

MAJOR LEAGUE SOCCER

Major League Soccer (MLS), the premier professional soccer league in the United States, was launched in April 1996. MLS has a unique ownership and operating structure that is unlike those of other major U.S. sports leagues. Even though the other leagues are confederations of independent franchise owners, MLS has a single-entity structure, which allows investors to own a share of the league as well as individual teams.

As of the 2007 season, MLS consisted of thirteen teams that were divided into two conferences: Eastern and Western. (The league has since expanded to include a total of 20 teams.) Teams compete through a season that runs from April through the MLS Cup championship in November. Each team plays thirty regular-season games, four games against each opponent within their division, and two against nonconference opponents. With the addition of the San Jose Earthquake in 2008, this structure will likely be adjusted. The MLS Cup Playoffs begin in mid-October and culminate in the crowning of a new MLS Cup champion.

Plans to start up MLS were first announced in December 1993. Twenty-two cities submitted bids to secure teams, of which ten were selected. A player draft was conducted in February 1996. The league's first game took place a few months later. According to MLS, a full stadium of 31,683 spectators and a national ESPN viewing audience watched the San Jose Clash defeat the D.C. United.

Two additional teams were added in 1998. The following year the Columbus Crew built the first major league stadium ever constructed specifically for soccer in the United States. The Crew ended up leading the league in attendance for the year. In 2002 the league was forced to cut two teams for financial reasons, returning MLS to its original ten-team size. Two new teams were added in 2005, bringing the league to twelve teams once again. The addition of Toronto FC before the 2007 season made the league thirteen strong.

MLS is far more ethnically diverse than any of the traditional four major sports in the United States. MLS rosters during the 2006 season included ninety-two players born outside the United States, representing forty-four different countries. MLS has also played a huge role in preparing American players for greater impact on the international soccer scene.

Attempts to establish a women's professional soccer league in the United States have not met with great success. The Women's United Soccer Association, the first women's professional outdoor league to be sanctioned by U.S. Soccer, was launched in 2001. It featured stars from the popular 2000 U.S. Olympic team, including Mia Hamm (1972–), Brandi Chastain (1968–), and Julie Foudy (1971–). Faced with financial struggles, the association suspended operations in September 2003. In 2004 a new nonprofit organization, the Women's Soccer Initiative, was established with the goal of reviving women's professional soccer in the United States. In September 2007, with seven confirmed teams already in place, the Women's Soccer Initiative announced plans to re-launch a professional women's league in 2009.

Western Conference

Colorado Rapids
FC Dallas
Houston Dynamo
LA Galaxy
Portland Timbers
Real Salt Lake
San Jose Earthquakes
Seattle Sounders FC
Sporting Kansas City
Vancouver Whitecaps FC

Eastern Conference

Chicago Fire
Columbus Crew SC
D.C. United
Montreal Impact
New England Revolution
New York City FC
New York Red Bulls
Orlando City SC
Philadelphia Union
Toronto FC