

PROFESSIONAL SOCCER: FROM THE GOLDEN SPIKERS TO REAL SALT LAKE: 1976 - 2004

Attempts to obtain a professional soccer franchise in Utah date back to the late 1960s, and the fortunes of Utah teams have risen and fallen with the national pro soccer leagues. After the exciting finale to the 1966 World Cup, American investors attempted to start a pro soccer league in the U.S., but the effort foundered after only a short time.²⁰ The first try at bringing pro soccer to Utah was in 1976, when the American Soccer League awarded a franchise to Salt Lake City, which put together a team called the Golden Spikers. The main force behind the Golden Spikers was a Greek businessman, George Brokalakis--also a sponsor for Hellas--who asked a number of local players, including Gus Colessides, as well as some of the BYU players such as Cres MacTavish and Dee Benson, to sign on for promises of a spot on a pro team when the Golden Spikers took off. There was no pay, since the team was just starting out, but Gus and the other players were anxious to get in on the ground floor. After a debut game at Rice Stadium on the University of Utah campus that was attended by 8,000 fans, the Golden Spikers seemed to be off to a good start. As it turned out, however, the only reason so many people came to the opening game was that the tickets were free. When the owners charged for attendance, the numbers dropped to less than 1000.



After allegations of debt and assault and other misdeeds surfaced, the team was expelled from the league in July 1976. When the IRS charged the Golden Spikers owner with tax fraud, that was it for the Utah team. They tried to reform a few months later as the Utah Pioneers, but that team

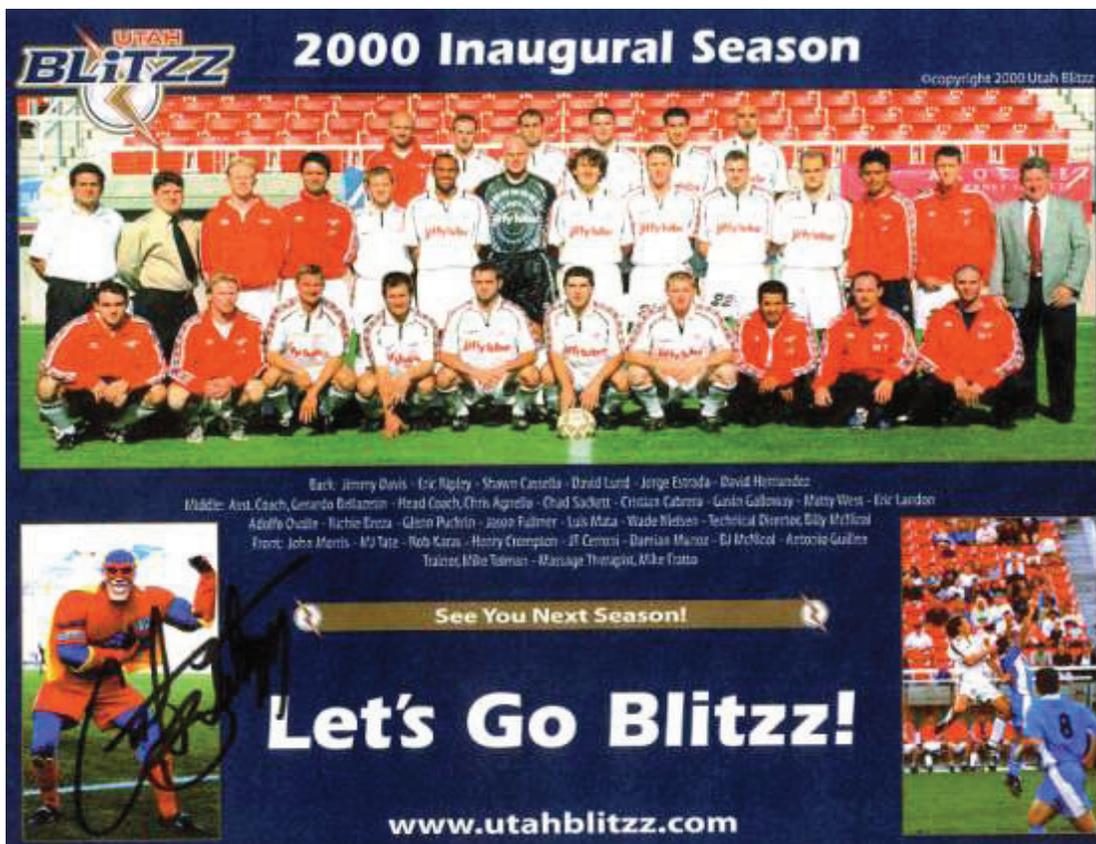
Utah Sting, 1990.

[Deseret Morning News photo]

²⁰ For a comprehensive overview of US soccer history, see the American Soccer History Archives at <http://www.sover.net/~spectrum/index.html> . This website contains literally everything you could ever ask about North American soccer history.

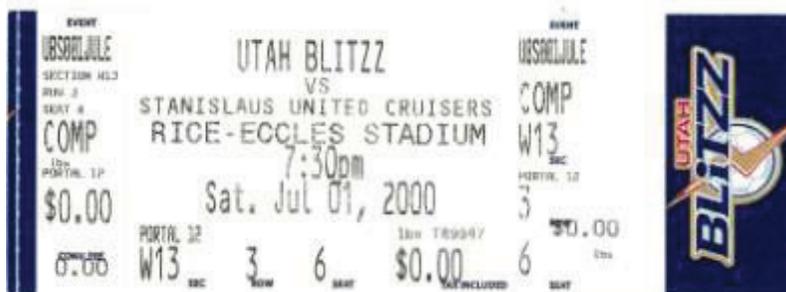
too quickly folded. Professional soccer in Utah was dormant until the late 1980s, when the American Professional Soccer League gave a franchise to Salt Lake City, for a team to be named the Utah Sting. They opened their play in April 1990, and for a time, things looked bright. The Sting played a full schedule in 1990 at Derks Field in Salt Lake, and the University of Utah was even considered as a site for the 1994 World Cup, which was held in the U.S. But by the end of the year, the Sting's owner decided that he couldn't afford both baseball (he also owned the Salt Lake Trappers, a minor league team) and the Sting, and put the club up for sale. The Utah Sports Foundation, a non-profit group, bought the franchise, and for a time, it seemed that pro soccer would take root in Utah. The Sting began a second year in 1991, but they just were not making enough money, with only 5,000 fans a game, to justify the costs. By the summer of 1991, the Sting "was pronounced dead by the American Professional Soccer League," according to an article in the *Deseret News*.

One team that showed every prospect of making a go of a professional soccer franchise in Utah was the Utah Blitzz. The Blitzz was a Division 3 professional soccer team, part of the USL, or United Soccer League. In terms of professional standings, the Blitzz was two levels below Major League Soccer; D3 is considered the entry level for professional



soccer players. The team got off started late in 1999, headed by Dell McNichol and his wife Stacy, with former Woods Cross High School star Chris Agnello as head coach. Tryouts for players were held through the fall of 1999, and by 2000, the team had a full roster of games lined up with teams from Arizona, Colorado, Nevada, and California. The first games were played in the University of Utah’s Rice-Eccles stadium, but McNichol had grander plans: the hotel developer had already hired a construction company and architects to build a 5000-seat “soccer-specific” stadium—expandable to 12,000 seats if the franchise took off—at the intersection of I-215 and 2100 South in West Valley City.

Site problems delayed the ground-breaking on the stadium, but it didn’t stop the Utah Blitzz from playing soccer. Their first official game, against the Chico (California) Rooks, was played at Chico on April 22, 2000. The Blitzz got off to an early lead but ended up losing the game 2-1. Their first win came in another away game, this one against the Colorado Comets, whom they defeated by a score of 3-2. In the meantime, the Colorado Rapids of the MLS agreed to play an exhibition game in June against the Blitzz. With that to look forward to, the team prepared for its first home game, on May 19, 2000, at Rice-Eccles stadium. It was a big event for the small-but-growing Utah soccer community; fireworks, a big pre-game party, and other festivities marked the opener. And the Blitzz didn’t disappoint; before 4000 fans, the team blanked the Stanislaus Cruisers 2-0.



The Blitzz were off to a great start. In the weeks before the Colorado Rapids exhibition game, the Blitzz compiled a winning record, including being undefeated at home. The

MLS team, however, shut out the Utah team four goals to none, but the Blitzz were not dismayed, and treated the loss as a way to gain both exposure and experience. Another exhibition game the next month, this time against a Mexican team from Tijuana, ended up with a 3-0 loss for the Blitzz, but both coaches felt that they had benefited. The Blitzz went on to compile an outstanding record for their first season, winning the Western

Conference finals before losing to the Charlotte Eagles in the semi-final. The Blitzz seemed poised for a great future.

That future included a summer camp program for young soccer players as well. Coach Chris Agnello modeled the summer camp program on those in Europe, which had been very successful in identifying and nurturing young talented players for advancement into upper level teams. Agnello's vision was a program that would fill in the gap between recreational and competition leagues for youth soccer, and allow kids to keep playing into their teens and beyond. Partnered with Salt Lake County, the program was wildly successful and is still in operation today. The same cannot be said for the Blitzz, unfortunately. 2001 proved to be a watershed year, with the Blitzz winning the USL national championship in a close game at Franklin-Covey Field, a baseball venue, in Salt Lake City. The University of Utah was playing a football game at Rice-Eccles stadium, and Derks was the only field available with enough seating. Even then the Blitzz—and the Franklin-Covey Field management—were taken aback by the interest. A crowd of over 8000 people showed up to see the game, and the local bus and light rail lines, as well as the concessions and security at the field, were completely overwhelmed. The crowd was rewarded with a close game against the Greenville, North Carolina, Lions, which the Blitzz won by a score of 1-0. The date was September 7, 2001.



After the September 11, 2001, attacks, the market that team owner Dell McNichol depended on for funding dried up, and he was forced to bow out. Head Coach Agnello and manager Stacy McNichol took over the team with private funding, and the Blitzz were able to keep playing for several more years. Agnello even led the team to another USL D3 championship, against the Charlotte Eagles, in 2004. Coming back from a two-goal deficit, the Blitzz tied the game and then won on penalty kicks after two overtime periods. After that win, Coach Agnello felt that it might be time to move up to Major League Soccer, and was able to interest a local investor in putting up the necessary funds, but Dave Checketts beat him to it, and secured the

MSL franchise for Real Salt Lake. In the interest of the game, Coach Agnello and Stacy McNichol dissolved the Utah Blitzz.²¹

The Utah Freezz, a member of the World Indoor Soccer League, didn't do as well as the Blitzz, with only a 12-10 record in their 1999 season. They played one more season before the WISL folded in 2001. A women's team, the Utah Spiders, was formed in 1999, and entered the Women's Premier Soccer League the next year. They were a successful team, winning several championships and placing second in the WPSL in 2002. In the ensuing years, the Spiders have continued to play and place in the top levels of the WPSL.

Soccer in Utah has a long and interesting history, from the days of the old miners in their natty jerseys and hard-toed boots, to the hard-charging urban, ethnic teams of the 1920s and 1930s, to the dedicated players in the 1950s and 1960s, to today's thousands and thousands of young and old soccer players and the Real Salt Lake. With the opening of the new Real Salt Lake Stadium in 2008, and the MLS All-Star Game, scheduled for Salt Lake City in 2009, combined with plans to build even more youth soccer complexes in the Salt Lake valley, soccer has found a permanent place in the Beehive state. Even though soccer's fortunes have gone up and down in Utah, it seems certain that there will remain enough people who love the "beautiful game" to keep it alive in Utah for many future generations.

²¹ This brief history of the Utah Blitzz comes from an interview with former head coach Chris Agnello, conducted on December 12, 2008. The author also used the Utah Blitzz 2000 Inaugural Season Year Book, loaned by Mr. Agnello. I am grateful to Mr. Agnello for this consideration.

A NOTE ON SOURCES

For this history, sources are divided into two periods. For the years before World War II, I relied heavily on newspaper accounts from the *Salt Lake Tribune*, the *Salt Lake Telegram*, and the *Salt Lake Herald*. Additional information was kindly provided by the National Soccer Hall of Fame in Oneonta, New York. A major source of the newspaper accounts was the Utah Digital Newspapers Index, available from the University of Utah at this web address: <http://www.lib.utah.edu/digital/unews/> Even though this index does not include the *Salt Lake Tribune* and the *Deseret News*, it provided a wealth of early accounts of soccer games in Utah from other newspapers. Clippings from the *Tribune* and *Deseret News* were found, however, in the scrapbooks of Alf Engen, Utah ski legend, which are housed in the Special Collections Department, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah. Alan Engen, Alf's son, was especially helpful in the course of this research. Marshall Henrie, grandson of George Herbert Clapham, provided photographs of the 1922 and 1923 Salt Lake Soccer Club teams, as well as photos of the U.S.F.U. championship pins. Some other mentions of Utah soccer before the present era were also found in publications of the Utah State Historical Society, and permission to use photos from their collections was kindly granted. Ray Cunningham, author of a comprehensive study of Prisoners of War and internees in Utah during World War I, provided useful information and corrections to the manuscript for the war years.

To write about Utah soccer history after World War II, I relied heavily on the Utah Soccer Association website, including the Utah Soccer Hall of Fame, available online at http://www.utahsoccer.org/hall_of_fame.php, and the lists of state and Daynes Cup champions on the same site. Mr. Bill Bosgraaf, President of the Utah Soccer Association, was unfailingly helpful and supportive throughout this project, and I am greatly in his debt. He introduced me to another great source of information and stories, namely Utahans who played soccer here in the 1940s to the present day. Besides Mr. Bosgraaf himself, I interviewed Willard Hansen, Peter Hughes, Gus Colessides, Bill Bosgraaf, and Tony Yapias, and held a group interview with Richard Gregersen, Stan De Waal, Willard Hansen, Ronnie Almond, Nicholas Hille, and Bill Bosgraaf. Chris Agnello, former head coach of the Utah Blitz, provided me not only with an interview about the history of that team, but allowed the use of photos from the Utah Blitz 2000 Inaugural Season yearbooks. The files of the Utah State Historical Society provided

records and photographs from Herman Neumann and AC Germania. The *Deseret Morning News* allowed me to go through their clippings files and photo morgue to gather information about efforts to bring professional soccer to Utah.

All clippings, interviews, photos, and other research materials are housed in the Special Collections Department, J. Willard Marriott Library, University of Utah.

