

Pro Soccer Comes To San Francisco

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San Francisco Deltas practicing at Boxer Stadium.

SAN FRANCISCO (KPIX 5) – San Francisco is home to a new professional soccer team called the Deltas. In mathematical terms, the name means change and it's something the startup club is taking to heart.

They are one of eight teams in the North American Soccer League, and are the only franchise west of the Mississippi River. The level of play is a rung below the San Jose Earthquakes' caliber, but some of the players on the Deltas roster come from the MLS.

The NASL provides a proving ground for those who want to reach higher levels or make it back.

"If players move to a higher level, that's a good sign," said head coach Marc Dos Santos who has experience building a team from scratch. The 2015 NASL coach of the year helped launch the Ottawa Fury in 2011.



The Deltas play home games at Kezar Stadium, and had over 4,000 fans show up to their inaugural game on March 25th. The early success is a dream come true for Colombian-born owner Brian Andres Helmick.

"There are two things they teach you in Colombia as a little boy. One, you have to love futbol. The other is you have to learn how to dance," said Helmick.

Helmick claims to be a good dancer, and his love of soccer is unquestioned. But Helmick is also an entrepreneur and recently sold his business administration company Argentis to focus on bringing the beautiful game to San Francisco.

He opened the team's headquarters in San Francisco's SOMA district, and the vibe in the office is how you might expect it.

"I think the other teams in our league look at us in the stereotype of the Bay Area," Helmick said. "I wear jeans, they wear slacks. They wear sport coats, I wear hoodies."

But don't confuse causal for uncompetitive. Helmick hopes the backing of investors from local tech giants can make his minor league team successful in a major league town.

"There's no question that a set of investors with those types of backgrounds helps us dramatically from an innovation perspective," said Helmick who has partners also working for Apple, Facebook and Google.

The Deltas are on the cutting edge of fan experience. They broadcast their games globally on Twitter in three different languages. They're also developing "artificial intelligence" online ticket purchasing, plus they've invested in the restoration of Kezar Stadium. The 90-year-old facility was fitted with new locker rooms, seats and lights.

The least expensive seat at Kezar Stadium costs \$17 and the season runs through October.

"We know we can't compete with the Warriors, Giants and 49ers," said Dos Santos. "For the community that likes soccer, this is the team to support."

The team believes San Francisco has an appetite for soccer. They point to the 2014 World Cup when thousands packed Civic Center Plaza to watch the games on big screen TVs.

While fans are beginning to support the Deltas, the Deltas are helping to support its players. The front office subsidizes rent for 12 players at a Nob Hill apartment building.

Deltas goalkeeper Alex Mangels was quick to point out the Deltas offer a few more perks than some of the other lower-level professional soccer teams.

"It's definitely taking a different approach," Mangels said. "Getting to practice is pretty unique. Some days I'll take the cable car to Powell Street and hop on BART."

"12 guys," said Dos Santos with a smile. "I don't know what the guys do, and I don't want to know."