



# Charleston Battery

By Andrew Mosier

It all started in 1991 in Iceland, of all places. That's where team founder and current Charlotte Rapids coach, Tim Hankinson was coaching in the Icelandic second division. Longing for a family setting and for the feeling to return to his own stragglities, Hankinson returned to the city with which he had become acquainted as a graduate at the University of South Carolina with an idea. "It's the kind of city you would pick if you could go anywhere... it has history, beauty, and the beaches. Charleston had it all, and it seemed like a logical place to have a team," Hankinson said. Armed with the franchise rights purchased from the USISL, a team name, and a wife designed, Hankinson began meeting with serious minded people in the area to drum up backing for his team.

Hankinson's first meeting was with Tony Bakker, founder of Blackbaud, a Charleston-based software company. The London native had a reputation for deep pockets when it came to supporting the game locally, and the idea of a team of his own seemed worthy of the millions he had to invest. Much like MLS sugar daddy Phil Anschutz, Bakker is not one to let the spotlight shine on himself. He prefers to let the success of his team, the privately funded facility, and club president Nigel Cooper do the talking for him. Though an overtly friendly and personable man, he has a strict policy of not giving interviews and is fiercely protected by the front office staff.

In 1993, the club's first year on the field, the side finished a respectable 8-8 in the USISL (what would become third division) playing home games at the aptly named Stony Field in downtown Charleston. Averaging 1,776 fans, attendance was not overwhelming, but owners were encouraged, especially considering the lack of tradition soccer had in

the South and the historically apathetic view toward professional sports in the area. In 1996, the year after Hankinson sold his share of the club, the Battery topped the Charlotte Eagles in a shoot-out for the USISL Pro

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Division National Title. With the third division hardware in the club trophy case, the ownership group thought it time to move onto bigger and better things and accepted the promotion to the A-League. The Battery, in the owners' eye, had become a true professional soccer club not unlike the clubs many of them grew up supporting in England. But they knew there was something missing. "We needed our own facility to make it work," Cooper said.

As luck and a highly successful business plan would have it, Bakker was in the market for new corporate headquarter digs and land was purchased on Daniel Island (one of the many islands that make up the Charleston metropolitan area), with enough space for the headquarters and a stadium. With total control, the Battery got exactly what they wanted: for a paltry five million dollars, they built themselves Blackbaud Stadium, from top to bottom arguably the best soccer stadium in the country, rivaled only by the Home Depot Center. "It's fantastic. You feel real fortunate when you go to other facilities and then come home to ours, from the training ground upwards," said Battery coach Chris Ramsey, an Englishman with over 20 years playing and coaching in England's top level.

Opened in the spring of 1999, the 5,100-seat stadium has the feel of some of the best soccer stadiums in the world. "The field is built like a traditional soccer facility. You're close to the action, which is like many of the European stadiums," said Cooper, a Newbury, England native. But being business people, the eight person board of directors that run the club knew it would take more than the "European feel" to make the stadium a success in South Carolina. "We've added some rather American traits which will allow a family-type atmosphere. That's what we want to try to

promote—family entertainment; people can enjoy first-class soccer and their families, who might not want to focus on the soccer, can enjoy some of the other things we have around the stadium," Cooper said. In one corner of the stadium, a playground was erected for those not old enough to be captivated by the action on the field. For those who have advanced beyond the playground, the stadium is home to the Three Lions Pub, one of the best pubs in Charleston. Decorated with an astounding amount of International Soccer memorabilia, the 5,000 square foot pub is made available to top-level season ticket holders and other VIPs for pre-game buffets, and beers with the players and coaches afterwards. The stadium also boasts four fully air-conditioned corporate skyboxes with a closed-circuit television feed of the game for those not wanting to sit outside and view the game from the balcony

(the best in the stadium). Battery management hasn't left out the average ticket buyer either. A slew of culinary

options are offered from the concession stands; from the typical hotdog and nacho fair to gourmet burritos and southern barbecue. A beer garden, where pre-game beers cost a buck and a cover band plays requests up to kickoff occupies half of one end of the stadium and, for the demure southern bells unwilling to swill beer (even the good imported stuff which runs through the stadium like tap water) there is a separate wine garden.

From the beginning, Battery management shared a philosophy that has defined the organization, and is the reason it is one of the premier clubs in the country. "You cannot cut corners... with players, with sponsors, or with the fans. You have to go in there thinking that with every opportunity you have, you have to put on a first-class show—and that's what it is—a show... from the operational standpoint and from the stands; everyone involved with the operational standpoint has to have the belief that it has to be a super-enjoyable experience for everyone that comes to the stadium. That focus on professionalism has to run throughout the organization," Cooper said. And it is that professionalism that has put the Battery at the top of the A-League. "It's franchises like the ones in Charleston and Rochester that give the

League credibility," said USISL founder and League president Francisco Marcos. "They have one thing that is essential for the success of the game here (and that's why it has done so well there, in Charleston), and that is the ownership. They have people willing to commit the dollars and cents necessary to run a club properly. Tony Bakker and his ownership group provides what is missing a lot of the time—continuity and stability—in Charleston, they (the owners) have, essentially, been there from the start of the franchise."

The Battery's ownership group is well known among the ranks of players throughout the country. The side is loaded with the top players in the league and former MLS players, many of whom chose the second division Battery over MLS. "We get plenty of calls from MLS players," said assistant coach Mike Anhaeuser, who has been with the

organization since 1994 (playing for seven years and then as an assistant coach). "When they are about to be released by their team, they call us because either they

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have seen what we have here, or have heard about us, and they want to come play here." Former MLS All-Star Ted Chronopoulos scored the opening goal in the Battery's 3-0 drubbing of Minnesota in the Championship game last year. And this year, the Battery bolstered an already strong backline with Ivan McKinley, a South African International and six year MLS veteran. "The organization is brilliant—the pitch, the stadium, the whole front office staff; it's really run professionally," McKinley said.

As for the future, the Battery is working hard on defending their A-League crown, advancing in the Open Cup, and creating a soccer tradition in the lowcountry. Despite the success of the club, and unlike Rochester (which has a larger market, is building a larger stadium, and has Major League aspirations), the Battery is still in the A-League division. "Our market isn't big enough for an MLS team, nor do I think the potential revenues with a city the size of Charleston is there for us to move forward to the Major League," Cooper said. The Battery is sure to stand at the top of American Soccer holding the blueprint of success for others to follow as the lower divisions become stronger and MLS begins to move away from single entity ownership. ☘