

## Major League Soccer: Why Increasing Interest in Soccer Has Not Translated into Better TV Ratings

Examining the criteria that constitute an aesthetic experience while viewing a sporting event may sound abstract to the point of being academic (well, it is), but doing so may hold the key to understanding the challenges Major League Soccer faces as it competes with the other major American sports and foreign soccer leagues for viewers, both at matches and on television. And it also may help explain why the huge commercial success of the recent World Cup may not translate into commensurate growth for MLS.

Major League Soccer has been a success by many measures: The quality of play is arguably higher than ever, which partially<sup>1</sup> explains why leading American players such as Clint Dempsey and Michael Bradley opted to return from major European leagues. Average attendance approached 19,000 for the second season running and the majority of clubs now own lucrative soccer-specific stadiums. And the league will expand to 21 teams in 2015, with the latest additions, New York City FC and Orlando, expected to pay a combined \$170 million in entry fees.<sup>2</sup>

But TV ratings remain stagnant. In fact, ESPN's figures for the English-language broadcast of the 2013 MLS Cup were the lowest in league history, 44 percent down from 2012 (though the increase in Spanish-language viewers lowered that drop to just 20.5%).<sup>3</sup> Overall, games on ESPN averaged about 220,000 viewers and NBCSN only drew about half that many.<sup>4</sup> By comparison, English Premier League matches aired on the NBC family of networks were routinely watched by more than 500,000 during the second half of the 2013/4 season,<sup>5</sup> despite the fact that many of them started around sunrise. MLS's regular season ratings even lagged behind the WNBA's.<sup>6</sup> Finally, interest in attending matches has not translated into watching that same team on local TV; even in large markets like New York, the number of fans who attend matches may sometimes actually exceed the number on couches.<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> The money was also much better and they were guaranteed starting jobs, which is an especially important consideration the season prior to a World Cup

<sup>2</sup> <http://www.ussoccerplayers.com/2014/01/why-mls-keeps-expanding.html>

<sup>3</sup> <http://fansided.com/2013/12/10/tv-ratings-mls-cup-final-show-least-watched-mls-history/#!AIE2M>

<sup>4</sup> <http://thebiglead.com/2013/11/12/mls-tv-ratings-are-lower-than-the-wnba-can-the-league-do-anything-to-improve-them/>

<sup>5</sup> <http://bleacherreport.com/articles/2128502-after-historic-fifa-world-cup-now-is-the-time-to-redefine-american-soccer>

<sup>6</sup> <http://www.sportsbusinessdaily.com/Journal/Issues/2013/11/11/Media/By-The-Numbers.aspx>

<sup>7</sup> <http://grantland.com/the-triangle/are-more-people-watching-mls-in-person-or-on-television/>

So we have the makings of a riddle: Why are MLS fans more willing to attend matches than watch them on TV, even when their own team is playing? Part of the answer is that MLS does not have to compete with the EPL for fannies in seats, but that begs two important questions: How does the experience of attending a MLS match differ from the experience of viewing one on TV? And how does the experience of viewing an EPL match, or other higher quality matches, differ from what MLS offers? Answering these questions will not only help MLS improve its TV ratings, I also believe it will help explain why the tens of millions of kids who have played soccer have taken so damn long to morph into lifelong fans.

In his groundbreaking piece, “The Well-Played Game: Notes Toward an Aesthetic of Sports,” philosopher Eugene. F. Kaelin convincingly argues that having an aesthetic experience while viewing a sporting event involves three interrelated factors: dramatic tension, continuity and articulation. Kaelin argues that an aesthetically successful game is characterized by psychic tension, in which the winners prevail at the end of a sustained struggle, continuity, which refers to whether the events that lead to the climax are tightly structured, and articulation, which ‘is a matter of perceiving the tensions where they occur’ and understanding how they lead to the outcome.<sup>8</sup> What follows are fuller descriptions of each, with emphasis placed on comparing soccer with the major American sports.<sup>9</sup>

### *Dramatic Tension*

In the case of sports, dramatic tension is best achieved when the performers employ all the resources at their disposal to try to achieve victory. The worst sin, Kaelin quite rightly points out, is to play for a tie or not to lose. He was particularly critical of the fact that Notre Dame settled for a tie in that infamous game against Michigan State in 1966. Coach Ara Parseghian’s decision to sit in the ball during the last minute of play was exceptional even then and college football’s current overtime rule would have compelled the Irish to try to score, at least come overtime. But excessive caution poses a particularly big problem for soccer.

Most goalless matches are hard to watch, but the problem is not the lack of goals; it is the lack of willingness to take the risks necessary to score them. Soccer is like boxing: every time you try to land a punch, you expose yourself to a counter-attack. And thus sometimes you have matches, such as the recent World Cup semifinal between Argentina and Holland, where neither side has the guts to expose their defensive vulnerabilities. Conversely, the best matches occur, regardless of how many goals are scored, when both teams have the confidence to seize the initiative.

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<sup>8</sup> E. F. Kaelin, “The Well-Played Game: Notes Toward an Aesthetic of Sports,” *Quest*, Vol. 10 (1968), pp. 16-28. Reprinted in *Philosophy of Sport: Critical Reading, Crucial Issues*, ed. by M. Andrew Holowchak, New Jersey; Prentice Hill (2002), pp. 99-108.

<sup>9</sup> Kaelin, p. 105.

Excessive caution is not a problem for the major American sports, except hockey (if that counts as a major sport) because defense and offense are only indirectly related:

- Baseball—A manager may make personnel changes to strengthen his defense, which conversely weakens his offense, but the players in the lineup still do everything possible to score runs while at bat. Similarly, the manager may replace an effective pitcher (in the National League) and weak defensive players because his team is behind, but the pitchers and fielders still do their best to try to prevent more runs from being scored against them.
- Basketball—Substitutions aside, the same five players do have to play offense and defense. And there are situations where taking offensive risks, for example, a guard crashing the boards to try to get an offensive rebound, can lead to a fast break for the opponents. But most of the time all ten players are on one end of the court or the other. Except when teams press, there is nothing remotely resembling a midfield in basketball. In soccer, by contrast, there are times when a team keeps ten, or even eleven men, inside their own half, and others where most everyone is pushed forward, even during open play. And a much higher percentage of action occurs in midfield.
- Football—Defense becomes offense, or *vice versa*, on the same play when there is a turnover, but otherwise the personnel are usually entirely different and they are only indirectly related. For example, an offense might call plays more conservatively if they have a relatively strong defense, are playing for field position, or trying to run out the clock. Most of the time, however, teams are doing everything in their power to score when they have the ball and to prevent opponents from scoring when they don't.

Considering the above, soccer has two related problems. The first is that teams often do not use all the resources at their disposal on the playing field to score. And two, they usually err on the side of defensive caution. Like with boxing, safety usually comes first. All nine players take their cuts in baseball, all five do most whatever they can in the frontcourt to help their team score in basketball, and all eleven players try to help move the ball in football, but as recently deposed Brazilian national team manager Felipe Scolari explained before the 2006 World Cup, in modern soccer it is normal to 'attack with six and defend with eight players'.<sup>10</sup>

The major American sports are invariably viewed through pragmatic lenses, while in soccer there is quite often a moral debate about whether a team should be realistic or idealistic, results-driven or attack-minded. The Brazilians go so far as to draw a distinction between *futebol resultados* and *futebol arte*. No one criticized Pat Riley when he toughened up the Los Angeles Lakers after the Boston Celtics bullied and intimidated them during the 1984 finals, but Brazilian national team managers

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<sup>10</sup> <http://www.soccer.com/guide/scolari-predicts-low-goal-coefficient-in-germany/>

have to constantly defend taking a more cautious or physical approach. Here, for example, is how Carlos Alberto Parreira defended the conservative tactical approach he adopted for the 1994 World Cup: "History doesn't talk about the beautiful game but about champions. Why do we have to play beautiful football and the others don't? If we can play the beautiful game we will do that but we want to be the champions."<sup>11</sup> On another occasion he simply proclaimed that, "Fantasy and dreams are finished in football."<sup>12</sup> That may be, but the debate never quite dies in soccer. By contrast, fantasy and dreams are entirely a secondary consideration in the US. Pat Riley never had to apologize when Showtime gave way to unapologetic pragmatism by the time the Lakers won their third title in four seasons in '88.

Given this, the powers that be in American sports have long realized that it is their job to promote offense and discourage conservative play:

- Baseball has been the most conservative major American sport since the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, but in 1973 the American League took the radical step of introducing the Designated Hitter. The National League still has not adopted the DH, but in 1969 both league lowered the pitching mound because of the record-setting lack of offense during the 1968 season.
- The halfcourt line was added in 1932, the center jump was eliminated after every basket in 1936, and the NBA implemented a 24-second shot clock in 1954 (the NCAA did not introduce any shot clock until 1985). The NBA also introduced a three-point shot in 1979. More recently, the NBA lowered the time to advance the ball past midcourt from ten seconds to eight<sup>13</sup> and created a system where flagrant fouls were identified and punished. The NBA also started clamping down on ubiquitous physical contact, which is largely prohibited—like soccer, basketball is supposed to be a no-collision sport—in the mid-90s.
- The most profound change of all occurred in football in 1906 when the forward pass was introduced and the rules encouraging passing were gradually liberalized. The NFL allowed unlimited substitutions (1948), which allowed teams to refine offensive plays. In 1978, the NFL liberalized holding rules for offensive linemen and restricted defensive contact with receivers, both of which helped increase scoring by encouraging more passing. 2013 was the highest scoring season in NFL history, mostly because, over a long period of time, the NFL has taken proactive steps to favor offense over defense.

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<sup>11</sup> <http://www.theguardian.com/football/2006/jun/28/worldcup2006.sport12>

<sup>12</sup> *The Ball is Round: A Global History of Soccer*, by David Goldblatt, p. 774.

<sup>13</sup> If the time allowed was lowered to six seconds, the game would probably change radically because it would make more sense to press. Much more of the game would be played in midcourt.

FIFA, by contrast, has been very reluctant to make radical rule changes or take steps to encourage more attacking play. In 1925, the number of defenders required to be behind the most advanced attacker when a pass was made was reduced from three to two. The impetus for this radical change to the offside law was to increase scoring, as the total in the English 1<sup>st</sup> Division had dropped to 2.58 per match. Goals shot up to 3.69 per match the next season, but teams started to play with three defenders (the center half joined the two fullbacks) and the average declined to 3.07 per match by the 1938-39 season. That number is still higher than current averages, which have ranged between 2.45 and 2.81 since the EPL was formed in 1992. Major League Soccer averaged more than three goals per match during six of its first seven seasons, but has not exceeded 2.68 the past five seasons.

FIFA has made four somewhat significant changes in the last 25 years. After the 1990 World Cup, which was the lowest scoring in history (2.21 per match), they prohibited goalkeepers from handling deliberate passes, stipulated that a player was onside if he was level, rather than behind, the second-to-last defender, and began to crack down on tackles from behind. And in the last ten years they have introduced the passive offside rule, stipulating that a player may be offside so long as he is not interfering with play, and allowed for two additional officials to be placed behind the goals. FIFA and UEFA both employ this for their competitions, and it should lead to fewer fouls, especially in the penalty area, but the additional officials are reluctant to make calls that would result in penalty kicks. Finally, FIFA has made periodic attempts to clamp down on dangerous play and professional fouls, especially if a goal scoring chance is denied. However, they have largely abstained from addressing the ubiquitous holding and grabbing or on punishing professional fouls if they don't directly prevent scoring chances.

The takeaway is the following: soccer has been far less willing to make radical rule changes than the major American sports. There is nothing MLS can or should do to change that. The NASL made some sensible rule changes, most notably changing the offside line to 35 yards, but they were never taken seriously by FIFA and adopting them further undermined American credibility<sup>14</sup>. MLS can, however, apply the existing rules more strenuously. Cracking down holding and grabbing and giving yellow cards to players who commit deliberate fouls, even if there is no direct threat on goal, would open games up a great deal. The advantage would shift from the more physical player to the more skillful one. This is crucial because athleticism—speed, strength, stamina, and tenacity—can nullify skill if the rules against contact are applied too leniently. And there would be more scoring chances because many

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<sup>14</sup> The irony is that in 1923 the English FA Council narrowly failed to pass a measure that would have marked the offside line at 40 yards. The proposal was aimed at lowering the constant stoppages of play, but, as the NASL's experiment proved, it also would have created more time and space for players on the ball. See [The Leaguers: The Making of professional Football in England, 1900-1939](#), by Matthew Taylor, pp. 253-4 and [Playing for Uncle Sam: The Brits Story of the North American Soccer League](#), by David Tossell, pp. 183-5.

deliberate fouls are committed to stop potential attacks just as they are being formed. Research should be done to confirm this, but I suspect there are about 15 serious attacks in an average match. This number would probably rise to 20 if these types of fouls were called.

The goal of changing or applying rules should be to shift the orientation from defensive to attacking play. Right now, it makes sense to play defensively, attack with six and defend with eight, but stricter application of existing rules should tip the balance in the other direction. Conceding free kicks becomes far more dangerous, and thus should occur less often, now that referees use spray to mark off ten yards. Similarly, if players knew they would receive a yellow for any deliberate foul, they would commit far fewer—and there would be more meaningful attacks. And defenders would be a lot less likely to take a chance by grabbing an attacker if the officials behind the goals called penalties more regularly.

Right now, the loose application of the rules encourages teams to absorb pressure, wait for the opponent to overexpose itself and then counter-attack. But stricter refereeing would encourage teams to keep possession because the defensive arsenal at the other team's disposal would be more limited. Moreover, if there were more goals, which I think there would be, matches would open up quicker. Finally, a team that falls behind would have a better chance of catching up because opponents could not resort to as many measures to stop them. This might even mean that the best way to protect a lead would be to continue to try to score or at least endeavor to keep possession.

The relative lack of scoring in soccer does have one positive that is often overlooked: most matches are close. A much higher percentage of games in the major American sports are effectively settled well before the end, In soccer, by contrast, most matches are settled by the odd goal and you feel genuinely gleeful the few times your team is winning by a wider margin because it happens so rarely.

This brings us back to the most important point about dramatic tension in soccer: the problem is not the lack of goals; the problem is that there are many matches, often involving the very best clubs, where neither side is willing to take enough risks to score. Right now it does not make sense for teams to take many risks, but stricter application of the existing rules would dramatically increase the incentives for being more attack-minded.

### *Continuity*

Kaelin argues that the aesthetic form sport takes best compares to dance. Both involve an attempt to achieve a kind of graceful flow, with opposition creating tension through the possibility of disruption. The dramatic structure should be tight—temporally, spatially, and interpersonally.

Temporal continuity: Soccer has two huge advantages over the major American sports. The first is that there are no commercial interruptions. There are lengthy stoppages after goals, for injuries, occasionally when the referee is sorting out a conduct issue or a team is preparing to take a free kick, but play continues without interruption, or with only brief interruptions, far more often.

Interpersonal continuity: Second, there are far fewer substitutions. This minimizes specialization and facilitates a much greater range of self-expression. Even if a manager makes the three allowed substitutions, there are still seven outfield players who have to play evolving roles over 90 minutes. They have to play offense and defense, combat fatigue by rationing how and when to expend energy, consider expanding or contracting the scope of their play, and adjust their role after considering the similar demands being placed on their teammates and opponents. You cannot watch soccer effectively unless you recognize when a player is making such decisions—a point that will be explored in detail when ‘articulation’ is being discussed—but for now noting that there is a greater degree of character development is sufficient. In the end, much more than is the case with the major American sports, especially football, soccer belongs to the players, far more than to the coaches, once a match starts.

One of the biggest problems that soccer faces is that a game loses continuity if execution of the constituent elements of play is poor: bad passes, dropped balls, careless turnovers, poor shooting, clumsy tackling, lackadaisical defending, etc. Ideally a team should score because they have executed well despite concerted opposition, rather than because the other team gifted them opportunities. But in soccer, most goals occur because of defensive mistakes.

Spatial continuity: Poor execution can undermine continuity in any sports, but it is a particularly big problem for soccer; it explains why low-quality matches are harder to watch than is the case with other sports. The basic constituent parts of play—controlling a pass, dribbling, passing and shooting accurately—are much harder to master. This is why soccer seems more disjointed than, say, basketball. You expect a basketball player to catch a ball with his hands if it is passed 30 feet, even if he is being covered tightly, but it is much harder for a soccer player to control the ball with his first touch and much easier to dispossess him. What’s more, failure to do so can be fatal. That’s why players are inclined to hoof the ball forward at the first sign of trouble near their own goal. Better to concede possession than gift opponents an easy scoring chance.

On the other hand, this degree of difficulty makes you appreciate the few teams, like Barcelona the previous five seasons, who are able to make something so difficult look so easy. And it adds to the tension of the match. There is usually very little drama while a basketball team is advancing the ball well into the frontcourt, but in soccer possession is often difficult to maintain in any and every part of the field.

There is another upside to using one’s feet: the ball can be kicked harder and farther

than it can be thrown and it can be made to bend dramatically using the inside or the outside of one's foot. The combination of difficulty and expanded possibility explains why goals in soccer are more varied and beautiful than scores in any other sport.

Quality of play may be difficult to measure quantitatively or qualitatively, but I am willing to bet that MLS lags behind the EPL, Spain's La Liga, or Germany's Bundesliga by a number of measures. There is less sustained possession, especially in the opposing half or final third of the field. Teams are less likely to have the confidence to make short passes to play their way out of their own end, especially if defenders are marking tightly. Players control the ball less adroitly with their first touch—which is critical—and thus are less able to pass the ball more accurately especially in crowded spaces. And the patterns of movement are less complex.

These differences, which constitute what Kaelin calls the sensual surface of an athletic contest, are crucial to having a good viewing experience. A poor first touch is as obvious as playing a shrill note with a violin. Not only is it discordant, it undermines the possibilities for continuity in the subsequent move. Soccer is the most difficult game because controlling or passing a ball with your feet is much harder than using one's hands, but the range of possibilities on offer are greater and at its best it achieves a dance-like rhythm. Anyone can see this. You do not have to be an expert to see that there is clearly a quality gap between MLS and the elite leagues in Europe and it obviously makes a difference.

### *Articulation*

According to Kaelin, articulation is the ability to perceive the tensions that lead to the outcome. And it is important to note that the meaning of the constituent elements of play are 'auto-significant': that, is, the meaning of any gesture or act has to be understood within the larger context of a sport and the particular dramatic structure of a given game. The casual fan might think that the defender that is running forward during open play is being courageous, but the devotee realizes that his behavior is foolhardy because it leaves his team spare at the back. Kaelin never uses the term, but the above implies that sports are esoteric rather than exoteric. Simply put, fans cannot accurately perceive the tensions that lead to the outcome unless they are sufficiently educated about a given sport and the personnel in a given match.

This is a particularly big problem for soccer because play is relatively continuous. The major American sports are easier to dissect because they are divided into relatively short increments.

- Kaelin quite rightly points out that much of the dynamic tension in baseball rests on the interaction between the pitcher and a series of batters. This makes watching the National Pastime because most fans don't know what sequences of pitches are being thrown or why. But the balls and strikes count



allows viewers to measure whether the batter or the pitcher is faring better. Similarly, the number of outs and the positions of any base runners allow fans to measure whether a team is likely to score. Moreover, the fielders play the same position, making it easier for fans to judge whether, for example, a shortstop played a good defensive game. Judging the play of, say, a defensive midfielder is a lot more complicated. He may do a wonderful job protecting his defenders, but his lack of ambition may make his team's attacks predictable. Finally, once the ball is in play, fans can easily locate the tension, such as a throw to the plate from right field, that will determine the outcome of a sequence of events. In soccer, the fan can see the striker score, but he may not understand why he was able to run into such a promising position unless he is cognizant of an ever-shifting context.

- Football is divided into plays that usually last no more than several seconds. Identifying the subtleties that lead to a successful or a failed play, such as whether someone blocked well, is very difficult to identify, especially in real time. However, fans have enough information to judge whether a team is making progress every play. They have the objective measure of down & distance and field position, and they can also tell whether a quarterback, ball carrier, or tackler executed well. By contrast, in soccer, a fan can tell when a player made an accurate pass that is controlled well, but the relative importance of it is much harder to determine. Football is actually much more esoteric than soccer, or baseball<sup>15</sup>, but it is easier to articulate because there are so many ways to easily measure the worth of what is occurring.
- Basketball is relatively accessible because there are only five active players on each team, they are all usually at one end of the court or the other, and they must shoot within 24 seconds (or 35 in the case of college). Fans may not understand that a team scored because a really good back screen was set, but they can easily see who scored and who assisted.

In sum, the larger problem soccer faces in terms of articulation is two-fold: there are usually fewer serious scoring chances (never mind scores) and it is harder to

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<sup>15</sup> Former Colts' president did perhaps the best job of explaining just how esoteric football is: You know, people ask me right after the game, "What happened on that play?" And I can't honestly tell them. I know the playbook, but I have to go through the film the next day, then find out from the coaches what the defensive call was, then talk to one or two of the players and ask them what they remember from the play—"Who did you think you were covering?" "Who did you think had this guy?"—and then, after all that, I *might* be able to figure out what went wrong. And then, I'm not going to publicly say who is responsible." Jim Mora, not surprisingly, put matters more succinctly: "You don't know when it's good or bad. You really don't know. You guys don't look at the film, you don't what happened. You really don't know. You *think* you know, but you don't know. And—you—never-will." See Michael MacCambridge's [America's Game: The Epic Story of How Pro Football Captured a Nation](#), p. 412.

determine what leads to them. If there are 15 serious attacks during an average soccer match, then there is an average of six minutes between them. Possession will have changed hands more than a dozen times, many possessions will be really short and there are periods when neither team controls the ball, and much of the play will be in midfield. From the point of view of most American viewers, the serious attack that finally occurs seems to have little or no relationship to the previous six minutes; it appears to come out of nowhere. That's not true, but quite often there is no easily dissectible way to explain why a real threat on goal finally materializes.

Soccer will often seem boring unless MLS better educates fans on what is occurring between serious scoring chances. At present, announcers abandon action during those intervals. Rather than informing us who has the ball or is doing the marking or making a run or abandoning his position, they draw our attention to matters that do not have a direct bearing to what is unfolding, such as promoting upcoming matches or telling us who the scoring leader is. They might argue that we can all see who has the ball or is marking or making a run, but the point is that their lack of focus is distracting. And it sends the wrong meta-message: what the audience hears is, "Nothing important is happening right now, but I will return to the action as soon as something does."

With rare exception, the match reports are even worse. As was outlined earlier, one of the great strengths of soccer is that there is tremendous character development because of the lack of substitutions. But this is rarely captured in local match reports. The *Times of London* might describe a defender as 'an immense and reassuring figure' or an attacker as 'predictable and easily isolated'. But Americans writers see these kinds of characterizations as subjective—or they are not informed enough to make them in the first place. American journalists have been raised to be 'objective', which means they are supposed to stick to the facts, which, if at all possible, should be quantifiable. But soccer needs to be covered like a theater review—with heroes, villains, and fools, and all manner of characters in between. This is both a more accurate way to cover matches—because numbers tell so little of the story—and it makes for more compelling reading. Soccer does not have enough useful stats to make fans argue, so MLS must educate writers to help prompt readers by teaching them to cover matches qualitatively.

This is especially necessary because fans, and even many who have played and coached, do not understand the game at a deep level. They have to be taught, and, in turn, they will be better informed, and become better coaches and players. In the meantime, however, MLS has to do a better job working with their limitations. They may not be willing to watch an entire match, especially if it lacks dramatic tension or continuity, but they might very well be willing to watch extensive highlights or pay attention while experts help them better understand the nuances. This occurs, at least to some extent, when matches are broadcast nationally, but most local broadcasts are produced very badly.

### *Partisanship*

The one area Kaelin hardly addressed was having a rooting interest. For him, being consumed by winning or obsessed with one's team's success undermined the ability to have an aesthetic experience. On one level, he is obviously correct: from an aesthetic perspective, seeing a well-played game should be more important than whether your team wins or loses. But the fact of the matter is that being neutral is not nearly as engrossing as having a strong rooting interest. The worst match involving your team is still a lot more interesting than the best one involving others. The latter are still watchable, but the aesthetic elements required to sustain sufficient interest are much greater.

The fact that MLS has had the greatest success with home attendance should not come as a surprise. The atmosphere on offer is unlike any other in North America. Because of the lack of commercials, clubs do not feel a need to entertain fans since play stops so infrequently. This created the temporal space for fans to generate the atmosphere rather than responding to orchestrated efforts, like cheerleaders or exploding scoreboards. The ability of fans to sing and dance and sway and light smoke bombs has really helped compensate for the problems with dramatic tension, continuity, and articulation that have plagued American soccer.

The problem is that this in-person experience does not translate much to watching your favorite team on TV, let alone to watching a game between other teams. Loud crowd noise is an important part of having a good TV viewing experience; you will appreciate just how important it is if you watch a game with the volume down. But there is a big difference between experiencing crowd noise in person, which can be a primary aspect of your experience, and on TV, where it helps create an engrossing background.

In other words, the game has to speak for itself when it is being broadcast on TV; you cannot compensate for a bad match or a lack of understanding with a fantastic atmosphere. It is simpler when your team is involved because (1) you are more familiar with the players, which helps with articulation, and (2) having a rooting interest intensifies the dramatic tension of every moment, even if a neutral observer would be bored.

The bar for having an aesthetic experience is much higher when the viewer does not have a rooting interest. Having such an experience requires a strong combination of atmosphere, dramatic tension, continuity, as well as the ability to perceive the tensions that determine the outcome. Bluntly put, you can't really expect people to stay tuned to a match played in a largely empty stadium, when neither team is willing to take a risk to score, play is clumsy, and you don't care much about who wins. Educated soccer fans are going to seek out better matches and the less educated are going to find something else to do. This is the ongoing challenge MLS faces. The stadiums are now mostly full, and filled with a unique atmosphere. However, teams have become increasingly cautious. The quality of play is improving but still well below the standards of the major European and Latin American



leagues. And we are still largely culturally illiterate about the sport. All of these areas will have to be addressed before Major League Soccer can compete with the other major American sports leagues for TV viewers.