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## Chicago Fire FC's unprecedented makeover is proof they mean business

And with that, the metamorphosis is complete.

With the latest unveiling of the Chicago Fire's new identity — a brand new badge and a name tweak from SC for "Soccer Club" to FC for "Football Club" — there's frankly not much left to change in a club makeover that is unprecedented in MLS history.

The Columbus Crew experienced a fresh start in 2019 with the arrival of the Haslam and Edwards families, but that's a multi-year project that's very much in progress. The 2005 FC Dallas team experienced some big changes — city, stadium, identity — but nothing as comprehensive as what the Fire are experiencing. The Sporting Kansas City reboot in 2011 similarly involved a new stadium and look, but it didn't extend to the squad.

By comparison, the overhaul of the Fire since new owner Joe Mansueto took over full control of the club has proven as impressive for its breadth as it has been for its swiftness. No one could have predicted this timeline of events:

Sept. 13: Mansueto becomes sole owner of the club

Sept. 13: On the same day, the club announces it will move to downtown Chicago

Oct. 8: Bastian Schweinsteiger announces his retirement

Oct. 9: Fire make move to Soldier Field official and announce 2020 home opener, vs. Atlanta United on 3/21

Oct. 10: Fire sign ex-Real Madrid midfielder Alvaro Medran

Oct. 12: Former Golden Boot winner Nemanja Nikolic announces he will not return to Chicago

Oct. 14: Fire announce they have 14 players under contract for 2020

Nov. 12: Starting midfielder Dax McCarty traded to Nashville SC

Nov. 13: Fire part ways with head coach Veljko Paunovic

Nov. 14: Homegrown defender Grant Lillard is traded to expansion side Inter Miami

Nov. 21: Chicago Fire SC become Chicago Fire FC and unveil a new badge

That long list — all occurring in a span of roughly two months — makes the 2020 Chicago Fire FC feel a bit more like an expansion team (and at this point they roughly have as many players as Inter Miami and Nashville SC). That's how fresh a start Mansueto is affording the club.

And that's also what arguably makes the Fire the most interesting team to follow this offseason and into 2020: Mansueto isn't playing.

In recent years MLS has also experienced a transformation into a league where clubs are racing to outdo one another. One year it's Toronto FC seeing their investments rewarded with the best season in MLS history, only for Atlanta United to one-up them soon after. And we all know what LAFC have accomplished in their short time in the league. And that arms race will continue into the new decade with several more clubs inserting themselves into the mix, led by deep-pocketed owners with visions of greatness.

Chicago is about to step into that picture.

Led by a billionaire owner — Mansueto is chairman and founder of global financial services firm Morningstar — Chicago Fire FC have that same stated ambition.

"There's no reason we couldn't be equal to or surpassing those cities," Mansueto said in October about the prospect of competing with clubs like Atlanta, Seattle and Portland. "I can't predict whether it's in one year, three years or five years but to me there's no question it'll happen. There's a rabid fanbase here for soccer and it's just the timing ... I have no doubt we'll fill this stadium."

By "this stadium" he means Soldier Field. By "fill this stadium" he means 61,500. Mansueto has a plan and there's no reason to believe it won't come to fruition based on how methodical the rebuild has been. This is the same owner who reportedly paid over \$60 million to buy out the Bridgeview stadium lease in order to move the team into Soldier Field.

Let your imagination run wild for a bit as to what Chicago — the third-largest city in the United States, known for its



rabid passion for its sports teams — can become in MLS if they can in fact match Atlanta, Seattle and Portland. For a fan base that has had to endure one of the toughest decade-long stretches of any club in MLS, that's a mind-blowing proposition.

The crest and name change? It was practically a necessity if the Fire are truly transforming into the next force in MLS. A new look for a new era makes sense.

For some this day will undoubtedly carry with it some nostalgia. The Bob Bradley-Peter Nowak-Hristo Stoichkov teams of 1998-2001 were among the best and they could compete with any in the league on any day. The 2007-2009 Cuauhtemoc Blanco era gave Chicago a star to put up against any in the league and he carried those teams to three straight Conference finals.

If Joe Mansueto's vision comes to be, the new Chicago Fire FC will be a combination of its two most memorable eras: a great team with big stars. But the trophies will need to follow. That's what will make this offseason so intriguing: Who do they bring in as manager? Who are the new players and faces of the club? These decisions will go a long way toward setting the tone and bringing that new club crest to life.

That feeling of anticipation and hope for what may be in store is one of the best parts of sports fandom and the long-suffering Fire supporters should revel in it. Supporters of the other teams in the Eastern Conference will experience these developments a tad differently: The competition is already pretty fierce as is and it's only going to get tougher. Chicago Fire FC mean business.

CREDIT: Benjamin Baer      New Media Editor

## Inter Miami CF managing owner Jorge Mas: "We aspire to bring the best players in the world"

Inter Miami CF still has yet to play an MLS match, but with their 2020 debut campaign approaching, managing owner Jorge Mas isn't afraid to share his lofty ambitions for the future of the franchise.

In an interview with TUDN on Thursday, Mas said his ultimate goal is to make the club a destination for the global elite, and not just on the back end of their careers. While that might seem like lip service that every club owner can easily say without following through, Mas pointed to a few factors that he's hoping will make him uniquely equipped to make good on that notion.

"We aspire to bring the best players in the world, to bring the elite of international football, and not just [bring] the elite here to retire," Mas said. "It has to be a player that is able to fully contribute immediately. I have talked to many global stars. David [Beckham] and I have met with them. I believe you will see astros coming here to the city of Miami, not only in 2020, but projecting to '22, '23, '24. You are going to see big fish in Miami because it's an attractive city, it's going to be an attractive project for international figures. It's important to elevate the level of the quality of play in MLS and I believe Inter Miami is going to do that. We're going to bring the best players in the world to our squad to our city, and I hope to welcome those players."

Inter Miami has already been linked to some of the sport's biggest names, including Luis Suarez, Edinson Cavani and even Lionel Messi, although at this point each of those can still be considered part of the silly season rumor mill.

One big name that has publicly expressed interest in eventually joining the new team is former Atletico Madrid superstar and current Barcelona forward Antoine Griezmann, who recently told French newspaper L'Equipe that he would like to finish his career in Miami or Los Angeles and that "If Beckham wants me in his club then I'll go."

Mas also touched on those rumors in the interview with TUDN.

"Yes, Antoine Griezmann loves Miami," Mas said. "He says publicly he wants to part of the Inter Miami squad in a few years, after his time in Barça, but there's Antoine and others and the reality is that we are in conversations with a lot of them to see who is joining in the year 2020."



CREDIT: Ari Liljenwall      Contributor

## Portland Timbers acquiring Venezuelan U-20 right back Pablo Bonilla

TRANSFER TRACKER STATUS: Report

The Portland Timbers are the latest MLS club to dive into Venezuela's burgeoning pool of soccer talent, according to a new report.

The Rose City side are in the process of completing a transfer deal for Vinotinto Under-20 national team fullback Pablo Bonilla from Deportivo La Guaira, according to Venezuelan soccer observer Mario Alberto Sanchez.

Mario Alberto Sánchez @MarioSanchezVe

El lateral Pablo Bonilla será nuevo jugador de Portland Timbers en la MLS. Será dirigido por Gio Savarese y será compañero de Renzo Zambrano. Pablo jugó este torneo con Deportivo La Guaira, pero ya no verá acción en lo que queda de torneo. Portland lo haría oficial en unos meses.

He's been a regular for La Guaira, one of the Venezuelan top flight's top contenders in recent seasons and one of four clubs still in contention for the league's 2019 clausura title as its playoffs move into the semifinals stage. On Sunday La Naranja won the first leg of their two-legged semifinal series vs. Deportivo Tachira 1-0. The tournament's final unfolds next month.

In his report, Sanchez alleged that Bonilla will not appear again for La Guaira again this season as the move to Portland is completed; he was not on Sunday's gameday roster.

Long South America's doormat, Venezuela are undergoing a soccer renaissance of late and several MLS teams have taken advantage, most prominently in the form of Atlanta United star Josef Martinez. Timbers head coach Giovanni Savarese was a Vinotinto regular during his own playing career and Portland signed Venezuelan midfielder Renzo Zambrano a year ago; Zambrano made 10 league appearances (nine starts) last season.

CREDIT: Charles Boehm Contributor



## Diego Polenta says he is departing the LA Galaxy

LA Galaxy defender Diego Polenta announced on social media Friday he will be departing the club.

Polenta's message, in Spanish and English, warmly thanks the Galaxy and fanbase for his tenure with the club.

"I want to thank all members of the LA Galaxy for the trust, the affection and the way they treated me," Polenta's English-language message reads. "It was an amazing experience. I [especially] want to thank Guillermo [Barros Schelotto] and his coaching staff for believing in me and Dennis [te Kloese] for always wanting the best for both parts. I know I will always be welcome back to the team, which is something that I really appreciate. To my teammates, staff and fans, a big thank you! Good luck and success for the upcoming [future]!"

Polenta, 27, joined ahead of the 2019 season, the Uruguayan having stepped away from the sport before being persuaded to return and play for the Galaxy. He made 28 appearances, all starts, in MLS regular season play, and started both of the Galaxy's Audi 2019 MLS Cup Playoffs games.

According to Corner of the Galaxy, Polenta wanted to leave LA in order to be closer to his family.

Polenta's contract option was formally declined by the Galaxy, among the end-of-season moves announced by the club on Thursday.



CREDIT: Alicia Rodriguez Contributor



## Inside Nashville SC's round-table brain trust aiming to propel MLS expansion success

With barely three months to go until their MLS debut, it's safe to say that Nashville SC have a lot on their plate.

The club just navigated the Expansion Draft, a key squad-building milestone in the lead-up to their inaugural league match – which they announced would take place on Feb. 29 at Nissan Stadium. The opponent is also notable: Atlanta United, the nearest MLS colleague to Nashville, a likely future rival and, for better or worse, the expansion success story that NSC are likely to be compared with often in the months and years ahead.

Nashville entered the Expansion Draft with just nine players signed to their MLS roster. But the group took significant shape over the course of a busy draft day where NSC picked five players, immediately flipped two of them for other assets and acquired two more via trades, a haul that drew generally positive reviews. They signed four more players from their USL team just days later.

They are also in the midst of the transition from USL to MLS, an organizational ramp-up spread across two leagues, two office locations and what will eventually be three home stadiums over a four-year period in which they're still introducing themselves to their community.

It all adds up to a hefty to-do list three months out from that first kickoff in MLS.



"Can we win in year one?" asked general manager Mike Jacobs in a recent conversation with MLSsoccer.com. "I think the teams that do really well, we talk about groups like Sporting Kansas City or Seattle: This product is about sustained success. It's about not only trying to find a way to be competitive in year one, but how do we sustain that and grow something that can be self-fulfilling – that every year, our fans are expecting that we're actually playing for something?"

Fortunately they've got an ace in the hole or two in the Music City, as MLSsoccer.com learned in a recent visit to NSC's headquarters to meet with several members of the technical staff charting the club's course towards the future.

With limited fanfare, Nashville have constructed one of the more intriguing brain trusts in modern MLS. To be sure, CEO Ian Ayre is a well-recognized figure in the world game thanks to his tenure as managing director and CEO at Liverpool FC from 2011-17, and he's played a key outward-facing role for NSC.

Most MLS insiders are familiar with Jacobs, a former Peter Vermees acolyte at Sporting KC and past president of the United Soccer Coaches who also worked at USL as an executive VP and coached at the NCAA level for two decades. And head coach Gary Smith has the 2010 MLS Cup title on his CV, the highlight of three-plus years in charge of the Colorado Rapids.

The group working to bring Ayre's and Jacobs's vision to fruition also includes:

Assistant GM Ally Mackay, a former agent and Scotsman who played for Jacobs at the University of Evansville and worked with longtime player agent Patrick McCabe at the Stellar Soccer agency  
Retired MLS fullback Chance Myers, the No. 1 pick in the 2008 SuperDraft and a 10-year league veteran who now heads Nashville's scouting operations

An analytics specialist with a neuroscience background named Oliver Miller-Farrell, who arrived from a stint with Opta and the Perform Group.

It is a group that to some will sound a familiar tone from Ayre's time at Liverpool, when he was part of a selection of experts from across departments that came together to identify potential transfer targets. Once derided as a so-called "transfer committee," it has produced undoubted success, landing signings like Roberto Firmino, Sadio Mane, Philippe Coutinho and later Mohamed Salah that helped turn Liverpool into the champions of Europe.

In Nashville, Jacobs often gathers the group to discuss a range of technical decisions, from evaluating potential signings to building out NSC's newly-hatched academy and beyond. No matter the topic at hand, an egalitarian sensibility reigns.

"The table we meet at, it's a roundtable," explained Jacobs, an idea he transplanted from his time as an assistant coach at Duke University. "And that may sound cliched or hokey, but the roundtable is really important to me ... So

when you're in there, doors closed, we're all the same. It's not like weighted or valued as far as whose opinion means more.

Nashville's brain trust (L to R): Chance Myers, Ally Mackay, Mike Jacobs, Gary Smith, Ian Ayre | Nashville SC

"None of us here are the smartest guy in the room. We don't have all the answers. And I think that we're going into this very open-minded about the fact that this is going to be a very challenging project. So for us, we're expecting the mistakes. We're expecting to not hit on all our guys that we selected. And we're expecting, at times, the tactics not to work."

Jacobs has, with tongue partially in cheek, referred to NSC as "SKC South," and there is some Sporting DNA present, no shock given that club's consistent success in a smaller market and mid-range budget. Myers spent most of his playing career in KC, where animated locker-room discussions with the likes of Benny Feilhaber and Ike Opara helped foster his interest in his current gig.

"I would always have conversation with [Jacobs] when he was in Kansas City. I'd sit down with Benny and Ike, and we'd just [say], 'alright, how does this guy fit? How's LA fitting guys into their salary cap? How's New York – where did they find this guy? What league did he come from?'" recalled Myers.

"So from an early standpoint, probably 22, 23 years old, just trying to figure out like how teams were being built. And the evolution of MLS 1.0, 2.0 – whatever we're at, just the different, you know, ebbs and flows of how the league's being structured."

But with two New York-area natives in the mix, there's also something of a cosmopolitan streak – literally, considering Jacobs was a New York Cosmos ballboy in his youth – that's well in keeping with the city's status as a rowdy entertainment capital. The club introduced German midfielder Hany Mukhtar, their first-ever Designated Player, by winging him in from Denmark on a posh private jet, and used the slogan "uniquely Nashville" as shorthand for the blend of graft, glitz and southern hospitality they feel epitomizes country music's neon mecca.

"Ask Chance – players want to be valued, they want to be treated as important," said Jacobs. "The great feedback we've gotten so far post-Hany signing was that 'Nashville does it right, they take care of their players. Players are important there, players are valued there.' I'm blown away by the number of players, through their agents, who talk about being intrigued by what we're doing here. And that's not just domestically, that's internationally as well."

Mackay's decade of agent work and multinational contacts network is a major benefit in this area, ensuring players are always looked after off the field in the aim of maximizing the chances of them performing on it.

Jokingly dubbing himself "the 'well actually' guy," Miller-Farrell is tasked with keeping data at or near the heart of NSC's decision-making processes. And while he doesn't consider himself a "spreadsheet guy" on the level of respected – and highly successful – analytics managers like Toronto FC's Devin Pleuler and the Seattle Sounders' Ravi Ramineni, he brings a "holistic" perspective that NSC believe can provide a range of competitive advantages.

Jacobs is firmly on board with the value of analytics across multiple areas of operations.

"We're not just doing this because other clubs are doing it – maybe we're doing some things other clubs aren't doing, in regards to how we use data and analytics," he said. "We just believe strongly that it's going to help us and we believe it's the right thing to do."

Nashville's technical staff know the risks that lie before them. They have no illusions about the difficult road traveled by all but the richest and most aggressive expansion teams. They also believe they are building the foundations of a sustainable club culture with a stable decision-making process, even if they're wary of making big promises or pronouncements about the results to come.

"We've got a lot of people who understand things very differently from different angles, different lenses," Jacobs said. "So to me, we're going to have better answers – but we're going to have more answers. We're going to have different answers."





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## Transfer watch: Big names linked to MLS moves of late

The MLS hot stove action is heating up this offseason, and some very big global names have been linked to the league lately. Need a refresher on who's being mooted for an MLS move? Here's some of the big stars who could be bound for North America in 2020.

Luis Suarez

Linked to Seattle Sounders, Inter Miami

This week, Suarez reiterated his interest in playing in MLS after his deal with FC Barcelona ends. As for the destination? That remains up in the air. Suarez's compatriot Nicolas Lodeiro has been lobbying hard for the Uruguayan star to join him at the Sounders, but there's been plenty of chatter he could end up with Inter Miami CF.

Mario Balotelli

Linked to interest in MLS move

Balotelli's move to hometown club Brescia hasn't worked out, and the latest word is he could be on the move as soon as January. As for the destination, a recent report from Gazzetta dello Sport claims Balotelli is intrigued by a move to MLS, although a specific team was not named.

Edinson Cavani

Linked to LA Galaxy, Inter Miami

Back on Uruguayan star forwards, Cavani was linked to a move to the LA Galaxy to replace his former Paris Saint-Germain teammate Zlatan Ibrahimovic just this week. Multiple outlets jumped on that report, but Cavani has previously been linked to Inter Miami, too.

Mesut Ozil

Linked to D.C. United, Inter Miami

Plenty of chatter emerged in the summer that the Arsenal midfielder could be the next big name at D.C. United, but that flurry has since died down. A report from Bleacher Report in October claimed Ozil was interested in coming to MLS if he was not going to be given a fair shake with the Gunners, with Inter Miami also mentioned as a possible destination. But in an interview with The Athletic last month, Ozil also said his intention is to stay at Arsenal until his contract ends in 2021.

Mario Mandzukic

Linked to LAFC, Inter Miami

The Juventus striker has not made an appearance this season, with the Old Lady brass reportedly telling Mandzukic he should move on at the next opportunity. The Croatian has been linked to numerous clubs on three continents, but among the reported interested suitors in MLS are Inter Miami and, previously, LAFC.



## Mario Balotelli interested in MLS move?

TRANSFER TRACKER STATUS: Rumor

Mario Balotelli is one of the world's best-known forwards, and has the time come for him to move to MLS?

It's certainly possible, with Italian outlet Gazzetta dello Sport reporting this week that Balotelli's stint at hometown club Brescia isn't going well and he is interested in moving on, perhaps as soon as January.

While Balotelli is being linked to a move to Turkish giant Galatasaray, the report relayed by Football Italia indicates Balotelli "could be tempted" by an MLS offer.

The Italian, now 29, remains one of the most mercurial players in global soccer. Playing for some of the biggest clubs in the world – Inter, Milan, Manchester City, Liverpool – Balotelli has bounced around, also featuring at French outfits Nice, where he played for a time under former NYCFC boss Patrick Vieira, and Marseille. His current club, Brescia, has not been a successful destination, with Balotelli struggling for form and dealing with racist abuse in a game earlier this month.

But amid the turbulence, Balotelli has had patches of form, and his profile could prove tempting to an MLS club.



CREDIT: Alicia Rodriguez Contributor

## Behind the scenes with Vancouver Whitecaps FC's new sporting director

Vancouver Whitecaps FC got their man in new sporting director Axel Schuster, and one week in, he's already hard at work.

Schuster joined the Whitecaps after working in his native Germany for Bundesliga clubs Schalke and Mainz, and was officially unveiled this week by the MLS side.

In this video feature, produced by the Whitecaps, we see some behind-the-scenes footage of Schuster visiting the club's offices, and working with head coach Marc Dos Santos and assistant coach Phil Dos Santos in targeting potential transfers ahead of the 2020 season. So far, Vancouver have made one change since Schuster joined in, transferring defender Doneil Henry to Korean side Suwon Samsung Bluewings on Friday.



CREDIT: Alicia Rodriguez Contributor





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