

“Center Circle”

Issue 38 – March 25, 2005

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1) ARMCHAIR MIDFIELDER [A look at the upcoming MLS season]

A monthly column about the State of U.S. Soccer that takes a hard look at everything from the performance of the U.S. National Teams to pro soccer in the good 'ole U-S-of-A. If you're looking for a viewpoint that you won't see in a generic, nuts-and-bolts U.S. Soccer press release, you've come to the right place.

This month we look toward the upcoming MLS season, the impressive 10th for the top soccer league in the United States. Things have changed quite a bit since the inaugural season in 1996. New teams have emerged as the league expanded to 12 teams again, the shootouts have been eliminated and overall the players and match quality has gotten better and better. But most of all, we've moved away from the dominant teams in the early days (see Bruce Arena's D.C. United) and joined the new sports era where parity is rampant in leagues all over America. And that has made the job of picking the final standings for the Eastern and Western Conferences harder than getting Donald Trump to change his hairdo. We took a crack at it anyway. Of course, if you think you know better, don't hesitate to tell us why.

Eastern Conference

K.C. – 1st Place

Outlook: Remember when the Milwaukee Brewers moved from the American League to the National League and then they dominated their new divisional opponents, becoming the class of the NL...wait, that didn't happen at all. The lowly Brewers just kept being lowly. Well, Kansas City definitely won't be struggling when it shuffles over from the MLS Western Conference to the Eastern Conference this year. While the Wizards would have loved to stay in the dismal Western Conference and no doubt get their second straight divisional championship, they now get the chance to do something no team has ever done or will probably ever do again – win the Western and Eastern divisional championship back-to-back.

Why they end up here: Kansas City is one of the deepest teams in the league, doing well to hold onto its core of players from last year's team that won the 2004 U.S. Open Cup and made it to the MLS Cup. Up front, the Wizards have the always dangerous Josh Wolff, along with Justin Detter and Davy Arnaud, who recently signed a multi-year deal after a breakout season last year in which he scored 26 points (nine goals, eight assists). The midfield is even more solid with Zavagnin re-signing after taking a peek over the pond, along with the return of Chris Klein and Preki from injuries, two players that will no doubt be willing to give every last bead of sweat on the field. Add in newcomer Sacha Victorine (acquired from L.A.), and the reliable Diego Gutierrez and there isn't much room (or need) for improvement or addition. The starting defense from last year that led the league in lowest goals allowed (30) is still intact and leaders Nick Garcia and Jimmy Conrad will now be backed up by starter Bo Oshoniyi, who is out of Tony Meola's shadow. If Oshoniyi can expand on his impressive performance last year when he allowed less than a goal a game and snagged five shutouts in his nine starts during the regular season, look for K.C. to add their second MLS Cup to the mantel.

D.C. United – 2nd Place

Outlook: D.C. United regained their place as the class of MLS last year, doing it in a less than smooth situation where they were dealing with a new head coach, handling the Freddy Adu traveling sideshow and dealing with the loss of Bobby Convey to Reading. This year things are a bit more settled, which allows the MLS champs the opportunity to concentrate on getting another back-to-back title. Okay, okay, so the attention on Adu will still be there, but at least the coaches, players and organization will be better able to deal with any situation. And in the end that additional concentration for situations on the field, rather than off, will come in handy during a season with a target on their back.

Why they end up here: One thing you can't dismiss is that D.C. is one of the best – if not the best – attacking team in the league. If Alecko Eskandarian can have another impressive year, Jaime Moreno is able to pull another rabbit out of his hat and Freddy Adu continues to get better each week, opponents will be scratching their heads trying to figure out a way to keep United off the board. On the other hand, losing Earnie Stewart and Ryan Nelson overseas doesn't bode well, especially Nelson who not only was the bolt holding the defense together, but a great leader who could lead with what he said as much as with what he did on the field. Did you see the horrible gaff in United's first leg Champions' Cup match against Harbor View FC? One of the worst gaffes we've seen in awhile and while the majority of the blame has to go to goalkeeper Nick Rimando; do you think that happens with Nelson manning the defense? We think not. In the end though, with Peter Nowak able to call on Kovalenko, Gros, Gomez and Olsen in the midfield, the nation's capital will once again easily get into the playoffs and push K.C. for the right to represent the Eastern Conference in the '06 MLS Cup.

Columbus Crew – 3rd Place

Outlook: In April, Columbus was the worst team in the league. By September they were unbeatable, literally, as they went on an 18-game unbeaten streak to end the regular

season. By late October after the Crew fell to New England in the first round of the playoffs, they were seen either as a disappointment, overrated or just doing what they always do. They call themselves “America’s Hardest Working Team,” but they haven’t proved it over the past 10 years. Working hard is great and all but here’s an idea, drop the label and actually get to the MLS Cup. So, can Columbus do that this year? Probably not, but they will make the playoffs, so you never know, they might actually throw on their hard hats and actually get it done. At the least they could find their 2002 Lamar Hunt U.S. Open Cup trophy a friend.

Why they end up here: With Jon Busch in goal and team leaders Robin Fraser, Frankie Hejduk and Chad Marshall available in the back, the Crew’s defense won’t have too many problems and can look to once again be near the league lead in goals allowed. In the midfield, Kyle Martino has the ability to be one of the best players in MLS, he just needs to start showing it on a consistent basis, and we’re betting he does this year. And he’ll need to as he can’t expect Ross Paule or Simon Elliot to be the leaders from the middle of the pitch. As for last year’s pickup, Danny Szetela will need to push himself to break into the starting XI. The midfielder might have lost his starting spot on the U-20s to some college players at the moment, but if he can regain the tough play and fire that got him to Columbus, he can make an impact during the season. Up front, Columbus looks like a team to be reckoned with as they improved their attack with the addition of Ante Razov to complement Edson Buddle, but while both at times can score seemingly at will, it’s also widely known that each can struggle. Buddle has the tendency to think he’s one of “America’s Hardest Working Players” on the field, when in actuality he’s not, and Razov first has to stay healthy before he can start scoring sick goals.

Chicago – 4th Place

Outlook: Last October, Barnburners were left wandering the streets of Chicago, confused the Fire wasn’t playing in the playoffs, the first time that had happened in the team’s history. After finding their way to Ginger’s Ale House on Grace and Ashland (ahem...voted as the 2004 Best U.S. Soccer Bar), the Barnburners no doubt turned their sadness into anger and cheered against Columbus, finding some solace in their first round exit. Trust me though, Chicago fans aren’t going to stand by and let another year go by without a spot in the playoffs and neither is head coach Dave Sarachan. The Fire lost some players, but did well enough in the off-season to re-patch a team that lost key players over the past two years.

Why they end up here: Chicago was busy saying a lot of good-byes this past off-season, losing Ante Razov, Andy Williams, Orlando Perez, Dipsy Selolwane, Evan Whitfield, Henry Ring and just recently Damani Ralph. There are some big names in there, but the Fire also did well to shore up a defense that took a big hit last season when it lost Carlos Bocanegra to Fulham. Sarachan brought in Tony Sanneh, Ivan Guerrero and Samuel Caballero, who will join mainstay Dustin Diamond...I mean Jim Curtin and C.J. Brown, Logan Pause and rookies Jack Stewart and Gonzalo Segares. And don’t forget one of the best MLS goalkeepers of all-time is back as Zach Thorton has returned from Portugal. Two of Chicago’s poster boys, Chris Armas and Jesse Marsch, are getting up in age, but

if they can stay healthy the Fire will have a solid midfield with speedster Justin Mapp, Kelly Gray, Will John and Brazilian Thiago, who has shown some ability in training. The biggest fear is where the goals will come from now that Ralph has seen the money in Russia and Razov has moved East. Andy Herron went on a tear in his first few games last year, but he'll have to be more consistent, while Nate Jaqua and rookie Chad Barrett will be counted on to find the back of the net.

New England – 5th Place

Outlook: For the past few seasons New England has been playing with fire, struggling for most of the regular season before going on a run to get into the postseason and putting together some good playoff performances. While waiting until the final games to slip into the playoffs might make it interesting (if not annoying) for their fans, it might not be a recipe that always comes out good. We're thinking this year they get burned.

Why they end up here: The biggest reason we think the Revolution just miss the playoffs with the fifth spot in the Eastern Conference is because they just haven't done enough in the off-season a year after they were lucky to see themselves sneak into the postseason above Chicago. While they do return with a young trio of recent U.S. MNT regulars Steve Ralston, Taylor Twellman, Pat Noonan and Clint Dempsey, who will provide New England with some firepower in the middle of the field, it's their defense that still needs some help. Carlos Llamosa is back from injury, but remember he's no spring chicken. At 35, Llamosa has the experience to lead the backline and help get rookies Michael Parkhurst and James Riley into the lineup quicker, but will that be possible without his legs dying on him near the end of the season when they'll need their standard run? Or worse, can Llamosa stay injury-free for the full season? If he can and Brazilian addition Cassio can balance the Revolution's flank attack on the left with Ralston on the right, maybe we'll see more of the heart-attack Revs. This time, though, we won't see it in the playoffs.

MetroStars – 6th Place

Outlook: The fact that a team in one of the biggest markets hasn't won a single piece of hardware since the league kicked-off in 1996 probably won't change in 2005. There's not much that can be done, though, unless the MetroStars wake up one day with someone with the talent and skill of Ronaldinho knocking on the gates of Giants Stadium. And we're not expecting things to change this year either, unless the teams that finish in last place in each conference get a trophy too.

Why they end up here: The MetroStars couldn't get much better in the midfield with two of the best players in the league – Amado Guevara and Eddie Gaven – manning the middle of the field. After that though, there are question marks all over the field. The MetroStars couldn't get rid of Jonny Walker no matter how hard they tried, and it doesn't seem they are trying to give him much of a chance this year by getting rid of defenders Eddie Pope, Craig Ziadie and just recently Tenywa Bonseu. They did bring in Jeff Agoos

(but is he better than Pope?) and drafted Tim Ward, who is currently starting at left back for the U-20s, but their defense got worse rather than better. The biggest signing was Yuri Djorkaeff, but that doesn't look too bright after the midfielder got injured shortly after joining the club. For the MetroStars to climb out of the cellar, they will have to find a more consistent scorer in Mike Magee, John Wolyniec or Sergio Galvan Rey.

Western Conference

FC Dallas – 1st Place

Outlook: In 2003, Dallas was not only the worst team in the league, they were the worst team to ever compete in MLS. In 2004, they were better, but still fell short of the playoffs. So, what's a way to get over the hump? Take a page from the NFL's Denver Broncos and change your logo. The team in the heart of Texas has done away with the Burn and now calls itself FC Dallas, complete with an updated, more soccer-like logo. The logo update propelled the Broncos to their first-ever Super Bowl victory in '98, so we're figuring the tactic might work for the Burn, I mean FC Dallas, as well. First people will have to get used to the name change and then get accustomed to Dallas winning in their new stadium, which they no doubt will with a better squad against weaker conference opponents.

Why they end up here: Benfica may have come calling, but MLS knows if it wants to get people in the seats it has to hold onto the players of the moment and Eddie (not Ed!) Johnson is THE player at THE moment. After struggling his initial couple years, Johnson broke through last year, becoming the prolific scorer everyone saw with the youth teams. And it doesn't seem like it was a fluke as Eddie has shown he can do it at the highest level as well, scoring seven goals in his first six games with the full Men's National Team. Let's see, international squads are struggling to contain Johnson, so how do you think he'll do against expansion teams like Real and Chivas? It will be easier for him to score than it is to get Barry Bonds to say he dislikes reporters. Losing Jason Kreis won't kill them as they also snagged Cornell Glen and Abe Thompson to help with the scoring duties up front. They also lost Cory Gibbs, but Dallas was able to pickup defenders Alex Yi from overseas and Drew Moor from college, and rumor is they might be in line to get Greg Vanney to shore up their defense line that includes Steve Jolley and Chris Gbandi and Carey Talley. Their biggest off-season pickup was Richard Mulrooney, who will team with Ronnie O'Brien, and Simo Valakari in a solid midfield.

Colorado Rapids – 2nd Place

Outlook: Colorado is kind of an enigma. Having players that can do damage, but never coming together as a team to get a championship ring. They seem to be MLS's example of the word average. This year, team average gets the chance to play in conference below average, giving the Rapids the chance to possibly make a deeper run into the playoffs. The one thing Colorado has coming into the season is the opportunity to start new, with head coach Fernando Clavijo bring a breath of fresh air to the club.

Why they end up here: The No. 1 reason that Colorado makes the playoffs is their man in the net – Joe Cannon. Cannon won the 2004 Goalkeeper of the Year award in part because he single-handedly provided the Rapids with points with big save after big save. He'll do his job and keep the Rapids in every game, so now the responsibility falls to the rest of the squad to put points on the board. To handle that duty Colorado called in Jeff Cunningham, who can at times be a bit like the Rapids teams of the past – average. On the other hand, despite his unpredictability, he can be one of the more dangerous strikers in the league. We're thinking being around a midfield with Kyle Beckerman, Chris Henderson and March Chung will be the pill that controls Cunningham's ups and downs and he leads a dangerous Rapids attack.

San Jose – 3rd Place

Outlook: Possible random thoughts of San Jose General Manager Alexi Lalas over the past year: "I don't get it. We're one of the better teams in the league the past few years, even winning the MLS Cup in 2003, but we struggle to keep a consistent fan base ... And now we've lost our – and the league's – best player to Germany ... I wonder if there are any Hawaiians moving to the mainland and settling in San Jose? ... Maybe I should write an Earthquakes theme song, strap on my old guitar and serenade people to come to Spartan Stadium." Okay, we're only joking and are certain Alexi is doing his best (a.k.a. more than playing his guitar) to try and solve their stadium and fan base problems, but a struggling team in a weak division probably won't help his cause. Fortunately for San Jose, Real Salt Lake and Chivas USA will probably struggle more to allow the Earthquakes to make the playoffs.

Why they end up here: The big question is how do you replace Landon Donovan? The simple answer is, you don't. Instead, you move on and everyone tries to pick up the slack. One good thing is Dwayne DeRosario is back after throwing his bait in the waters of Europe, giving the Earthquakes the ability to put him up front with Brian Ching, who showed he can put up numbers with 12 goals and four assists last year. The midfield could pack a punch with newcomers Brad Davis, Ricardo Clark and rookie Danny O'Rourke, joining Brian Mullan. On defense, as long as Pat Onstead doesn't knock any goals into his own net and the defense of Eddie Robinson, Troy Dayak, Ryan Cochrane, Danny Califf and Wade Barrett can gel after the departure of Jeff Agoos, the 'Quakes will be just fine in the post-Donovan season.

L.A. Galaxy – 4th Place

Outlook: Sigi Schmid was fired last year when he had L.A. atop the Western Conference. So, what happens if Steve Sampson struggles? We have a feeling we're going to find out. For what it's worth, Sampson is definitely going his own route in an attempt to do what he can to put his imprint on the team. He had some surprising selections in the 2005 MLS SuperDraft and not too many other coaches in the league were chopping at the bit to pick up some of the players he brought in to The Home Depot

Center, but we've got to think he'll keep the Galaxy above the two expansion clubs for the final playoff spot. And if they do better, well, then maybe Sampson really is smarter than everyone else in the league.

Why they end up here: When you think of L.A., the first name that comes to mind is Carlos Ruiz. How could it not? The Guatemalan international is one of the most dangerous strikers in the league, the player every defender has to keep an eye out for as he can score at any moment. He'll also be accompanied by a familiar face, as the hand that feeds him on the Guatemalan National Team will also be the hand feeding him in L.A., with Guillermo Ramirez joining the Galaxy lineup. That quality gives L.A. some confidence that they will have a chance in any game, but Ruiz definitely can't do it all himself and the Galaxy will be hurt when Ruiz and Ramirez gets their national team call-ups. He has help from Jovan Kirovski, but his first season in MLS was basically like the rest of his career – brilliant at times, lost at others, while Joseph Ngwenya will have to improve on his four goals from last year to make sure L.A. stays in the playoff hunt. Ruiz and the rest of the Galaxy cast could get an offensive boost from newcomer Edinaldo Conceicao, however, whose *jogo bonito* could spice things up. The Galaxy midfield has Peter Vagenas, Guillermo Gonzalez, Ned Grabavoy, Josh Gardner, Paul Broome and Cobi Jones, leaving something to be desired as no one really stands out. Ryan Suarez is gone, but the defensive line should hold their own with Chris Albright and Tyrone Marshall sitting in front of Kevin Hartman along with the Galaxy's new signings, Costa Ricans Michael Umana and Pablo Chinchilla. Umana, 22, was the defensive anchor of his previous club CS Herediano, as well as having played every minute in Costa Rica's four games at the 2004 Olympics. Ugo Ihemelu may also see time considering he was Sampson's surprise first pick in the draft as well, but it might take him a bit to adjust to the speed of the game.

Real Salt Lake – 5th Place

Outlook: Before Utah's newest professional sports team even had one player on their roster, soccer fans across the country were chuckling at the choice of their name – Real Salt Lake. What else did they want? The name-game is over though and now the goal is to make sure those same fans aren't also laughing at the product put out on the field by former U.S. Under-17 head coach John Ellinger. That's going to be tough for the mountain expansion team and there will probably be a bit of snickering as they will no doubt struggle to keep pace with already established squads in the league. But, we're thinking RSL will be able to say, "At least we're not Chivas."

Why they end up here: If you're going to start a team, it doesn't hurt to get two well-known, proven goal scorers like Jason Kreis and Clint Mathis. Neither does getting youth standout goalkeeper D.J. Countess, along with Eddie Pope, Rusty Pierce and Evan Whitfield in front of him. Add in midfielder Andy Williams and, overall, there is definitely some talent on RSL, but you've got to expect that there will be a need for the team to gel, which in turn means some tough times during the first year. The biggest question will probably be Mathis, who Real is betting will be the creative, dangerous

forward he showed he could be while scoring 33 goals in four years with the MetroStars. But what if he struggles, can the conservative Utah residents handle seeing the side of him that came out in Germany. Will other untested forwards, including rookie Jamie Watson, be able to step up? In other positions around the field, head coach John Ellinger has brought in a number of former U.S. U-17 Residency players and current member Nikolas Besagno (RSL's No. 1 draft pick), which has led people to nickname the expansion club Real Bradenton. Ellinger is comfortable with those players, but they might not be able to get them to the playoffs right off the bat.

Chivas USA – 6th Place

Outlook: One thing is for sure: no team in the league will give Chivas any breaks. Every team they meet this year will want to beat the expansion squad...and most likely will. Chivas wants to be better than anyone in the league, even making sure they had better offices than their neighbors, the L.A. Galaxy, in The Home Depot Center, but there are just too many uncertainties as they move toward their opening match. We've heard head coach Thomas Rongen, despite his best effort, has yet to master Spanish. We're thinking his team will also not get totally comfortable playing in MLS as quickly as they would like, providing Chivas fans looking south for some wins by a club in red and white.

Why they end up here: Things don't appear to be going too smoothly and Rongen is probably beginning to feel the burden of trying to put together a mostly Mexican squad. The biggest news coming out of the Chivas USA front office the past couple weeks was that Ramon Ramirez was back on the team after leaving for a week when he couldn't get his nanny to the U.S. (Ramon, they have them in the states as well). Rongen did not need that wrench thrown in during the final month before they kick off the season. You've got to assume he'd rather be figuring out how he's going to get his young squad to be able to handle the rest of the league and what players he can count on to get the ball into the back of the net (Romo, Torres, Gomez?). Less than two weeks out, there are a number of other things that are still unsettled as well. Such as, how Brad Guzman will handle directing his above-average backline in a language that isn't his first and can Suarez be the player that once got him to be a Rookie of the Year finalist in 2001. We don't know the answers and we're not sure Chivas does either.

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“BEHIND CLOSED DOORS”

A section that will let you get to know the real personalities of your favorite Men's, Women's and Youth National Team players through various funny and unique first-person accounts. In this issue, you'll find:

2) IN 3's (w/ U-17 MNT Forward Preston Zimmerman)

What's it going to be? Door number one, door number two, or door number THREE?!? Okay, so this section has less to do with “Let's Make A Deal” and more to do with the

Multiple Choice section of an SAT test. "In 3's" peeks inside the head of a select National Team player as they pick one of three choices for 25 questions about personal tastes and pop culture.

U.S. U-17 MNT forward Preston Zimmerman burst onto the U-17 national team last April and hasn't looked back. He solidified his role as the team's goal scorer a month after joining residency, traveling with the team for the Ballymena International Tournament in Northern Ireland where he scored two goals and wreaked havoc in all four games, good enough to be chosen as the tournament MVP. Zimmerman will be an important key if the U-17s are going to continue their streak as the only country to qualify for every FIFA Under-17 World Championship, when they head down to Costa Rica for the CONCACAF qualifying tournament from April 12-16. The Pasco, Wash., native sat down with "In 3's" and gave us an inside look into what a natural goal scorer likes from categories like television, music and sports.

Miscellaneous:

Best macho vehicle: sports car, SUV or big ol' truck?

"Big ol' truck. I don't like anything big and fancy, I just like something big and cool like a big ol' truck that can smash other cars."

Favorite of the three rivers that merge in your hometown of Pasco, Washington: Columbia, Yakima, or Snake?

"I'm going to have to go with Columbia because it is right by my house. It's like a block over. I see it every single day when I'm home. I used to do a little fishing, but it was pretty bad around the area I live. I go boating out on the river though, or tubing which is really fun."

Favorite player to come out of Duke: Jay Heaps, Jason Kreis or John Kerr?

"I'm going to have to go with Jason Kreis on this one. Jason Kreis is the best Duke player ever. He's going to get Salt Lake to the championship this year."

Best thing to go see when in Seattle: The Fish Market, Mount Ranier or the Space Needle?

"I'd say probably the Space Needle because when you are at the top of it you can see every single thing. That's a pretty cool sight when you are at the top. Usually it is pretty cloudy and rainy there, so you don't see that much, but (on a clear day) you see everything down below."

Best thing about U.S. Soccer's Residency Program: training against the best players every day, traveling around the world for games or getting the best coaching in the nation?

"I'm going to have to say traveling around the world because it's the coolest experience ever. You get to see all these different places that you never thought you would see. You get to see how people live and see how soccer is different in other countries, how passionate they are. Experiencing all these things that are different from your country helps you learn more about everything."

Worst thing to happen to you in a game with the U-17s: getting your nose broken, missing an open shot on goal or getting ejected?

“Missing an open shot on goal. It’s happened probably two or three times now. The ball is right in front of the goal and the goalie is gone for basically an empty-netter and you just miss it. I can’t really explain it more than that. It has happened...I was going to say two or three times, but I’m going to say two. They haunt me. I’ve broken my nose four times now, so I’m kind of used to it. I broke it in Guatemala and I just kept on playing.”

Best leisure footwear: flip-flops, runners or sneakers?

“Flip-flops. They’re the most comfortable. I wear them to games, practices, everywhere. The only bad thing is I trip in them a lot when I’m walking in the grass.”

Food:

Favorite type of non-American food: Mexican, Italian or Chinese/Asian?

“I’m going to say Chinese/Asian. That’s what I just ate tonight (in the cafeteria) at IMG Academy. I eat it pretty regularly.”

Best burrito joint: Shippable, Bag Fresh or Q’doba?

“I don’t think I’ve experienced any of those. Wait, did you say Q’doba? That one is pretty good actually. They don’t have one in my hometown, but they have one in Spokane, two hours north, so I’ve eaten there before. That’s the only one I know, so I’m going to have to pick that one.”

Best fish to eat: salmon, trout or swordfish?

“Probably salmon. My dad goes fishing a whole lot and he catches salmon sometimes and cooks them for us to eat. They’re real good.”

TV/Video Games:

Best show on MTV: “Punk’d,” “Real World” or “Viva La Bam?”

“That’s a good question, but I think “Punk’d.” The show is awesome. You get to see all these celebrities getting messed with, doing all this stupid stuff. It’s pretty funny. I just like to see how they all freak out. Got to put a little scare into them sometimes, they’re lives are too good.”

Funniest animated series: “Simpsons,” “South Park” or “Family Guy”?

“Definitely “South Park.” I mean everything about it is hilarious. How Kenny and Cartman and all the guys talk, what each episode is about it is just pretty hilarious. It’s all random stuff. I haven’t seen the movie, I’ve just seen the shows, but I hear the movie is pretty funny, too.”

Reality show you’d most like to be on: “Survivor,” “The Amazing Race” or “Real World?”

“Real World. I think that would be awesome to meet all these random people in one place. I’m not sure where I’d want it to be. Well, definitely not in Bradenton. Probably New York City because I’ve never been there and I’ve always wanted to go.”

Best team to control when you play NHL Hockey: N.Y. Rangers, Colorado Avalanche or Detroit Red Wings?

“I play NHL 2005 all the time. Those are pretty good choices because I’m actually in a season right now and I’m the Rangers. So, I’m going to have to go with the Rangers. Washington doesn’t have a team, so I always have to go with someone else.”

Soccer & Sports:

Biggest conference game you’re looking forward to while at Duke: North Carolina, Wake Forest or Virginia?

“You know, I’ve been hearing so much about the rivalry between Duke and Virginia and how crazy it is. So, I’m really excited about the Duke-Virginia game. I hear that Duke hates Virginia. Duke hates all three of those schools I guess, but Virginia the most.”

Favorite sports team in Seattle: SuperSonics, Mariners or Seahawks?

“Definitely not the Seahawks. They’re bad. I’ll say the SuperSonics. That’s probably the best choice out of the three.”

Best U.S. National Team player with ties to the state of Washington: Kasey Keller, Chris Henderson, or Michelle Akers?

“Definitely Kasey Keller. Lacey, Washington. He’s a big-time player and he’s representing Washington well.”

Best sports magazine: Sports Illustrated, ESPN The Magazine or Sporting News?

“Probably Sporting News. Sometimes they’ve got a lot of hockey games on there. I’m kind of crazy about hockey because I used to play it.”

How far will the University of Washington go in the NCAA Basketball Tournament: Round of 16, Final Four or National Championship?

“I don’t even think they will get to the Round of 16, but I’ll say that because that is the lowest one. Hopefully I’m not fully quoted on that one, but I’m not really a University of Washington basketball fan. I don’t know how they even got a number one seed. They barely beat Montana (in their first round game). That’s trouble when you can’t beat Montana.” [Editor’s note: The Washington Huskies made it to the Round of 1 before falling to Louisville 93-79.]

Favorite EPL team: Manchester United, Chelsea or Arsenal?

“I was hoping Arsenal was going to be there. Definitely Arsenal. They’ve been my favorite team since I was a little kid. I used to watch them all the time. I’d watch Thierry Henry tear people up and score goals. That’s my favorite team. All their players are all-stars. I’ve got the jersey, the scarf, all that kind of stuff.”

Music:

Best Seattle grunge band from the 1990's: Pearl Jam, Nirvana or Alice in Chains?

“Probably Pearl Jam. I haven’t heard a lot of their music, but I haven’t even heard of the other two choices. I’m just going to go with the biggest name on that one to save face. [Editor’s note: Preston was questioned how he could not know of Nirvana] Oh, you said Nirvana? I’m going to stick with Pearl Jam. When I heard Pearl Jam, I basically didn’t even hear the other two choices.”

Best kind of music to listen to before a game: rap, rock or pop?

“Before a game I usually listen to the punk rock stuff. I listen to Yellow Card, Green Day, those kinds of bands. There are another two that aren’t bands, but I get made fun of for. I listen to Hilary Duff and Lindsay Lohan. Wait, not Lindsay Lohan, Jessica Simpson. My bad. Wait, not Jessica Simpson, (laughing) Ashley Simpson. There’s so many names.”

Worst actress/model turned musician: Lindsay Lohan, Paris Hilton or J-Lo?

“Definitely Paris Hilton, she’s pretty bad with the music.”

Movies:

Soccer related movie coming out soon that you’re most looking forward to seeing:

“*Game of Their Lives*,” “*Kicking and Screaming*” or “*Fever Pitch*”?

“‘Kicking and Screaming’ with Will Ferrell in it. Every movie that has him in it is funny. The movie looks like it will be hilarious, so I’m looking forward to seeing that one.”

Hottest actress: Angelina Jolie, Jennifer Aniston or Halle Berry?

“Angelina Jolie. All the movies she makes are awesome. Usually, I go to the movie because she is in it. She’s so hot. You can’t even really explain it, she’s just really hot. Everyone knows it.”

Funniest former SNL actor turned movie actor: Will Ferrell, Chris Rock or Adam Sandler?

“I’d have to say Will Ferrell again. I like all the movies he makes. Old School, Anchorman, those movies are awesome. I can watch them over and over again.”

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3) GEAR GALORE (U.S. MNT/WNT Watches)

In this section, we engage in some shameless self-promotion by spotlighting a different U.S. Soccer product each month, from the newest, state-of-the-art Nike apparel to all kinds of other exclusive U.S. Men’s & Women’s merch.

You’re a U.S. Soccer fanatic. Whether you’re attending a U.S. Soccer match, watching it on television from you couch or favorite hangout, logging on to catch MatchTracker, or

scanning ussoccer.com to get the latest news, feature, pictures of All_Access Video, you are thinking about the U.S. national teams 24 hours a day. Okay, maybe not 24 hours a day, I mean you've got to sleep sometime, right? Then again, we know some of you dream about U.S. Soccer (you know who you are).

Well, since U.S. Soccer takes up so much of your time, why not let it tell you *exactly* how much. We introduce you to the first-ever Nike U.S. National Team watch.

U.S. Soccer fans can choose between two distinct styles with two color options available with each model. The Triax Swift 3i has the larger face of the two models and comes in a red face/black band or obsidian face/obsidian band. The Triax Swift Analog comes in either an obsidian face/red band or red face/obsidian band.

Both watch styles are designed in a S-shaped with a pre-curved polyurethane strap, so the timepiece fits comfortably and include a laser-etched logo on the face with the analog time and date displayed under a clear mineral glass crystal. With one-touch backlighting and water resistant up to 100 meters, there's no doubt you'll be able to know the time no matter where you are or what you're doing.

While throwing on your authentic U.S. Soccer jersey might not go over in the office, these watches are a perfect way to show your allegiance to your favorite U.S. Soccer national team at all times. Don't hesitate, click below and get the new Nike U.S. National Team watch!

Nike U.S. National Team Watches

<http://www.ussoccerstore.com/watches.html>

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4) BMOC (w/ U-20 MNT Defender Greg Dalby)

Greg Dalby is proof a Big Man on Campus doesn't need to be the loudest or most flamboyant. The soft-spoken Dalby became the BMOC at Notre Dame by making a quick transition from high school to the well-known institution, starting all 23 games for the Irish his freshman year as a central back and midfielder and helping the team to a appearance in the NCAA Sweet 16.

Dalby was in the U.S. Under-20 Men's National Team picture since last year, but he only got three caps with the team due to a minor leg injury keeping him from getting more appearances. Fully recovered, the Poway, Calif., native was a rock as a holding midfielder for the U-20s during qualifying for the FIFA World Youth Championship in January and is looking to secure his spot on the 20-man roster that will go to Holland in June.

I think going to Notre Dame is a lot different experience than people get at other universities. For one, there is more on-campus stuff going on in the dorms than outside of

the school, such as Greek life, because probably around 80 percent of the students live in the dorms. At another school you might live in a dorm for only a year or two, but at Notre Dame the majority of juniors and seniors also live in the dormitories.

I'm not saying it is better, but I think the social life is just different as there tends to be more campus pride than your average school because so many of the 8,000 undergraduate students are involved in whatever is going on at the campus.

It's definitely an aspect I really enjoy, but at the same time I wouldn't call myself a "Domer," which is a nickname for Notre Dame students who are really gung-ho about the school. I take pride in being part of the Fighting Irish, but I'm not over-the-top like a lot of students.

I ended up choosing Notre Dame because I knew I'd get a great education and when I visited I really connected with the players and the guys on the team. Growing up I was always a fan of the school and I always wanted to be part of the Fighting Irish.

The one thing that was the biggest change for me and something I wasn't really ready to deal with was the weather. Walking through eight to nine inches of snow in sandals is a lot different than what I'm used to in California, but I'm getting used to it.

Obviously, the religious part is something different for me, as I'm not catholic. It is almost always around you as I have a few priests for teachers and there are chapels in every dorm and crucifixes in every classroom, but I don't feel smothered by it at all. Actually, I've found it to be a real eye-opener and beneficial at times.

Notre Dame is first-and-foremost a football school and the games are great. Almost 100,000 people pour into the area on game day and makes for a great atmosphere. The constant attention to the football team may take away from the soccer, but you can't complain too much. The only bad thing is that I don't get to go to a lot of games because we're usually traveling or have a game ourselves.

We are in the Big East Conference so we end up traveling a lot to the East Coast, which I really enjoy. For the last two years it's been a pretty cool experience because I had never really been to the East Coast before and its great to see other college campuses.

On the road, we don't go out much as we're always trying to keep up with our homework, but we make the best of it. Once in awhile our coach will take us bowling or out to eat.

Now that I've been with the U-20s a lot, too, it seems like my work load is getting to be a nightmare at times. I always have to talk to my teachers and at times it's tough to get homework done or take tests on the road. But, overall, I've really appreciated how cooperative my teachers have been and Sigi has been great as well, which I think he understands because he was a college coach.

The last few years at Notre Dame we've made a lot of huge strides. My freshman year we won the Big East Conference tournament and then this year we won the regular season title.

Along with our success as a team, we've seen three players get picked in the MLS draft, which means there are good things to come for our school in the future. It also makes me think that if they can do it, then I can, too. I know I've improved since my time with the U-20s, just playing with guys like Eddie Gaven and Freddy Adu, but even though it is tempting, I'm just concentrating on our next season. I'm not sure what I'll do after that, but either way getting my degree is something that is really important to me. As of now, college soccer is still the best thing for me and I feel I get as close to a professional environment you can get in college at Notre Dame.

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5) "MARK THAT CALENDAR"

MNT Video Previewing Mexico and Guatemala World Cup Qualifying Matches [March 27 vs. Mexico/March 30 vs. Guatemala]

A stern reminder about an upcoming U.S. Soccer-related event, whether you plan to check it out live and in person, on the "telly" or that wacky world wide web.

If you don't know what's happening on March 27, then we're assuming you are reading Center Circle by pure accident. If that's the situation, then we'll inform you one last time that the U.S. Men's National Team is facing Mexico in the final round of 2006 World Cup qualifying at Estadio Azteca in Mexico City on Easter Sunday at 1 p.m. ET/10 a.m. PT, live on ESPN2.

Most of you are already yawning, not due to the game itself of course, but because you've had this game's date/time/location imprinted on your brain for months. You no doubt also know that three days later the MNT heads back to the States to host Guatemala on March 30 live on ESPN2 at 8 p.m. ET at Legion Field in Birmingham. Basically, you don't need a reminder for either match in Center Circle's "Mark That Calendar."

Well, for the people that fall into that category, we figure you would like a reminder to check out all the great behind-the-scenes footage you have the ability to see from ussoccer.com's All_Access video. Since the Men arrived in camp in Carson, Calif., almost a month ago, our videographer has been hard at work putting up some great pieces together showing the players like you've never seen them before as they prepare for Mexico and Guatemala.

Directly from the front page, you can access the video and see segments covering a day in the life of Chris Albright, Eddie Johnson talking about seeing snow for one of his first times in Colorado, a one-on-one interview with Kerry Zavagnin and the players getting into a snowball fight.

You won't find this kind of behind-the-scenes access anywhere else, so surf around ussoccer.com and check it out!

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6) SUPERSTAR!!! (w/ U.S. WNT Forward Amy Rodriguez)

In March of 2004, Amy Rodriguez was with the U.S. Under-17 Women's National Team at a camp in Bradenton, Fla. At that moment, she had no idea what would happen over the next 12 months.

How does a player go from the U-17 Women's National Team, to a part-time player with the U.S. U-19s, to a starting spot in the U-19 FIFA World Championship to the U.S. U-21s to the full National Team, all within a year?

Amy Rodriguez has no idea. And she actually did it.

"Seriously, each new step was a huge surprise, it was crazy," said Rodriguez. "There's really no explanation or words I can say to describe the past eight months. Nobody expected this to happen, even me, but it sure has been fun."

A little more than year ago, Rodriguez was a 16-year-old junior at Santa Margarita High School who was just busy working hard to keep her grades up and trying to focus on picking a college. The goal scoring forward was a regular at U.S. Under-17 camps, but her focus wasn't on getting a shot with the full National Team. Heck, she wasn't even focused on the 2004 U-19 World Championship. She figured if she were going to get a shot at playing for her country in a world event, it would be at the FIFA youth tournament in 2006.

That's still a goal, but now, so is the 2007 FIFA Women's World Cup.

Rodriguez got her first two career caps for the U.S. Women's National Team in at the Algarve Cup in Portugal a few weeks ago, playing against Finland and Denmark, albeit when both games were decided, but it only whetted her appetite for the future.

"The whole experience in Portugal was just amazing because I had never gotten to play at such a high level," said Rodriguez, who played well in her 60 minutes of total action over the two games in the tournament. "For someone so young, it was an experience of a lifetime. Many soccer players never get to the opportunity to be in that environment, so I feel so fortunate. Being able to work with players with such great talent who have played in World Cups and Olympics, to learn from them and get to know them as people was awesome. Hopefully I can take that experience and grow and get better as a player."

Still, the 5-foot-4 dynamo knows, even at this young age, of the ills that befall many who get too much, too fast. That's why she setting realistic goals and taking it slow.

“It’s a long, long road to making a World Cup team,” said Rodriguez, who has shown flashes of the one-v-one dribbling ability that has made stars of numerous U.S. forwards. “Even making the 2006 U-20 World Championship team is going to be very challenging. Even though I have accomplished a lot recently, I know nothing is ever handed to you. I know I have a lot of work to do and many parts of my game that need improvement. The door has been opened for me, but I know it could close at any time, so I am focused on working really hard on continue to develop myself.”

Rodriguez’s ascension to the National Team was so rapid that in August of 2004, she didn’t even think she’d be in Thailand for the 2004 FIFA U-19 World Championship. In fact, she’d never played in a full international match at the U-19 level until the USA’s first game, a resounding 3-0 victory over South Korea.

Rodriguez scored in that game and was an impact player throughout the tournament. That performance earned her a spot in a U.S. U-21 training camp at the beginning of March. She scored goals with the U-21s as well and just a few weeks later, was named to the U.S. roster for the Algarve Cup.

It can happen that quickly for a talented young female player in the United States, and for Rodriguez, affectionately known as A-Rod, it’s been a whirlwind journey.

In 2003, the Lake Forest, Calif., resident had be asked to play in a few scrimmages with the U-19s due to the large number of training camps held by the U.S. youth teams in Southern California, but it was always drive up, play, go home.

She must have made an impression during those few games as she was invited by then U-19 head coach Tracey Leone to her first official U-19 camp in October of 2003, but the Fall camp consisted only of high school-aged players.

“I was surprised,” said Rodriguez of her first U-19 call-up. “I told myself that I was going to go come in and work hard, but I was really never expecting to earn a spot on the World Cup roster.”

With the regulars in the player pool returning to training after the college season, Rodriguez was sent back to the U-17s, which suited her just fine. She enjoyed her time with the U-19s and figured it would be a great experience to build on. And build she did.

Possessing some Tiffeny Milbrett-esque characteristics, the mobile Rodriguez has a low center of gravity, is explosive, skillful and just a handful for opponents to deal with in the penalty box.

She did not travel with the U-19s to China in early August of 2004, but was invited to the next camp in Carson, Calif. later that month. She performed well, got invited to the following camps in Florida and back in California, and then, in what was really her fourth event with the U-19s, she was starting in a world championship.

“It all happened so fast,” said Rodriguez. “From my perspective, I really didn’t think the coaches were looking at me for one of the spots on the team. I was just there trying to make myself better.”

With a 21-player roster for that tournament, former U.S. U-19 head coach Mark Krikorian had several spots to fill after selecting the first 19 players, all collegians who would have to miss their college season, after that trip to China. Two spots remained. Rodriguez got one of them.

“She was the missing piece as I saw it,” said Krikorian. “Every player on the team was very talented, but in order for a team to be very successful, we had to have different types of players. She is more a powerful, strong target-type of player and I didn’t really feel we had that until we got her in camp.”

Krikorian’s faith paid off just 17 minutes into the USA’s first game in Phuket, Thailand, against the South Koreans. Rodriguez ran onto a perfect through ball from Megan Rapinoe, put a five-yard gap between her and her defender and then stuffed the ball through the legs of the Korean ‘keeper to make it 2-0 in front of almost 10,000 boisterous fans.

“I turned around and started screaming,” said A-Rod. “I saw Megan’s face and all these thoughts came rushing in my mind. We were both so worried that we would never be here, and then it was happening and I was scoring. It was just so surreal.”

As surreal as playing for the full U.S. Women’s National Team at the age of 18? Rodriguez summed up her first cap experience, which came when she entered the match at halftime against Finland on March 11, with a perfect mixture of teenage charm and wonderment.

“It’s my first cap and I was nervous,” she said. “But once you get out there, after the first five or 10 minutes you get comfortable and get used to it and it’s just like any other soccer game. Except different, totally different.”

Rodriguez hopes that one day the experience of playing for the National Team will be a familiar one, but for now, she’s just enjoying the ride, as wild as it has been.

“You never know when you are going to get a chance like this, so I am just going to enjoy every minute,” said Rodriguez, who is headed to the University of Southern California next fall. “I guess it goes to show that if you keep working hard, believe in yourself and don’t let the stress of competing for roster spots affect your performance, anything can happen.”

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7) “YOU DON’T KNOW JACK (MARSHALL)” (MLS Past)

Think you know your soccer trivia? We’ll be the judge of that. Pop quiz: who the heck is Jack Marshall? Even the trivia buffs in the U.S. Soccer Communications Department would be hard-pressed to tell you that one Jack Marshall received his one and only cap way back in 1926. Okay, that was pretty much impossible. They get easier.

The 10th MLS season is just around the corner, so we figured we’d test you on your knowledge of the past nine seasons. We’re not going to be just going back the past couple years, so to get the answers right to these questions you better hope you’ve been paying attention since 1996. And no excuses like, “I’m only 15, when the league started, I was only six.” Sorry youngster. Now get cracking!

Questions:

1. When Youri Djorkaeff suits up for the MetroStars this season, he will be the third World Cup winner to play in the league. Who are the other two players in MLS history who have been on World Cup winning sides?
2. From Friedel to Hartman, Howard to Meola, there have been some world-class goalkeepers in MLS. Which of these lucky bunch have the dubious honor of surrendering the most total goals in All-Star games?
 - a. Jorge Campos
 - b. Tony Meola
 - c. Zach Thornton
 - d. Tim Howard
 - e. Kevin Hartman
3. There are 15 players on MLS rosters that are nine-year league veterans, having played every year of the league's existence. Of those, 13 have suited up for the U.S. MNT. Who are the two players that have not?
4. Since the league opened play in 1996, there have been four players who have been in the Top 5 on the Budweiser Scoring Leaders chart a record three times. Who are these four players? Hint: Two are still active to go for a record fourth in 2005.

Answers:

1. Lothar Matthaeus, Branco
2. c. Zach Thornton
3. Brian Kamler, Jaime Moreno
4. Raul Diaz Arce, Roy Lassiter, Preki, Ante Razov