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The evolution of the talent pathway in Major League Soccer

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ABSTRACT

Interest in North American soccer is re-emerging following the multiple announcements that major club (e.g., 2025 FIFA Club World Cup) and international tournaments (e.g 2026 FIFA World Cup) will be held on the continent in the coming years. However, there is a dearth of evidence on talent identification and development originating from this part of the world. The top-tier domestic league in the United States and Canada, Major League Soccer, operates as a single-entity business model and its clubs have gradually expanded their organizational structures, assembling youth academies and reserves teams, to help streamline a talent pathway into their first teams. The overall growth in Major League Soccer has ultimately created greater opportunities for homegrown domestic talents in North America, particularly the US. The present commentary highlights the evolution of the talent pathway within Major League Soccer, particularly during the better part of the previous two decades.

Introduction

A recent book chapter showcasing ‘International Perspectives’ on male talent pathways in youth soccer presented contextual information about the current state of talent identification and development (TID) in the United States (US) and Canada.¹ The evaluation presented by Kelly and colleagues is timely given the re-emerging interest in North American soccer following the high-profile move by Lionel Messi to Major League Soccer (MLS) club, Inter Miami CF, along with the announcements that the 2025 FIFA Club World Cup will be hosted in the US, followed by the 2026 FIFA World Cup, which will be co-hosted in the US, Mexico and Canada. So, while these contributions are to be welcomed, we feel as though a more detailed and nuanced perspective on the US soccer landscape can be provided, particularly concerning the evolving talent pathway in MLS. To be clear, this is by no means a criticism of Kelly and colleagues. On the contrary, we are standing on their shoulders. We understand the word constraints placed on contributors by editors and publishers and the chapter to which we refer included commentaries on various nations and so presumably prevented a wider historical and cultural perspective. The commentary that follows is provided by researchers active in talent development in the US soccer landscape, and specifically in the case of the lead author, a professional who works in the High Performance Department at the US Soccer Federation.² For brevity, this commentary is primarily focused on MLS’ presence in the US and is divided into sections concerning the historical backdrop of MLS, the growing organizational structure of its clubs, pertinent roster and financial regulations regarding international and

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homegrown players and the present annual calendar(s) for the MLS ecosystem. As a whole, MLS has witnessed a tremendous evolution over the course of its 29-year history, which has had major implications on the league's present talent pathway and shaped a very different TID system relative to British and European soccer, which have historically dominated the peer-reviewed literature. Therefore, this commentary aims to inform its readers on the evolution of the talent pathway within MLS over the previous two decades and, like Kelly and colleagues, attempt to address the dearth of evidence on TID practices within North American soccer.

Background on MLS

MLS is the highest-tier league in men's professional soccer in both the United States and Canada. The league is sanctioned by the United States Soccer Federation (USSF), the national governing body (NGB) for soccer in the US and an affiliation member to both the Federation International de Football Association (FIFA) and the Confederation of North, Central and Caribbean Association Football (Concacaf). MLS was formed in 1993 in the run-up to the 1994 FIFA World Cup after the USSF won the bidding process to host the tournament in 1988 and agreed in principle with FIFA to assist in re-establishing a new professional league in the US.³ The previous professional league, the North American Soccer League, dissolved and ceased operations at the close of 1984, and for more than a decade, the US did not have a sanctioned first division league until MLS began league play in the Spring of 1996.⁴ In its inaugural season, MLS started with 10 teams solely based in the US, and since 1998 the league has expanded multiple times across the US and, since 2006, Canada.⁵

The institutional structure and operations of MLS are unique to both global soccer and professional sport in the US.⁶ Unlike other major professional sports leagues in the US, MLS operates under a single-entity business model in which a group of investors, or franchise owners, collectively own all MLS teams jointly, along with the league's other assets, but each investor is aligned to a single club and granted a licence to operate their team in a select city, or 'market'.⁷ Consequently, the league controls the ownership of all teams, sponsorships, broadcasting rights, as well as player contracts, which means player transfers into MLS or between its clubs is largely determined by the league.⁸ Additionally, professional soccer in the US (and Canada) is a closed pyramidal system, meaning there is no promotion or relegation system.⁹ Hence, MLS sits atop the pyramid as a closed league and the only means of entry is when a new franchise owner, or ownership group, pays the league's expansion fee.¹⁰

Although each franchise owner holds significant management control over their respective club, it has been argued that the league structure results in a monopolized market for professional soccer in the US.¹¹ However, MLS believes its single-entity structure, strategic market expansion and strict player acquisition and roster management regulations are all critical to its sustainability and long-term success.¹² Despite contracting in 2001, losing two Florida-based clubs in Miami and Tampa, league expansion kickstarted again shortly thereafter in 2005 (Figure 1).¹³ Today, MLS is made up of 30 clubs, including 27 based in the US (i.e., San Diego FC is the newest club set to compete in 2025) and 3 in Canada, but future plans for league expansion expect the league to eventually reach 32 clubs.¹⁴ This accelerated league expansion has ultimately created greater opportunities for homegrown domestic talents in North America, particularly the US.

Growing club infrastructures

For decades, professional clubs, particularly in Western and Northern Europe, have been making significant investments into their organizational structures to provide a comprehensive pathway that aims to progress talented young players into the first team or generate financial income by selling these talents in the transfer market.¹⁵ MLS adopted this globalizing youth development model established by leading European clubs when it launched its youth academy and homegrown player initiatives in 2007 and 2008, respectively.¹⁶ Despite receiving strategic recommendations to

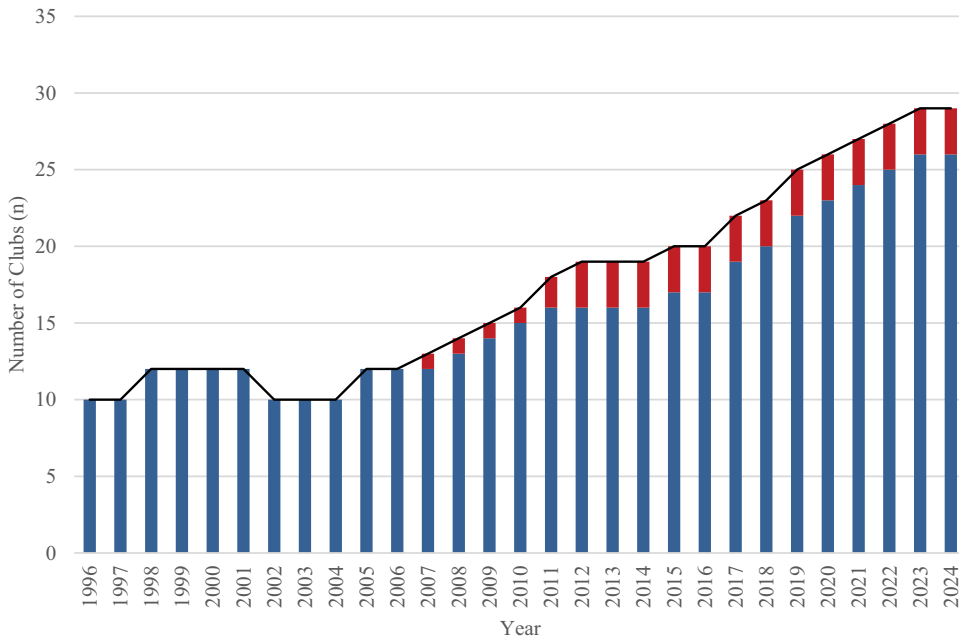


Figure 1. The growing number of clubs in MLS over the course of 29 seasons. Blue bars denote US-based clubs and red bars denote Canadian-based clubs.

cut spending in youth development almost a decade later after enacting these initiatives,¹⁷ MLS has continued to finance its talent pathway, referred to as the ‘Professional Player Pathway’, conceivably to keep up with the ever-increasing globalization, professionalism, and investment in elite global soccer. Consequently, for the better part of the last two decades, MLS clubs have steadily expanded their organizational structures, assembling youth academies and reserve teams, that model after European clubs to help streamline the player pathway into their first teams. This has subsequently been a crucial factor that has changed the role of the college draft system within MLS, whereby many clubs now heavily rely more on developing players within their youth academy system given the significant investments made into TID initiatives since 2007 and more recently.¹⁸ Amidst the coronavirus pandemic (Covid-19), MLS spearheaded the launch of its own youth league and third-tier domestic league for its club’s youth academies and reserve teams, respectively. As a result, the MLS ecosystem now encompasses a more definitive talent pathway for developing potential home-grown players. [Tables 1 and 2](#) provide an overview of the sporting infrastructure and present talent pathway, respectively, for each MLS club

Youth academies

Professional clubs across the globe strategically utilize their youth academies to provide talented players a systematic youth development program,¹⁹ involving a combination of expert coaching, multidisciplinary support, organized training and competitive match play.²⁰ MLS laid the foundation for its Professional Player Pathway when it began its youth academy initiative in 2007. The initiative mandated both Canadian and US-based MLS clubs to begin operating youth teams to compete in the US Soccer Development Academy (USSDA), a youth domestic league that launched the previous year by the USSF. The NGB-sponsored youth league offered various age categories and featured both MLS academies and independent youth clubs. The financial impact of Covid-19, however, abruptly shuttered the USSDA in 2020, and in response MLS announced the formation of its own youth league, MLS NEXT, a month later.²¹ It is unknown what the annual budgetary costs

Table 1. The geographical conference structure in MLS and each club's sporting infrastructures in the North American domestic league.x

Conference	Club	Location	Joined	Soccer-Specific Stadium	Capacity	Opened	Training Facility
Eastern	Atlanta United FC	Atlanta, GA	2017				Children's Healthcare of Atlanta Training Ground
	Charlotte FC	Charlotte, NC	2022				Atrium Health Performance Park
	Chicago Fire FC	Chicago, IL	1998				
	FC Cincinnati	Cincinnati, OH	2019	TQL Stadium	26,000	2021	Mercy Health Training Center
	Columbus Crew	Columbus, OH	1996	Lower.com Field	20,000	2021	OhioHealth Performance Center
	D.C. United	Washington, DC	1996	Audi Field	20,000	2018	Inova Performance Complex
	Inter Miami CF	Fort Lauderdale, FL	2020	DRV PNK Stadium	18,000	2019	Florida Blue Training Center
	CF Montréal	Montreal, QC	2012	Saputo Stadium	19,619	2008	Centre Nutri Lait
	Nashville SC	Nashville, TN	2020	GEODIS Park	30,000	2022	Century Farms Training Complex
	New England Revolution	Foxborough, MA	1996				Revolution Training Center
	New York City FC	New York City, NY	2015				Etiihad City Football Academy
	New York Red Bulls	Harrison, NJ	1996	Red Bull Arena	25,000	2010	Red Bulls Training Ground
	Orlando City SC	Orlando, FL	2015	Exploria Stadium	25,500	2017	Orlando Health Training Ground
	Philadelphia Union	Chester, PA	2010	Subaru Park	18,500	2010	Power Training Complex
	Toronto FC	Toronto, ON	2007	BMO Field	28,351	2007	BMO Training Ground
	Austin FC	Austin, TX	2021	Q2 Stadium	20,500	2021	St. David's Performance Center
	Colorado Rapids	Commerce City, CO	1996	Dick's Sporting Goods Park*	18,061	2007	
	FC Dallas	Frisco, TX	1996	Toyota Stadium*	20,500	2005	
	Houston Dynamo FC	Houston, TX	2006	BBVA Stadium	22,039	2012	Houston Sports Park
	Sporting Kansas City	Kansas City, KS	1996	Children's Mercy Park	18,467	2011	Compass Minerals National Performance Center
Western	LA Galaxy	Carson, CA	1996	Dignity Health Sports Park*	27,000	2003	
	Los Angeles FC	Los Angeles, CA	2018	Banc of California Stadium	22,000	2018	LAFc Performance Center
	Minnesota United FC	Saint Paul, MN	2017	Allianz Field	19,400	2019	The National Sports Center
	Portland Timbers	Portland, OR	2011	Providence Park	25,218	1926	Adidas Timbers Training Center
	Real Salt Lake	Sandy, UT	2005	American First Field	20,213	2008	Zions Bank Training Center
	San Jose Earthquakes	San Jose, CA	1996	PayPal Park*	18,000	2015	
	Seattle Sounders FC	Seattle, WA	2009				Sounders FC Center at Longacres
	St. Louis City SC	St. Louis, MO	2023	CITYPARK	22,500	2022	Washington University Orthopedics High-Performance Center
	Vancouver Whitecaps FC	Vancouver, BC	2011				National Soccer Development Centre

* indicates club stadiums also utilized as a training ground facility.

Table 2. The organizational structure within each MLS club's talent pathway, or professional player pathway.

Club	Reserve Team	Youth Academy [Age Categories]						
		U19	U17	U16	U15	U14	U13	U12
Atlanta United FC	ATL UTD 2	X*	X	X	X	X	X	X*
Austin FC	Austin FC II		X		X	X	X	X*
Charlotte FC	Crown Legacy FC	X*	X		X	X	X	
Chicago Fire FC	Chicago Fire FC II	X	X		X	X	X	
FC Cincinnati	FC Cincinnati 2	X*	X		X	X	X	
Colorado Rapids	Colorado Rapids 2		X		X	X		
Columbus Crew	Columbus Crew 2	X*	X		X			
FC Dallas	North Texas SC	X	X	X	X	X	X	X*
D.C. United		X*	X		X	X		
Houston Dynamo FC	Houston Dynamo 2	X*	X		X	X	X	
Sporting Kansas City	Sporting KC II	X*	X		X	X		
LA Galaxy	LA Galaxy II	X*	X		X	X	X	X*
Los Angeles Football Club	Los Angeles Football Club 2	X*	X	X	X	X	X	X*
Inter Miami CF	Inter Miami CF II	X*	X	X	X	X	X	X*
Minnesota United FC	MNUFC2	X	X		X			
CF Montreal	CF Montreal U23**		X		X			
Nashville SC	Huntsville City FC		X		X	X	X	
New England Revolution	New England Revolution II	X	X		X	X	X	
New York Red Bulls	RB2		X		X	X	X	X*
New York City FC	NYCFC II		X		X	X	X	X*
Orlando City SC	Orlando City B	X*	X		X	X	X	X*
Philadelphia Union	Philadelphia Union II		X	X	X	X	X	X*
Portland Timbers	Timbers2		X		X			
Real Salt Lake	Real Monarchs		X		X			
San Jose Earthquakes	Earthquakes II		X		X	X	X	
Seattle Sounders FC	Tacoma Defiance		X		X			
St. Louis City SC	St. Louis CITY 2	X*	X	X	X			
Toronto FC	TFC II	X	X		X			
Vancouver Whitecaps FC	Whitecaps FC 2		X		X			

*Indicates age categories that compete in separate youth leagues outside of MLS Next. **Indicates CF Montreal's U23 reserve team competes in the Ligue 1 Québec.

are for operating an MLS youth academy, but at the launch of MLS NEXT, the league's press release reported MLS collectively investing over \$70 million alone in 2019 into its youth academy initiative.²²

Like the USSDA before it, MLS NEXT includes both MLS academies and independent youth clubs, offering competition programming across multiple age categories, from Under-13 (U) up to U19 (see Table 2), with the aim of developing and preparing young players for international, professional and collegiate soccer.²³ The relatively new youth league also adopted several 'technical standards' previously set by the USSDA, such as compulsory weekly training frequencies for specific age categories (i.e., players registered in the U13 age category must train a minimum of 3 times per week; players in the U14 and older age categories must train a minimum of 4 times per week) as well as licencing requirements for both technical leadership and staff (ie academy directors and head coaches).²⁴ To help further elevate the coaching provision within its youth academy system, MLS has also been offering select academy coaches the opportunity to participate in the 'Elite Formation Coaching License' since 2013 through a partnership with the French Football Federation.²⁵ Despite these advancements, there remains a dearth of evidence on the practice activities and microcycle periodization strategies employed by coaches within MLS' youth development system and future research is warranted to examine these working practices as well as the efficacy of MLS' technical standards presently in place.

Alongside the launch of its new youth league, MLS also announced days later the beginning of a strategic partnership with US Youth Soccer (USYS), the largest youth sports organization in the US.²⁶ The partnership is intended to expand the youth academy system's TID network across the different regions of the US and ultimately provide a means of better integrating a talent pathway

between the professional and grassroots levels of the sport.²⁷ Consequently, this partnership would substantially increase each youth academy's talent pool size. Caution is warranted, though, given that the relative age effect has been previously shown to be a major factor in the selection process of male youth soccer players in the US.²⁸ Further, while MLS provides 'player development guidelines' stipulating the regulations concerning its youth development programming initiatives, the guidelines do not provide any insight into how clubs should approach youth player selection processes nor any practical implications to help mitigate confounding factors that negatively influence how youth players are identified and developed (eg coaching biases, inter-individual differences in the timing and onset of biological maturation and relative age effects).²⁹ Instead, it may be left up to individual clubs to design their own bespoke strategies for player recruitment, and therefore, TID researchers should consider exploring working practices concerning player selections and releases within MLS to support the league's youth development initiatives.

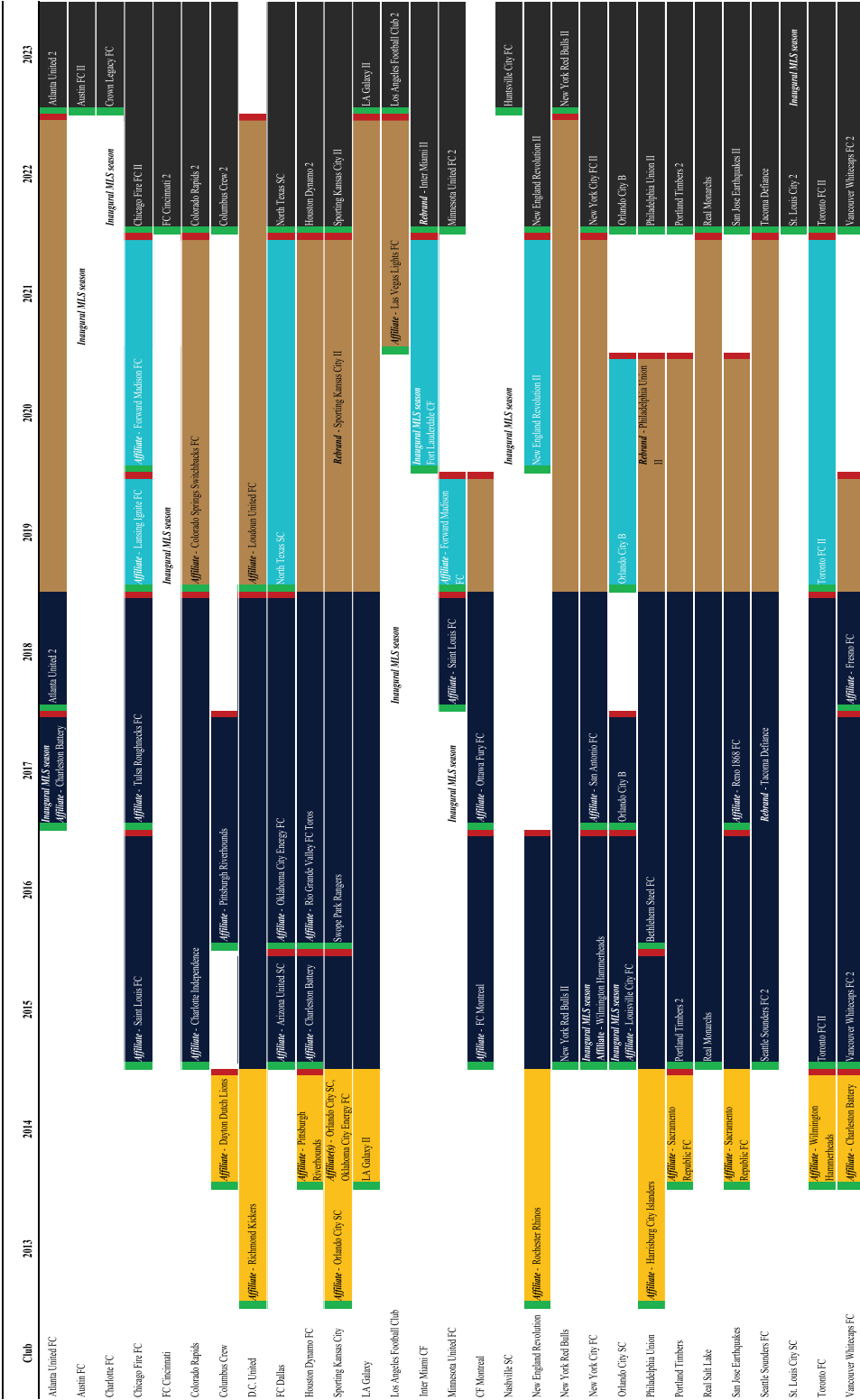
Training compensation and solidarity payments

For academies that have installed model pathways, their status and influence can often be an integral element to clubs' strategic aims,³⁰ particularly due to the nature and financial impact of the transfer market in global soccer.³¹ Therefore, MLS announced in 2019 it would begin aligning itself more, on a fiscal level, with the rest of the soccer world by adhering to FIFA's Regulations on the Status and Transfer of Players.³² These regulations ensure professional and amateur clubs are appropriately compensated for incurred training and education costs if one of their players signs their first professional contract with a club overseas, or when a player has a transfer fee agreed between two clubs belonging to different international federations.³³ Historically, MLS was not inclined to assert training compensation and solidarity payments due to concerns that they violated US child labour laws or would result in litigation on anti-trust grounds from opposed stakeholders in the US soccer landscape.³⁴ Though, as MLS and its academies matured, they began developing better youth domestic players, but were frequently losing many of these talented players for no compensation to clubs abroad.³⁵ The players' union, the Major League Soccer Players Association (MLSPA), responded negatively to the MLS, as it has historically opposed the FIFA system due to concerns that the policy is 'a tax', creating a disadvantage for domestic players wishing to go abroad.³⁶ Nonetheless, MLS adopted these regulations perhaps to ensure its clubs remained incentivized to continue investing in youth development.³⁷

Reserve teams

Reserve teams act as a conduit between a club's youth academy and first team,³⁸ giving players a supportive yet challenging environment where they can continue their development after graduating from the academy.³⁹ The evolution of MLS reserve teams, also referred to as B teams or second teams (i.e., commercially denoted as 2 or II), has been sporadic, however. An independent MLS Reserve League commenced play in 2005 with 12–14 teams competing in a single conference for four seasons before pausing for a 2-year hiatus.⁴⁰ The league eventually resumed in 2011 with 18 teams strategically grouped into three separate geographical conferences (ie East, Central and West) to mitigate the financial burden of domestic air travel. However, the MLS Reserve League failed to provide players with an adequate frequency of competitive fixtures due to its insufficient 12-match summer schedule.⁴¹

In 2013, MLS and United Soccer League (USL; then United Soccer Leagues) agreed to a multiyear partnership that instituted interleague competition between MLS Reserve League teams and USL clubs, which were competing in USL Pro, a third division domestic league with 13 teams at the time.⁴² As part of the agreement, MLS also initially granted its clubs the option of either maintaining their operations of a reserve team or signing an 'affiliate agreement' with a USL Pro club, which enabled a loan system for select MLS rostered players. In the



Notes: In 2015, United Soccer Leagues rebranded as United Soccer League (USL), dropping the league name USL Pro. In 2017, USL was granted provisional division two status by U.S. Soccer (USC) and then granted full division two status in 2018. In 2019, the second division and third division leagues rebranded as USL Championship and USL League One, respectively. In 2022, MLS launched its own third division league, MLS Next Pro.

■ USL Pro (1st division, 2011 - 2014)
 ■ USL Championship (2nd division, 2019 - Present)
 ■ USL League One (3rd division, 2019 - Present)
 ■ USL League Two (4th division, 2012 - Present)
 ■ Start of Affiliate Agreement/Independent Reserve Team Operations

Figure 2. A timeline of 'affiliate agreements' and independent reserve team operations from 2013 to 2023.

Table 3. The MLS' annual increase in salary budget, GAM and TAM available for each club at their discretion⁸⁵.

Year	Salary Budget	GAM	TAM
2021	\$4,900,000	\$1,525,000	\$2,800,000
2022	\$4,900,000	\$1,625,000	\$2,800,000
2023	\$5,210,000	\$1,900,000	\$2,720,000
2024	\$5,470,000	\$2,585,000	\$2,400,000
2025	\$5,950,000	\$2,930,000	\$2,225,000
2026	\$6,425,000	\$3,280,000	\$2,125,000
2027	\$7,068,000	\$3,921,000	\$2,025,000

partnership's first year, four MLS clubs elected to sign affiliate agreements,⁴³ and grew to 10 by the following season (see [Figure 2](#)), resulting in the complete elimination of the MLS Reserve League at the conclusion of 2014.⁴⁴ The independent reserve league's closure was also due to MLS' evolving strategy, pushing its clubs to either 'affiliate' with a USL club or field their own independent reserve team in USL Pro.⁴⁵ LA Galaxy would become the first club to initiate the latter with its 'Los Dos' project at the start of the 2014 season and eventually other MLS clubs followed suit.⁴⁶

In just under a decade, the partnership between the two domestic leagues helped galvanize USL, which underwent extensive league expansion, two commercial rebrands, and was sanctioned by the USSF as a second division league in 2018. Coinciding with their second rebrand, USL also launched a third division league, USL League One, situated below its second division league, USL Championship.⁴⁷ Consequently, several MLS clubs maintained their affiliate relationships or independent reserve team operations in USL Championship, while a handful of others elected to sign affiliate agreements with newly formed USL League One clubs or operate their own independent reserve teams in the new third division league. At the height of the partnership in 2019, most MLS clubs had contracted reserve team players in the multidivisional USL.

Although the partnership between MLS and USL was established as a player development initiative, the long-term stability of affiliate agreements and independent reserve teams were often in flux for most MLS clubs,⁴⁸ aggravating their strategic efforts to maintain a cohesive talent pathway. After the 2020 season, Orlando, Portland and Philadelphia withdrew their reserve teams from USL in part due to the financial implications of Covid-19,⁴⁹ and when MLS announced the launch of its own third division league, MLS NEXT Pro (MLSNP), in the Fall of 2021, it initiated a significant exodus of MLS reserve teams from USL prior to the 2022 and 2023 seasons that followed.⁵⁰ This marked the end of a unique decade-long player development initiative between two commercially independent domestic leagues in the US and signalled the beginning of MLS assuming complete control of its Professional Player Pathway.

Roster and financial regulations

Building a first team roster in MLS requires extensive knowledge of the league's 'player acquisition mechanisms' and accompanying financial regulations enforced by the league office. Each club must assemble its roster by adhering to a 'soft' salary cap that is determined by a collective bargaining agreement (CBA) negotiated between the league owners and MLSPA.⁵¹ The CBA, which was most recently ratified in 2021 ([Table 3](#)), also stipulates the annual sum of 'allocation money', which are two sources of supplementary currency regulated by the league that clubs can use to 'buy-down' a portion of a player's salary.⁵² Allocation money is made available to clubs as either General Allocation Money (GAM) or Targeted Allocation Money (TAM). The former can be used to reduce the budget charge for all players, while the latter is predominantly used by clubs to fund the recruitment of marquee players (*see First team*

roster).⁵³ Additionally, both GAM and TAM can be now used to sign homegrown players to their first professional contract in MLS.⁵⁴ Ultimately, though the purpose of ‘allocation money’ is to provide clubs greater means of managing their roster builds and incentivizes them to spend more on highly coveted talents in the global soccer market.⁵⁵

First team roster

An active roster may be comprised of up to 30 players with roster slots 1–20 and 21–30, defined as the senior and supplemental roster, respectively. There are a finite number of international roster slots ($n = 233$) annually divided among the 29 clubs that are tradeable, resulting in some clubs having more than eight and some less than eight during any given season.⁵⁶ To enable its clubs to recruit highly talented players, the league has introduced various marquee player categories over the years, including the Designated Player (DP) in 2007, the Young Designated Player (YDP) in 2012, and most recently, the U22 Initiative in 2021. These player categories guarantee lucrative financial compensation for the leagues’ most high-profile talent without burdening the salary cap and were created to help increase the popularity and marketability of MLS on both a global and local scale.⁵⁷ While the DP Rule may have favoured larger market clubs with greater financial resources,⁵⁸ MLS introduced the YDP to encourage its clubs to sign younger developing talent (≤ 23 y) because the league’s public image was becoming tarnished by being labelled a ‘retirement league’.⁵⁹ Previously, the number of DP rostered players impacted the number of U22 Initiative spots a club could utilize in a given season, but this was recently eliminated midseason of 2024, giving clubs more autonomy to sign both established and emerging talents in the transfer market.⁶⁰ At present, it would seem the league is employing a strategy that encourages its clubs to scout and recruit young potential talent either domestically or abroad.⁶¹

Homegrown player

In 2008, MLS’ homegrown player initiative enabled clubs to sign their academy players to professional contracts and designate them as homegrown players on their active rosters. To sign a player to a first team contract and register him as a homegrown player, said player must reside in the club’s homegrown territory (see *Homegrown territory rule*), have spent at least 1 year in the club’s youth academy, and meet other unspecified league requirements.⁶² Once signed, a homegrown player may occupy a slot on either the senior or supplemental roster. At a minimum, the supplemental roster slots 29 and 30 were previously reserved exclusively for homegrown players, but MLS recently removed this regulation at the start of the 2024 season.⁶³ MLS clubs are not subject to homegrown player quotas from either the Canadian or US federations, nor the regional governing body, Concacaf, unlike European clubs, which are mandated to meet certain player quotas within their 25-player roster that are set by the Union of European Football Association (UEFA) for those clubs competing in continental cup competitions (eg UEFA Champions League).⁶⁴ At present, however, it is unknown why MLS discontinued its aforementioned homegrown player rules for roster slots 29 and 30.

Homegrown territory rule

In conjunction with MLS’ homegrown player initiative, the league has also enforced a homegrown player recruitment policy, known as the ‘homegrown territory rule’. It stipulates the geographical boundaries where each club may exclusively conduct its TID enterprises (eg youth club affiliations, talent identification camps, youth tournaments and clinics) without any interference from another MLS club.⁶⁵ Consequently, clubs have historically been barred from actively scouting and recruiting youth players from other clubs’ designated market territories. The geographical boundaries for each club have been defined and altered by MLS over the years as the league has expanded and vary based

Table 4. The homegrown territories adapted from the '2024 MLS player development Guidelines'⁸⁶.

Club	Homegrown Territory
Atlanta United FC	The state of Georgia and several specific counties located in Tennessee ($n = 5$)
Austin FC	Various counties located in Texas ($n = 42$)
Charlotte FC	The states of North and South Carolina
Chicago Fire FC	A 75-mile radius of the club's stadium, including Milwaukee County
Colorado Rapids	The states of Colorado and New Mexico, excluding El Paso, Texas
Columbus Crew	Various counties located in Ohio ($n = 74$), including some of which may be shared with FC Cincinnati
D.C. United	A 75-mile radius of the club's stadium
FC Cincinnati	Various counties located in Ohio ($n = 64$), including some of which may be shared with Columbus Crew, as well various counties located in Indiana ($n = 16$) and Kentucky ($n = 27$)
FC Dallas	A 75-mile radius of the club's stadium, and all of Texas north the Dallas-Fort Worth area.
Houston Dynamo FC	Various counties located in Texas ($n = 30$)
Inter Miami CF	A 100-mile radius of the club's home stadium, excluding any non-Floridian territories
Los Angeles Football Club	A 75-mile radius of the club's stadium, excluding San Diego County
LA Galaxy	A 75-mile radius of the club's stadium, excluding San Diego County
Minnesota United FC	The states of Minnesota and Wisconsin, excluding a 75-mile radius from Chicago Fire FC's stadium, but including Milwaukee County
CF Montréal	All of Canada, excluding: (i) Provinces of British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan and Manitoba; and (ii) a 50-mile radius from Toronto FC's stadium
Nashville SC	The state of Tennessee, excluding several counties part of or adjacent to Chattanooga ($n = 5$); Specific counties part of or adjacent to Huntsville, Alabama ($n = 4$)
New England Revolution	A 75-mile radius of the club's stadium, plus the state of Rhode Island
New York City FC	A 75-mile radius of the club's stadium, excluding a 25-mile radius from Philadelphia Union's home stadium
New York Red Bulls	A 75-mile radius of the club's stadium, excluding a 25-mile radius from Philadelphia Union's home stadium
Orlando City SC	A 100-mile radius of the club's stadium, plus to the north of said stadium, the remainder of the state of Florida
Philadelphia Union	A 75-mile radius of the club's stadium, excluding: (i) the state of Maryland; and (ii) a 25-mile radius from New York Red Bull's home stadium
Portland Timbers	The states of Idaho, Oregon and New Mexico, and including Vancouver, Washington state and their vicinities
Real Salt Lake	The states of Utah and Arizona
San Diego FC	In the US, a 75-mile radius of the club's training facility, excluding Orange County; In Mexico, a 62.1 mile (100 km) driving distance from the club's training facility
San Jose Earthquakes	A 75-mile radius of the club's stadium
Seattle Sounders FC	The states of Hawaii and Washington, excluding a 50-mile radius from Portland Timbers's home stadium
Sporting Kansas City	The states of Kansas and Oklahoma; the state of Missouri, including some of which may be shared with St. Louis City SC, but excluding various specific counties adjacent to St. Louis ($n = 34$)
St. Louis City SC	The state of Arkansas, excluding several specific counties ($n = 5$); the state of Missouri, including some of which may be shared with Sporting Kansas City, but excluding various counties adjacent to Kansas City ($n = 25$); Several specific counties located in central Illinois ($n = 8$) plus the remainder of Illinois to the south of these specified counties, as well as two specific counties in Indiana
Toronto FC	All of Canada, excluding the Provinces of British Columbia, Alberta, Saskatchewan, Manitoba and Quebec
Vancouver Whitecaps FC	All of Canada, excluding: (i) a 50-mile radius from Toronto FC's stadium; and (ii) the Province of Quebec

on market size (Table 4). For example, several market territories are demarcated by a 75–100-mile radius expanding from either the clubs' stadium or training site, while other clubs in smaller markets are allocated an entire US state or several states to fulfill their talent identification strategies. Moreover, for clubs in the US states of Missouri and Ohio, the geographical boundaries are demarcated by county lines with several clubs given clearance to scout and recruit players in the same counties that are less densely populated.

The territory rule has been the subject of significant debate for several years among fans and various stakeholders working in the MLS ecosystem.⁶⁶ Many have argued that the league has allowed each of its franchise owners to passively monopolize their respective market's talent pool

Competition [Level]	Jan	Feb	Mar	Apr	May	Jun	Jul	Aug	Sep	Oct	Nov	Dec	
Major League Soccer [First Team]	Off-Preseason		In-season								Post-season	Off-season	
MLS Next Pro [Reserve Team]	Off-season	Preseason	In-season							Post-Season	Off-season		
MLS Next [Youth Academy]	Winter Pause	In-season					Post-season	Off-season	Preseason	In-season			Winter Pause

Figure 3. Annual calendar(s) for the professional and youth divisions within the MLS ecosystem.

and subsequently handicapped the capabilities of the growing North American talent pool, which has recently become more active in the transfer market and garnered significant interest from European clubs that are keen on signing young players from the US and Canada.⁶⁷ In 2022, it was reported that the league relaxed its territory rules by installing a new youth player protected list, potentially restricting the movement of up to 54 players in each club’s market territory, but meanwhile granting more freedom of movement to those youth players not on said list.⁶⁸ Almost 2 years later in 2024, MLS publicly released the rules governing what it refers to as ‘homegrown exclusivity’ which stipulates that clubs may select up to 45 players registered within their academy and an additional nine players who have either a permanent address or currently reside in their homegrown territory, and put these 54 players onto their ‘homegrown player list’, which means they are ineligible to be recruited by other MLS clubs.⁶⁹

Reserve team roster

An active roster for MLSNP may be comprised of up to 35 players with roster slots 1–24 made up of professional players, either international or domestic, or players on loan (eg first team players loaned down). Each team’s roster has seven roster slots for international players, which may be traded, but these roster slots expire at the end of the season.⁷⁰ Roster slots 25–

Table 5. Professional competition programs for first team players in MLS.

Competition	Description
Campeones Cup	An annual single competitive match that is contested between the previous year’s MLS Cup champion and the Campeón de Campeones from Liga MX.
Canadian Championship	An annual knockout domestic cup competition exclusively contested between professional Canadian clubs in MLS, the Canadian Premier League, and the champions of three semi-professional leagues in Canada, including League 1 Ontario, League 1 British Columbia and Ligue 1 Québec. The tournament is organized by the Canadian Soccer Association.
Concacaf Champions Cup	An annual continental club competition organized by the regional governing body, Concacaf, and held between February and May. The tournament format has undergone multiple adaptations since 2008. The latest format entails 27-teams competing in five knockout rounds with two-legged home-and-away ties.
Leagues Cup	An annual knockout competition that is contested between clubs from MLS and Liga MX. In 2023, the tournament expanded to include all clubs from both leagues and hosted during the months of July and August. The tournament’s champion, runner-up and third place finisher secure their places in the Concacaf Champions Cup for the following year.
MLS All-Star Game	An annual friendly match hosted by MLS and typically held in July–August, the midpoint of the in-season phase. Hosted as part of MLS All-Star Week, the match is contested between a prominent international club and selected MLS players chosen by a system of fan voting and selections made by the appointed All-Star team head coach as well as the league commissioner. Previously, MLS All-Star Week also featured the MLS Homegrown Game, but was later replaced by the MLS Next All-Star Game, featuring top talents from MLS’ youth domestic league.
U.S. Open Cup	An annual knockout competition contested between both professional and amateur clubs in the US. The single-elimination tournament, organized by the U.S. Soccer Federation, is the oldest soccer cup competition in the US.

35 may be filled with amateur academy players, which the league specifies as an individual under the age of 21, who has not competed in any collegiate soccer program and is currently representing the club's youth academy in MLS Next.⁷¹ Also, per league rules, there may only be a maximum of five youth academy players per team on the field during official match play.⁷² This latter roster regulation would seem to encourage the transition of academy players into the professional reserve team setting. On the contrary, while this regulation may present academy players with the opportunity to learn to adapt to a lower tier professional league, it may also diminish the pressures associated with professional soccer and subsequently attenuate the development for others.⁷³ Future qualitative research is, therefore, warranted to address the views of different stakeholders involved in the third division league to understand its role and impact on player development and its suitability in preparing players for first division soccer in MLS.

Annual calendar

The annual calendar for MLS' professional and youth divisions entails preseason, in-season, postseason and off-season phases (Figure 3). Interestingly, there is a calendar misalignment within the MLS ecosystem, and it is unknown whether this presents any challenges for practitioners charged with implementing their club's TID working practices.

First division league: MLS

Unlike European soccer, MLS runs its entire competitive season within the calendar year, in part to avoid freezing temperatures in winter as well as commercial broadcast competition with other major American sports.⁷⁴ MLS first teams generally hold a 6-week preseason period that commences in January. Clubs located in more northern latitudes typically travel south to US states with warmer climates, such as Arizona, California and Florida, or even abroad to Central and South America to hold their preseason training camps. Next, a 31-to-34-week in-season period kicks off in February–March, encompassing league play, separate domestic cup competitions for the US- and Canada-based clubs, as well as continental and single-cup competitions (Table 5). Over the course of its brief history, MLS' first division has lengthened its in-season phase in an effort to avoid fixture congestion caused by the growing number of expansion clubs.⁷⁵ Additionally, the first division also neither hold temporary pauses during in-season nor postseason phases to observe FIFA international windows, which can present a significant challenge for clubs when multiple players in their rosters are called up for international duty by their respective senior national teams.⁷⁶ The in-season phase concludes in late October and the team with the greatest sum total of points is awarded the Supporter's Shield. Like other major American sports (ie American football, baseball and basketball), however, MLS holds a postseason playoff tournament, which is structurally arranged by the league's geographical conferences, and the tournament format has been adapted by the league on multiple occasions throughout its history.⁷⁷

League geography and climate

Presently, MLS' 29 actively competing clubs are geographically located in various regions of North America, split across four time zones, including fourteen in Eastern Time (UTC-5:00), seven in Central Time (UTC-6:00), two in Mountain Time (UTC-7:00) and six in Western Time (UTC-8:00). Consequently, clubs are divided into two conferences according to their geographical location and their competitive fixtures predominantly consist of intra-conference competition to mitigate extensive trans-meridian air travel, particularly for those clubs located on the continental coastlines (eg Inter Miami CF, Seattle Sounders FC, Vancouver Whitecaps FC, etc.). For the 2024 season, the Eastern and Western conferences consist of 15 and 14 clubs, respectively. Still, the considerable

distances between clubs ensure teams regularly undertake short- (<3 h) and medium-haul (3–6 h) air travel for competitive fixtures. Consequently, this frequent travel can not only force adaptations to team's training plans, but it can also impair players' sleep and recovery.⁷⁸

The distribution of clubs across the North American continent also predisposes players to play in variable environmental conditions, such as heat, cold, different relative humidities, and low altitude (500–2000 m), which can impair their physical performance outputs.⁷⁹ For example, during the height of the summer months (ie July–August), the home venues for Houston Dynamo FC (Houston, TX; Mean Daily Maximum Temperature = 38.2°C) and Orlando City SC (Orlando, FL; Mean Daily Maximum Temperature = 35.5°C) are particularly oppressive due to their location in humid subtropical climates.⁸⁰ In contrast, low temperatures are routinely recorded at the start of the in-season phase (i.e., February–March), as well as during the postseason (i.e., October–December) for clubs in the northern US, such as Minnesota United FC (Saint Paul, MN; Mean Daily Minimum Temperature = –18.6°C),⁸¹ as well as clubs in Canada with outdoor soccer-specific stadiums (i.e., Toronto FC and CF Montreal). Additionally, Colorado Rapids (Dick's Sporting Goods Park, Commerce City, CO; 1592 m) and Real Salt Lake (America First Field, Sandy, UT; 1349 m) host their matches at venues in cities located at relatively higher elevations.⁸²

Third division league: MLS NEXT pro

Like MLS, the competitive season for MLSNP also begins and ends within the calendar year. The 27 reserve teams competing in the relatively new third division domestic league are split into two geographical conferences. Teams in each conference are split again and organized into two divisions (ie Frontier, Northeast, Pacific and Southeast). The in-season commences in late March and is typically preceded by a 6-week preseason. Further, the 26-week in-season phase includes 24 matches for each team, finishes in mid-September, and is followed by a postseason playoff tournament. As for domestic cup competition, only two independent MLSNP clubs are eligible to compete in the U.S. Open Cup (ie Carolina Core FC and Chattanooga FC), while reserve teams with organizational ties to a parent club in MLS have historically been barred from competing. However, when MLS announced the withdrawal of its US-based clubs' first teams from the competition in December 2023, opting to enter its reserve teams instead, the decision was initially rejected by the USSF before an agreement was reached, permitting nine MLS reserve teams to enter the 2024 edition of the tournament.⁸³ While this move by MLS concurrently reduces the number of fixture congestion scenarios for first team players (ie a minimum of two matches with ≤4 days recovery) and provides developing reserve team players more meaningful match play opportunities, the decision was met with heavy criticism from fans and US media outlets given the tournament's history and tradition and its role in the greater US soccer ecosystem.⁸⁴

Youth league: MLS NEXT

The youth domestic league's annual calendar breaks tradition with North American soccer norms and instead mirrors the European soccer calendar with its preseason and in-season phases commencing in late-July and mid-September, respectively. MLS NEXT's 9-month season observes a brief winter-pause, from late December to early January, before resuming the remainder of the in-season phase in the new year. In addition to domestic league play, there are also a host of auxiliary competition programs that youth academy players compete in, including the Generation adidas Cup, an annual youth tournament featuring both MLS academies and professional academies from around the world. Like the professional levels in the MLS ecosystem, however, MLS NEXT also features a postseason phase involving a playoff tournament held in late-June followed by a 3-to-4-week off-season period. During the off-season phase, which coincides with the first division's MLS All-Star Week (see [Table 5](#)), the youth league since its inception has opted to host its MLS NEXT All-Star Game, a single friendly match between top talents from the Eastern and Western

conferences. The calendar misalignment between the professional and youth divisions may be unique to North American soccer and warrants further investigation to assess its impact on the working practices of club practitioners involved in TID within MLS.

Conclusion

To summarize, this commentary presents a detailed overview of the talent pathway in MLS. Following a recent chapter on the state of play in the US soccer landscape, this paper extends the field by providing more of a contextualized and nuanced perspective by including evidence on the growing organizational structure of the various clubs, the roster regulations concerning home-grown domestic players, and information on the annual calendars across the MLS ecosystem. From a research perspective, this commentary also provides some areas which are currently under explored (eg the practice activities employed by youth coaches, the relative age effect within the youth academy system, the influence of biological maturation on player selection, etc.) and we would encourage applied practitioners working in MLS to consider studies in these areas. This is an exciting and important period for soccer in the US, and North America in general, and we hope this paper provides the stimulus and momentum for future work in this area.

Notes

1. Kelly et al., 'International Perspectives'.
2. Mannix et al., 'Surveying the Youth-to-Senior Transition'.
3. Jewell and Molina, 'An Evaluation of the Relationship'; and Duerr, 'Becoming Apple Pie'.
4. Jewell and Molina, 'An Evaluation of the Relationship'; and Dure, 'Before Kickoff'.
5. Coates, Frick, and Jewell, 'Superstar Salaries'.
6. Brownlee and Lorgnier, 'Marketing Professional Soccer in the United States'; and Jewell, 'The Effect of Marquee Players'.
7. Bradbury, 'Financial Returns in Major League Soccer'; and Brownlee and Lorgnier, 'Marketing Professional Soccer'; and Warren and Agyemang, 'Soccer in the United States'; and Watanabe, 'The Economics of Major League Soccer'.
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9. Warren and Agyemang, 'Soccer in the United States'.
10. Davis, 'MLS Exists in a Bubble'.
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14. Stejskal and Tenorio, 'MLS Expansion Update'.
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26. MLSsoccer staff, 'MLS, US Youth Soccer Announce'.
27. MLSsoccer staff; Boehm, 'How the MLS, US Youth Soccer Partnership'.
28. Glamser and Vincent, 'The Relative Age Effect'.
29. Bennett, Vaeyens, and Franssen, 'Creating a Framework for Talent Identification'.

30. Nesti and Sulley, *Youth Development in Football*; and Reilly et al., 'The Role of the Soccer Academy'.
31. Liu et al., 'The Anatomy of the Global Football'.
32. Strauss, 'MLS to Seek Training Compensation'.
33. FIFA, *Regulations on the Status and Transfer of Players*.
34. Carlisle, 'What Does Adoption'.
35. Strauss, 'MLS to Seek Training Compensation'; and Turner and Tenorio, 'Breaking down MLS's New Solidarity Payments'.
36. Carlisle, 'What Does Adoption'; and Turner and Tenorio, 'Breaking down MLS's New Solidarity Payments'.
37. Carlisle, 'What Does Adoption'.
38. Dowling et al., 'Developing Individuals'.
39. Relvas et al., 'Organizational Structures and Working Practices'.
40. Davis, 'MLS Reserve League En Route for 2011'.
41. Rueter, 'MLS to Launch Reserves League'.
42. Doyle, 'MLS, USL Pro Reach Deal'.
43. Freedman, 'MLS Wants All Its Clubs'.
44. Bird, Liviu, 'As USL Grows'.
45. Freedman, 'MLS Wants All Its Clubs'.
46. Boehm, 'Proving Ground'.
47. USLSoccer.com Staff, 'USL Unveils New Structure'.
48. Strauss, 'MLS Next Pro Adds Another Element'.
49. Mood, 'Portland, Philadelphia and Orlando'.
50. MLSsoccer staff, 'MLS NEXT Pro Unveils 21 Clubs'; and Strauss, 'MLS Next Pro Adds Another Element'; West, 'MLS Next Pro'.
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