

Culture, International Players and the MLS



Helping International Players Adjust and Succeed in Major League Soccer

by: **Kari Heistad**, CEO, Culture Coach International

Cultural neglect is costing MLS teams millions of dollars a year in players who are not successful with their teams. My analysis of 18 MLS teams (Portland was not included) shows that while international players make up a sizable portion of the team rosters, their retention rate* of 51% between 2012 and 2013 on the same team is 21% lower than US players at 72% and 65% for Canadian players.

2012 Season

Total # of players on 2012 pre-season rosters: 495

US players	298	High Salary (400k+)	4 (1% of American players)
Canadian players	19	High Salary (400k+)	2 (11% of Canadian players)
International players	178	High Salary (400k+)	11 (6% of international players)

Retention to same team for 2013 (as of 2/1/13) preseason roster: 316 or 63% retention rate overall

US players	72%	High Salary (400k+)	50%
Canadian players	65%	High Salary (400k+)	50%
International players	51%	High Salary (400k+)	73%

There are many reasons why the retention rates of international players may be lower than domestic players. It may be harder to scout them so they are more of an unknown, players may not adjust well to the style of play in the MLS or they may not adjust well to the coaching style of their team. On the other hand, given the fact that MLS teams are recruiting from the entire world, the argument could be made that as these players come from a larger talent pool, teams should be able to draw from a high level of talent that should be able to overcome these challenges.

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Without a minute analysis of the talent levels of all of the international players, there is one area that can account for at least some of the lack of success of these international players in MLS teams and that is cultural adjustment. Soccer is as much a mental game as it is physical game. A player can be game ready and have all the skills in the world, but if mentally he is not in the right space or he fails to adjust, all of that talent and preparation is for naught. While a player may be given a few weeks so adjust to his new team and country, his ability to adapt is often left to chance with little or no cultural assistance. Six months later with potentially hundreds of thousands spent on salary, recruitment and training he is put on a plane back home and chalked up to one who “failed to make it in MLS.”

* Retention Rate: This was determined using the team 2012 pre-season roster and comparing it to the team roster as of 2/1/2013.

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Moving to a foreign country can pose daunting challenges. From the minute the player steps off the plane, they are expected to perform at a top level in a new league, with a new team, in a new city, in a different language and with a new culture to learn. While MLS teams are now providing some level of assistance in finding housing and setting up essentials like bank accounts, I will argue that they are still not providing the level of assistance needed for the team to help the investment in their international player succeed. A small investment in additional assistance from the team could help their international players at least rise to the success levels of the Canadian players who do face cultural differences coming to the US but they are not as large as most international players coming from other parts of the world. It is vital that MLS and the teams begin to examine how to address this issue for three important reasons:

1. Return on Investment

Teams spend a great deal of time, effort and money scouting and recruiting players. When a player does not succeed with a club, the club has lost a valuable asset and it has not maximized the return on its investment.

2. MLS Brand

With MLS seeking to raise its profile in terms of its perception across the world as a high caliber league, having players who don't succeed is not helping its image.

3. Fan Experience

Fans who have invested heavily in "their" players become less engaged when those players are gone after just a few months or a season.

This article focuses on the areas of cultural adjustments that a team can make to help its international players succeed both on and off the field from scouting them in their home country through finding housing, adjusting to new food and coping with language issues. Specific tips for each area are provided in a companion article titled: *Tips for Helping International Athletes Succeed in Soccer*

Scouting

Scouting players in their home countries can lead to an unrealistic expectations of what a player can do for an MLS team. A player in their own country is typically playing with a team they know, in their own country and culture, speaking their own language and with a support structure of friends and family around them which helps them to be happy off the field and thus able to perform at their best on the field. In essence, they are in the best possible conditions. All of that changes when they are uprooted and brought to their new MLS team where they are in a new culture, with a new team, often without a support structure as they are far from family and friends. Many are also struggling with a completely new language so their ability to communicate with their coaches and teammates is very limited and their ability to settle into a new community is challenged greatly by this inability to speak the language. If they have a family, a player is also struggling with either missing them as they are back home, or worried about their happiness and ability to settle into the new country where they are often isolated due to language issues. So how to improve the chances of an international player succeeding?

Before offering an international player a contract take into account the following:

- Have they lived and played abroad before? If so, were they successful?
- Do they have any language skills (English/French)? If not, are they willing to learn? Are you

willing to provide the type of support needed to help them learn the language?

- Have they lived away from friends and family before?
- Do they have a spouse and children? If so, will they relocate with the player or will they remain at home? Are you willing to provide the support the family will need to settle in if they come with the player?
- Does the player have an outgoing, problem solving personality that will make it easier for them to make friends and to adjust to the challenges they will encounter?
- Is there a local community from the player's home country near your team that can help the player to adjust culturally?
- Why does the player want to play in the MLS? Is it because they think it is good for their career or because they really want to play in the US/Canada?
A strong desire to play in the US/Canada will help them to be more successful.



Before Their Arrival

A player will be anxious about the move to an MLS club. Providing information ahead of time that helps to allay his concerns and apprehension will assist greatly in helping him to make an easier transition. Give them information not only about the team and the other players they will be working with but also about the city and the local region.

Daily Life

Once a player arrives, their first few weeks with the team is a critical time as they settle into daily life. While it may seem like enough for the club to provide the basics like helping the person get a work permit, driver's license and a place to live, this level is not sufficient if they want the player to really be successful. Once a player has a place to sleep and transportation to get back and forth to practice, the next level of support is helping them to understand the basics of daily life.

Language

This is the largest barrier to a player's ability to adjust well. The ability to communicate with team members and coaches is absolutely critical. While watching what is going on will lead to some comprehension, verbal communication is essential to a deeper understanding of the team, the style of play and the coach's desires for the player. It is important that a team use a professional translator as much as possible instead of fellow team members who may speak the language. A teammate may not know the vocabulary or may feel awkward giving feedback to a colleague. It limits the international player's independence and his ability to seek and receive feedback from the coach directly.

Cultural Adjustment

Addressing the language barriers is the first step, the next step is helping the player to adjust to the new culture. Culture is at its essence, the values and norms of a group of people. As such, each MLS team will have its own culture and the player is adjusting to this culture at the same time they are also adjusting to the national culture of the country. People living in a culture rarely stop to think about their own culture. How things get done is just "the way things happen." But, to an outsider, this may or may not be the way things have been done in their home culture. In the US for example, there is a very direct communication style as Americans "tell it like it is." Many cultures around the world have a communication style that is much more indirect and thus, international players have to adjust to this new style of communicating. This is just one small example of the myriad of ways that culture impacts virtually every facet of our lives.

Players will also go through the five stages of culture shock as they transition. Helping players to know the stages of culture shock will enable them to anticipate it and be better prepared. It also helps them to realize that other people have gone through the same stages and been successful and this is reassuring.

Boredom

What does a player do with himself when he isn't practicing? Players often have 18 hours a day to fill and isolated in an apartment by themselves is not a great way for them to integrate into the community nor will it help them to learn the language or feel connected to their new culture. In the worse case, it can lead to depression, isolation and loneliness. Seek to link the player with local resources, people in the community and with hobbies to help him integrate into the local community.

Social Life

The life of a pro soccer player is an unusual lifestyle and not one that lends itself easily to making friends in a local community. While friendships do develop among teammates, seeing team members as being the only social safety net for players is an unwise choice. For the player, team members are the people they work with. No-one wants to spend all of their time with the people they work with, no matter how fun they are. Helping the players to make some initial contacts outside of the team through supporters groups, local community groups or through a player's hobbies will help him to adjust more quickly.

Eating and Food Preparation

Often the food that is available in their new country is not the same as in their home countries. This is both an exciting chance to try new foods and also frustrating as sometimes players just want the tastes from home. No matter what, it is an adjustment and the cheap and large quantities of fast food available might be a temptation that many find hard to resist. Needless to say, this type of food is also not a great diet for a professional athlete. Another factor that impacts their eating habits, is that many international player do not come from cultures where men do cook frequently. Thus, they may lack cooking skills and so food preparation is another transition that they need to make.

Food Allergies

If a player is adjust to not only new cultural foods, but also coping with food allergies such as glucose or lactose intolerance at the same time, this can make the very act of eating seem overwhelming. Make sure that the training facility and any hotels while on the road are alerted ahead of time so that they can prepare food that the player can eat and without having to explain 3x/day why they cannot eat what the rest of the team is eating.

Daily Life

Daily life can be time consuming and tiring if you don't know the language and the system. Helping the player to figure out these logistics will help them greatly to get over the learning curve. Figuring out how to do your laundry may seem like an easy thing to do, but if you don't speak the language and a laundromat is not in the apartment building it can be a challenge. Take time to help the player orient himself to the daily life activities he needs to do in his new community.



Groups of International Players

If the club has more than one international player on its team, it makes sense to make some activities group activities. International players can use tools like flash cards to quiz each other and help them to improve their language skills. This not only gives the international players a chance to bond better with their team mates, it also helps them to realize they are not the only person going through the cultural adjustment challenges. If the other non-international players are interested, ask for volunteers to lead a cooking demonstration or to explore a local national park during off hours.



Team Preparation

In addition to helping the player adjust, it is also important for club officials and coaching staff to familiarize themselves with at least the basics of the country and culture that the international players are from. This will help everyone to better understand the players and thus able to know how best to motivate them and coach them for peak performance. Showing a basic interest and knowledge in their country also shows the player that the club is taking an interest in who they are a person beyond the pitch.

Many of these steps are not that time consuming nor expensive to implement. With the investment of up to hundreds of thousands of dollars that a team is already making in bringing in an international player, making a small additional investment in these extra steps can help the player to adjust better and in turn give his best on the field. This in turn this will result in higher player success, team success and league success.

Author:

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