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Seattle Sounders FC 3, Toronto FC 1

Mark it down: The Seattle Sounders are your 2019 MLS Cup champions.

They had to work for it in a tightly-contested rematch with Toronto FC – their third championship meeting in four years – but the Sounders took the rubber match 3-1 thanks to a 57th-minute winner from unlikely hero Kelvin Leerdam and beautiful insurance goals from Victor Rodriguez and Raul Ruidiaz. Jozy Altidore added a consolation goal for Toronto in stoppage time.

The opening goal came somewhat against the run of play, as Ruidiaz switched the ball right to an isolated Leerdam,

who evaded a challenge before firing in a shot that ricocheted off two TFC defenders and into the net. It was Seattle's first goal in their three MLS Cup appearances, and took the air out of a Toronto team that up until that point had looked more dangerous.

The visiting Reds certainly had the better of a back-and-forth first half, enjoying nearly two-thirds of the ball in the opening 45 and creating a number of dangerous opportunities. The first clear chance of the game came in the 11th minute as a quick take from Jonathan Osorio went straight into Stefan Frei's arms. The Seattle goal-keeper's best moment came in the 36th minute, though, as he got down well to get a firm left hand to Nicolas Benezet's low shot.



Seattle weren't without their own looks in the

first half, as Roman Torres put a good chance from a corner kick over the bar in the 21st minute. Ruidiaz then had his team's best chance of the half just before the whistle, sneaking in behind Omar Gonzalez only to see his 1v1 effort well-saved by Quentin Westberg.

The home team was clearly buoyed by Leerdam's goal just before the hour mark, which changed the complexion of the game. Even Altidore's introduction as a substitute in the 68th minute – his first playoff minutes since suffering a hamstring injury – wasn't enough to slow down the Sounders.

The home side was able to ice the game and send most of the 69,724 fans in attendance into party mode when Rodriguez buried an exquisite layoff from Nicolas Lodeiro in the 76th minute, while Ruidiaz added the third with a sublime chip of Westberg in the 90th minute, with Toronto pushing hard for a way back into the game.

Goals

57' – SEA – Kelvin Leerdam 90+3' – TOR – Jozy Altidore 76' – SEA – Victor Rodriguez 90' – SEA – Raul Ruidiaz \$40,000 was contributed to the Audi Goals Drive Progress fund.

Three Things

THE BIG PICTURE: By and large, they've done it the hard way, but the results are impossible to argue with. Seattle are MLS champions for the second time in four years, a result – along with a host of U.S. Open Cup success – puts them firmly in the conversation as one of the best MLS teams of the 2010s. It's also a second MLS Cup win for Sounders head coach Brian Schmetzer; many made the case before the game that his role in Seattle's success has not been talked about enough, but this result will surely cement his place in the MLS coaching pantheon. It's a bitter pill to swallow for TFC, whose fans will argue they were the better team for the first hour of the game, but credit is still due for a strong run that saw them knock off the top two seeds in their conference, in no small part to an excellent coaching job from Greg Vanney.

MOMENT OF THE MATCH: Leerdam's goal had an element (or two) of good fortune to it, but when your team hasn't scored in 267 minutes of MLS Cup play, you'll take it by hook or by crook. The goal was a gut punch to what had been, to that point, a superior Toronto team, and they were unable to muster a response.

MAN OF THE MATCH: The unsung hero on the day – as he has been for much of his time in Rave Green – was Gustav Svensson, who shined in the second half. His two assists spoke to his offensive contributions but it was his composed play on both sides of the ball that earns him this honor.

CREDIT: Nick Rosano Senior Editor

LA Galaxy roster build for 2020 MLS season largely hinges on Zlatan Ibrahimovic

The LA Galaxy have been in transition since Bruce Arena took off after the 2016 campaign with the aim of saving the US men's national team's World Cup run, only just returning to the Audi MLS Cup Playoffs in 2019. So what's one more season or being in flux? Or even two?

Big strides were made in this initial season under general manager Dennis te Kloese and head coach Guillermo Barros Schelotto, and LA were rewarded with a trip to the Western Conference Semifinals. If there's now a real foundation to build upon, there are also seemingly endless questions that, so far, have few answers.

What the Galaxy will look like in 2020 is anybody's guess. Until Zlatan Ibrahimovic's fate is determined – within the next

two weeks, Schelotto promises – there's no telling what will be required if the Swedish is gone. Te Kloese and Schelotto say there is no Plan A or B, one with Ibra and the other without, that it's just wait and see. So that leaves everyone wondering what Ibrahimovic will do.

The 38-year-old striker has been spectacular for LA, scoring 53 goals in 58 games, playoffs included. He's said he doesn't yet know what he'll do next year, and speculation is exactly that – conjecture.

If Ibra goes, the Galaxy are less interesting off the field, but it might not be the worst thing



between the lines. Replacing his 30 goals this season would be tough – too often if he didn't score, neither did LA – but they were sometimes too dependent on him.

But whether or not he returns, but his presence impacts every step forward. Building a roster, te Kloese noted "is a big puzzle," whereby every move impacts every other move.

Ibrahimovic's possible departure would free up a Designated Player spot, and finding a replacement would become the priority. If he stays, there are money decisions that must be made. Cristian Pavon, who arrived from Boca Juniors on loan in August and will return in 2020, appears could step into a DP slot. Midfield general Jonathan dos Santos inhabits another. So does French winger Romain Alessandrini, who missed most of this season with a knee injury and is out of contract at year's end.

Alessandrini's future could depend on what happens with 22-year-old Mexican winger Uriel Antuna. He's on loan from Manchester City, the Galaxy hold no options on him, and Chivas de Guadalajara are reportedly interested in the Mexican international.

Te Kloese says there's a "gentlemen's agreement" with Manchester City that would allow the Galaxy to match any offer made for Antuna, but matching the Chivas offer would make him "a very, very expensive player for us." And if they want to bring back Argentine attacking midfielder Favio Alvarez, who has been on loan from Atletico Tucuman, they must purchase his contract.

Pavon is the pivotal figure for the Galaxy. He embodies what they want to be – dynamic, attacking, fast-paced – and his arrival boosted the offense. The Galaxy are almost certainly going to purchase his rights come 2021, and the Argentine is likely going to spearhead the new era. That's if a big European offer doesn't come first.

Te Kloese also spoke about wanting to develop a club identity that's present on the field, and the initial steps – primarily through young Latin American talent – have been encouraging. Te Kloese is a Dutchman who has spent the bulk of his

LA Galaxy continued..

career in Mexico, and Schelotto has played and coached primarily in Argentina.

But that's not solely indicative of who the Galaxy want to be, te Kloese said.

"I think we need to assess players by their qualities and not by if they're Latin or they're European ...," he said. "To pin us down as more of a Latin team, I don't see that. I think we should assess every good player the Galaxy can take. And I think this is a very diverse city, and I think we're more geared to that point of the philosophy."

He told Soccer America in September that Schelotto's familiarity with the Argentine market and his with Mexico's provided a "certain trust level and comfort level" in acquiring players.

"I don't think that going forward, everything or every player needs to come from South America," Te Kloese said. "If the player is good and he's South American, that's fine, but if the player is American and he's good, that will be even better. And if the player is good and he's from Europe, more than welcome."

Rather, the Galaxy want dynamic players, regardless of origin, that fit into the wing-heavy, possess-and-counter style that Schelotto has embraced. There are targets in mind, and "in the coming weeks there will be a lot of traveling and a lot of looking at players and a lot of assessing where we should be reinforcing and what not to do."



Finding and developing American talent is equally as critical. Efrain Alvarez and Julian Araujo played important roles with the first team this year, and the Galaxy want to see a steady flow of talent from their academy and Galaxy II, their USL Championship-affiliated second team.

Te Kloese grades these first steps mostly positively.

"We have some players within our roster who are perfectly within a playing style that we'd like to see ... being dynamic, being offensive," he said. "Now to balance out other things is certainly important in the coming year."

LA also must become better defensively, since only four teams conceded more goals than LA (59). The Galaxy won't discuss specific moves until roster deadlines, but Jorgen Skjelvik and his million-dollar salary are certainly gone, and we'll see what happens with veteran Daniel Steres and outside back Rolf Feltscher. Dave Romney, who started down the stretch at left back, appears to be gone, in a reported deal with new expansion side Nashville SC.

That all underscores a long list of questions around LA: Is the focus up front, which won't come cheap, or at the back, where there is great need? Is this another step forward or is a more dramatic remake required? How best to balance short-term needs with long-term plans?

LA must mull it all over, and a final decision probably hinges on one thing: What happens with Ibrahimovic.

CREDIT: Scott French Contributor

NYCFC, head coach Dome Torrent mutually agree to part ways

New York City FC and head coach Dome Torrent have mutually agreed to part ways, the club announced Friday. Torrent took over the club in June 2018, replacing Patrick Vieira. He helped lead the team to a third place finish in the Eastern Conference as well as a playoff win. This season he lead the club to a franchise record of 64 points, topping the East as well as clinching a Concacaf Champions League berth.

"While I've greatly enjoyed coaching NYCFC and the incredible life experience of living in New York, in mutual discussion with the club, I feel this is the right time for myself and my family to look for other opportunities as I develop my career as a head coach," Torrent said in a statement. "I'd like to thank NYCFC for giving me this opportunity. I've learned a lot during my time at the Club after working with a fantastic Sporting Department and a great group of coaches."

Torrent, who was a longtime assistant of Pep Guardiola at Barcelona, Bayern Munich and Manchester City, who are also part of City Football Group alongside NYCFC.



There had been rumblings surrounding Torrent's future for some time, most recently popping up after the club were eliminated by Toronto FC in the Audi 2019 MLS Cup Playoffs where the Spaniard cited some frustrations and downplayed his role in the club's success.

"I'd like to sincerely thank Dome and the coaches for their hard work since joining NYCFC," vice chairman Marty Edelman said. "With Dome leading the team, we had an excellent regular season and we were extremely proud to finish top of the Eastern Conference. In discussions with Dome since our season finished, we've decided that this is the right moment for both parties to focus on new opportunities."

NYCFC have been linked with Giovanni van Bronckhorst to potentially take over at the club. Bronckhorst won five titles in four years at Feyenoord, his only full managerial role, before joining City Football Group.

CREDIT: Tom Bogert Contributor

Unnamed MLS club makes \$11 million offer for young Romanian

TRANSFER TRACKER STATUS: Rumor



An unnamed MLS club has made an offer of \$11 million to acquire 21-year-old winger Florinel Coman from Romanian side FCSB, according to a report from Romanian outlet Digi Sport.

Former Romanian international Lita Dumitru, who works as a youth coach in the Atlanta area, told the Romanian outlet he was in his home country with an American entrepreneur and that an offer had reached Coman's agent, Ioan Becali, who is the cousin of FCSB owner Gigi Becali.

Coman was previously linked to New York City FC at the same price by Romanian journalist Emanuel Rosu in October.

The Cityzens would be a logical landing spot for Coman, who could join countryman Alexandru Mitrita on NYCFC's roster.

Coman has 20 goals in 67 appearances with FCSB in Romania's Liga 1 and has also scored four times in UEFA Europa League play. Between FCSB and previous club Viitorul, he already has 111 first-team league appearances after making his debut during the 2014-15 season.

CREDIT: Ian Quillen Contributor

Julian Gressel looking for new Atlanta United deal, "frustrated" with impasse

Julian Gressel is one of the best utility men in MLS, and the Atlanta United player says he deserves more.

In a report by Doug Roberson of the Atlanta Journal-Constitution on Thursday, Gressel said he's seeking a new deal and has been left frustrated by a lack of progress with his current club, after his agent began talks with the club earlier this year.

Perhaps most stunning of all, the German says if Atlanta aren't prepared to get serious on a better deal, he's open to moving on.

"It's come to a point where I've produced a lot," he said in the report. "I've played well. I should reap the benefits of that. I want to do that. If it's here, if the club wants to make me a priority here, I would love to be here. If the club decides not to

make me a priority here, I would love to go somewhere where I can be a priority."



Drafted by Atlanta out of Providence College in 2017, Gressel won MLS Rookie of the Year and has played at least 32 regular-season games each of his first three seasons in the league. Notching a career high in goals in 2019 with six in league play, Gressel has been a regular under both Tata Martino and Frank de Boer due to his versatility, capable of playing across the midfield, as a wide defender, and occasionally in a more attacking capacity. Gressel has won the 2018 MLS Cup, 2019 U.S. Open Cup and 2019 Campeones Cup.

Gressel's comments come on the heels of a report that Atlanta are set to trade midfielder Darlington Nagbe to Columbus Crew SC, with local press speculating the club will make more significant moves in the offseason.

CREDIT: Alicia Rodriguez Contributor

Major League Soccer, adidas unveil MLS NATIVO XXV as match ball for league's 25th season



Major League Soccer and adidas on Sunday revealed the official match ball for the league's 25th season: the 2020 MLS NATIVO XXV.

The NATIVO XXV pulls inspiration from the first MLS ball in 1996 to celebrate the 25th MLS season and kick off a new decade of soccer in North America. It will go on sale online and in stores on Jan. 2, 2020.

Incorporating colors from the original MLS ball and identity, the ball is made from 100% water-based materials and print colors, yielding the most sustainable ball to date. Additionally, the unique 'Hi-White' material used for the ball will allow for better visibility on the field for players.





CREDIT: MLSSoccer Staff



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Lamar Jackson joins elite club with perfect passer rating

On the day Baltimore Ravens quarterback Lamar Jackson delivered the longest touchdown run of his career, he joined

elite company with his arm, as well.

In Sunday's 49-13 rout of the winless Cincinnati Bengals, Jackson became the second player in NFL history to produce a perfect passer rating (158.3) in multiple games in a single season. The only other player to do so was Steelers quarterback Ben Roethlisberger, who had two in 2007.

"I'm a quarterback at the end of the day," Jackson said. "I want to prove that each and every day I go out and practice. I treat it like it's a game. If I miss a pass at practice, I'm ticked off."



Jackson, who began the season with a perfect rating in Miami, became the sixth player in NFL history with perfect passer ratings in multiple career games, reaching that feat in his 16th NFL start. This came during a season that started with Jackson facing questions as to whether he could be an effective NFL passer.

Week 10 NFL takeaways: What to make of the Saints' and Chiefs' upset losses

"I mean, jeez, you go out there and he's whipping the ball and putting it in awesome spots," Ravens tight end Nick Boyle said. "You saw his awesome passes today. That's something he can do that people don't think he can do or didn't think he could do. That's what makes him so dangerous. He could do everything."

In going against the NFL's worst run defense, Jackson and the Ravens surprisingly attacked the Bengals through the air. Before being pulled after three quarters, Jackson was 15-of-17 passing for 223 yards and three touchdowns. His only incompletions were a spike to stop the clock late in the second quarter and a pass to tight end Mark Andrews in the end zone that was nearly caught.

But Jackson's best highlight came with his feet. Midway through the third quarter, Jackson scored on a thrilling, 47-yard dash that displayed his jaw-dropping speed and athleticism. After getting to the open field, Jackson sidestepped Bengals safety Jessie Bates III and then spun around linebacker Nick Vigil to get to the end zone.

Ravens coach John Harbaugh remarked, "I said to the offensive coaches on the [head]phones, 'They'll be watching that run for decades and decades. That's one that everyone in the country is going to see by tomorrow afternoon."

It was the longest run by a quarterback since Cam Newton's 62-yarder on Dec. 10, 2017. It was also the longest touchdown run by any Ravens player since Ray Rice's 51-yarder in 2012.

Asked if that was the best run of his career, Jackson said, "I don't know. I don't know. It don't matter. We scored. Move on."

Jackson became the first quarterback in NFL history to finish a game with a perfect passer rating (minimum 15 attempts), at least 50 yards rushing and one touchdown run, according to the Elias Sports Bureau data.

"He's one of the most exciting players I've ever seen," Bengals coach Zac Taylor said. "(He's) dynamic. I'm interested to see what teams do down the road here to stop him, because he certainly is hitting on all cylinders right now."

Thanks to Jackson, the Ravens (7-2) won for the fifth straight time, closing to within one game of the New England Patriots (8-1) and the top seed in the AFC.

In the third quarter, chants of "MVP" filled Paul Brown Stadium.

"He has my vote, definitely," Bengals safety Shawn Williams said. "He's definitely the best we've faced this year. Hats off to them and what they are doing over there."

CREDIT: Jamison Hensley ESPN Staff Writer

USWNT trounces Costa Rica 6-0 in 2019 finale

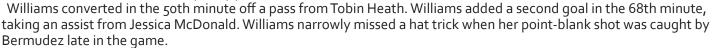
Carli Lloyd and Morgan Brian scored in the first 10 minutes and Lynn Williams came off the bench to add a pair of second-half goals in the United States' 6-0 victory over Costa Rica on Sunday night at TIAA Bank Field in the Americans' final match of the year.

The U.S. was 20W-3D-1L in 2019, finishing with a 23-match unbeaten streak.

Lloyd started the scoring in the fourth minute, taking a long pass from Rose Lavelle and drilling a shot from the left side of the box past goal-keeper Noelia Bermudez. Lloyd scored twice in a 3-2 victory over Sweden on Thursday night.

Brian added a goal in the 10th minute, taking Lavelle's pass and sending a scorching shot into the corner of the net. It was especially gratifying for Brian, who grew up in nearby St. Simons Island, Georgia, and conducts camps in the Jacksonville area during the offseason.

U.S. coach Vlatko Andonovski made several substitutions at halftime and it quickly paid dividends.



U.S. goalkeeper Ashlyn Harris had a relatively easy time, needing to turn back just one shot. The closest Costa Rica came to scoring was when Melissa Herrera hit the cross bar on a shot in the 62nd minute and teammate Priscilla Chinchilla did the same in the 76th minute.



'I'm Never Going To Retire!'

Nate Diaz isn't retired! What made you think something stupid like that?

That's the gist of Nate Diaz's latest message, which comes on the heels of his last message, which ended "Peace out fight game" and set off a tidal wave of retirement speculation. But according to Nate, people just misunderstood him. "Who said I was retired? I'll fight tonight," he told ESPN. "I'll fight forever. I'm never going to retire, that's for sure."

That's definitely good to know, especially after all the other stuff he's been saying since his UFC 244 loss on cuts to Jorge Masvidal in New York City. Immediately after he called for a rematch (despite losing every round on every

judge's scorecard), and straight up said we may not see him for another three years if the UFC wasn't willing to work with him to secure it. With Dana White making it clear that the promotion had other plans for Masvidal, it all sets up a situation where Nate disappearing again sounded likely.

At the very least, we won't be seeing the younger Diaz brother back in the cage for a while. He's got that massive cut above his right eye to heal, and he undoubtedly wants to do that properly this time considering it was the same cut that opened up in his August fight against Anthony Pettis.

He also hurt his knee leading up to the Masvidal fight, which kept him from running and sparring in the lead-up. That in turn

stopped him from pouring on the constant pressure as he typically does to overwhelm his opponents.

But now we know: when his body is ready, Nate Diaz is willing to keep fighting. Whether he'll be able to come to an arrangement with the UFC that satisfies his financial demands and personal interest is a whole other discussion. We'd hope the hype surrounding UFC 244 would make the UFC more willing to treat Diaz as the unique star he is, always entertaining and mysteriously impervious to reputational damage even in defeat.

But I have a feeling they'll try to stick him back in the co-main, with co-main pay, against some lesser known prospect the UFC is building up the contention ladder. If Diaz says no to that I wouldn't be surprised, motherf**ker.

CREDIT: Ryan Harkness



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