

FROM THE MEN'S LEAGUES

Let's Talk About It

WHAT I LEARNED WHEN I WENT LOOKING FOR ANSWERS ABOUT ANOTHER TEAM'S SUSPENSION.

WHAT MAKES A MAN drive an hour and a half to Trenton on a weeknight for a meeting that has no impact on his family or his job?

Of course it relates to soccer—and the recurring theme of those governing the game not listening to the voice of fans and players. In this case, our Willy Loman is the manager of Hump Street FC, an over-30 men's team based in Hoboken, who's hoping to overturn or at least lessen the decision by the New Jersey Soccer Association board to ban Hump Street for over three years from the game of soccer.

The dispute between Hump Street and NJSA stemmed from a quarterfinal State Cup match between Hump Street and Sport Club Portuguese based in Ironbound neighborhood of Newark. Hump Street won 2-0. The game was a heated match between two teams of different ethnic backgrounds: one largely Italian, the other obviously Portuguese. As the teams walked off, a Sport Club player is rumored to have told a Hump Street player that "Carlos would take care of this"—referring to Carlos Pais, NJSA Vice President of Game Operations, who also happens to be Portuguese.

Several weeks later, Hump Street learned from NJSA that Sport Club had filed a protest over a penalty awarded to Hump Street and a red card issued to the offending Sport Club player, a violation of the new "double jeopardy" rule recently passed by FIFA. Moreover, NJSA relayed to Hump Street that a replay would likely have to be played. Hump Street's manager is a lawyer by day, so decided to pore over the NJSA bylaws. He found that for Sport Club to file a protest, they must pay a fee to NJSA. He asked for evidence that Sport Club had indeed paid the fee. When NJSA failed to respond, he sent a long and well-considered appeal with

Kearny. "Soccer Town, USA." In 1950 Sir Matt Busby's Manchester United chose Kearny as a site for an exhibition game against a team of locals.

PHOTOGRAPHS BY JOE MARTINEZ



proper citation of NJSA governing rules. Thus begun a downward spiral of the dispute over e-mail and the inclusion of way too many people on the cc list that led to attached members of Hump Street skipping all legal citations and giving the NJSA board members an electronic "New Jersey hello," a.k.a., "Go F*ck Yourself."

The board members—mostly gentlemen of a certain age—did not take kindly to being the recipient of such profanity and promptly ruled that Hump Street be disqualified from the State Cup and that certain of its players would be banned from organized soccer for over three years. And each offending player had to send a formal apology to the board and copy all of the other managers in the league.

I play for an Over-30 team called Kearny Scots. Most of our players are Brazilian or Peruvian or anything other than Scottish. Our manager Anthony Portelli, half Italian and half Polish, but 100% Kearny with about 10% of soccer still left in his legs, was copied on the correspondence. The dilemma reminded us of when Kearny Scots was the defending state champs heading into the 2016 season and during the State Cup NJSA forced us to take a forfeit because we could not secure a home field. The same administrator, Carlos Pais, abruptly made us take a forfeit and Sport Club, of all teams, advanced to the next round. Sport Club won the State Cup that year and it stung that we were not able to defend our title due to some disconnected administrator.

In the mid-1870s, several Scottish textile, shipping, flooring and manufacturing companies built mills along the Passaic River in Kearny, attracting a huge labor force from the U.K. The Clark Thread Mill Co. left an indelible mark by planting the seed for Kearny's nickname, Soccertown, USA, by importing soccer talent to play on

"More often than not you're greeted by five old men, three wearing Celtic jerseys, one from each of the past three decades."

its company team. Kearny became such a soccer hub that in 1950 Sir Matt Busby's Manchester United chose Kearny as a site for an exhibition game against a team of locals.

In the 1960s, Kearny had a population of over 21,000 Scottish immigrants. One of the later families to move from Scotland was that of a former teammate of mine, Gary Nimmo—or "Gazza." He has a raspy voice from years of cigarettes, booze and non-stop trash talk. In recalling what made Kearny such a soccer hotbed, Gazza noted that he'd been coached by former Hibs player Jake Bradley, who'd finish day job as an electrician then coach the youth for Kearny Scots. Later it would be Rob McCourt, current head of Monmouth University and Gerry McKeown, founder of Players Development Academy and Nike iD2 scout, who would continue the tradition of coaching subsequent generations of Kearny Scots players.

In addition to this rich tradition of experienced volunteer coaches, Kearny had fierce pick-up games—with each court having its own rules. Hoyt Street games were on an abandoned tennis court with a torn-out net—pegged poles counted for a goal. At Washington School, the metal grates over the windows and a couple feet off the ground served as the goals, teaching the players to hit laser on net. The most competitive games were at the Harrison Courts. You only brought your A team because if you lost there was a wait of about 10 teams. A wager might even ride on the games, losing team owing the winners Clinton Iced Teas and subs at Stash's on Kearny Ave. You learned by trying your moves on your friends. Your skills progressed by adapting to the different games and playing against older guys you looked up to and trying to stay on courts for as long as you could or before it got dark.

One of the oldest and most historic social clubs in New Jersey is the Kearny Scots Club on Patterson Avenue. As you enter, a door warns: "Members Only." Once inside, more often than not, you're greeted by five old men, three wearing Celtic jerseys, one from each of the past three decades, who immediately look up from their Magnier's cider ale. On a good afternoon after the Kearny Scots has won or after concluding a horseshoe tournament out back or around any of the holidays, drinks line the bar with casino chip markers backing your pint representing a round of drinks bought by members with names like Wee Man (he is small) or Genius (he is not a genius). An immaculately maintained shuffleboard spans the length of the wall opposite of the

bar, beneath shelves displaying the club's rich history: framed photos, scarves, signed posters of pro teams and U.S. national teams, some containing past members, trophies.

Learning about Hump Street's dispute and our being forced to take a forfeit indicated to me a fundamental rupture with NJSA and its members, where arbitrary decisions are affecting players who have given so much of their lives to the game and come from established and storied soccer areas like Kearny and Hoboken. NJSA is a non-profit and was created in 1913, the same year as USSF. Many board members have run NJSA for the past 30 years. Many are in their mid- to late-60s and have devoted an incredible amount of time towards soccer in New Jersey.

I reached out to NJSA executive vice president Pat Varsallona to voice my concerns regarding Hump Street and Kearny Scots. He graciously took time to answer my questions. Mainly, I wanted to get his perspective on the percolating feeling that soccer governance, from USSF down to the state associations, is taking its members for granted, and could he and NJSA really justify banning Hump Street players for three years when most of the them have one foot in the retirement graveyard. His response was simple: the board felt the language used by Hump Street players in the emails was too offensive could not go unpunished. When NJSA asked Hump Street to send a contrite email, it was a request for respect to men who could be the players' grandfathers. Varsallona did say that the Board would probably revisit Hump Street's punishment—and in fact did just that since Hump Street is back in the over-30 league and the main players involved in the offending email chain are back playing soccer.

In advocating for a more democratic election process in determining the next president for NJSA, I asked why not allow each team to have a member vote to elect the president and get rid of the existing "electoral college" system of voting that prioritized leagues over clubs. Varsallona stated that it would be an administrative nightmare to allow each team or even each player a vote in the election. I was losing my skepticism of NJSA's competence the longer I was having a civilized, polite conversation with him.

My final question was a hopeful extra-time lob into the box: Did he feel the federation was on the right track with Cordeiro as president? He said that Cordeiro had sat down with each state association and listened to their concerns and that as a post-election follow-up, U.S. Soccer has an

attorney continually communicating with the state associations. Varsallona stated that this dialogue is something new and proactive by the Cordeiro administration. I had wanted to rail against the national and state soccer hierarchy and show that if NJSA is unjustly sidelining my teammates in our last years of old-man soccer glory, imagine the abuse and corruption that exists at the USSF level? In life, like soccer, you come into a challenge with full-on studs up ready to take out everything in your way, but rash challenge after rash challenge, you get older and just want to slide with your buddies toward the sidelines celebrating having scored a couple of nice goals along the way.

But by the end of my interview, I felt the same feeling I had when the Portuguese guys at SCP used to give me a cup of Port wine before the start of the second half: warm, comfortable and no longer itching to do battle for my voiceless, balding brethren.

In a world of hot takes, viral tweets and memes, we're succumbing to the urge to jump to conclusions and offer self-important half-baked opinions instead of asking questions, and instead of listening to answers. In person even.

Kearny became Soccertown because



wanderers who loved the game built themselves a community. New Jersey soccer may not be as ethnically homogeneous as Kearny's early collection early, but it's still a community—or should be. Did Hump Street's manager really drive an hour and a half because he was angry at a seemingly callous act of authority? Partly yes, but more likely he probably drove to Trenton to be with his—our—people. —BY MICHAEL

WHEELER

FROM THE NWSL

A Season In Review

2018 BROUGHT MORE DRAMA, MORE FANS, AND MORE CARING (EXCEPT...MAYBE...IN NEW JERSEY).

"NO ONE CARES about women's soccer."

Every single fan of women's soccer has to hear this. Every time they talk about their love for the women's game where other people can hear or see it, someone responds with that. Some man—and let's be real here, it's almost always a man—will invariably feel the need to insert themselves into the conversation with that snide takedown.

No one cares about women's soccer.

You see this whenever the National Women's Soccer League gets promoted on social media, whenever their annual Championship Final gets hyped, whenever the superstars of the game say anything to the media, some rando on Twitter with zero followers and a default egg avatar will feel the inescapable need to interject with that nugget of unsolicited wisdom.

No one cares about women's soccer.

21,114 fans poured in to Portland's Providence Park in September to watch their beloved Thorns compete in the NWSL Championship Final. That's the highest attendance figure for any professional women's championship match, in any league, in U.S. history. That's not a thing that happens by accident. Even in Portland. Soccer City USA. *Even in Portland*, this was a big thing.

While the Thorns boast one of the largest supporter bases in the NWSL, a not-insignificant number of those in attendance came on the merits of what looked to be a titanic match-up. The defending league champions, aiming for their second title in a row and their third all-time, in a rematch of last year's final against the North Carolina Courage. The challengers had come off one of the most dominant seasons in the history of American club soccer—men's and women's—with 17 wins, six draws, and only one loss. This was going to be a big

deal, and everyone knew it. After the game, Portland forward and Canadian soccer legend Christine Sinclair said this year's Final was about establishing a benchmark.

"I think that it's a huge day for women's soccer," said Sinclair. "This is hopefully what the future of the game will look like in this country."

THE 2018 SEASON did offer a glimpse of what the future of women's soccer in the U.S. will be. For good or ill, it's going to look a lot like the rest of professional sports in this country. For the most part, that's good. Women's soccer is entertaining. Women's soccer tells compelling stories. Women's soccer is lucrative. Women's soccer brings people together. The economic and cultural forces that work to deny the women's game legitimacy are losing their grip on their gatekeeping powers. We know this because fans and media are demanding better from the league.

The NWSL was beset by controversies in 2018—some typical of any professional sports organization, some that could only happen in this league. Two NWSL teams from 2017 did not survive to see 2018; FC Kansas City was moved to Utah and rebranded as the Royals, while the Boston Breakers were unceremoniously wound up.

Sky Blue FC was embroiled in controversy over the club's treatment of players and general operational malpractice. It started with an off-hand remark by former star striker Sam Kerr after her new team, the Chicago Red Stars, beat Sky Blue handily that she drew no satisfaction from the victory and that "I wish things were better [at Sky Blue]." That led to a series of investigative reports uncovering, among other things, that players were not provided adequate training facilities or even a functioning shower, and were told to bring their own drinking water from home to

ICON SPORTSMIRE VIA GETTY IMAGES

"Despite all the issues, the 2018 NWSL season was probably the best in the league's history."



practice. An absentee general manager and a culture of silence at the club exaggerated problems that would be intolerable in any other professional sports organization. That the situation was allowed to develop in the first place and has yet not been adequately addressed since these issues came to light remains a black mark on the league.

Several late-summer league games in Seattle and Portland were forced to go ahead more-or-less as scheduled, despite much of the Pacific Northwest being blanketed in wildfire smoke. Each time players, clubs, and fans demanded answers and action, the league issued the same tepid response: that they were monitoring the situation.

And as the regular season drew to a close and the playoff brackets were set, the league made another unforced error. The semifinal clash between North Carolina and Chicago, set to be played in Cary, North Carolina, was thrown into peril as Hurricane Florence bore down on the Eastern Seaboard. The league waited until the last possible moment to make a decision on the game, all while North Carolina insisted that the game could go on as scheduled. Ultimately, the match was moved to Portland, providing a neutral location and easy travel logistics for whoever won. But the uncertainty, and the lack of firm answers from the league office, made an already difficult situation worse than it needed to be.

DESPITE ALL THESE ISSUES, the 2018 NWSL season was probably the best in the league's history. Maybe all of women's soccer in the U.S. The games were fun—some saw a flood of goals, others were tense strategic battles, but few matches this season could be considered boring. Sam Kerr missed the first two months of the season and still managed to win the Golden Boot. Rivalries

deepened and strengthened. And through it all, North Carolina steamrolled every team that thought they could slow the Courage down.

Having beaten Chicago in that rescheduled semifinal, North Carolina went into the Final with not just the crowd against them, but history. No team who won the Shield had won the Championship. Even a league as young as the NWSL can have curses.

But curse or no, the Courage would not be denied. Portland put up a noble fight, but their title defense melted before the blistering radiance of the challengers. North Carolina cruised to a 3-0 win, capping off a truly historic year in the history of the sport in this country.

All this happened in front of a large, boisterous, supportive crowd. Fans of the home team, to be certain, but also those invested in the women's game. Fans who get behind their players and their clubs. Fans who have bought into the project of American WoSo.

But hey, no one cares about women's soccer, right?

Portland defender Meghan Klingenberg didn't hold back when describing what the support from fans means to her. "I started tearing up a bit," said Klingenberg. "Not necessarily because we lost—I mean that does suck, but you lose in life. It's more about having these people around and it's almost like having your family behind you at the game and when you let yourself down it's one thing but when you feel like you've let your family down it's something different. So, it's pretty emotional, but having them behind us is one of the best things in the world and I know they're going to turn up next season for every game and make it hard to play here so I can't thank them enough."

You can fake caring. But you can't fake showing up. —BY JAMES BRIDGET GORDON