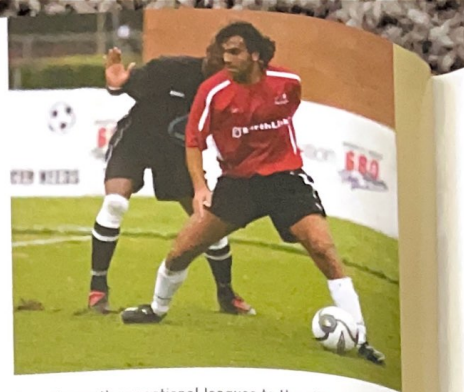


The success, professionally at least, of soccer in Atlanta hinges on Silverbacks Park. In the seven-year history of the professional side, the Silverbacks have only made the playoffs twice, in 2001 and 2002. This year, led by former MLS All-Star Alex Pineda-Chacon, the club finished in eighth place in the USL Division One 12 team table going 10-15-3. But it is widely believed that will change with the opening of the facility, due in part to what is seen as a newfound ability to attract and retain quality players. "I think they have a better vision of the future than a lot of clubs," says Silverbacks goalkeeper Joe Barton. Barton spent the 2003 season as a developmental player with the Los Angeles Galaxy before joining Atlanta in 2004. "Players are going to want to come play here."

Unlike most USL teams, which do not have their own facilities, everything will be centralized at the park creating a truly professional environment—something essentially absent even in much of the American top flight. It is hoped this newfound professionalism will afford the Silverbacks the luxury of creating a nucleus of players from which to develop a certain amount of continuity from year to year, a problem in the highly transient USL, and to which fans can become attached.

"We're looking at guys who want to come here and stay for more than a season," says head coach Jason Smith. "We need to have players here for more than a season or two. It makes for better soccer, and it gives the fans someone to cheer for. It puts the game at more of a personable level." And because of the inclusion of youth soccer within the organization, paid coaching opportunities are more readily available for players, making it economically feasible for them to stay in Atlanta year-round.

"For so long, players have had to bounce back and forth between indoor and outdoor to make a living," says Fedrigo. "We're creating an environment where players can stay here year-round and focus on their outdoor game." Player development is also something the organization is betting on heavily. "We will have the luxury of seeing players rise through the ranks,



from the youth recreational leagues to the elite teams, and on up to the professional teams," says Pratten. Though the men's team has yet to sign a player brought up through the club, four players on the women's team were previously part of the organization's youth program.

So the seeds of a soccer club unlike that of any other in the country have been sown and is by all indications, flourishing. What's next is the task of boosting attendance for the professional branch of the club that in 2004 ranked fourth to the bottom in the league, averaging just 1,625 people per game. "Playing at DeKalb Memorial brought our professionalism into question because it was such an old place with such a bad field," says Fedrigo. "It's hard to get fans out to watch a game at a place where the people they are there to watch don't want to be playing there. A lot of our players looked forward to playing on the road because the stadium was so bad." The aforementioned venue featured a cement grandstand with no actual seats, and an absurdly narrow, mostly-dirt field covered with American football lines that the Silverbacks shared with a community college and a number of high school football teams. "Now we can create an atmosphere that is enjoyable for everyone. First in the mini-stadium, and as we build our fan base, we can carry that over to the larger facility," says Fedrigo.

With the opening of the new facility, the Silverbacks will also begin an aggressive marketing campaign in hopes to become more visible in a market in which they are competing against the Braves, Falcons, Hawks, Thrashers, the University of Georgia, Georgia Tech and NASCAR for media attention. But in a major league city, it is all but impossible for a second-tier team to garner even minimal media attention. However, with the completion of the full-sized stadium comes the possibility of moving to the top-tier of American soccer, MLS, a topic on which no one in the organization would directly comment on, though hints of future promotion of the club in the not so distant future were prevalent. "It is our goal to bring top-level soccer to the people of Atlanta," says Pratten. "Though when that will take place exactly is hard to say." **90:00**

