



ST. LOUIS CLOSE TO GETTING FOOTBALL BACK?

By DINO COSTA

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-St. Louis

Today the city of St. Louis moved one step closer to bringing football back to the Gateway City.

Unfortunately, it's the wrong kind of football and it will do little to raise the spirits of the local sports citizenry.

Today the board of Alderman's approved a plan to develop a soccer-specific stadium west of Union Station along Market Street that would house a new Major League Soccer expansion franchise. Major League Soccer is expected to announce additional expansion franchises in the next few months ahead and St. Louis is thought to have a great chance at being one of those new cities in MLS.

St. Louis has always been thought of as an American soccer hotbed going back to the early 1900's when the

St. Louis Soccer League was the country's first and only professional soccer circuit back in those days. In addition, the city previously had a team in the late North American Soccer League from 1967-77, with the St. Louis Stars, which featured many local St. Louisians and played against teams like the New York Cosmos and some guy who goes by the name of 'Pele', before the club eventually left town and moved to California where they were rebranded as the Surf.

Indoor soccer, a bastardized version of the game, also had a time and place in the city, when the St. Louis Steamers played from 1978 through 1988 and actually enjoyed some terrific support. From 1980-84 the Steamers actually outdrew the Blues, and in 1982, they got all the way to the MISL championship round before losing to the New York Arrows.

The Steamers eventually went away and were replaced by a second MISL team for a few years, as the St. Louis Storm, played in the league from 1989-92 before ceasing operations. A second incarnation of the Steamers emerged in 1998 and played through the 2006 season as a part of something known as the World Indoor Soccer League.



St. Louis University has obviously featured a powerhouse program for many years and their 10-NCAA championships are still a record for collegiate play.

Currently, of course, St. Louis has a pro soccer team in something known as USL, a league that is a few steps below MLS. The St. Louis Football club plays at a minor league facility located in Fenton and enjoys mild fan support while getting virtually no coverage by any of the media platforms in town.

Now, while I like soccer and have always been a fan of the game played at its highest level, and while I actually enjoy me some Major League Soccer on occasion, and while I'm not necessarily against St. Louis getting an MLS team of their own (in fact I'm all for it), on the other hand, I believe that the city is settling for a team, in a sport that very few beyond a niche audience will really care about when all is said and done.

When we talk about a professional sports franchise in any city that moves a needle, a soccer team, despite the fact that MLS has done a nice job of growing the game over the years since the league has been in existence, is simply not going to get it done.

I would imagine that this stadium that's on the drawing board will have a capacity of somewhere between 25-30,000 people — and I have no doubt that most games will be complete sellouts if the city is awarded a franchise. However, beyond the core group of soccer-crazed fans that the team will eventually have as their ardent supporters, the indisputable fact remains that the overwhelming majority of St. Louis sports fans will yawn whenever news about this team is eventually announced.

Of course, the image of the city was hurt when the Rams decided to pull out of the city a few years ago — and whenever someone mentions St. Louis in the same sentence as the NFL they are quick to note that St. Louis is the only city in America to lose a National Football League franchise — not once — but twice. Actually, when you consider that St. Louis was left at the altar back in 1995 when the NFL decided to award expansion franchises to Charlotte and Jacksonville, it may be argued that St. Louis has been jilted over football teams a total of three times.

I get that the sting of losing the NFL for a second time is still fresh in the minds of many, however, if St. Louis is ever going to be thought of as major sports city again then it simply cannot settle for some crumbs that will come with the announcement that St. Louis is getting a Major League Soccer franchise.

As much as Major League Soccer is showing signs of making an impact in terms of growing the game of soccer across the country, the unfortunate fact is that soccer in America is still thought of as minor league and nothing more.

Look it, maybe its because I have never been one to think small and I'm always prone to thinking big. Maybe its because I find myself bullish on the future of St. Louis and I want to see St. Louis become more than it is currently in regard to its sports landscape. I guess there are a number of reasons I find myself being in the position of wanting to see the city redoubling its efforts to bring an NFL team back to town and not merely settling for a niche sport like soccer.

I do know this; each and every time the NFL has left a city, the record shows that eventually the league went ahead and back filled that vacancy with another team. Will this eventually be the case here in The Lou? Only time will tell.

Where does it say that St. Louis can't have both an MLS and an NFL franchise at the same time?

Are we short on vision, short on tenacity, do we lack the gusto to pick ourselves up and make the National Football League take notice of this city again? Are we simply going to curl up into a fetal position, lick our wounds, and posture ourselves forever with a woe is us mentality? Let me get this right, St. Louis has more Fortune 500 companies than current NFL cities such as, Buffalo,

Charlotte, Jacksonville, Seattle, Cincinnati, Pittsburgh, and Nashville, yet St. Louis isn't currently in the conversation of being a viable NFL city again? This I find unacceptable, and you should find it unacceptable as well. For crying out loud, only 250 miles to our west, Kansas City has three Fortune 500 companies compared to the 10 that currently reside in St. Louis!

Stan Kroenke will forever live in infamy around these parts, but trust me a lot when I tell you that that is the last thing on Slimy Stan's mind these days. Kroenke is the ultimate opportunist, an incredible businessman, who cares nothing about feelings or sentimentality. The only thing that Slimy Stan cares about are greenbacks. Period.

It is in LA, where Slimy Stan now does his football business and it is in that city where true opportunity should be able to be had for St. Louis when you think about it.



Right now, while they call themselves the Los Angeles Chargers, they could also call themselves the Austin Chargers, or the Calgary Chargers, or the Tuskegee Chargers, or the Bermuda Chargers, over the next few weeks. They could play home games in any of the aforementioned places I mentioned over the next few weeks and maybe 4 people in Los Angeles would notice or care. Maybe.

In what was one of the worst decisions ever made (maybe the worst ever?) by a professional sports franchise, the Chargers pulled up stakes in San Diego, and instead, chose to become the tenants of Stan Kroenke in his new football palace that will open in a few years. Would you choose to be Slimy Stan's tenant?

In the interim, of course, the Chargers play their home games in a soccer stadium where empty seats as well as fans of other teams usually outnumber the amount of 6 or 7 Chargers fans in attendance each game.

The jury is still well out on whether or not Los Angeles can capably support one NFL team let alone two. The Chargers are virtually invisible in the hearts and minds of LA sports fans as well as in the minds of those in the Los Angeles sports media. The Chargers simply don't matter even a little bit in Los Angeles — and they never will.

Here is where St. Louis, in my mind, has an opportunity. Under the umbrella of visionary thinking with visionary people, St. Louis could possibly be a player so far as the future of the Chargers franchise is concerned and where they wind up long-term.

The Chargers current predicament of being an invisible team in a town that doesn't want them is compounded by being subservient to the same Slimy Stan Kroenke who uprooted the Rams and took them back to the west coast. The lease they've signed up for playing in Slimy Stan's new gazillion dollar playpen is onerous and then some. I also believe that Slimy Stan is absolutely dying to see a situation materialize such as the one I am outlining that sees the Chargers leave Los Angeles for St. Louis or any other outpost in the country come to fruition. Kroenke doesn't play well with others, and instinct tells me he wants Los Angeles all to himself – why wouldn't he?

And so, enter St. Louis back into the picture.

I speak about the right people involved in this brazen attempt to lure the NFL back to town. People with the better interests of St. Louis in mind. Such people should be able to convince Chargers brass that the worst day here in the midwest truly beats the shit out of being the Los Angeles Chargers on most sunny day in the history of Los Angeles, and at the end of the day, Chargers brass (the Spanos family) gets a more than nice financial reward for their proactive participation in returning the NFL to St. Louis.

The value of the Chargers franchise has grown by millions with the shift of the franchise to Los Angeles, however, the irrelevance of the team in a market where they don't matter even a little bit stunts their growth and limits their revenue generating ability by a lot, both short and long-term. The NFL and the Chargers current owner, Dean Spanos, have to be well aware of this. The St. Louis Chargers?

No, in fact, St. Louis should want nothing to do with adopting the name of this club if it ever relocated here and St. Louis shouldn't be thinking about purchasing a Los Angeles based club, but rather, a St. Louis based operation which would decrease the cost of that purchase by millions of dollars.

How?

Well, you're gonna need people with huge balls to pull off the maneuver I have in mind, you're gonna need people with steel nerves, people who won't take no for an answer no matter how many times they may have the telephone hung up on them, and people who can navigate around the complex issues that will come with such an ambitious acquisition.

In my plan, a deal should be consummated where a minority share of the Chargers are bought by St. Louis interests. The club is then moved to St. Louis where they then rebrand under a new moniker, with the St. Louis ownership contingent having the option to purchase the team and with the local St. Louis interests eventually winding up with 100% of the franchise.

For instance, Dean Spanos moves the club to St. Louis and owns majority share of the team for a period of anywhere from 5-7 years under a stipulation that allows local St. Louis interests to purchase the club sometime within that window.

Spanos is then forever hailed as a hero to the people of The Lou for moving the team here and then turning over interest of the franchise to local St. Louis people. Spanos gets to parachute out of the NFL with a more than healthy pay day and St. Louis finally has a team of its own without ever needing to worry about losing it ever again.

But where would they play and who would pay for the cost of a new stadium?

Here is where the NFL would have an opportunity to refurbish their image around these parts. It would be illogical to believe that the NFL would foot the entire bill for a new stadium, however, the league could commit to funding the majority cost of a new stadium while the team could conceivably play at the Dome downtown until the new stadium is ready.

Also, forget about putting a new NFL stadium downtown, that simply won't fly for what should be obvious reasons. While I'm not ever here to defend slimy Stan Kroenke, I will concede that the stadium idea floated with the intention of keeping the Rams in St. Louis at the site down by the river would have been a disaster for myriad reasons.



No, any new stadium should be thought of with the idea of putting it in one of the outer suburban rings around the city. The old Chrysler plant in Fenton might be a good place to think about putting a new stadium — and if not there then someplace else.

Of course, I'm not naive enough to believe this could all happen at the drop of a hat, nor am I not aware that there are hurdles and issues that time and space prevent me from mentioning here in this column that would need to be addressed, however, creative and visionary people are able to move hurdles out of the way and to find solutions to the issues that need to be confronted.

Question: Whose ready to step up? Who will refuse to allow St. Louis to be without a franchise in America's still greatest sports league?

I don't believe the NFL is in any hurry to expand any time soon and so getting a franchise back under such a hypothetical isn't a reasonable alternative.

But with the right people and with the right game plan, with the right kind of can-do thinking, with the right kind of support, the situation in Los Angeles with the Chargers is one that should be looked upon as a legitimate opportunity to bring St. Louis a football team once again, this time forever.

The right kind of football team.

The kind that everyone can and would care about.

In 4 or 5 years maybe the expansion 'Spirit Of St. Louis' MLS team will win the MLS Cup, followed by a parade and keys to the city for all of the players. That'll be nice, but hardly anyone outside of St. Louis will truly notice.

But on January 30, 2000, the then St. Louis Rams won Super Bowl XXXIV in Atlanta beating the Tennessee Titans by the score of 23-16.

That evening, the city of St. Louis, Missouri, was the professional football capital of the world.

And everyone took note.