

"Creating an environment encouraging men, women, amateurs, professionals, our youth and adults to come together for the good of the game." So reads the Atlanta Silverbacks mission statement. A utopian vision that is slowly, and successfully, coming to fruition.

This mission, that is only now truly taking shape, began in the early '90s when Stephen Pratten, Boris Jekunicia, John Latham, the ownership group of the club and a handful of others began debating what was necessary for the game to thrive in the United States. "In the U.S., the game is so segmented," says Pratten, club president, who represented England at the youth level before coming to the U.S. to attend Columbia University in the early '80s. "It seems like everyone in the sport is fighting each other—youth leagues, amateur leagues, professional leagues—in order for the sport to grow, the various factions have to work together."

PRATTEN AND COMPANY FIGURED THE BEST WAY TO start was from the top. They acquired the operating rights to the folded USL side, the Atlanta Ruckus, and in 1999 fielded the first Silverbacks squad. But along with the professional team, they began fielding youth and amateur adult teams under the club banner, something still uncommon among American professional franchises. Now, there are nearly 4,000 people playing within the Silverbacks organization. "We cover the entire spectrum of soccer," says Pratten. "From recreational under-four mini-soccer leagues up to adult recreational leagues, elite youth teams, women's W-League and a professional men's team."

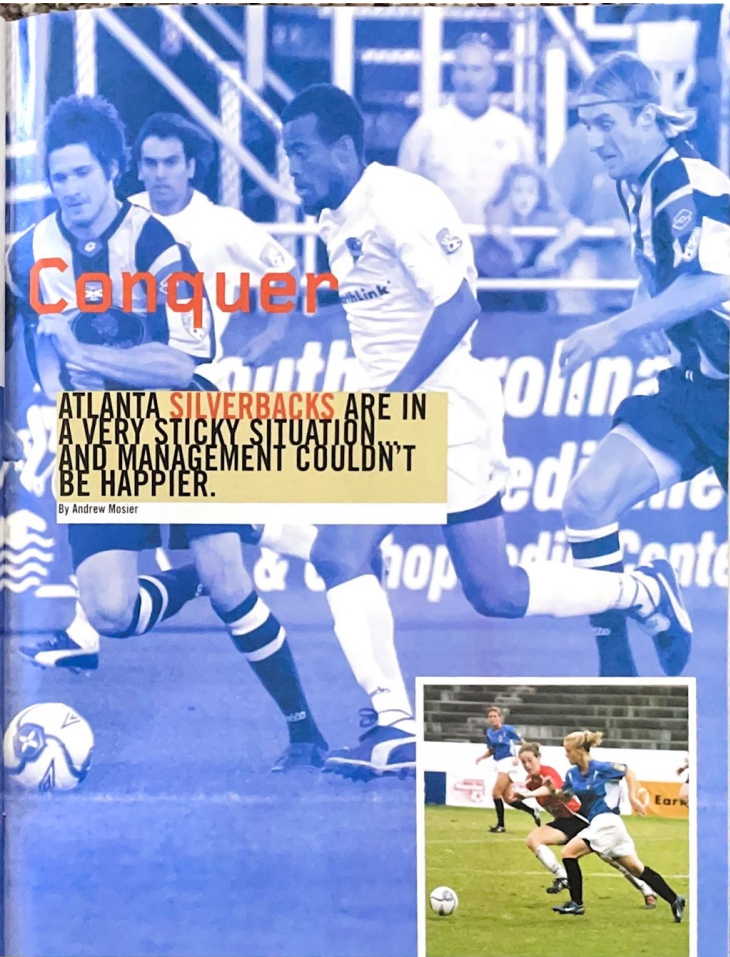
With the creation of the all-encompassing club, the Silverbacks are not only offering a place for people to play, but also hopefully planting the seed of long-term support for the game and the Silverbacks, something Pratten feels is necessary for the game to continue to grow in this country. "Though we want to excel with the elite teams, the recreational programs are just as, if not more important, because that's the majority of the people playing," Pratten says. "If you look around the world, it's not the relatively few players who almost made the professional squad that are the fans, it's the thousands of people who never were going to make it—it's the legions of recreational players who are the biggest supporters. They are the ones who become fans because they have a passion for the game, not because they were once good players."

Because of its size, the club has been broken down into separate divisions within the organization: the USL First Division team, the W-League team, professional development teams—the elite youth program which competes in the highly competitive USL Super Y League, competitive youth divisions, the Silverbacks

Sports Center, an indoor facility offering two full-sized indoor soccer fields, roller hockey, flag football, volleyball and other activities; Silverbacks Park, the complex the club is building, and the Silverbacks Youth Foundation, the non-profit arm of the club that runs all of the recreational youth programs.

With the groundwork of the club in place, the next step was to create Silverbacks Park—home for the nearly 100,000 strong in Atlanta's soccer community. Located on a 20-acre plot of land in the heart of suburban Atlanta along one of the heaviest traveled interstates in the country, the organization is in the midst of a four-phase, multi-million dollar development process that Silverbacks director of marketing Laura Fedrigo hopes will someday be "the Home Depot Center of the East."

Phase one of the project saw the installation of three playing fields, two field-turf fields and one grass field on the site, completed last year. Because of the large number of public fields throughout Atlanta and limited available real estate, the club opted not to build a large-scale complex featuring multiple fields as FC Dallas did at Pizza Hut Park. Phase two, expected to be completed in the early spring of 2006, is the construction of a 2,500 capacity stadium complete with locker rooms, concessions and parking. The "mini-stadium" will serve as home to both the USL and the W-League sides next year, both of which had been playing in the decrepit DeKalb Memorial Stadium. Phase three, which has also begun, is the construction of a sporting club that will include a swimming pool, tennis courts, 30,000 square feet of office and retail space, and a restaurant and bar. Phase four will be the construction of a 15,000-20,000-seat stadium, which has a tentative 2007 completion date.



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ATLANTA SILVERBACKS ARE IN A VERY STICKY SITUATION AND MANAGEMENT COULDN'T BE HAPPIER.

By Andrew Mosier



FOOTER TRIVIA

What sparked an actual shooting war between El Salvador and Honduras in 1969? (Answer on page 43)