

SHANE STAY

THIS IS OUR CITY

ST. LOUIS CITY SC AND THE REVIVAL
OF AMERICA'S FIRST SOCCER CAPITAL

MEYER & MEYER SPORT

This Is Our CITY

*Bob Guelker (1923-1986), Harry Keough (1927-2012),
and Bob Kehoe (1928-2017), three pioneers
of St. Louis and American soccer*

*Whether soccer fans or not, this book, which was
largely written during COVID-19 (coronavirus),
is also dedicated to the many people that died from
the virus. The pandemic, coincidentally, stalled
the opening season of St. Louis City SC.*

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Meyer & Meyer Sport

British Library of Cataloguing in Publication Data

A catalogue record for this book is available from the British Library

This Is Our CITY

Maidenhead: Meyer & Meyer Sport (UK) Ltd., 2023

9781782558750

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Aachen, Auckland, Beirut, Cairo, Cape Town, Dubai, Hügendorf, Hong Kong, Indianapolis, Maidenhead, Manila, New Delhi, Singapore, Sydney, Tehran, Vienna

Member of the World Sport Publishers' Association (WSPA), www.w-s-p-a.org

9781782558750

Email: info@m-m-sports.com

www.thesportspublisher.com

Credits

Cover design: Isabella Frangenberg

Interior design: Anja Elsen

Layout: DiTech Publishing Services, www.ditechpubs.com

Cover photo: ©AdobeStock

Managing editor: Elizabeth Evans

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INTRODUCTION

ST. LOUIS: WHERE GREATNESS HAPPENS

After a long, tedious, wait—it happened. St. Louis got its MLS team. St. Louis City SC has arrived!

St. Louis is overwhelmingly familiar with professional sports franchises. As most people know, St. Louis—where the Mississippi and Missouri Rivers join—has been a flourishing sports city over the years, with the St. Louis Cardinals (second all-time in World Series titles with 11), St. Louis Blues (Stanley Cup champions, 2019), previously the St. Louis Rams (Super Bowl champions, 2000), St. Louis Hawks (NBA champions, 1958), and the Spirits of St. Louis (who didn’t accomplish much other than kick starting the career of Bob Costas, who called games for KMOX radio). It’s a city that has embraced traditional sports with the best of them. I like to call baseball, basketball, and football the “Big 3” of traditional American sports. St. Louis, Missouri, has thrived in each.

As for other sports, you might not think of St. Louis right away. You might not think of St. Louis and tennis in the same sentence, yet, the great champion of the Australian Open, Wimbledon, and the US Open, Jimmy Connors, hails from East St. Louis, Illinois, a Metro East suburb. In the world of “non-contact” sports, such as bowling, St. Louis has sat atop the mountain, with Pete Weber, who was born in St. Ann, leading the way. Interestingly, in the world of chess, also normally a non-contact sport,* St. Louis hosts the distinguished Saint Louis Chess Club located in the Central West End. As for bocce ball, well, St. Louis has some catching up to do.

* Who are we kidding? It’s an activity.

Regardless, soccer, which in recent years has turned from a non-traditional anomaly to one of America's go-to feature attractions, has gone hand-in-hand with St. Louis as no other city. It's almost law that kids play youth soccer in St. Louis, in leagues such as the CYC, Catholic Youth Council; SLYSA, St. Louis Youth Soccer Association; and SISL, Southern Illinois Soccer League. For all intents and purposes, St. Louis is known as the king of soccer. We'll elaborate on this title in due time. But hold on. There's something very interesting to discuss.

JUST LIKE A NEUTRON STAR

Years ago, in 1982, astronomers made a remarkable discovery far off in the universe—a neutron star spinning 642 times per second! Then, as reported in 2006, according to Maggie McKee in *New Scientist*, astronomers found a neutron star rotating even faster! “The fastest-spinning neutron star ever found has been discovered in a crowded star cluster near the centre of the Milky Way, a new study reveals. The star rotates 716 times per second—faster than some theories predict is possible—and therefore may force researchers to revise their models.”¹ “The previous record holder, which spins at 642 Hz, was discovered in 1982.”² There are various neutron stars (by the way) that spin at slower, but still amazing, rates such as “...thirty-three revolutions per second,”³ as Martin Rees pointed out. However, the report of 716 spins per second is a mind-boggling concept. To think such a thing had been sitting there, in all its brilliance, rotating at a speed that defies logic, just waiting to be discovered.

In a way, St. Louis soccer—which has a magic all its own—has been sitting there, waiting to be discovered by new soccer fans in the US and around the world. As you'll see, St. Louis soccer has been spinning

off into space with fantastic teams, players, passion, results, records, organization, and high-quality for generations.

Let's start with the 1950 FIFA World Cup in which the United States miraculously defeated England in the famous 1-0 match. Five of the starting 11 US players were from St. Louis! That should be it; that should be "case closed," "thanks and good night," followed by "story's over." Five players? *Five players?* Yet there's more. Much more.

Within the world of club soccer, St. Louis teams—Seco, St. Paul, Kutis, St. Philip Di Neri, Imo's, Busch, Scott Gallagher, among others—have won a large number of national championships. In fact, St. Louis has been a leader in this regard, which we'll touch on later. For now, just remember this: In 1958, St. Louis Kutis was so good that it was called upon to play as proxy for the US national team. (Were there a couple of guest players? Sure. But that actually happened. And that's unheard of.)

In terms of Missouri high school soccer state championships, it's no contest. St. Louis leads the pack. St. Thomas Aquinas-Mercy, CBC, Vianney, St. Mary's, De Smet, and others who we'll touch on in a bit, have been the dominant schools in Missouri for decades now. Missouri, by virtue of the dense forest of talent in St. Louis, along with worthy competition from Kansas City and Cape Girardeau, is considered one of the nation's top high school soccer states. St. Louis has also contributed a substantial number of high school All-Americans.

Let's briefly talk college soccer, shall we? To this day, St. Louis University is the reigning all-time NCAA Division I champion with an amazing 10 titles. As a result, coaches Bob Guelker and Harry Keough[†] helped to shape American soccer. But that's not all. Many people are unaware of the incredible year 1973 in which St. Louis colleges garnered all national championships (SLU in NCAA Division I, UMSL in NCAA Division II, and Florissant Valley Community College in NJCAA Division I). When a city runs the table like that, something's going on—

[†] Harry Keough happened to be on that famous US team in the 1950 FIFA World Cup.

something very special. Furthermore, one can't forget the 1979 NCAA Division I championship earned by SIUE (located in the Metro East suburb of Edwardsville, Illinois), coached by the aforementioned Bob Guelker, one of America's early soccer innovators.

St. Louis has been a longtime leader in American professional soccer. St. Leo's, way back in the early 1900s, is credited with being an early pioneer in professional American soccer. From the 1960s onward, the St. Louis Stars competed in the NASL with many St. Louis players in the lineup (a bold move at the time). Some notable players from the Stars era included Bob Kehoe, Pat McBride, Jim Leeker, John Pisani, Gary Rensing, Al Trost, and Dennis Vaninger. (Bob Kehoe, a St. Louis legend, was a player and coach for the Stars and also the USMNT.) With all due respect to St. Leo's, the Stars were truly the pioneers of pro soccer in St. Louis (and America at large, along with fellow NASL teams). After the Stars joined the NASL, the result was massive. Subsequently, the Stars, in part, played a crucial role in the increase of youth, high school, and collegiate players around St. Louis, and, arguably, around the country. Following the Stars came a gradual inundation of professional indoor teams that included the St. Louis Steamers, St. Louis Storm, St. Louis Ambush (1995 NPSL champions), St. Louis Illusion, and Illinois Piasa, along with the professional outdoor teams, St. Louis Knights, AC St. Louis, Saint Louis FC, and, most recently, St. Louis City SC.

Still, that's not all. How about just a handful of players that have represented the USMNT? You have Harry Keough, Bob Kehoe, Pat McBride, Al Trost, Denny Vaninger, Ty Keough, Greg Villa, Steve Pecher, Steve Trittschuh, Mark Santel, Mike Sorber, Matt McKeon, Steve Ralston, Chris Klein, Taylor Twellman, Brad Davis, Tim Ream, Josh Sargent, and many others who we'll cover in a bit.

It's been a long, interesting history. Sure, St. Louis hasn't exactly spun around 716 times per second (that would make it a neutron star and I don't think the mayor would allow such a thing, wink-wink), but,

nonetheless, it's been achieving things in soccer that demand a second, third, and fourth look.

I know what you're thinking, New Jersey guy, California guy. Ye of little faith. For that matter, Liverpool guy and Munich guy might be thinking similar thoughts: *Yeah, so there's been soccer in St. Louis—what's the big deal?* Sure, your initial thought—likely laden with a vague assortment of disparate information—is a valid one. Certainly, the quality of soccer in New Jersey, D.C., California, and elsewhere throughout America, has been quite significant with respect to accomplishments and the overall growth of the sport nationwide. Though, without a doubt, regardless of how important the aforementioned places—and others—have been in the culture of American soccer, St. Louis has been the cradle, the hub, the headquarters—essentially ground zero.

MLS LAUNCHES IN 1996 WITHOUT THE KING

In brief, we've gone over the broad historical points of St. Louis soccer. Yes, we'll get into much more, later. (There's so much more!) Whether a seasoned St. Louis soccer aficionado or newcomer, one should find this very interesting. In 1996, when Major League Soccer launched its first season there were 10 teams...10 original teams. St. Louis was not one of them! This was odd. Bill McDermott—a former NCAA national soccer champion with SLU, a radio and TV announcer known as “Mr. Soccer” in St. Louis (a name bestowed on him by Bob Costas)—said, “If there's going to be a professional soccer league in the United States, it's almost mandatory that St. Louis play a part.”²⁴ This has been the sentiment in the soccer community for ages. Yet, back in 1996, even Kansas City had a team while its neighbor and soccer stronghold, St. Louis, didn't. This was *very* odd. And everyone knew it. Well, let's just say, anyone that knew American soccer knew it. It was a mysterious travesty. Let's take a look at the original 10 MLS teams:

THE EASTERN CONFERENCE (1996)

Columbus Crew, D.C. United, New England Revolution, New York/New Jersey MetroStars, Tampa Bay Mutiny

THE WESTERN CONFERENCE (1996)

Colorado Rapids, Dallas Burn, Kansas City Wiz, Los Angeles Galaxy, San Jose Clash

There was no St. Louis. Here's why this was significant. For years, for generations in fact, St. Louis—the king of soccer—has led the soccer community in America. It's been the leader. No question.

Even folks from Chicago—which has a rich soccer tradition of its own—have admitted as much. If you know anything about the entrenched rivalry between St. Louis and Chicago, then you'd know this is saying something. There's the St. Louis Cardinals vs. Chicago Cubs; always draped in beer, it's a peaceful, yet overwhelmingly passionate affair. Then there's the St. Louis Blues vs. Chicago Blackhawks; always draped in beer, yet it's a tribal affair two steps away from a UFC cage fight. In the longstanding sports rivalries between St. Louis and Chicago it's difficult for people from Chicago to give St. Louis a compliment. End of story. It usually doesn't happen. If it happens at all, there better be a damned good reason. Take a brief example from back in 1992. (It may seem passingly trivial and innocuous, but it has a lot to do with the overall status of St. Louis in the grand landscape of American soccer.) I played high school soccer at Collinsville, Illinois, a St. Louis Metro East school second only to its neighbor, the colossal, legendary, mega-powerhouse jet engine that was Granite City High School which dominated the Illinois high school landscape in the name of St. Louis soccer for years. (Granite City has 10 state championships, in fact, still a record!) In 1992, my CHS team was about to win a fourth Illinois High School Association (IHSA) state championship, amid the final game against Evanston Township

High School. It was televised on SportsChannel[‡] and calling the game from Chicago were Mike Leiderman and Bob Dollaske. Speaking of the Metro East and St. Louis, Leiderman said: “For those who are not that familiar with high school soccer in general, the Illinois side though in particular, the downstate area really has an awful lot of competition with St. Louis schools. And St. Louis, of course, is the number one, the number one soccer area in the country.” In turn, Dollaske added, “When we talk about downstate, it’s really just the area, Belleville and Collinsville and Granite City, those that can go across the river and play in St. Louis where soccer is king.”

For anyone from Chicago—or even standing on Chicago soil—to offer such a compliment to St. Louis is astoundingly significant. The announcers were echoing an ‘ancient mantra’ doused in fact that has lingered in America like a Greek myth. St. Louis: The King of Soccer.

Let’s put it this way: In 1958, when the United States needed a club team to represent the US national team as proxy, did it call upon Seattle, Portland, San Francisco, Los Angeles, San Diego, Phoenix, Dallas, Houston, Kansas City, Chicago, Detroit, Cincinnati, Cleveland, Memphis, New York, New Jersey, Philadelphia, Pittsburgh, D.C., or Miami? No. The United States of America[§] asked St. Louis Kutis. When a nation calls upon one club team, from one city, to play as the national team, that’s called being “the king of soccer.”

Get used to it. That’s how it always has been and it’s how fans of St. Louis City SC intend for the future to be. These fans have been sitting back, astonished, since 1996 when St. Louis was left out of the initial MLS liftoff. Given the history of St. Louis soccer, it was bizarre.

[‡] Essentially, SportsChannel took off in 1976 with headquarters in New York City, and was owned by Cablevision (1979-98) and NBC (1988-98). It was superseded by Fox Sports Networks, Comcast SportsNet.

[§] Technically, the United States Soccer Federation. Grant it, there were a few guest players but this does not diminish the reality of Kutis playing as proxy for the US national team.

Imagine this sci-fi hypothetical: The United States shuts down for a month. It completely shuts down. Everything goes silent. All lights are turned off. Everyone hibernates. Then, all of a sudden, everyone wakes up and things start to operate again to full functioning capacity. Finally, everyone takes a sigh of relief. At this point, each city announces it will have an NFL team. In fact, everyone announces this except for Dallas. That's right, Dallas. It turns out that Dallas is the only city with no NFL team. I know what you're thinking: *Well, this is kind of weird. Why wouldn't Dallas have a football team?* Then, lo and behold, the NFL community has to wait over 20 years for the Dallas Cowboys to become a team. What? How in the hell (pardon my French) is this possible? This is how insane it is that St. Louis—the king of soccer—took so long to have a Major League Soccer team. It just didn't make sense. So much so that when the league continued to expand, St. Louis was not included.

After the original 1996 MLS season, gradually the league grew successful. With this success came expansion. New teams were emerging onto the scene left and right it would seem. However, St. Louis was still not included. You might want to sit down for this: Salt Lake City, Utah, had a team and St. Louis didn't. Salt Lake City, that amazing beacon of soccer. It just didn't make sense. Wait, there's more. Orlando, Florida, had a team and St. Louis didn't. Don't get me wrong, Orlando is a great place, with a good soccer community. But anyone knows—especially people from Orlando, along with every other city in the United States—that St. Louis is the dominant soccer community between the two. It's a joke actually; it's not even worth a realistic conversation. That wasn't all. Let's not forget Montreal, Canada. When everyone thinks Major League Soccer, they automatically think Montreal, Canada. (Slight sarcasm.) Despite being an enthusiastic soccer city, Columbus, Ohio, had a team and St. Louis didn't. What a slap in the face. Columbus? Really? And not St. Louis? Okay, I guess. If you insist. (A little more sarcasm.) All in all, none of this made any sense.

Meanwhile, as St. Louis was living in an ongoing episode of *The Twilight Zone*, the years were piling up in Major League Soccer's gradual climb in popularity. After a while, more cities were joining the league: Portland, Seattle, Vancouver, Atlanta, yet no St. Louis. Then Minnesota got a team before St. Louis! What?! How was this possible? Well, it was. Who was next, Cincinnati? Yep. That actually happened. *That actually happened*. Cincinnati got an MLS team before St. Louis. Oy. I know. The weirdness kept piling up. If you're thinking, *What?* Trust me, you're not alone. Then again, you could be someone that looks at this whole situation and thinks it was completely normal. If you are, well, you're probably from Cincinnati. (Timeout. Before you think I'm having a go at Cincinnati or Ohio in general, I'm not. Soccer's no joke in Ohio, that's for sure. It's a state that's had multiple professional teams over the years. Youth soccer has been a big deal there as well. I remember at a U13 tournament in Germantown, Tennessee, I was playing as a mercenary on a very talented team from Cape Girardeau, Missouri—which, for a time, was number one in SLYSA, the top league in St. Louis—and we went up against Coke from Cincinnati in the championship game and they took it to us 4-1. In our defense, we were exhausted after a 1-0 revenge victory in the semi-finals over a team from Memphis that had defeated us 4-1 the night beforehand; it was a triumphant moment for us, and, indeed, our legs could barely move in the final. But the team from Cincinnati was good, not to mention it was sponsored by Coca-Cola (a major plus), and, just based on this one team, you could tell something was going on in Cincinnati. Add to this multiple pro teams over the years, along with the Akron Zips, and you can understand why Ohio is a legitimate soccer state.)

Whether we're talking about Cincinnati or Vancouver or a city with two names in Minnesota, the bottom line is this: It took a long time for St. Louis—the king of soccer—to get a Major League Soccer team. The struggle was real. Interestingly, St. Louis was even pleading to join MLS, with multiple well-intentioned attempts as Dale Schilly, a crucial

figure in this process and a former coach of Saint Louis FC, can attest. These were attempts with a lot of momentum that unfortunately failed before crossing the proverbial finish line. Dale was part of two previous efforts, dating as far back as 2008. Lest anyone forget there was much underway before certain billionaire investors stepped in during the final push to victory.

It was a long process, there's no other way to put it. At one point, around 2015 or 2016 (I forget which exactly) I went down to an office—somewhere near downtown St. Louis—where efforts were being made to bring an MLS franchise to the Gateway City. I was given some information and that was about it. At the time, I was researching material for another book. But, the overall message I'm relaying to you is that an effort was indeed underway to bring Major League Soccer to St. Louis, which occurred in different phases, years before St. Louis City SC came to fruition.

The end result is a product—an MLS team—that will not only represent St. Louis proper but also the immediate area, and then some. Indeed, the introduction of any team has the potential to affect lives across the world. In some time, when MLS becomes the world's next super league (as I firmly believe it will), St. Louis could very well be the next Manchester United, Bayern Munich, Barcelona, or Juventus. The introduction of this jewel St. Louis City SC is, without a doubt, a historic event. A truly historic undertaking.

YOUR EFFERVESCENT GUIDE

The honor I have to bring you the history of the beautiful game in St. Louis is beyond compare. Through the lens of my experiences with St. Louis soccer I'm in a position to humbly reflect on St. Louis' vast history and put forth why this area is prepared to send forth a stellar MLS franchise in the form of St. Louis City SC.

From my travels throughout St. Louis soccer as a player I've realized that where there is amazing talent on the field the result is an aftermath of super-savvy aficionados of the game, which is what St. Louis City SC has inherited.

Just before 9th grade I moved to the St. Louis area by way of Collinsville, Illinois, in the Metro East. I'm originally from Carbondale, Illinois, which is about an hour and a half south of St. Louis, give or take. Essentially, for what it's worth, I was stuck in the wrong place to play soccer seriously. Carbondale was seen as the backwater of American soccer, the backwater of Illinois soccer, and the backwater of Southern Illinois soccer. That's a lot of backwater. Not good. It's the home of SIUC not SIUE, though both are related. When I was there it was a vibrant college town that focused on baseball, basketball, and football, with soccer as a fourth option. Though, from time to time, we did have some very good players, and we'd occasionally encounter teams from St. Louis in this tournament or that tournament.

Everyone knew that St. Louis was a soccer factory. Soccer was serious there. It was *the* place to be. If you encountered a team from St. Louis, you'd notice how the skill and intensity levels were higher across-the-board; the teams were confident and arrogant like nobody's business. Soccer was just plain better in St. Louis and it had been around a long time as well, there was a rich tradition going back generations.

Eventually, while living in Carbondale, I played in St. Louis when I was around 11-12 years old (we'll get to that in a second). Let's just say, I played on a lot of teams. When I say a lot of teams, I mean a lot of teams. To say I was a mercenary would be an insult to mercenaries everywhere, though, I would say I was essentially a player for hire.

As a result, I have many former teammates that helped shape my perspective on soccer, and like concentric circles forming in a lake from a rock hitting it, these players were part of an expanding circle that intersected with other circles in a vast array of connections over time. They are all interconnected; just as players such as Harry Keough, Carl Gentile, Pat McBride, Perry Van der Beck, Steve Pecher, Steve

Trittschuh, Mike Sorber, Steve Ralston, Tim Ream, and Josh Sargent have played a role in making those circular patterns, so too have a myriad of teammates and opposition around them along the way. Now, with various circles combining into one, St. Louis City SC has formed from a community—household names on ESPN right down to aficionados that only dabbled in youth soccer—that has been invested in the game for generations.

The St. Louis soccer experience has touched the lives of many, and, long before St. Louis City SC, I was fortunate to be a part of it.

When I was around eight or nine, my earliest experience with St. Louis' famous Soccer Park* (that I can remember) came after a scrimmage game against Fenton.

Fenton was a team that would show up to the Cape Girardeau tournament in southeast Missouri and annihilate opponents. The All-Star team I was with from Carbondale—where I first began playing—made the trip up to Fenton and lost 3-1, in a game after one of their practices. This was just before the Fenton kids transitioned to teams like Busch and Johnny Mac; this Fenton side likely consisted of Tony Williams, Timmy Pratt, Tommy Rohr, and Jason Feeney. Our goal-scorer that day was Dylan Bates. Dylan—the former CEO of ATI Physical Therapy—was a gifted four-sport athlete—baseball, basketball, football, and soccer—that eventually played college basketball. As was the case with most kids in Carbondale, soccer was typically his last choice, though, oddly enough, it might have been his best sport—a natural. Defender Andy Vanawken, who later played soccer for Eastern Illinois University, and forward Gregory Gimenez, who eventually suited up for SIUE, were also on our side. It wasn't enough. A typical result. This was the fate many clubs from across the country endured when they went up against a St. Louis team. It was the culture, it was the tradition St. Louis had to its advantage (not to mention, a substantial population).

* Soccer Park is thought of as a St. Louis gem, though it's technically located in the south suburb of Fenton, Missouri.

This Fenton team, by the way, wasn't just one group of guys operating in a vacuum. At this point in time, the early to mid-1980s, the St. Louis Steamers were roaring with insane attendance numbers, and players like the ones we had lost to were taking all that in, watching top-notch performers, while also receiving strong coaching that flourished in the area. This wasn't just one game as a model. This Fenton team and others nearby were indicative of a large culture of soccer. When you have players as good as they were, along with a pro team, the Steamers, you'll also have strong fanfare for the sport, which was the case. We had entered a section of the country where soccer was a cultural phenomenon. Today, when you visit a St. Louis City SC game, you'll probably come across middle-aged men walking to their seats with a beer in hand, many of whom might've put on a little extra weight and haven't done a sit-up in maybe 15 years, waddling around, and you'd never suspect that at one time they were youth soccer badasses. After talking with them for about 30 seconds, you'll come to realize their soccer IQs are off the chart.

Following the loss to Fenton, a few of us went to Soccer Park which was down the road a bit and sat in the bleachers that overlooked the whole thing—a pristine multi-field complex equipped with a concession area, deck, bleachers, night-lights, scoreboard, and parking lot. I imagined teams around my age, wearing Umbro and Patrick uniforms (which were popular in the 80s), playing on the two turf fields. It was an awe-inspiring sight. Then we trampled on one of the side grass-fields with a ball, feeling lucky to tread on such perfect grass. We had a field complex back home, but not quite like this. Ours was nice though (Parrish Fields). There were two fields on one side of the road, and about six on the other. There was a YMCA there. There was also a shed...for our basic communal uniforms—reversible jerseys with the colors of red on one side and gold on the other—along with flags and other such things that fields need. Soccer Park, on the other hand, was special. You could feel it.

I also played for the Cape Girardeau Cobras—my first mercenary gig—that competed in the late 1980s in SLYSA[†] and for a time we were

[†] St. Louis Youth Soccer Association.

number one (how'd that happen?). A few players included Seth Benton, Derek Doyle, Ty Eggiman, Gregory Gimenez, Damon Harkins, Shannon Lee, Todd Nordman, Sean Pfeiffer, Craig Scheer, and Phil Tomlinson. This was a very competitive team whose dads were on a quest each game to prove they were former Civil War Generals. Armed with a fleet of minivans at their disposal, it was an era in American soccer that saw club competition soar, with St. Louis leading the nation. It would seem the sole intent of this team was to dismantle the mighty reputation of the Gateway City. In fact, within Missouri, Cape Girardeau might be considered the second St. Louis—it's a very talented soccer city.

Subsequently I played with a Carbondale club team, the Pharaohs, which competed in SISL.[#] Some players were Dylan Bates, Jason Clark, Gregory Gimenez, Matt Henry, Matt Lawrence, Leandro Sapiro, Andy Vanawken, Matt Wadiak, and Jason Wooley. Once upon a time, as underdogs, we beat Granite City 1-0, a great achievement.

Eventually, at the start of my freshman year in high school, to pursue soccer at a higher level, my mom got a job teaching in Jennings (just north of St. Louis), and I moved to Collinsville, Illinois, and let's just say, Carbondale was far enough away that when I arrived my new classmates got a kick out of my Southern accent.

Back to my travels as a mercenary. I played with the Granite City Elks, Troy Chargers, Busch Soccer Club (with whom I won a Missouri club state championship), a one-off Metro East team coached by Ed Gettemeier—a former goalie for the St. Louis Steamers—that won the Holland Cup, Edwardsville Soccer Club, Collinsville United, and Collinsville High School whereby I was part of two high school state championships, thank you very much. I wasn't kidding: That's a lot of teams in the St. Louis area! From these various squads, the amount of teammates was vast, yet a mere handful would include Rick Artime, Jamey Bridges, Marty Bub, Pauli Bucherich, Jason Feeney, Doug Hartmann, Jaron Hines, John Houska, Josh Jenkins, Casey Klipfel, Mike

[#] Southern Illinois Soccer League. This was a Metro East league that mainly included Belleville, Collinsville, Edwardsville, Granite City, and Alton.

Masters, Timmy Pratt, Ryan Seim, and Steve VanDyke. Hold on, there's a bit more. Moving into my elder years, I played on an all-African team for a game or two, and, not to mention, while I was attending SIUC for graduate school, I reluctantly played for the Southern Illinois Blast, a team that competed in a Metro East indoor league. At the age of 32, I even had a brief stint in professional soccer with the St. Louis Illusion in which I would argue I made Bob Uecker look like Stan "The Man" Musial. All in all, I submit that I've lived St. Louis soccer like no one else. I also have over 30 trophies and awards to boot (35 to be exact, but who's counting?). Ahem. Not to mention, I gathered two consecutive MVP awards from Indiana Soccer Camp. Well that's just petty, come on Shane, get a grip. (Now I'm just shamelessly bragging; let me get it out of my system and we'll get back on track very soon, I promise!) Ahem-ahem!

Shameless and pathetic bragging aside, this next point is actually very apropos. Let's rewind for a second. When I was around 14, I was fortunate enough to stay in Porto Alegre, Brazil, and train with a farm team of Sport Club Internacional. Why do I point this out? Good question. Good answer, I hope. I realized that the best of Porto Alegre, Brazil, were no different than the best of St. Louis. This meant the top talent of SLYSA within my age group—Chris Klein, Craig Corbett, Kevin Kalish, Tony Williams, Kevin Quigley, Timmy Pratt, Casey Klipfel, Jason Feeney, Mike Moriarty, Pat Moriarty, and others—were among the best players in the world. This had been the case before my time, and, certainly, it will continue to be so.

The following year, when I was part of an undefeated team that won the U16 Holland Cup, with the brilliant Ed Gettemeier as our coach, the opposition consisted of teams from Netherlands, Denmark, Austria, and Italy. These were top teams and yet again I realized how they were tantamount to top SLYSA teams in my age group.

Well, you might be thinking, if that's the case, if St. Louis youth players were and are as good as others in leading nations around the world, then why hasn't the USMNT won the FIFA World Cup? Great question. Great answer, I hope. The question of why the USMNT has not won the World Cup is out of the scope of this book, yet, it raises a valid—and very tantalizing—point nonetheless. After all, when the USMNT inevitably loses in World Cup competition (an all too familiar outcome these days) it leaves US players and fans alike to commiserate over yet another mysterious hurdle left to climb within the lexicon of the dominant American sports landscape. Let's reiterate that last point as simply as possible: The United States has won every other title in sports except for men's soccer.[§] As it turns out, soccer is America's last athletic frontier. It's an interesting phenomenon.

The only thing standing in the way of complete American sports dominance comes in the form of the men's soccer Olympic gold medal and FIFA World Cup championship. That's it. (Go figure; yes, it's that simple.) Let's face it: Since 1990, the USMNT has never reached the semi-finals of a World Cup. So why hasn't the USMNT won a World Cup? The answer is multifaceted. Again, the reasons for this are not directly within the scope of this book. In brief, one important reason has to do with the following: There is an interesting disconnect with youth soccer in America (which is competitive worldwide) and the results of the USMNT in World Cups. While youth soccer players in America are as good as any players from around the world, something seems to click—in a negative way—when it comes to adult competition. Here's the thing, though. For US soccer fans there is hope; for international soccer fans there is reason for massive bouts of trepidation. The continued improvement of MLS will only help contribute talent (and invaluable high-level experience) to the US men's national team, which, in turn, will have better chances of eventually, potentially, winning a World Cup.

[§] You may have guessed: The United States leads the world in Olympic gold medals.

This next point is perhaps most interesting of all. St. Louis is now directly back in the limelight and part of the equation (along with every other MLS franchise). It's all interconnected. St. Louis and fellow MLS franchises—acting as incubators for the USMNT—are right on the threshold of history. Hence, in this interconnected world, fans of St. Louis City SC—who, in all likelihood, are already aficionados of the game—essentially have a vested interest to be part of not only an MLS team's success but also that of the USMNT.

Given the vast and impressive pedigree of St. Louis soccer (tantamount to practically no equal in the continental United States), there has been speculation as to whether or not an “all St. Louis roster” should represent the USMNT similar to how Barcelona players were a salient factor in Spain's success during the Triple.* Pat McBride (a former SLU national champion, NCAA All-American, St. Louis Stars standout, USMNT midfielder, and St. Louis Steamers coach) told me, despite an overwhelming amount of past success, and considering how soccer has grown substantially around the nation, “it would be a tough sell.” Unfortunately, for St. Louis soccer and USMNT fans, this is true. Despite the USMNT in the 1950 World Cup being comprised of five starters from St. Louis, a side that yielded a 1-0 victory over giant England, that was a long time ago, a different era. McBride—a St. Louis legend that gathered much of his keen insight from another St. Louis legend, Bob Guelker—also has a master's from SIUE in Physical Education and is no one to scoff at when it comes to such matters. Perhaps, deep down, he probably knows that a magical St. Louis roster in the modern era could make history; and, yes, without a doubt, such speculation might be more valuable than what an average soccer fan realizes.

Regardless, it's an exciting time. As a soccer fan in America, you really couldn't ask for more. In fact, it's not just an exciting time. It's a historically significant time. The addition of all these new teams to MLS,

* The Triple is in reference to when Spain won the 2008 UEFA Euro, 2010 FIFA World Cup, and 2012 UEFA Euro in a row. No other European nation has ever done this.

St. Louis included, is like a soccer fan's dream come true. It couldn't be a more exciting time for US soccer at large.

As I weaved in and out of research for this book, it became apparent how fortunate I've been to have played with and against many players that helped put St. Louis soccer on the map. Aside from a number of players in my immediate age group that were distinguished high-level talents (such as Chris Klein, who subsequently played for the USMNT and became President of LA Galaxy), as a 15-year-old center midfielder for Busch I was obliged—in scrimmages—to guard a very quick, fast, high-jumping, and highly skilled Tim Leonard (who eventually became a SLU standout, pro player, and interim coach of Saint Louis FC), who was on the Busch team a year ahead of me, no less...if that didn't make me a better player (and thinker of the game) I don't know what would! (It was never a walk in the park, by the way.) From the teams and players I've played with and against in the St. Louis area, I've gathered indispensable insight from it. Furthermore, in researching this book (what a great journey it was), I interviewed influential St. Louis soccer icons that not only represent soccer at the highest level but also provided invaluable information about the past, present, and future state of St. Louis soccer.

So to rewind for a second...what does all this personal experience have to do with the history of St. Louis City SC? As a kid, way back when, never in my wildest dreams did I think I'd be writing a book about a pro soccer team in St. Louis and the area I grew up playing soccer in! Never, not once! (To say it's an honor would be an insult to the word honor!) As such, without knowing it, I was consequently imparted with valuable wisdom I never went looking for in the form of the following three points.

I just covered it a tiny bit, but first off, to reiterate, having experienced St. Louis soccer as a player—with various teams—provided indispensable insight on the subject. This seems obvious yet it's worth pointing out all the same.

Secondly, from my travels throughout St. Louis soccer as a player I've realized that where you have an overwhelming number of players—at all levels that spans generations—you also get an aftermath of super-savvy fans of the game, which is what St. Louis City SC inherited.

And thirdly. Luckily (thank God), this isn't about me. You might be thinking otherwise at this point, but I assure you, to the best of my ability, it's not. Though, credentials-wise, it's worth pointing out I've had the "outsider looking in" and "insider looking out" experience in the world of St. Louis soccer, and I'd argue this is exactly what you need as a guide for a book like this. I'm no psychologist, just a 400-hundred-pound gorilla; yet, I would imagine if you were writing a book about New York City fashion, it would help if you've had some experience in the realm of New York fashion. You see, an outsider looking in has limited perspective. For that matter, an insider looking out also has limited perspective. Luckily I've played both roles. You're welcome.

Unlike many who carry the somewhat cumbersome responsibility of being attached to one club, high school, or college, for instance, I have a different perspective. Originally, before I had an insider's view of St. Louis soccer, as an outsider looking in, one that played with numerous clubs, I always had the luxury to empathize with many teams and see them all as distinctly great in their own way, like puzzle pieces with the ability to be combined into a greater purpose. While many players have enjoyed deep instilled rancor toward opposing jerseys, based on rivalries,[†] I've luckily had the freedom to appreciate any and every great team with unclouded judgment. For instance, my high school team—Collinsville High—traditionally played CBC early in the season to kick things off, so to speak. I'd like to sit back and enjoy animosity toward that program, but I can't; as a team led by future SLU players Mike and Pat Moriarty, they were just too damn good; and if a program is that good it earns my respect and it should earn anyone's respect. Certainly players from, say,

[†] Such as the Northside-Southside clashes that go back generations, even, if you can believe it, before the 1960s.

Vianney, had dislike for CBC while still holding onto a healthy level of respect; though, I would imagine, a certain amount of animosity trickled over as well. This is where I feel lucky to have separated myself from the norm with the ability to roam free from judgment over any team based on a deep-rooted, passionate, rivalry.

There are generations of people in St. Louis that have been tied to a club, high school, college, and pro team in one way or another. Essentially, Scott Gallagher, CBC, Vianney, St. Thomas Aquinas-Mercy, St. Louis University, and others, serve as handy gateway tools to understanding how in-depth the St. Louis soccer love affair is. Of course, the clubs—such as Kutis, Busch, and Scott Gallagher—have all been interrelated with the local high schools, which have been interrelated with the local universities, which, in turn, have been interrelated with the pro teams (e.g., St. Louis Stars and St. Louis Steamers), Olympic teams, and national teams. In one way or another, it's an interconnected system. Where you have talent this good (CBC for example), there's a natural spillover effect into the immediate athletic community, and community at large. In aggregate, within the interrelated world of club, high school, college, pro, and national team soccer, you have generations of people that are highly knowledgeable of the game.

Not too long ago, I came across an old friend, a former teammate of mine in SLYSA. We reflected on the high-octane atmosphere of that league, and the prominence of St. Louis soccer nationwide. To have played in SLYSA was to play against the best in the country, hence the world. The teams we played against had such a strong sense of pride for the jersey they wore.

As Confucius said, "Hold faithfulness and sincerity as first principles." St. Louis has that and then some. People are not only loyal to their club but also to St. Louis soccer as a whole, all that it stands for, and all of its individual parts that have piled up trophies on top of trophies. Needless

to say, but it should be said nonetheless, if people set aside past rivalries, every ounce of St. Louis soccer, regardless of who contributed, adds up to greatness. Setting aside past grievances is a small premium to pay yet the big picture is nothing less than all-encompassing St. Louis pride, kind of like a large museum everyone can walk through, appreciate, and say, “I added to a small part of this structure.”

People now have a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to pledge their allegiance to one pro MLS team, similar to how many players in the past attached themselves to a club or high school team, players I was envious of, to an extent, for their ability to ‘be attached to one team as their own.’ To the delight of many, all tradition now pours into one St. Louis MLS team at the very top of the soccer pyramid. Ultimately, if you didn’t already know, now you do: St. Louis has been the king of soccer in America for as long as anyone can remember.

Now, St. Louis is finally joining the ranks of LAFC, LA Galaxy, Seattle Sounders, Sporting Kansas City, New England Revolution, Atlanta United FC, and the rest. Oy. It was a long, mysterious, wait. Former SLU All-American, St. Louis Stars standout, USMNT captain, and St. Louis Steamers skipper, Al Trost, said, “I’m going to be a season ticket holder for sure.” Former NASL Rookie of the Year who became President of the St. Louis Soccer Hall of Fame, Jim Leeker, pointed out, “It’s a very exciting time!” noting that aspects of the stadium are similar in style to that of LAFC, where St. Louis soccer legend Mike Sorber landed as director of soccer operations back in 2017. The stage is set. St. Louis is all in.

The fact that it took so long for Major League Soccer to come around to St. Louis is intriguing, and, as you’ll see, it’s a perfect place for a new MLS franchise. It may sound like I’m pitching the city for some tourism grant money from the US government. Well, I’m not (unless there’s something in it for me). We can talk later. For now though, I’m just laying out the facts for you. This story of soccer in St. Louis and the rise of MLS in this amazing sports city is truly a great piece of

American sports history, and American history. Period. St. Louis—which has been home to the Cardinals, Blues, professional indoor and outdoor soccer, previously the Rams, and even a pro basketball team that Bob Costas started out with, the Spirits of St. Louis—is deserving of such an opportunity like no other city. (If it hasn't become somewhat clear to this point, well, frankly, I suspect you're from Cincinnati. There I go again, having a go at Cincinnati. It's too easy, I tell yah.) The process, in fact, like Brian Wilson finally dropping Pet Sounds, was an arduous struggle for St. Louis (collectively over the years) to put together a plan that would impress MLS executives enough to allow entry.

On this vast and exciting journey of St. Louis receiving an MLS team, we'll look at many things along the way to this pinnacle, including but not limited to the clubs that stood out, such as Kutis, Busch, Scott Gallagher; the high schools, all-mighty St. Thomas Aquinas-Mercy, big shot CBC, the great Vianney, De Smet, St. Mary's, Granite City; the colleges, the one and only SLU, SIUE, UMSL, Florissant Valley Community College; the pro teams, the legendary Stars, all-time classic Steamers, Storm, Ambush, Illusion, Illinois Piasa, AC St. Louis, Saint Louis FC; the coaches, Bob Guelker, Harry Keough, Bob Kehoe, Vince Drake, Gene Baker, Pete Sorber (just to name a few); the players, Harry Keough, Pat McBride, Jim Leeker, Ty Keough, Daryl Doran, Steve Trittschuh, Taylor Twellman, Brad Davis, Tim Ream, Josh Sargent (and so many others in-between); the ownership group; the magnificent stadium; and of course the new MLS team itself.

Ron Jacober—the iconic voice of the St. Louis Cardinals who also called games for the original St. Louis Steamers, St. Louis Storm, and original St. Louis Ambush—reminded me there are thousands upon thousands of players in St. Louis today. That fact (which is resonating throughout the nation) is a revealing representation of how the world's beautiful game landed in America generations ago, and time (interlaced with passion and effort) has brought MLS to St. Louis where soccer is greater than ever and it's about to launch into a new stratosphere. The

story of Jack Maher—a Scott Gallagher product that, according to the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, “...spent two invaluable summers training with St. Louis FC of the United Soccer League”⁵—is just a sign of things to come. After a strong career at Indiana University—a goliath of a school that has acquired numerous St. Louis players over the years—Maher began plotting out a journey in MLS just as St. Louis was about to embark on its inaugural season. From this point forward, future players such as Maher, who grew up in the St. Louis area, will have a local team to lean on, to cheer forward, and to glean inspiration from.

Just as St. Louis City SC is inheriting super-savvy fans of the game from participants of all levels (that span generations), along with passionate, rowdy, dedicated, experienced, organized, steadfast, unwavering, and über-loud fans under the umbrella of the St. Louligans (founded 2010), it will undoubtedly pull in fans from around the world as well. After all, it’s joined the international family of club soccer.

For some 10 years when I owned a restaurant in the wine country of San Francisco—in the historic downtown of Petaluma, right around the corner from the wine shop of soccer-enthusiast Jason Jenkins—plenty of people talked soccer. Some knew of St. Louis, some didn’t; local soccer-guy Ron Masi, for instance, needed a little dropping of the science. Most knew something of St. Louis, though. They should’ve, after all. The legend of St. Louis soccer and all its glory has been lurking out there, in the ether of society, for a long time. Having said that, despite knowing about St. Louis soccer, many people didn’t know the full gamut of the situation; when it’s all said and done, it should go without saying, there are a myriad of details that go unnoticed unless brought to full clarity.

I’m glad you’ve joined. Sit back and enjoy the ride like a jazz odyssey from Vince Guaraldi (so we hope). I can’t wait to get started. Well, technically we have. Here we go. (By the way, if I ever do live tours ((doubtful)) and talk like this, hopefully you’ll leave a tip at the end. But seriously, more than a dollar—papa needs a new pair of shoes, Blues tickets are getting more expensive, and there’s a jacket I’ve been eyeing

down at Frontenac. Okay, let's move on!) I'm honored to bring home the full story of St. Louis soccer to you, in its entire splendor, and elucidate why it's in perfect harmony with Major League Soccer.

As you'll see, there's nothing quite like St. Louis soccer.