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Real Madrid Reigns in Spain -- and Beyond

By Thomas Heath
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Adrian Hanauer's job was seemingly impossible. The sports entrepreneur had only 16 days to sell enough tickets, at an average price of \$60, to fill a 67,000-seat NFL stadium in Seattle for an exhibition soccer match between D.C. United, a Major League Soccer team playing almost 3,000 miles from home, and Real Madrid, the Spanish power that has struggled in recent years despite its all-star cast of players.

But when the teams enter Qwest Field tonight, the Seattle soccer official's success will be evident. About 59,000 tickets had been sold as of yesterday and Internet sites were selling them for more than \$290.

It helped that Real Madrid is one of the richest and most iconic soccer clubs in the world, with a New York Yankees-like roster that includes superstars -- known among the club's millions of fans as "*Galacticos*" -- David Beckham of England, Brazil's Ronaldo, Dutch striker Ruud van Nistelrooy and Italian defenseman Fabio Cannavaro.

"They are one of the greatest sports brands that virtually no one in this country has ever seen play," said David Carter, a principal in the Sports Business Group, a Los Angeles sports consultant. "It's the history of the Dallas Cowboys with the recent performance of the Boston Red Sox and the notoriety of the Los Angeles Lakers."

United is the most successful team in MLS's 11-season history, with four titles and 17-year-old Freddy Adu, who has drawn crowds wherever he has played.

"Freddy Adu has never been in the Northwest and he will be a big draw himself," said Hanauer, owner of the minor league Seattle Sounders soccer team, which plays at Qwest and draws about 4,000 per match.

Before the deal was signed, Hanauer stipulated that Real Madrid bring its best players to Seattle, and most of them will be on the field tonight. At the same time, he had directed his staff to put an aggressive ticket-selling plan into place. It included calling Sounders season ticket holders and sponsors first to see if they were interested. Within minutes of signing the deal, the Sounders' public relations staff launched Hanauer on a day-long media blitz designed to lead the television news and capture the front pages for that news cycle.

"We knew that if it was done right, the editorial side of newspaper and TV and radio was going to be our best form of advertising," Hanauer said. "If they thought this was a big deal, we were going to sell a lot of tickets."

The result: 47,000 tickets sold in the first three days.

Adidas, which pays Real Madrid \$25 million a year to wear its merchandise, began touting the game at its Seattle store and is entertaining dozens of corporate guests and employees. The shoe giant sells more than 1 million Real Madrid white jerseys a year, according to a company spokesman.

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Beckham did his part. The worldwide soccer idol had helped sell out the Seattle stadium in five hours when Manchester United, whom he then played for, visited Seattle in 2003. Hanauer and his staff were in immediate contact with Real's promotional group in Spain, where Beckham and other Real stars were put in a television studio for video promotions that have aired in Seattle. Adidas sells 300,00 Beckham jerseys a year.

"David Beckham is one of the biggest sports names globally," said Chris McGuire, sports marketing manager for Adidas soccer

Real Madrid's two-game tour, which includes another match Saturday in Utah against Real Salt Lake, follows successful U.S. tours by other high-profile European soccer clubs over the last decade, including Juventus, AC Milan, FC Barcelona and Manchester United.

The game against Salt Lake was planned for months, but Real Madrid decided to add another game in North America after the team decided a planned visit to South America was too far if the club wanted to get back to Spain and be ready for its season. Real Madrid and United considered the East Coast of the United States, but there was a conflict with the Nationals at RFK Stadium.

Another option was to play at Camden Yards, but MLS didn't want Real Madrid playing United so close to Real's arch-rival Barcelona, which is scheduled to play in Giants Stadium against the New York Red Bulls on Saturday. Toronto was also considered.

"We would have much rather played in this market for a whole host of reasons, but [MLS] asked us to play on the West Coast," United President Kevin Payne said. "They were concerned it would seem disrespectful to Barcelona to have a game down the road featuring their arch rival."

Real Madrid, founded in 1902 and the most storied club in Spain, is estimated by Forbes magazine to be worth more than \$1 billion. But the club, which is owned by its 100,000 members, in recent years has been overshadowed on the field by Barcelona. The teams have a long history of enmity dating from the Spanish Civil War, where Real was considered to be the club representing the monarchy and Generalissimo Francisco Franco's fascist seat of government, while Barcelona was identified with the Catalans and rebels.

So Real headed west for its "friendlies," as the exhibition matches are known.

"We come [to the United States] to be close to the fans, which means putting the best team on the field and playing the game at the highest level," said Ivan Bravo, Real's international development manager. "If we continue to increase our fan base, that increases value to our sponsors."

Real, which commands around a \$1 million fee plus expenses, is a marketer's dream. Though it doesn't have a big U.S. presence, it still drew 54,000 people to Chicago's Soldier Field last summer for a game against Chivas of Guadalajara, Mexico. During the same trip, Real also sold out its match against the Los Angeles Galaxy in eight days, including drawing 8,000 people who paid \$30 apiece to see the club practice.

Payne said Real has wisely rationed its exposure to the U.S. market, adding mystery and more excitement to the club. Like other major globetrotting soccer clubs, Real has also capitalized on the worldwide expansion in sports broadcasting and merchandising. Adidas has 2,000 stores in China alone, for example.

For years, the team embarked on its expensive strategy of cobbling together the best offense in the world, including attackers such as Beckham (\$30 million salary), Ronaldo (\$15 million), Zinedine Zidane (\$19 million), Raul Gonzalez Blanco (\$15 million) and Luis Figo (\$12 million). The Galacticos helped Real Madrid overtake Manchester United as the highest-grossing club in the world with revenue last year of \$350 million, according to an annual business study of

soccer teams by Deloitte Football Money League.

"There's a real magic to Real Madrid," Payne said.

But some of the magic has been lost on the field. The policy spearheaded by former president Florentino Perez, who resigned earlier this year, failed to bring the club a major trophy since its Spanish league title in 2003. Real hasn't won the European Champions League, which it has won nine times, since 2002.

Perez's successor, Fernando Martin Alvarez, and new manager Juan Ramon Lopez Caro may be departing from the Galacticos' strategy.

The Frenchman Zidane, who famously head-butted an Italian counterpart in the World Cup final, has retired. Figo was recently transferred. But Real has added more offensive firepower in Nistelrooy, Beckham's former teammate at Manchester United, as well as Cannavaro, formerly of Juventus. Payne said that the addition of the defender Cannavaro signals a commitment to more balance between offense and defense.

"They made a classic error and forgot the first principle of why they exist," Payne said. "That is to win on the field."

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