

San Francisco Deltas soccer team could win a championship, fold soon after

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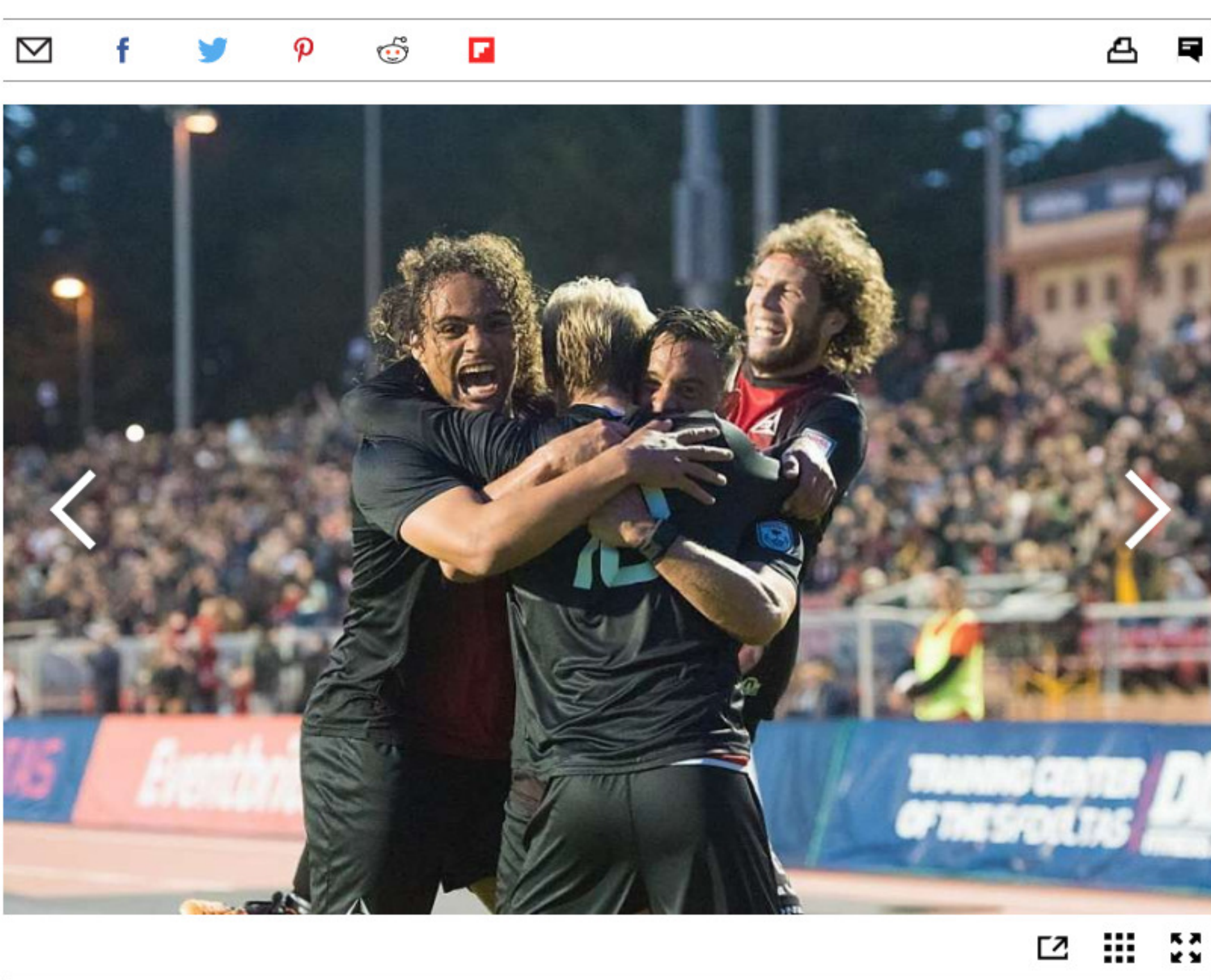


IMAGE 1 OF 33

Teammates embrace Kyle Bekker (back to camera) after scoring the first goal in San Francisco Deltas history against the Indy Eleven on March 25, 2017 at Kezar Stadium in San Francisco. (Trevor Will)

Few San Franciscans know the city may soon have another championship to celebrate. The San Francisco Deltas, a first-year pro soccer team, have put together a remarkable season to make the playoffs. In two weeks, the team could be crowned champions.

And then they could fold.

The Deltas, a team of unknown players, have banded together under head coach Marc Dos Santos to make the North American Soccer League playoffs. The league is considered the second professional division of soccer in the U.S., below Major League Soccer.

"It's a testament to the group and their character," said San Francisco Deltas CEO Brian Andres Helmick. "This is history in the making, and it's been really special to be able to watch it happen since inception."

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Although the team has succeeded on the field, they have struggled off it. San Francisco joined the NASL as a "soccer startup," a term coined by Helmick as he hoped to bridge the best of the Silicon Valley tech mentality with an expansion sports team.

Despite the ambitions, the Deltas found it hard to make a name for themselves in the crowded Bay Area sports scene. The Deltas averaged just under 2,600 fans per game at Kezar Stadium and **reportedly lost several million dollars.**

Midway through the season, Helmick decided to explain the Deltas' struggles to fans and players. In July he **wrote a blog post** challenging fans to help fix the team's issues with attendance and possibly attract more outside investment.

He blamed a combination of factors for the team's problems, including the plethora of entertainment options in San Francisco. On social media, most complaints about the Deltas consisted of cold weather, the location of Kezar stadium, parking, and ticket prices. Tickets for most home games ranged from \$19 up to \$124 for VIP seats.

"The answer is complicated as there are many reasons," said Tommy Hodul, a reporter for the Midfield Press who has covered the team all season. "But a simple answer, in my opinion, is that they never formed a true connection to the city and did not create new soccer fans."

Even the future of the league is in doubt. NASL had its Division 2 status revoked by the United States Soccer Federation in August. The league filed a lawsuit in federal court fighting the decision and asked for a preliminary injunction to keep their sanctioning for next season. During court hearings earlier this week it was brought to light that the **Deltas have not guaranteed they will return next season.**

Despite all the off-field issues, the team has been able to keep its focus on the pitch. Since Helmick's blog post, the Deltas lost only two of their final 16 regular-season games.

"Our mentality is: What can we do?" explained Deltas team captain Nana Attakora. "One thing here is we've known for a while now. We were told straightforward and knew what to expect. Any off-the-field issues, as a player, you try not to focus on."

Head coach Dos Santos fashioned a team with no stars. He has relied on every player on the roster to play a significant role. "In our locker room there are no egos," Dos Santos explained. "Nobody thinks that they're bigger than the team. Everyone works in the same way, the same mentality, and I think that's very important."



San Francisco Deltas' Maxim Tissot, Tyler Gibson, Kenny Teijse and Cristian Portilla practice at Beach Chalet Soccer Fields in San Francisco, Calif., on Thursday, June 22, 2017. Buy this photo

"That type of culture is easy to talk about but really hard to execute and we've seen the proof on the field," added Helmick.

Of the Deltas' 20 field players, 12 have scored a goal. Leading the pack is forward Tommy Heinemann with nine goals.

"This group has gone through a lot on the field and off the field," said Heinemann. "It's not easy to overcome the things that we've gone through this year. It's brought us closer together for sure, but it's also given us a drive to win."

The midfield trio of Kyle Bekker, Michael Stephens and Brazilian import Dagoberto have often set up the scoring. The defensive midfielder has been captured by Tyler Gibson after Spaniard Cristian Portilla tore his ACL midseason. The Deltas defense also has been solid all year long, conceding only 35 goals in 32 games. Reiner Ferriera, who started 31 of 32 games, was named to the **NASL team of the month** for October. Starting goalkeeper Romuald Peiser was nominated for NASL player of the year.

While San Francisco has ground out their fair share of results, they have also developed a knack for the dramatic. Seven times this season the Deltas scored a goal in the last 20 minutes to get a win or a draw. Their **most sensational comeback** was against the New York Cosmos on the road in September. Down a man and two goals, Devon Sandoval scored twice in the last 10 minutes to draw the defending champions.



Devon Sandoval celebrates scoring his second goal against the New York Cosmos on Sept. 20, 2017 in Brooklyn, New York. (Courtesy New York Cosmos)

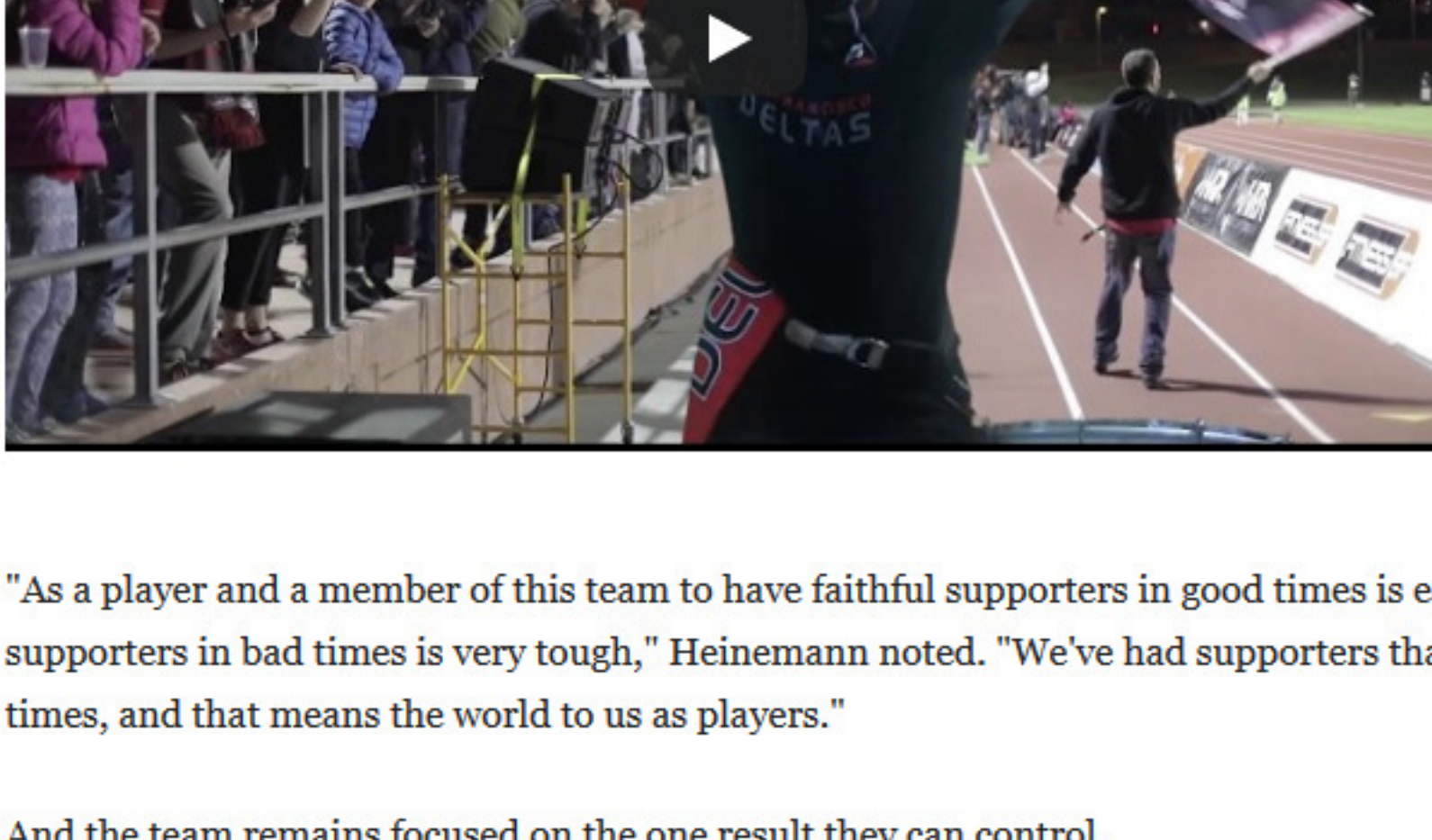
For the season San Francisco was only defeated once on the road and never lost a game they led after the 70th minute.

A second place finish in the NASL standings ensured the Deltas a home playoff match at Kezar Stadium on Sunday against North Carolina FC. The game starts at 5 p.m.

If they win, the Deltas will play for the championship against first-place Miami FC or the New York Cosmos, who have won three of the last four NASL Championships. If Miami wins, it will host the championship on Nov. 12, but if New York wins, the Deltas would host the championship at Kezar Stadium.

After achieving their primary goal to make the playoffs, coach Dos Santos has adjusted their focus to winning the championship. "We do it a lot for us as a group, and we do it a lot for the few fans that actually embrace this team every day and are at every game," added Dos Santos. "We need to do it for them also."

The supporters' group for the team, known as the Delta Force, recently released a song entitled **"We are the Deltas" on YouTube** chronicling their game day experience and support for the players.



"As a player and a member of this team to have faithful supporters in good times is easy but to have faithful supporters in bad times is very tough," Heinemann noted. "We've had supporters that have been faithful in bad times, and that means the world to us as players."

And the team remains focused on the one result they can control.

"You have a sense of the work that you've done as a team," explained Dos Santos. "The only thing that matters in the semifinal is to win the championship. Not reaching the final, not being in a semifinal. You have to go with everything to win the championship."

Douglas Zimmerman is SFGate's soccer beat writer covering **the San Francisco Deltas** and the "beautiful game" around the world. He also is working on a photo essay photographing **the fans of the World Cup** that