Kicking & Streaming

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A new professional soccer team in San Francisco finds its footing.

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Deltas players warming up for a home match at Kezar Stadium. The club invested close to $1 million on stadium improvements.

The San Francisco Deltas, a new professional soccer team that began play in March 2017, were on fire. In the team's first nine games they had let in only four goals and lost zero games. They managed to eke out a preseason victory against the regional nemesis San Jose Earthquakes of Major League Soccer, or MLS. Overall, the Deltas ended up losing just four of their first eighteen games en route to a second place finish during their inaugural season in the North American Soccer League, or NASL. Winning was, somehow, an innate talent for the team.

So when the New York Cosmos arrived in San Francisco to play the Deltas in late April, there was little cause for concern. A crowd of 3,302 sprinkled into the 10,000-capacity Kezar Stadium, the Deltas rental space they use as a home field. Kezar, a scholastic sports venue and public space in Golden Gate Park, housed the 49ers from 1946 to 1970. As a tip of the hat to the hallowed ground, the club installed 3,800 red seats from the 49ers previous home, Candlestick Park, part of a slew of renovations that totaled nearly $1 million.

The Delta Force, the team's supporters group, doesn't make use of seats. A vocal sea of Deltas swag, the group is quarantined to a section of wooden bleachers that bookend the Candlestick rows. For the Cosmos game, a couple of drummers hit out rhythms and a mighty few recited cheers near the front row. One fan seated at the top of the Delta Force section, where the chants faded to fog and kids climbed over dormant rows, had a grey Deltas scarf draped around his neck that read "FOUNDING MEMBER." A season ticket holder of the San Jose Earthquakes, too, he has seen the pinnacle of the sport firsthand, both in play and fandom at World Cups. "You can't take your eye off it," he said, alluding to watching stars like Lionel Messi in person.

While he was talking, Cosmos midfielder Emmanuel Ledesma chipped the ball from the corner of the eighteen-yard box on goal. Deltas goalie Romuald Peiser, who an hour-and-a-half earlier got down on one knee and proposed to his girlfriend at midfield (she said yes), stood leaden-footed and watched the ball sail into the top corner for the game's only goal, and the Deltas' first loss in team history.

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Brian Helmick was leaving for vacation in June 2015 when he got a phone call. His friend Fabio Igel, a Brazilian venture capitalist and former Olympic skier, was on the line. "He said, 'I have a once in a lifetime opportunity for you. We should do pro soccer in San Francisco.' And I was like, are you crazy?!" Helmick, the Deltas' CEO, said from the team's modest headquarters in SOMA. He was wearing an SF Deltas t-shirt with his first name stenciled on the back.

On paper, San Francisco is a strong candidate for a professional soccer team. Twelve thousand children, one in every eight, play youth soccer. The oldest continuous amateur league in the country, San Francisco Soccer Football League, is in its 115th year. And the spectator side of the sport is thriving. Antal H., the manager at soccer haven McTeagues Saloon on Polk Street, said the pub's biggest revenue days from sporting events were U.S. games during the 2014 World Cup — larger than when the Giants were in the World Series and when the 49ers were in the Super Bowl. In other words, a two-hour match invented in a foreign country generated more cash than four-hour American pastimes. There is also no existing team in the city. The other professional clubs in the area are unglamourous commutes away in San Jose and Sacramento.

Helmick was still apprehensive. Soccer in his native Colombia was built on shoddy business practices, and he equated American sports owners as sons of billionaires, which he is not. Helmick, a cherubic forty-one-year-old with a carefree smile, didn't have a bloated bank account (or any experience running a sports team), but he had deep connections in Silicon Valley and started one successful company from scratch.

Emily Melton attended Stanford Business School with Helmick. Now, she is one of 19 Deltas investors. Melton, a venture capitalist based in Silicon Valley, said it is the ability " to get shit done married with being able to think big," that sets founders apart. "That strategic, tactical combination is something that Brian has in spades," Melton asserted.

Brian Helmick, left, the Deltas' CEO, and Mayor Ed Lee chatting before the team's inaugural match against Indy Eleven at Kezar Stadium. The Deltas compete in the second division North America Soccer League (NASL)

Helmick is from Bogota, but his family moved every two years when he was young — Thailand, Dominican Republic, Venezuela — due to his father's work. After he earned a bachelor's and master's in accounting from the University of Florida, he sought what his family never had an abundance of: money. He applied to 23 investment banks around Wall Street and got rejected from each one (Goldman Sachs rejected him four separate times). Eventually, he settled into a job doing mergers and acquisitions for investment banking for Latin America.

The lifestyle wore on him. The big-shot vibes were short-lived, and the environment was toxic — too many bosses in bouts of infidelity, too much materialism within the Manhattan elite. He changed gears, enrolled in business school at Stanford, and became an entrepreneur. In 2006 in Silicon Valley, he established Algentis, an HR technology platform, that he eventually sold.

"Entrepreneurs try to do too much," said Mac Harman, another Deltas investor whose artificial Christmas tree company used Algentis. "Brian is the contrast. He is thoughtfully focused on making things happen."

To get himself up to speed with the American soccer landscape, Helmick packed his Kindle with books on the subject. He talked to owners and general managers across different leagues. He even got advice from Colombia soccer star James Rodriguez, whom he ran into at an airport.

A couple of findings swayed Helmick's decision to join Igel. For one, he noticed advantages that were not around even five years ago: Lyft and Uber to shepherd people to the stadium, the virtual accessibility of the sport via social media, and the mindshare soccer has garnered in the U.S. as a result of European leagues on TV. Moreover, there was another kicker. Three of the top five most valuable sports franchises, according to one Forbes list, were soccer teams — Real Madrid, Manchester United, and FC Barcelona — yet 44 of the top 50 were in the United States, none of which competed in soccer.

"The most popular and valuable sport in the world is not, in a meaningful way at least, in the most valuable sports market in the world," Helmick concluded.

How he plans to take a team, nobody has heard of in a league most people have no idea exist and crack the American soccer enigma is anyone's guess.

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Kyle Bekker, right, scoring the Deltas' first goal in team history.

The Deltas started to pick soccer aficionados' brains before they had a coach or players or approval to use Kezar Stadium. For the team name, fans urged the staff not to inflate history with European monikers like FC, Sporting, or Real. So they bypassed history altogether and chose a word nobody can connect with the city. Take Don Capone, an early Deltas fan and psychologist at U.C. Berkeley. He, like most fans, thought there was a deal with Delta Airlines (there is not) or some connection to river banks (also not the case). Deltas is derived from Delta, the mathematical symbol for change, which, as Helmick explained in an AMA on Reddit, fits with the city's DNA of innovation. The symbol is also a triangle, common in soccer tactics and San Francisco landmarks, like Twin Peaks, the Transamerica Pyramid, and the Red Triangle, he also wrote.

"I don't know what the Red Triangle is, and I have been in this city close to twenty years," Capone said with a laugh. " Whatever, I am just happy we have a soccer team at the end of the day," confident that Helmick and his team are the right people to create a thriving pro club in San Francisco.

The task of selling people on an expansion team fell to Ricardo Stanford-Geromel. A native of Brazil, he attended Fairleigh Dickinson University on a soccer scholarship where he played alongside future U.S. international Alejandro Bedoya. The on-field skills fell to his brother, Pedro, who plays professionally for Brazilian club Gremio and has represented the Brazilian National Team. Stanford-Geromel took the front office route and worked with clubs in Phoenix and Fort Lauderdale before the Deltas. Fluent in five languages, he anticipated preaching to soccer elitists with a refined taste for European leagues. "I thought there would be many soccer snobs that would say, 'Uh, I want to watch Ibrahimovic, Messi. Why would I go to a stadium to watch NASL when I can stay home and see Cristiano Ronaldo.' But, I tell you, it was a very very tiny little portion of people that were like that. Because the truth is, the feeling at the stadium, for the true soccer fan, is unmatchable."

The club sparked interest in logical and unlikely places. Hans Stadem, the founder of the Delta Force, was at a corporate soccer event when the Deltas arrived. He spun a wheel, won a sweatshirt, and got involved. Rick Johnson was drafted when the Deltas made a presentation to the Community Police Advisory Board he sits on. A soccer novice who did not have a grasp on the rules of the game, Johnson now writes letters to the sports editor of the *San Francisco Chronicle* pestering the paper for better coverage on the team.

Not everyone was on board from the start. Evan Ream, a soccer writer who followed the Deltas since before they had a name or league to play in, wasn't impressed with the initial marketing — a "Meet the Foggers" prank website, merchandise with "KEEP HANDS OFF BALLS" plastered on it. In a post for SBNation, he curated all the online heat the club's logo took in a series of screenshots. After Ream chatted with Helmick and Stanford-Geromel at a preseason game, he changed his tone. "Maybe they are a little bit ambitious, or their goals might not be able to be achieved. But I don't think in the grand scheme of things that somebody is swinging for the fences in American soccer is necessarily a bad thing."

The team's first public appearance happened in February 2016. Helmick, Stanford-Geromel, and one hundred or so fans marched through Super Bowl City in downtown San Francisco — faces painted, drums beating — to announce the club's name and show off its logo. A month later, on St. Patrick's Day, Helmick arrived at the Kezar approval hearing with an army of scarved supporters that needed an overflow room to contain them. The Recreation and Park Commission listened to eighty minutes worth of testimony from fans (and some concerned citizens) and granted the Deltas a five-year lease for Kezar Stadium. The team rode this wave of support through the summer at bubble soccer events and Pride marches. By late August they hired a coach. All the fronts were coming into place. Months of preparation yielded a place to play, people to cheer them on, and a person to build a competitive team on the field. Then teams started to disappear from the NASL.

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The first incarnation of the NASL kicked off in 1968. Powered by an ambitious commissioner and the Brazilian legend Pele, who came out of retirement to play for the New York Cosmos, the league hurled through the 70s before folding in 1985. The current version of the NASL started as a renegade league in 2010. (The league has no link to its predecessor except for the rights to some legacy clubs.) A handful of owners in the Division 2 United Soccer League, USL, grew frustrated with the league's franchise model and a domineering central office in Tampa Bay. Seeking less oversight and more independence, eight teams broke away and formed a new league.

The NASL surged while the USL struggled, bolstering credentials and adding teams as the USL dropped down to Division 3. Success proved to be the league's kryptonite. Instead of focusing on making the strongest league possible, the NASL embarked on a quixotic quest to sue its way to Division 1 status.

The hubris hit the fan in September 2016. Two teams folded — the Fort Lauderdale Strikers and Rayo OKC, another two joined USL — the Tampa Bay Rowdies and Ottawa Fury, while Minnesota United FC was already scheduled to jump up to the first division MLS. Technically, these were isolated events, but the laissez-faire approach of the NASL guided each team toward its fate — poor vetting of owners, uncapped spending, richer teams poaching smaller clubs' players — not to mention a rival league with a better cost structure and the bounty of MLS. "When you consider that pretty much all teams except maybe Edmonton and the Cosmos at least spoke to USL last year, that is not an insignificant consideration," explained Nipun Chopra, who runs the website Soc Takes.

Players defending a set piece. The Deltas are comprised of wide range of nationalities. While no players are household names nearly each player on the team has professional playing experience.

Helmick flew to Tampa Bay during the turmoil to see if there was a potential fit with USL. He stuck with the NASL for two reasons. One, the NASL model, he says, is better aligned with other leagues around the world, allowing easier access to the global soccer market. Two, the NASL gives each of its teams more freedom to choose jersey manufacturers, website templates, and distribution platforms. MLS and USL are less flexible on those fronts.

"Each team has its personality," Helmick explained. "That is what makes it easier for fans to have a stronger personal connection. When all the clubs have the same apparel company — the kits look very similar, the websites are all the same — you lose some of that."

The NASL has taken steps to the right ship. They cut out Traffic Sports, a Brazilian marketing group that had an ownership interest in the league and was implicated in the FIFA scandal, ended commissioner Bill Peterson's tenure, and, while it is not a luxury tax by name, implemented a similar mechanism to keep overspending in check. This year the league is comprised of eight teams, half of which will make the playoffs.

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In NASL terms, San Francisco is in no-mans-land. The Deltas are the league's first West Coast team. Only one of the seven other NASL clubs is west of Ohio. According to an article on Top Drawer Soccer, the Deltas will travel over 85,000 miles for sixteen away games, more than most MLB teams travel over a 162-game season. The farthest they will travel is to San Juan to play Puerto Rico FC. The closest opponent is FC Edmonton in Canada. Steven Sandor covers FC Edmonton and runs the soccer website The11.ca. He said the Eddies, the team's nickname, will travel the equivalent distance of Edmonton to Turkey over a six-day span this season that includes three games. "NASL does no favors with scheduling," Sandor quibbed.

On Mother's Day, the Eddies hosted the Deltas in Edmonton. The Delta Force arranged a viewing party at Kezar Pub across the street from the stadium. A dozen or so people showed up for the game — the club's marketing director, a Delta Force member, a player's girlfriend, a father and his Deltas-jersey-wearing son. The match was streamed via ESPN3 (Deltas' home games are streamed on Twitter). For this game, unlike the simultaneous Golden State Warriors playoff game in crisp HD, there were some issues. The screen froze a couple of times and sported a circular loading sign. The picture quality was mercurial, swaying from slightly pixelated to clear. At one point, a box showing low battery popped up, requiring someone to run to the bar and plug in the computer.

TV deals are the north star for sports leagues, a way to prove legitimacy and add a revenue stream. MLS recently crossed that threshold with a three-network deal that generates $90 million per year. To reinforce soccer's coming of age, NBC retained the U.S. rights to the English Premier League, England's top division, through 2022 for a reported $1 billion. "If NBC is paying a ton for the EPL, they are less likely to be paying a ton for domestic leagues. It's just the reality," said Todd Dunivant, the Deltas' head of business and soccer operations who retired in 2015 from a 13-year playing career in MLS.

The NASL does not disclose the details of its TV partnerships, but both Kartik Krishnaiyer, a former PR manager for the NASL and now a journalist, and Sandor guessed it was an ad revenue split with teams shouldering all the production costs. Costs that are not cheap. Krishnaiyer said it took about $1 million to produce Tampa Bay Rowdies games for one season when the team competed in the NASL. So, “less likely to be paying a ton” is closer to paying nothing when it comes to the NASL.

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The last attempt at professional soccer in San Francisco was the California Victory in 2009. The team competed in the USL and also used Kezar as its home stadium. The Victory disbanded a year later. Terry Fisher, the general manager of the Victory who now runs Washington State Youth Soccer, applauds Helmick and his group for their effort but is hellbent that San Francisco, soccer, and Kezar Stadium don’t compute — for a number of reasons: weather: “It’s hopeless at night;” health of the league: “NASL is a dead man walking;” Division 2 status: “If you’re not major league, I don’t care what you’re doing, you’re not going to make it.”

Regardless of league, San Francisco presents its challenges. Keith Bruce, a Deltas advisor who led the Super Bowl 50 Host Committee, thinks the Deltas will need to compete not just with the established sports teams in the Bay Area but also with summer escapes, like Tahoe and the Coast, and the bevy of entertainment options on Saturday evenings. To add to the battle, Bruce does not think the fan pool is deep enough in San Francisco. Eventually, he said, the team will need to grab the attention of people from the North and East Bay.

One way to cut through the noise is a marquee player. Dunivant, the Deltas head of business operations who played four seasons with David Beckham at the LA Galaxy, sees this route as a short-term stitch and not a long-term solution for the club. Helmick thinks Prius-driving San Franciscans are less interested in flashy names and big egos than the New York or Miamis of the world. There is also the cost to consider.

The Deltas’ entire roster totals $1.2 million. Alejandro Bedoya, Stanford-Geromel’s former college teammate, has a guaranteed compensation of $1.19 million in MLS. If the entire Deltas team had pay parity — they don’t, but Helmick said the range is slim — each player would earn roughly $55,000 per year. Helmick also added that none of the players have second jobs with meaningful time commitments.

Head coach Marc Dos Santos. "We suffer well together and that's a very good sign. That's the sign of championship teams," Dos Santos said about the team's collective character. The Deltas are his third team in as many years.

The NASL has no players union and does not disclose individual player salaries. Francisco Terreros, an agent who represents players across all U.S. professional soccer leagues (he does not represent any Deltas players), said the range for NASL salaries is $15,000 to $200,000 per year. The average salary is between $30,000 and $40,000, he said.

Terreros noted there is rarely, if ever, a bidding war at the NASL level for a particular player. Transfer fees, a fee one team pays to another team to pry away a player under contract, are almost non-existent, he added. "These players playing at second, third division, they are usually either coming up or going down in their careers as pro players," Terreros said.

Marc Dos Santos, the head coach of the Deltas, has built successful teams in North America. He took the Ottawa Fury to the NASL final in 2015 and Swope Park Rangers to the USL Cup in his first and only season with the team. He is a pragmatist on and off the field. "If a player goes out every night until 3 am, and you are the best player on the San Francisco Deltas every game, I am going to make sure I bring you out."

Dos Santos assembled a multicultural team that resembles the city it plays in. The roster has Americans, Canadians, South Americans, and Europeans, all with varying professional experience. He also knows the importance of hometown athletes. Dos Santos made attempts to sign players with ties to the area but aside from Bryan Burke, a defender who played collegiately at the University of San Francisco, and Alex Mangels, a backup goalkeeper who grew up in Lafayette and attended U.C. Berkeley, few recruited players have Bay Area on their resumes. “If we build the team of local guys, and we lose every NASL game, people are going to say, ‘But what are they doing?’ People want local players, but they also want winning. So you have to find the best local players possible.”

Deltas midfielder Saalih Muhammad chatting with fans. Muhammad, a native of Pinole in the East Bay, suffered an Achilles tear before the start of the season and will miss the entire year.

During an open tryout in November, the Deltas signed one player out of 300 participants: Saalih Muhammad, a 21-year-old midfielder and East Bay native. Muhammad left school at 16 to enroll in Croatian club Dinamo Zagreb’s youth academy. “I was like Dinamo, what about Arsenal?” Muhammad’s father, Jamal, who used to get up early with his son to study Premier League games, said with a laugh during a team practice at Beach Chalet. Muhammad, who was born with clubbed feet and was in casts for the first few years of his life, said that as an African American he had few role models in soccer and got demeaned playing after school by being called a “white boy” or “Mexican.” During his first practice at Dinamo, he heard monkey chants from the stands; in another instance, one teammate jokingly threw a banana in the shower. “When you can’t even