for all of its clubs.

In the short term, however, the league would be agreeable to using Legion Field, which is rated one of the finest soccer pitches in the world.

And the sport has strong veins of support that reach across the state, primarily from its college teams.

UAB has built fine NCAA Division I men's and women's programs. Birmingham-Southern College's men's and women's programs gained NAIA prominence before recently moving over to the NCAA. Auburn University-Montgomery and the University of Mobile both finished in the Top 10 of the NAIA's final NSCAA/Adidas 2002 rankings. The University of Alabama at Huntsville regularly ranks among the top regional NCAA Division II teams.

Birmingham also spawns talent, most notably rising women's national team star Katherine Reddick, a Briarwood Christian School product. Does Mia Hamm ring a bell? She was born in Selma.

We need to survey the Birmingham and Alabama soccer communities, corporate and municipal interests and the general populace. With those results, it shouldn't be too hard to convince MLS or the USL to stage exhibition matches in a test-marketing exercise.

Last year, in the run-up to the USA-Ecuador match at Legion Field, local media began to tout Birmingham as "the soccer capital of the South."

And doesn't the soccer capital of the South deserve a pro team? We sure think so.

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champions. He can be reached at russell@wilhite-richey.com. Lorrin Etko-Shepherd is director of client services and strategy at Marketry Inc., a Birmingham-based research firm. She is former head coach of women's soccer at Birmingham-Southern College. She can be reached at les@marketryinc.com.