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**Women's Professional Soccer in the United States
&
Soccer in Austin: A Look into the Pub and Bar Scene**

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Report

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Abstract

Women's Professional Soccer in the United States & Soccer in Austin: A Look into the Pub and Bar Scene

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This is a two-part story looking at women's professional soccer in the United States. First, it is a look at the newly formed National Women's Soccer League. The league is the third attempt to establish a women's professional soccer league in the U.S. Low attendance, low-ticket sales, and poor team ownership spelled the end for past leagues. The United States Soccer Federation's involvement in the league has team owners and players overwhelming confident that the league will be a success. Challenges await them as the NWSL looks to learn from the mistakes of its predecessors.

The second part looks at women's professional soccer in Texas. The first audio story focuses on the Houston Aces and Lauren Prewitt. Prewitt plays semi-professional soccer for the Aces. At 30 years old, she still has dreams to play professionally. Aces owner William Brumbaugh is hoping his team can be the first women's soccer team from Texas, to play in a women's top league.

The second audio story puts a focus on the Austin Nationals and the Austin Women's Soccer League. Both are attempting to build women's soccer in Austin but are going about it different manners. Anna Villarreal is attempting to establish a team that is not as reliant on ticket sales as most teams are. Through community outreach and partnerships with local businesses she is hoping to build a team to compete in Europe come 2014.

The AWSL is a local soccer league for women that is trying to establish itself in Austin. They receive little outside support in terms of funding but president and vice president Angela Molock and Casey Gannon are hoping the changes they have brought to the league can help it grow.

The "Soccer In Austin" piece focuses on the local establishments that have given soccer fans a place to go to watch their favorite clubs on television. Fadó Irish Pub and Cuatro's have established themselves as the more popular locales when it comes to showing soccer games on television.

Others have attempted to emulate Fadó's and Cuatros' popularity but many have struggled to attract the committed fan base that have helped Fadó and Cuatro's become the go-to spots to watch a soccer game in Austin.

Aside from showing soccer matches, these places provide people who share interests to come together and interact. For those who come from soccer loving countries such as England and Ireland, these places help to remind of home. While not quite the same in every aspect, the fans have fully embraced having a place to go where they can watch a soccer match while drinking a pint and engage in some friendly banter.

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Women's Professional Soccer in the United States

“For a short time we felt like celebrities,” Kristine Lilly wrote in a journal she was keeping for Sports Illustrated just days after the United States Women's National Team defeated China 5-4 on penalties in the 1999 Women's World Cup. The win was witnessed by a crowd of more than 90,000 fans and for many marked the beginning of women's soccer here in the United States.

In a 2011 piece written for ESPN.com, David Hirshey, a journalist who has covered soccer for more than 30 years, recalled a dinner he had with Brandi Chastain in the summer of 1999 in New York City. Chastain was the goal-scorer of the penalty kick that clinched the 1999 World Cup for the United States. Paparazzi and young fans flooded the restaurant as word spread of Chastain's pending appearance. The two had to enter the establishment through the kitchen. It was the first time Hirshey had ever had to do that. As they made their way through, workers dropped their utensils to cheer and ask Chastain to sign aprons and menus.

Hirshey returned to that same restaurant 12 years later as he prepared for the start of the Women's World Cup. A confused bartender asked him what he could possibly be writing about given that the English Premier League (England's highest soccer league) season had ended. Hirshey informed the bartender of the impending start to the Women's World Cup, to which the gentleman responded, “Is the U.S. in it?”

The United States was. The Americans finished the tournament as runners-up, losing to Japan 3-1 in penalty kicks. It was the team's highest finish at a Women's World Cup since the 1999 victory.

Despite not having won the tournament in more than a decade, the United States Women's National Team has continued to thrive at the international level. The team has won three gold medals and a silver medal in the four Olympic competitions since 1999. The success internationally, however, has not been enough to sustain the sport stateside. Twice, attempts to establish a women's professional soccer league have been made and twice they have failed. On April 13, the National Women's Soccer League (NWSL) officially kicked off its inaugural season. With a new structure in place, there is an overwhelming confidence among league officials, team owners and players that the right model has finally been found.

For the first time, the United States Soccer Federation, the governing body of soccer in all its forms in the United States, is playing an active role in the operations of a women's professional soccer league. It expressed its support for past leagues but never did anything to show it. The first task it faced was finding the teams that would take part in the inaugural season.

“Ultimately we felt the best thing to do was to find the most committed, financially secured owners we could in the first year,” said Brian Remedi, chief administration officer of the USSF. “We took some measures that allowed us to investigate financial stability of the different prospective team owners. After going through that financial process we took a few more considerations into account.”

The federation was interested in finding out about team owner's business plans. It wanted to know about matters such as operating budgets and where teams expected to play their home games. Location was also taken into consideration.

Of all that were interested and applied, only eight were deemed suitable. The teams chosen were: Boston Breakers, Chicago Red Stars, Western New York Flash, Sky Blue FC, FC Kansas City, Seattle Reign FC, Portland Thorns and Washington Spirit.

The Breakers, Red Stars, Flash and Sky Blue FC have been participants of previous leagues.

The success of Major League Soccer teams, the Seattle Sounders and Portland Timbers, made the Northwest an appealing location for federation members.

The MLS is the top men's soccer league in the United States.

The Thorns are the only NWSL club to be affiliated with an MLS side (Portland Timbers). For Thorns Chief Operations Director Mike Golub, the affiliation has its advantages.

“We have an existing stadium that we control, an existing organization, professional front office that runs a soccer team. We have a sales force in place. We have a broadcast network in place, etc. etc. So we are able to start by hitting the ground running with an existing, very successful organization,” he said.

The decision appears to have been a smart one after the first game between the Thorns and Reign drew a crowd of more than 16,000. The attendance set a single-game record for a women's professional league game in the United States.

With the teams in place, it was then time to fill the rosters.

For this, the USSF sought the help of the Federación Mexicana de Fútbol Asociación, A.C., also known as the Mexican Soccer Federation, and the Canadian Soccer Association.

In January, 24 national team players from the United States and 16 from Mexico and Canada were allocated to the eight inaugural teams. Each federation agreed to pay the salaries of their respective national team players. That meant each team would not have to worry about the salaries of seven players on its roster.

“Having a financial backing from an outside entity that doesn’t come out of an owner’s pocket is a major difference for this league as compared to the last ones,” said Alyse LaHue, general manager of the Chicago Red Stars.

Salary caps have been put into place. Players will make \$6,000 to \$30,000 for the five month long season. The salaries will be based on experience and talent. The contracts will be with the league, not individual teams. It is a move that better helps the USSF ensure level competition across the league. It will also help prevent owners from overspending.

Housing caps have also been put into place. This has left teams needing to find creative housing solutions for their players. The Washington Spirit have two of their players living in a Rockville retirement community in Washington D.C. for the season. Others have found host families for the players to stay with during their time in the league.

The scaling back of front office staff and the scaling back of stadiums are the most notable examples of how clubs are trying to cut operation costs this go around.

Most clubs are playing in facilities with a maximum capacity of 4,000 to 5,000. The Boston Breakers have made the move from the 30,000 seat capacity of Harvard Stadium to Dilboy Stadium in Somerville, Mass. normally only able to hold 2,500: 1,000 more seats were added for the NWSL season.

The USSF and team owners say a much more realistic approach is being taken this time. They hope it will help the league avoid suffering the same mistakes of its failed predecessors.

Spurred by the success of the 1999 Women's World Cup, the Women's United Soccer Association was formed. It was the first attempt to establish a professional women's soccer league in the United States.

Eight inaugural teams were selected to take part. Each team was given a salary budget of \$800,000 for its 20 player rosters. National team players earned about twice as much as non-national team players.

Two of those non-national team players were Elie Foster and Trudi Sharpsteen. Drafted in 2001 by the Boston Breakers and the San Diego Spirit respectively, both left the comforts of their much higher paying jobs to pursue playing soccer professionally.

In 2001, Sports Illustrated's Grant Wahl reported that Foster's \$35,000 salary in the inaugural season of the WUSA was half of what she was making as an associate marketing manager for San Francisco based software company Moonlight Systems.

While most clubs were playing in stadiums with a capacity of less than 10,000, teams such as the Washington Freedom and Bay Area CyberRays played home games in stadiums with capacities of 56,000 and 30,000. In its first season the league averaged 8,116 fans a game.

After its first season, signs of trouble began to appear.

The league severed its original television deal with Turner Sports and agreed a two-year deal with the PAX cable channel, now known as Ion Television. But by the end of its run, the broadcasts were averaging a .1 rating--equivalent to about 110,000 viewers.

The league had spent all of its \$40 million investment in its first season. The amount was projected to last five years. Corporate sponsors were sought to help cover the revenue loss but the league failed to attract the number it needed. Unable to recoup the money it lost, the league ceased operations after just three years.

John Hendricks, chairman of the WUSA board of governors had this to say to USA

Today's Vicki Michaelis about the league's failure:

"I was intoxicated by what I witnessed in 1999, and I mistakenly believed that level of support would flow over into the league."

It was not until 2009 that another attempt would be made at establishing a women's professional soccer league. This one came in the form of Women's Professional Soccer.

The WPS took steps that mirrored some of those that had been taken by the NWSL.

The WPS began its first season with seven teams and decided to limit team's salary caps to \$565,000. As part of the agreement, national team players were guaranteed at least a \$40,000 salary for the season.

Teams such as the Washington Freedom moved to smaller stadiums to help lessen some of the operating costs.

The league exceeded expectations in its first season. The average attendance was 5,361 and the games were averaging 32,000 households over 12 weekly telecasts on Fox Soccer Channel.

But like the league before it, the WPS soon began to experience trouble after just one season. The Los Angeles Sol became the first club to cease operations. At the time, the Sol were averaging a league-high 6,985 fans a game. Underfunded and not meeting the owner's attendance goals, the Sol folded after AEG were unsuccessful in finding a new owner.

Despite the loss, the league decided to add the expansion clubs Atlanta Beat and Philadelphia Independence to the league in 2010.

Natalie Smith, a doctoral student at the University of Texas-Austin, served as the operations manager for Sky Blue FC in its inaugural season of the WPS.

She left after just one season to attend graduate school but admits she would have been laid off. The letting go would not have been because she was bad at her job but because of cutbacks the club was going to have to make. She attributes the slow downfall of the league to the Los Angeles Sol folding after just one season. Uneasiness is created whenever one team folds, she said.

Just four games into the season, the Saint Louis Athletica became the second team to shut down. Owner Jeff Cooper was unable to find a willing buyer or collect the necessary funds to keep the team alive. The WPS considered taking over the club on a temporary basis until a new owner was found. But due to financial and operational issues of its own, it was not able to do so.

By the third season the WPS was down to just six clubs and attendance numbers were at an all-time low. The eventual downfall of the league came in the form of Dan Borislow.

Borislow is probably best known as the inventor of magicJack, a device used to make phone calls across the country for a monthly rate.

He purchased a majority share in the Washington Freedom and relocated the team to Florida. The team was renamed to simply magicJack. Soon after the move, Borislow was accused of multiple league violations. He refused to market his team and failed to comply with league regulations regarding field signage, media access and game film distribution. The WPS players union soon filed a lawsuit. The league was suspended and later shut down due the financial burden of the legal proceedings. A settlement was finally reached in early 2012.

After the Borislow issue was resolved, a committee was formed to address women's soccer. Those associated with the NWSL are convinced the proper structure has been put into place to avoid making the same mistakes that doomed previous leagues.

“People keep asking why are things going to be different this time and the answer is because it is different,” said Chris Hummer, general manager of the Washington Spirit wrote in an e-mail.

Hummer is right. It is different. Never before has a sports federation had such a financial stake in a league.

Ticket sales and getting people to attend games are first and foremost the most important things for these teams. One of the problems with the previous leagues was their inability to keep fans coming back. The NWSL hopes having national team players such as Alex Morgan, Shannon Boxx and Abby Wambach will be a big help in attracting fans.

Chicago Red Stars General Manager Alyse LaHue said having national team players from other countries playing in the league will hopefully attract a wider fan base.

“Being in a place like Chicago with a large Mexican population, we’re able to expose ourselves to a demographic that really didn’t pay attention because they had no one to relate to,” LaHue said.

Teams in bigger city markets such as Boston and Chicago face extra competition from other professional sports. So for them, it becomes important to provide a different fan experience. Chicago is adding a beer garden to its home stadium. Players are also made accessible after games, allowing fans to get autographs and take pictures for a more personal experience.

Return numbers on team’s season ticket sales have been promising. Renee Meier, director of sales and marketing for the Western New York Flash, reported in mid-March that the club had already sold more than 700 season tickets. The total surpassed the number of season ticket sales the team had the previous two years combined. Meier attributed the increase in sales to the allocation of Rochester native Abby Wombach to the Flash.

Other teams as the Washington Spirit and Portland Thorns have also reported an increase in season ticket sales.

The goal is to also keep people watching at home. The league struck a one-year deal with Fox Sports Media Group.

"The agreement with the NWSL showcases our support of women’s soccer and the growing popularity it’s experiencing in the country," said David Nathanson, general manager of FOX Soccer in a press release. "We are excited to be the network home for

the sport's top level players, many of whom will be featured on FOX Sports at the 2015 FIFA Women's World Cup."

Nine games will be broadcast live on Fox Soccer Channel. Six will be shown every week leading up to the playoffs. Once the postseason begins, the two semifinal games along with the final will be broadcast live.

In addition to broadcasting games on television, fans will also be able to stream all NWSL games online. Games will be available through the league's YouTube channel. Teams will also stream games via their websites with some charging a minimal fee.

"The opportunity to highlight the race for the playoffs and the three biggest games of the season that will decide the first league champion on national television is important for the growth of the league," said Cheryl Bailey, executive director of the NWSL. "Our fans will get the chance to see the high caliber of women's soccer, and we also hope to create many new fans who will appreciate the amazing athletes and personalities in the league." FC Kansas City has already agreed to a deal with a local television affiliate to broadcast all eight of the team's home games.

The television deal indicates another change in direction the league is taking with the NWSL. The one-year deal allows for the league to be seen in thousands of homes while being a low risk, high reward situation for FMSG.

Steve Wille, a former vice president of marketing and brand development for the Sacramento Kings of the NBA, said he believes the league must attract the male audience more than any other if they are to be successful.

“Success of women’s sports is to have good sports played well and competitively but that captures male audience by embracing the component of attractiveness,” he said. “It may sound sexist but I don’t care, I’m a marketing guy. What they found in the Ladies Professional Golf Association (LPGA) is ‘Wow! Attractiveness matters.’”

Interest in women’s soccer has been helped by the likes of Hope Solo and Alex Morgan. Both have been featured in ESPN the Magazine spreads. Most notably, Solo appeared semi-nude in the magazine’s 2011 Body Issue. The exposure to American sports fans through that magazine has helped the two grow in popularity.

As a result of the multiple spending caps being enforced by the NWSL, teams are being forced to work with little or no marketing budget. Thus, it becomes more important that teams use other tools.

The rise of social media sites such as Facebook and Twitter provide teams with a new way of interacting with fans. Kansas City native Scott Lewis has launched NWSLnews.com. The website’s slogan is “By the fans, for fans.”

The contributors are simply fans of the sport and the league. The team provides people with up-to-date information about anything going on in the league through the website and Twitter. The website does not have any direct affiliation with the league. But the effort being made is an example of how excited people are about the NWSL.

The league will look to partner with local youth soccer clubs to help build and maintain a fan base. Player appearances will be made and autographs will be signed but where the difference will be made is in the impact the players have on the young girls.

In 2008, the Women's Sports Federation conducted an extensive study on youth sports in the United States. 'Go Out and Play: Youth Sports in America' looked at participation levels and factors that affected participation. Race, parent's income, parent's marital status and where the children lived were just a few of the items studied.

At the time of the study, 69 percent of the girls surveyed were active or had participated in a sports activity in the last 12 months.

The troublesome finding is that on average girls are starting sports almost a year later than boys and are dropping out of sports sooner and in greater numbers than boys.

(In the study, the term "dropout" was defined as girls dropping out of sports, not school.)

To look at dropout rates the study compared more than 300 elementary, middle school and high school female students from urban, suburban and rural communities.

The study found that the highest dropout rates came from students in urban communities.

The rates went from 4 percent for those in third to fifth grade to 24 percent for sixth to eighth graders. The study also found a steady six percent dropout rate from elementary to middle school for children from suburban communities. The rate then increased to 25 percent once high school was reached.

But of that group of girls, just more than a third were participating in traditional sports.

Traditional sports referred to soccer, softball and basketball among others. The other two-thirds were almost evenly split between recreational and emerging sports. Activities such as camping, boating and swimming were considered to be recreational while dance, cheerleading and gymnastics were deemed to be emerging.

What those results show is that girls participating in sports have many more options to choose from than the traditional sports of soccer, softball, and basketball. The promising sign for NWSL teams is that as the girls approach high school, there is a hike in the participation of traditional sports for those still participating.

The National Federation of State High School Association reported for the 2006-2007 school year the number of girls playing sports in high school exceeded 3 million for the first time.

For the student-athletes that will play soccer in college after high school, the existence of the NWSL now provides them with a chance to play professionally in the United States. A popular decision among young female soccer players is to go overseas to work and play.

The new structure has the NWSL feeling confident that players will choose to stay in the United States instead of going overseas.

“U.S. soccer came on and realized that it’s important for their players to have a league at home to play in as opposed to having to go abroad and play in leagues that are questionable in quality shall we say,” said Alyse LaHue, general manager of the Chicago Red Stars.

What remains to be seen is whether players will continue to go overseas during the NWSL’s offseason. In order to earn more money, players in the past have gone to play in other leagues. It is a practice shared by players in the WNBA.

Compared to their male counterparts in the MLS, NWSL players will be earning far less. The lowest pay for a player in the NWSL will be \$6,000. The lowest earning MLS players will earn \$33,750 this season.

Finding new sponsors and entities to invest in the clubs and the NWSL will be a crucial component to the league's survival. From a league perspective, the USSF's involvement is doing its part.

"U.S. soccer has committed a great deal in terms of legal staff, financial staff, communications staff, events staff, marketing and promotion staff and so that's allowed us to have people that are already in place to be able to go out and work with contacts that we've had," said Cheryl Bailey, executive director of the NWSL.

From a team perspective, most have been able to maintain healthy relationships with the local businesses they worked with in previous leagues. Attracting new sponsors is near the top of every team's goals for the season. Specifically, building relationships with companies or people who can help in any way to reduce certain team expenses.

Local Subway restaurants provide the Western New York Flash with food for players. Hendrick Buick GMC Cadillac in Kansas City, MO is the "official automotive sponsor" of FC Kansas City.

While no one can accurately predict exactly how well the league will do, the fear of failure is in the back of some people's minds.

"I think if this one doesn't work out then it's going to be done for a long time," said Ella Masar, striker for the Chicago Red Stars.

Natalie Smith, the former Operations Manager for Sky Blue FC hopes the league is a success. She admits that the league may not the immediate results American sports fans are used to.

“It’s going to be a constant, steady, ugly growth which Americans don’t like,” she said.

If the NWSL proves to be successful the doors open for expansion. Traditional sports towns such as Los Angeles and Miami were overlooked this go around for not meeting the financial stability criteria set forth by the USSF. Steve Wille, former vice-president of marketing and brand development of the Sacramento Kings, suggests the league take the route of minor league baseball when it comes to expansion. Wille believes that teams will thrive in smaller market cities where there is less competition.

But that road will be crossed when the time comes.

Most involved are cautiously optimistic that the league will succeed. They know high hopes were held with the previous leagues only to be disappointed, but many finally feel that the right structure has been put into place.

“The league will show the amount of talent that will be competing will be second to none. There will be no other league in the world that could put out quite the same amount of talent the NWSL will this year,” said Lee Billiard, general manager of the Boston Breakers.

As for Remedi, the chief administration officer of the USSF, he said he understands the risk the USSF has taken in investing so much into the NWSL. The goal is to grow and he’s confident if they stick to the plan, that’s exactly what will happen.

“We’re just trying to build a stable house here and doing it one brick at a time,” he said.

Update

The Portland Thorns defeated the Western New York Flash 2-0, to be crowned NWSL champions in the league's inaugural season. The match was attended by more than 9,100 people.

Soccer in Austin: A Look into the Pub and Bar Scene

Glory, glory Man United. Glory, glory Man United. Glory, glory Man United as the Reds go marching on, on, on! United! (Clap of the hands) United! (Clap of the hands).

The traditional chant sung by supporters of Manchester United after a victory rings out from half the patrons in Fadó Irish Pub in Austin, Texas. The Liverpool supporters who occupy the other half sit silently and are left frustrated as the team is held to a 0-0 draw against fellow Premier League club, Stoke City.

The turnout on this Sunday morning in October is typical for the pub. A wave of devilish red soccer jerseys fill the dimly lit, cave-like interior that is Fadó. Manchester United and Liverpool supporters account for the majority of the crowd but scattered throughout are the brave few wearing opposing colors. Then there are those huddled in the corners, purposely sitting away from the television. Those are the same people who come for the ambience and to enjoy a hangover sandwich or all day breakfast from Fadó's Irish themed brunch menu.

For fans in England, the act of catching a soccer (or as they would call it "football") match at their local pub is one they've been accustomed to for decades. Go back a few years, and the notion of Americans waking up at 6 a.m. to watch a European soccer game at a pub downtown would be deemed ludicrous or unimaginable especially in the American football-loving state of Texas.

While football remains king in terms of television viewers, the television rights for soccer matches, specifically those for the major European leagues such as England's Premier

League and Spain's La Liga have become a hot commodity. Major television networks such as ESPN, Fox Sports and NBC now enter bidding wars in hopes of being able to gain the television rights to these leagues. NBC recently won the American television rights to the English Premier League with a three-year \$250 million bid. The deal is the largest soccer television deal in history. Twenty-two games into the season NBC Sports Network averaged 391,000 viewers a match. That is 70 percent better than the average viewership held by Fox Soccer last year.

In Austin, places such as Fadó, Cuatro's and others have been paying attention to the growing popularity of the sport. During the 2012 UEFA European Championships, Austin averaged a 1.2 rating for the 28 group stage matches. That means an average of more than 1.1 million households were tuned in to watch the matches. The rating tied Austin with San Francisco, Calif., Richmond, Va., and Atlanta, Ga., for the sixth-highest in the country.

For many in Austin, the act of watching soccer goes well beyond TV ratings – and even the household. It's about pubs, where the soccer-viewing culture in an American football state endures. It hasn't been easy. It hasn't been smooth. But it remains as testament to the spirit of futbol fanatics.

An Introduction

Eric Russell, 42, a manager at Fadó Austin, has been with the company for 15 years.

Bearing a slight resemblance to actor Michael Chiklis (*The Shield*, *Fantastic Four*) both facially and physically, Russell's demeanor is that of a person who you would not want to mess with.

He is able to recall a time when having a live Manchester United match on in the pub was a special event. Over the years, Russell has been witness to the multitude of changes to the pub.

“We had two projectors in the pub,” he said. “Two pull-screen projectors—the screen, archaic with the big light bulb—so that was it. We wanted to maintain the pub atmosphere but not have a TV everywhere, so that’s all we did.”

As word spread of a place on Fourth Street opening its doors in the early morning that soccer fans could catch live soccer matches, interest from the local soccer community began to grow. Presented with an opportunity to set itself apart, Fadó made the decision to “modernize” the pub.

“We just bit the bullet and crossed over into the AV world,” Russell said. “Over the years we added another projector, then we added one TV—a TV in the pub, holy crap that was huge.”

The pub now has the ability to have 15 televisions going at one time if the occasion called for it.

As Fadó grew in popularity it actually played a role in Cuatro’s decision to show soccer matches.

Cuatro Kowalski opened Cuatro’s in 2008 with the intention of it being, for all intents and purposes, an average bar. Nestled within walking distance of the University of Texas at Austin, he wanted it to be a place where people could grab a drink, grub on some food and maybe take in a game.

After a Manchester United-Chelsea game in which the Red Devils were victorious, Jens Busch, the president of the Austin Blues (the local Chelsea Football Club supporters group) did not take kindly to the verbal banter being shouted in his direction by the Manchester United supporters that filled Fadó.

When he heard of a new bar opening up near his workplace, Busch approached Kowalski about the possibility of opening up early and being a place where fans could regularly catch soccer games. Kowalski agreed to give it a shot.

“I ended up opening for a Chelsea game early one morning and we were inundated with fans,” Kowalski said. “We decided it was a great thing so we made a commitment to the soccer guys that we would open for them and cater to them and it’s kind of taken off since then.”

After seeing and getting a feel for Cuatro’s commitment to the club, the decision was made to make it the new home of the Austin Blues. The experience offered by Cuatro’s began to gather interest from other area soccer fans.

The Experience

A benefit of having multiple establishments that broadcast live soccer matches is that each will offer a different experience in an attempt to lure you in.

Dark, cramped and loud Fadó offers the environment that most resembles an English pub.

Daniel Dillon, 36, or “The Captain” as he is known at Fadó has been frequenting the establishment for nine years. The scruffy bearded Irishman and Capitol Beer distributor truck driver said Fadó is the only place to catch a game.

“They open up and we hang up our banners,” he said. “The service is always spot on. I glance at the bar, I’ve got another pint coming. I don’t even have to order.”

A lot more open and lit, Cuatro’s offers a much different scenery than Fadó. A pair of garage doors in the main room act as walls that can be rolled up whenever the weather permits. Outside, the large patio area is highlighted by the 16 television sets that combine to form one massive viewing screen. Large enough that someone stuck at a red light on 24th and San Gabriel streets can easily take in some the action.

“Some of the other places they kind of seem like pubs back in England,” Kowalski said. “A lot of people like that which we understand. We like to give people what we think is the U.S. soccer feel.”

As each has come up with ways to set themselves apart there is one common element they share. Come game day, each will house opposing fans of some of the bitterest rivals in the sport. The most notable example is how many of the places are at full capacity for “El Clasico” between Barcelona and Real Madrid. The teams are the top teams in Spain’s first division and regardless the occasion, a match between these two teams is never taken lightly.

Fans of the opposing sides would never be able to occupy a pub or bar together in Europe. Pubs affiliate with one club only. Those brave enough to step foot into the pub of a rival are not likely to come out unscathed.

While the pub experience in Austin differs from what European fans are accustomed to back home there seems to be a consensus about why they enjoy coming.

The notion of having supporters from rival clubs watching games in the same pub is something that would never work in England, said Phil Harding, a London native and longtime West Ham United supporter. He has been catching games at Fadó for more than 10 years.

“If this happened in England, it would end up in fights,” Harding said. “They would not be mingling together and drinking even after the match so this is great.”

Arthur Markman, a psychology professor at the University of Texas at Austin offered an explanation into why rival fans can get along without conflict.

There is no hometown connection or pride with a European club. The choice to support a specific team can stem from liking a specific player or liking the team’s style of play.

It is different in Europe.

“Soccer in Europe still has a lot of the local flavor to it,” Markman said.

For many in Europe the team you will support for the rest of life is often decided well before birth. If born in Manchester you are either a blue or a red. Born on the blue side you are a Manchester City supporter. Grow up on the red side and you are a Manchester United supporter.

“My granddad is a massive United fan,” Dillon said. “He’d drown in me the Shannon if I didn’t support United.”

The River Shannon is the largest river in Ireland.

Markman said European fans are very similar to college football fans in big college towns. Just as Austin is painted in burnt orange on Saturdays during the fall, towns and cities across Europe are covered with the home team’s colors. Fans fill the streets while

making their way to the stadium. They stop at pubs along the way holding every note of the chants they sing.

“Finding a group of people that gets together that are all fans of the same team many of whom may have also grown up in the same region puts you back into that community for a while,” Markman the University of Texas psychology professor, said.

Markman added that every once in a while it’s kind of nice to be in groups of people that you don’t have to explain yourself to.

While these pubs allow supporters to enjoy their teams without having to spend an entire paycheck to see the match in person, fans agree that there is no substitute for the real deal.

“There’s no comparison,” West Ham supporter Phil Harding said. “If you go as a West Ham fan to Old Trafford (Manchester United’s home stadium) and you’re in that 3,000 people wedge, you can’t even hear the Man United fans because as an away fan you’re making so much noise. In a pub you can chitchat we can all be friends together because we love the game otherwise we wouldn’t be here. At a match it’s more than the game. It’s an institution. That’s the difference.”

The Others and Their Struggles

As restaurants and bars began to take notice of the potential business soccer games could generate, many made the attempt to give it a go. They soon found out that it was not as easy just opening the doors in the morning.

Mister Tramps’s owner Alfredo Cedrone always intended for his bar to be a soccer bar. Highlighted by his full head of black hair and his salt and peppered Groucho Marx

mustache, the Italian owner of Mister Tramps spared no feelings when discussing his dislike of American sports.

“Soccer is the only sport to me that matters,” he said.

Mister Tramps features a back room with the floor painted green and white lines making it resemble a pitch. Massive projector screens cover three of the four walls so that anyway you turn, you have a view of the game. Cedrone created the room to provide fans with a stadium feel as they watched their clubs.

Another bar owner who has had trouble attracting a steady soccer fan base has been Keith Sandel, owner of Black Sheep Lodge.

For Sandel reality did not meet expectations after the 2010 FIFA World Cup. Sandel said he felt Black Sheep Lodge, with its pub-like atmosphere, could appeal to the strongest of soccer fans.

“I thought we’d be able to snowball that right away and to being able to open at 6 a.m. for the EPL (English Premier League) games,” he said. “It didn’t quite workout.”

Without an established supporters group to call Black Sheep Lodge their home, the plan to show soccer games on a regular basis was put on hold. He understands that fans are just as loyal to their pubs and bars as they are to their favorite club.

“I’ve found it’s more of a process than it is just you need to come over for this, this and this and that kind of thing,” he said.

The lack of a loyal fan base is also the reason why both Mister Tramps and Black Sheep Lodge cannot open earlier. Opening at 11 a.m. Sandel is only able to show the late game that usually takes place at 11:30 a.m on Saturdays.

The time difference also played a role in another establishment's inability to gain repeat customers. Ringers succeeded in briefly luring a few fans away from Fadó early on but the time difference between the U.S. and England proved too difficult for Ringers to deal with. A six-hour time difference between England and Austin means that matches often start as early as 7:00 a.m.

"It's not one of those situations where you just open the door at 6:45 a.m.," Fadó manager Eric Russell said referring to Ringers' attempt to emulate Fadó. "The TV's have to be cued up, the sound's gotta be going, the coffee's gotta be made, the kitchen's gotta be rolling, and the servers have to be dressed and ready to go."

Not Just an Austin Thing

Places all over the country have opened their doors to the game. Nevada Smiths, located in the East Village of New York, has grown to be one of the more popular spots in the city. It employs 10 security officers to help deal with the crowds of hundreds that gather on a weekly basis.

Current owner Paddy McCarthy bought the then rat-infested building in 1993. The broke Irish drummer had made his way to the US from Ireland in 1982 and held different jobs before Nevada Smiths.

A massive Manchester United supporter, he has done his best to provide patrons with the best possible soccer watching experience. As people enter, they must make their way through a tunnel lined by framed signed jerseys from clubs and national teams from all over the world. In most European leagues, players make their way onto the field by walking through a tunnel. Paddy wished to give his customers a similar experience.

At the end of the tunnel, sits the main bar and viewing area. Here, viewers can enjoy a match on the 80-inch projector screen that serves as the room's focal point. Despite his loyalty being with Manchester United he does not want people to think that Nevada Smiths is solely a pub for Red Devil supporters.

"It's everyone's bar," McCarthy said. "I don't want it to be labeled."

In Bay View, Wis., Joseph "Joe" Katz, 40, has provided the soccer faithful of the north with The Highbury. Originally purchased with the intention of opening a tile, art studio for his sister, the Highbury has served as a soccer bar since 2004.

Because it shared the name of the former home stadium of English soccer club Arsenal, supporters of rival clubs were turned off by the name at first. But as time passed, fans of different clubs have made The Highbury home. There are people who even make the 90-mile drive from Chicago to catch a match at Katz's bar.

Katz has also used the popularity of the pub to help out the local soccer community.

Every year the regulars of The Highbury compete in skills challenge against the regulars of another bar in the area, The Three Lions Pub. All of the funds raised go to helping buy soccer balls for inner city kids.

"I've opened a bunch of bars and you can point the bar in a certain direction but you really can't tell it what to do," Katz said. "The neighborhood will tell you what it wants."

Room For Growth

"The pubs have got to take the initiative," West Ham supporter Phil Harding said.

"They've got to get a fan base there. You need to have a pub or owner or franchise which gets behind the teams and the sport will grow from there."

For Fadó's Eric Russell and Cuatro's Cuatro Kowalski, the success they have achieved so far has been in big part because of the dedication each shows to his loyal contingency.

"Your job is to come in, sit down, watch the game. Leave your work behind, don't worry about anything else, enjoy your game," Russell said.

"We made a commitment to them (Austin Blues) that we would open every morning that there was an early game for them if they would make a commitment to us to show up and they did," Kowalski said. "We kept our end of the bargain."

As the sport continues to grow, so will the demand for places to carry games. Alamo Drafthouse and Jackalope's are two of the newer players in the game. The loyal following Fadó, Cuatro's and the others have established will leave others playing catch up. The challenge will be to keep their respective contingency happy. Many have increased their social media presence and reward customers with daily specials.

A goal of every one of these establishments is to broaden the soccer coverage they offer to help draw in as many soccer fans as possible. All are hoping to carry more games from the Bundesliga of Germany and Serie A of Italy.

All are aware of the competition they face with each other but the owners and fans have a mutual respect for each other and for the game. No one is claiming to be better than anyone else and the goal is never to outdo each other. Each place hopes to provide unique experiences that will satisfy any soccer fan.

"Everybody gets along," Russell said. "I respect the fact that Cuatro's does what they do. They respect the game as much as we do. There's plenty of it to go around for everybody. There's no reason to be uncool. I don't speak singularly; we all feel the same way."

APPENDIX A

1. The Houston Aces: An Audio Story
2. Women's Professional Soccer in Austin: An Audio Story

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