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2023 Meet the Underdogs: UDA Soccer, a rare college team qualifies for US Open Cup

MARCH 21, 2023 BY [ANDREW MOSIER](#)



UDA Soccer celebrates after defeating Azteca FC 4-1 (after a 4-4 draw) in a PK shootout to qualify for the 2023 US Open Cup. Photo: Andrew Mosier

It's been three months since UDA's epic 2023 US Open Cup **qualifying win over three-time Open Cup qualifier, Azteca FC 5280**. But even now, UDA technical director and coach Tahlon Drake has a hard time containing his emotions when he talks about it.

"It's games like that that remind us why we do this in the first place. To qualify our first time out, on the road, in the cold at altitude, to come back and tie the game twice after going down a man, it was truly something special," Drake said of the **4-4 heavyweight slugfest that was ultimately decided at the penalty spot**. "And then for our 'keeper to step up and make three saves in the shootout. The whole thing was just incredible."

Drake leads the University Degrees Abroad men's soccer academy program at New Mexico State University. UDA operates as New Mexico State University's men's soccer program, wearing both the UDA and NMSU crests when they play. But it is more than just a university club team. Based on the three UDA academies in England, UDA at NMSU is a European-style

academy, training and playing year-round. It is the only one of its kind in the United States. The club currently fields three teams competing in the United Premier Soccer League (UPSL), college club leagues, elite youth leagues, the US Open Cup, and other competitions. Because UDA is a de facto college team, the team's average age hovers around 20-years-old.



Photo: Casey Morris | UDA Soccer

"All of our kids have to be enrolled in school," Drake said. "We want to make sure we are changing lives through education. We're not just a vessel on the football field. Ultimately, we want them to get an education, because the ball stops rolling for everybody at some point."

UDA opens the 2023 Lamar Hunt U.S. Open Cup at home versus 2022 USL League Two Mountain Conference champions, Park City Red Wolves, on Wednesday, March 22 at the NMSU Soccer Athletic Complex.

In qualifying, UDA is only the second team in the Modern Era of the Open Cup (1995-present) directly affiliated with a college or university to qualify for the tournament proper. Teams from the University of Florida, Oklahoma University, Louisiana-Lafayette, and the University of Southern California have entered qualification in the past, but only Brigham Young University, which competed in the PDL—now USL League Two—from 2003-2017, qualifying for the Open Cup in 2006, 2007, and 2015.

What is UDA?

University Degrees Abroad was founded in 2018 at the University of Cheshire and has since expanded to eight universities in England and Wales offering foreign students a pathway to degrees from those institutions, with the University of Chester and University of Gloucestershire offering soccer academies through the universities. The initial success of the program UDA Program Director and former NMSW assistant woman's basketball coach, Jeff Thompson, floated the idea of incorporating the UDA soccer academy model with an American university. NMSU seemed like the perfect partner, with first-class facilities in place

for its NCAA Division I women's program, a climate conducive to year-round play, and lots of local talent to help build the program.

"Because NMSU only had a woman's program, we were able to go to them and say, 'We want to be your men's division one program, just not under NCAA rules,'" Drake said.

With the agreement with NMSU in place in 2019, Drake, Ordel, and a support staff began to build the program. Then COVID-19 hit.

"We didn't even get to have a proper training session until 2021," Drake said. "It wasn't until then things really got started."

In the spring of 2021, the club entered the first UDA team into competition, finishing a respectable 5-1-2, good for second place in the seven-team West Texas-New Mexico division of the UPSL. For the fall 2021 season, the club moved to the intensely competitive UPSL Arizona Division. UDA won the ten-team division, winning eight and drawing two. In the spring of 2022 UDA moved back to the West Texas-New Mexico division, going 6-2-2 to win the division and earn a berth in the UPSL post season tournament. They beat the San Antonio Surf in penalty kicks and the Arizona-based River Valley Bully's 1-0 before falling to the Dodge City Toros 4-1 in the quarterfinals.

The quarterfinal appearance qualified UDA to play in the inaugural UPSL Champions Cup, featuring four of the top UPSL teams from the United States versus four top teams from the UPSL Mexican divisions. UDA finished winless in its group versus Mexican sides Deportivo Teziutlan and Altiplano FC, and Chicago Nation FC from the U.S.

"It was a learning experience for all of us," Drake said. "We grew a lot as a team and as an organization during that time. Our program is about so much more than just getting the immediate result."

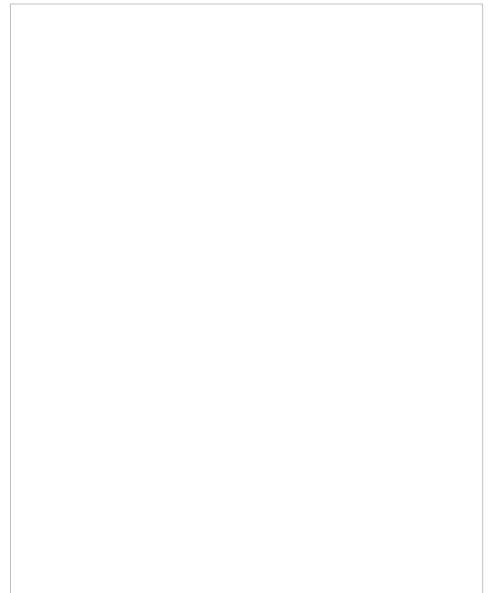


Photo: Casey Morris | UDA Soccer

Entering the fall 2022 UPSL season, UDA moved back to the West Texas-New Mexico division. For the first time the club fielded two teams. UDA Crimson finished second in the division going 5-3-0. UDA White finished at the bottom of the five-team table going 1-7-0.

"We put a lot of energy and effort into qualifying for the Open Cup," Drake said. "Maybe at the expense of league play. But it paid off in the end."

How They Got Here

With first round byes for both clubs, UDA opened 2023 Open Cup qualifying at home versus UPSL side Coronado Athletic from Sierra Vista, Ariz. UDA had little trouble, cruising to a 4-0 win over the Coronado club that finished in the middle of the table for the fall 2022 UPSL Arizona division. Mattias Cavallo put UDA up in the 15th minute followed by a second-half brace by captain Eric Gomez-Silva the capper by Marco Millan with fifteen minutes to play. Next up was fall 2022 Arizona division and UPSL national champion Olympians FC.

"We had played Olympians before," Drake said. "We knew it was going to be a difficult game. "They made it incredibly tough for us to play. I was incredibly proud of the way our boys handled themselves. Of the 18 cards shown in that game, we only received four of them."

UDA played much of the game down a goal after 19-year-old goalkeeper Mario Castillo was caught off his line with a ball hit from near midfield. The game became a chippy, choppy affair. The tide turned in the 75th minute when Olympians were reduced to 10 men. UDA's Jay Mustielis leveled the score in with just three minutes to play in regulation. In the second period of extra time Olympians went down another player making way for Keane Garcia to get on the end of Will Hanes cross to put UDA up 2-1. Alan Gudino put the game out of reach at 3-1 just before the final whistle.

The Fourth Round draw sent UDA to face Denver-based Azteca FC 5280, on one of the

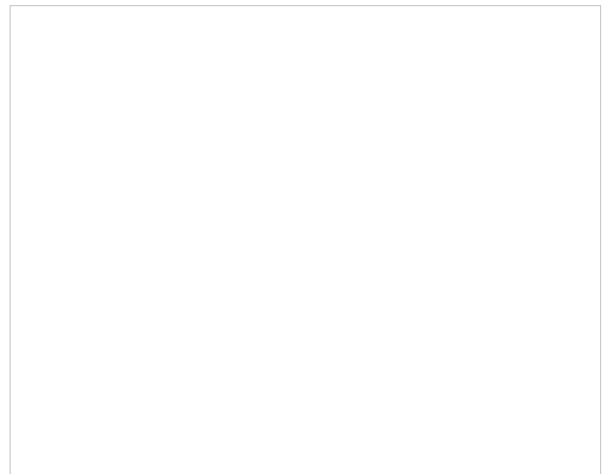


Photo: Casey Morris | UDA Soccer

surrounding fields of Dick's Sporting Goods Park, home of the Colorado Rapids (MLS). A massive storm had blown through earlier in the week dumping more than a foot of snow that had been plowed into piles at each end of the synthetic field.

Going into the match, Drake said the conditions were going to be a factor.

"Some of our guys have never even seen snow before," he said before the match. "The cold and altitude are going to make things interesting for us."

For the better part of the last decade, Azteca FC 5280 has reigned as one of Colorado's top amateur sides, playing in the incredibly competitive Colorado Super League, qualifying for the Open Cup three times (2017, 2018, 2022). Azteca failed to advance beyond the first round in all three Open Cup appearances.

"We knew Azteca was going to be good," Drake said. "They qualified for the Open Cup in 2022. We knew they were very dynamic up front. But we have never been the kind of team to change the way we did things based on an opponent. That is one of the things we try to instill from the beginning. We play the way we play. Let everyone else adapt to us, not the other way around. We want to play thorough our attacking mids, with our number 10 stepping high and go at 'em.

'Go at 'em' is exactly what UDA did in what would become a qualifying match for the ages. UDA landed the first punch in the 14th minute when Gudino combined with Jose Rivan down the left flank resulting in an easy tap in from close range to put the visitors up 1-0.

Azteca responded immediately, leveling the score in the 20th minute, then smashing in a second at the 36th minute mark to go up 2-1. Then Daniel Ruiz Galan pulled UDA level just before the halftime whistle, slotting a Lucas Burch cross to the far post from close range.

After a hectic start to the second half, Azteca took the lead for a second time, going up 3-2, when a controversial penalty was given in the 63rd minute. Drake was shown a red card for his vociferous protests of the penalty call from the bench and will watch his club's inaugural Open Cup match from the stands.

More importantly, UDA will also be without midfield lynchpin and captain, Gomez-Silva, who

was shown a second yellow card with less than ten minutes to play in the Azteca match. Gomez-Silva was one of UDA's top recruits, having spent time in the system of La Liga club Real Sociedad.

"Eric is tough to replace. He sees the game so well; he is so good on the ball. He is the leader," Drake said. "We are going to miss his presence, his experience, everything a player of his quality brings. But we have someone we believe can step up do all the things Eric does so well." With time running out UDA began to throw numbers forward, almost making it look like Azteca was the team playing short-handed. Then Alfredo Villescas got on the end of a corner kick to pull the game level again, at 3-3, forcing extra time.

Azteca took firm control of the first overtime period, scoring on a recycled set piece in the 107th minute after UDA failed to clear the ball. After the goal, UDA threw everything they had forward. Just moments before the final whistle Garcia found himself inside the Azteca six-yard box with the ball at his feet. He slotted home the equalizer sending the game to penalty kicks, where UDA's 19-year-old goalkeeper stole the show.

UDA's Garcia shot first, making his attempt. Castillo then saved Azteca's first shot to his left, but was ruled to have left his line before the ball was kicked. He saved the re-take, this time to his right. Blake Bastain put UDA up 2-0 in the shootout. Azteca then converted their second kick making it 2-1. Villescas converted his kick to make it 3-1, then Castillo made a one-handed save to his left, leaving it up to Gudino, who calmly put the ball straight down the middle to put UDA into the tournament proper.

"I think it says so much about what we are doing, how far we have come in such a short period of time," Drake said. "Qualifying for the Open Cup was one of our goals when we started. To do it the first time out, the way we did it, is just incredible."

US Open Cup Round One

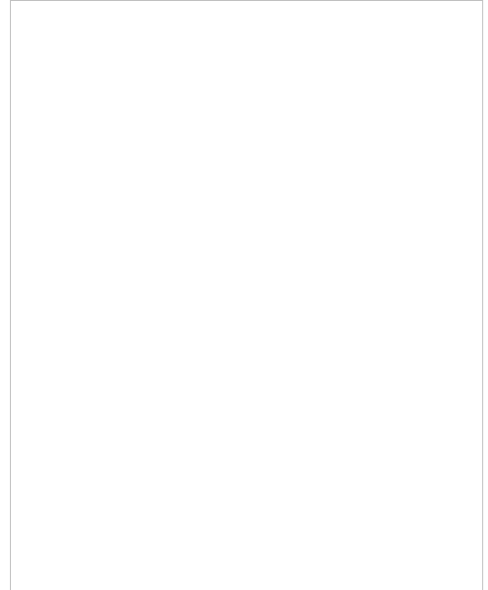


Photo: Casey Morris | UDA Soccer

With the 2023 Spring UPSL season not yet underway, UDA has been playing regional professional teams, and competing against college club teams to prepare for its Open Cup debut versus Park City Red Wolves, winners of the USL League Two Mountain Division for the past two seasons. This is the second consecutive Open Cup appearance. They list 3-2 at Las Vegas Legends (NPSL) last year. Like UDA, Park City are out of season. Park City kicks off its 2023 USL League Two season May 27.

"Honestly, we don't know a lot about them," Drake said. "The best we can do is go out and play the way we want to play and see what happens."



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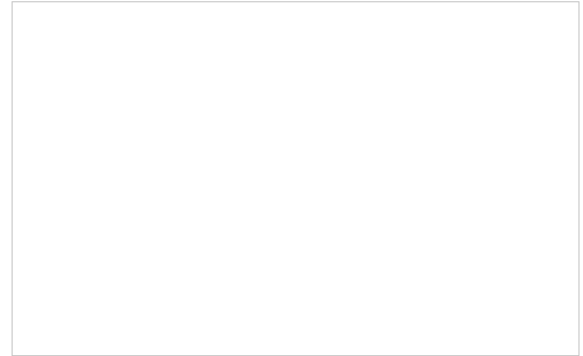
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Unfortunately, in the long history of the US Open Cup, this was not the first time that there have been more than a few incidents where games were halted due to referee abuse.

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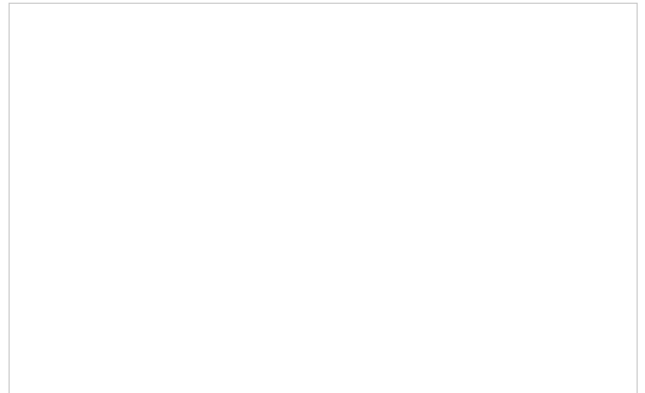
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