

Once Upon a Time in America

Benjamin Adler, November 4, 2007

Two French players are exiled in the anonymity of the North American soccer leagues. The MLS and its little sister, the USL, are still not attractive destinations for professional players, but this could soon change with the planned development of soccer in the United States, where the Beckham effect has now begun. ESPN SoccerNet delves into this still-uncharted territory.

America, a land of soccer? Not really. Not yet, anyway. At Uncle Sam's house, soccer remains an unknown sport in the media and in the hearts of the tens of millions of ardent sports fans. A potentially huge market, certainly, but one which is growing ever so slowly under the direction of Major League Soccer (MLS), which is determined not to repeat the mistakes of the past. "Beckham's arrival has sealed the foundations, and now they are going to build on a solid base. The current rules on salary caps and foreign player quotas per team are going to evolve as to allow for an increase in popularity," says New York-based French agent Michael Wiesenfeld. Established just twelve years ago, the MLS has imposed limits on the qualitative and quantitative development of its franchises' players in order to achieve homogeneity and sustainable growth. For this reason, the US is not quite yet an attractive destination for Europeans who are not seeing much of playing time and who, nevertheless, earn lucrative contracts in the Old World.

The only two Frenchmen currently playing professional soccer in the United States are Laurent Merlin, who played in the MLS playoffs, and Sebastien Le Toux, who won the second-division USL title. These pioneering figures have garnered both recognition and playing time, and their French technical training is a real asset in leagues where most players are products of the NCAA university system. "I've regained my love of playing soccer here," says Le Toux, 23. "I lost a little bit of that during my two years playing right wing at Lorient, which wasn't my position. In my first match for Seattle, the coach put me up front as a striker, and it worked out really well. Some matches can be a bit boring, played at CFA or CFA2 [French reserve leagues] standard, but on average USL is equivalent to the bottom of Ligue 2 [French second division]. But you also have to take into account the travel and the frequency of the matches, both of which take a toll on your body. Today, MLS is the equivalent of a good Ligue 2 or even bottom of Ligue 1 level," adds Wiesenfeld. "Its big shortcomings are consistency, overall vision of the game and speed of execution. Things also often go wrong with the very last pass."

Maximum salary is lower than the average for French Ligue 1.

Trained in Rennes and a contemporary of such big names as Briand, Gourcuff, Faty and Bourillon, Le Toux has just finished a six-month contract in Seattle, which is the longest allowed by USL. A combination of circumstances brought Le Toux to the States - the offers he received from

the National League [the professional league below Ligue 2] were not financially attractive. But he has no regrets. He loves the sheer adventure of being here, despite the obvious lower salaries offered. "Seattle is a great city. They pay for my apartment and car, and I've felt really welcome. I'm hoping to play in the MLS next season on a one-year contract - the salary should be better there," said Le Toux, who had to make do with a \$500 bonus for winning the USL championship. For Laurent Merlin, 2007 was much more profitable, with a base salary of \$60,000, not including guaranteed compensation. But this is still far short of what he could be earning in Ligue 1 or Ligue 2.

"In general, clubs recruit foreigners based on community marketing criteria, and it's the big names that get the best salaries," says Michael Wiesenfeld. Other than Beckham, players such as Juan Pablo Angel (\$1.6 million), Cuauhtemoc Blanco (\$2.7 million), Claudio Reyna (\$1.25 million) and Denilson (\$880,000), also enjoy comfortable salaries based on their 'designated player' status, which exempts them from salary caps. "This rule will be expanded in April to include one more player for the beginning of the next season. But yes, it applies to very few players - yet it's another instance of crucial marketing considerations," adds Wiesenfeld. At present, the absolute salary cap is \$2.3 million, split between eighteen professional contracts. "There are twenty-eight players per team, but the other ten have what are known as developmental contracts, paying between \$12,900 and \$17,700 per year," explains Wiesenfeld. The number of foreigners is limited to seven per team (four over 25 and three under 25), and the minimum salary is \$30,000 a year. The maximum is \$400,000 - hardly likely to attract experienced European players.

"Real market potential"

"The MLS deliberately put these rules in place to prevent a recurrence of what happened after Cruyff, Beckenbauer, Pelé and Best left the NASL, and that everything collapsed,' continues Wiesenfeld. 'They wanted to start off on a sound footing, set a solid base, and create a consistent and even level of play before removing the barriers. Once they will actually remove these barriers, they'll have the resources to make the MLS a major championship. There's a real market potential because the demand from clubs will always be high given the limited number of "quality" U.S players.'" Le Toux agrees. "There really could be a good championship in a few years. Soccer is gaining importance in people's minds, and Europe is more open to the MLS." That said, he has spent this season playing to crowds of 4,000 to 10,000 in an 80,000-seater stadium.

Most clubs plan to follow the example of Los Angeles, Chicago and Houston by building their own smaller and cozier 25,000-seater soccer stadiums in the very near future. Could this be a part of the Beckham effect? "Without a doubt," Wiesenfeld says. Since England's "golden boy" moved to the City of Angels, the league has earned its first income from TV rights, and has closed its first multi-million dollar jersey sponsorship deals. The players' Union plans to renegotiate the collective bargaining agreement in 2009, and

Wiesenfeld believes that both the minimum wage and salary cap will double to triple soon. It's no Eldorado, but Rome wasn't built in a day.