

# BYU far from a traditional college soccer program



By Maria Burns

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Earlier this summer, Brigham Young midfielders Brock Trejo and Steve Magleby signed professional contracts with Real Salt Lake Reserves. The next week, they were back in uniform for the BYU Cougars.

The reason this was possible was not because they found a loophole in the NCAA laws, but because their college team doesn't have to abide by NCAA regulations.



BYU Athletic Department/Other

Brock Trejo and BYU finished the PDL regular season 13-1-2 and Northwest Division champions.

The BYU men's soccer team plays in the Premier Development League, a division of the USL.

The PDL was actually founded with college students in mind. The idea was to give college athletes an avenue to play competitive soccer during the summer while retaining their amateur status and eligibility. A number of Division I players take that opportunity.

BYU found the PDL provided its players a much-needed opportunity to upgrade their level of competition.

"It's a lot better option for teams that can't get sanctioned," Trejo said. "With regards to teams that have to play in the club-type setting, I think this is much more advantageous for players that want to make it and enjoy their college soccer years."

BYU's transition from collegiate club soccer to the PDL began after the 2001 season. Cougars coach Chris Watkins felt stuck. If BYU was not going to sanction its men's club soccer team to be an official NCAA program after winning its seventh national club title in nine years, it never would.

"After all, nobody is adding men's soccer," Watkins noted.

That much was evident. What wasn't completely clear to the coach was how -- if competing at the NCAA level was a no-go -- he could find a level of competition that would push his players.

Then the Premier Development League came to mind.

"It was one of those epiphanies, and I thought this could work," said Watkins, who played for the Utah Blitz of the United Soccer Leagues and was familiar with the PDL.

PDL teams are owned and operated like professional teams, which meant that for BYU to become a member of the league, the university would have to commit to purchasing a franchise. Having years of experience dealing with university bureaucracy, Watkins prepared for what he believed would be a challenging task: convincing BYU higher-ups this was a purchase worth making.

"They were really receptive, quite surprisingly," Watkins said. "There were some issues. There's not as many students on campus during the summer."

The initial fear was the PDL schedule would make it much more difficult to attract players -- and fans.

Otherwise, Watkins said, "it really went quite smooth. One presentation and they said, 'Let's do it.' "

More than just being a financial investment, it was a leap of faith. This was uncharted territory for any university. What made it an especially controversial move was the perception by some that this was a way to circumvent Title IX. In some past statements, Watkins has come across as being critical of Title IX, for which he has caught flak. He now says that was never his intention.

"I used to be kind of a sounding board for Title IX, but I was never against Title IX by any stretch," Watkins said. "Everybody wants to blame Title IX [for the struggles of nonrevenue men's athletic programs]. The blame in my opinion is on the growth and expense of college football, not necessarily laws that are there to help women. The amount of money we're spending for coaches, for facilities, all those things that are turning football into a big business is taking money away from what could have been spent to serve some of these other students on campus."

The school, through its club program as opposed to its athletic department, found the money to invest in a franchise, and in 2003, BYU made the transition to the PDL.

It was a rough one. The team went 2-15-1.

"We just got hammered," the coach said. "We didn't deserve to win any more than the two."

Since then, the team's progress has been impressive. This season, the Cougars finished the regular season 13-1-2 and were the Northwest Division champions.

"Looking back, now that we're having a pretty good amount of success in the PDL, [the early struggles] seem like time well spent," said Watkins. "But at the time, it was an all-time low for me personally and for many of our players."

His current team feels the early hardship was worth it.

"It was an excellent move to go into the league just because of the previous success in the collegiate club level," forward Dave Clark said. "You're getting a lot of superstars from other universities and professional players that have come down to the PDL. As the competition has increased, our program has improved."

However, BYU is still far from a traditional college soccer program.

Many of the players Watkins tries to recruit are fielding offers from Division I programs that offer scholarships, something BYU does not. However, because of the unique situation at BYU the school is largely funded by the Mormon Church -- tuition is considerably lower than it would be at most universities, even factoring in scholarship money.

Unlike other PDL teams, BYU's squad is comprised solely of full-time students. There are no restrictions on length of eligibility, although the school requires students maintain a 2.4 GPA to remain on the team (NCAA regulations stipulate a 1.8).

Because the PDL season runs from late April through late July, students miss much less class than their NCAA counterparts.

This schedule does require athletes to give up their summers. Initially, that was a challenge; however, BYU offers its players employment through summer youth soccer camps.

"What we tell [prospective players] is that we feel like the PDL is better competition than most college conferences out there," Watkins said, explaining how he tries to sway recruits who are also looking at other programs.

Another selling point is that the team goes on an international trip annually to play professional squads. The NCAA permits only one international trip every four years.

Trejo transferred to BYU after playing his freshman year at NC State. The decision was based primarily on academics, but he did find the Cougars' move to the PDL intriguing.

"I'm going to walk away with a lot of international experience," Trejo said. "I walked away having played some of the best clubs in the world which is something you cannot do as an NCAA team."

So why aren't more teams taking the PDL route? It would seem to be an appealing option for many universities with powerhouse athletic programs — such as SEC schools, the University of Southern California, Miami, etc. — that don't have men's soccer programs.

"When we first did this, everybody was calling," Watkins said. "Everybody wanted to do it."

However, the calls have stopped since many teams find joining the PDL isn't viable.

Funding is just one obstacle. A PDL team costs between \$100,000 and \$200,000.

Summer is also a tough time for a team of college athletes to train and compete. While BYU has roughly a third of its students on campus during the summer months, most schools do not have the number of people it takes to run a soccer program -- and while athletes might be willing to make sacrifices to play, there would be a lot of empty seats in the stands.

Although BYU's situation is unique, Watkins won't be surprised to see that change eventually.

"I really feel like we're on the cutting edge as far as player development for this age group," he said. "I think we're on the cusp. Twenty years from now, we'll look back at college players having different opportunities than just college soccer and a 10-week season. I think it will be more similar to what we're doing."

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