



MLS Confidential poll: What the players really think

25d - ESPN Staff

Ibra: Chance of World Cup return 'sky high'

4h - ESPN staff



MLS Confidential: Players polled on U.S. failure, salaries, pro/rel, overrated, underrated players

Schweinsteiger and Ibrahimovic's reunion

5h - Chris Wight

D.C. United holds off Columbus in Annapolis

17h - ESPN staff

Zlatan scores in first start to boost Galaxy

21h - ESPN staff

Rapids cruise to win as Toronto rests for CCL

21h - ESPN staff

Red Bulls rebound with win over Montreal

23h - ESPN staff

LAFc beat Vancouver on 3 goals

2d - Associated Press





ESPN staff

Mar 21, 2018



Who should be blamed for the United States' World Cup qualifying failure? Do young American players get sufficient playing time in MLS? Do you favor promotion and relegation in the league?



During preseason ahead of the 2018 campaign and on the condition of anonymity, we asked these and other hot-button questions to 104 current players in our fourth annual MLS Confidential (previous results: [2015](#), [2016](#), [2017](#).)



These players represented 22 of the league's 23 clubs -- for the second consecutive year, New York City FC was the only team that declined to participate -- and, as you'll see, they didn't hold back.

WHO IS TO BLAME FOR THE U.S.' FAILURE TO QUALIFY FOR THE WORLD CUP?



PLAYERS



U.S. SOCCER



COACHES



ALL OF THE ABOVE



What the players said:

"I am a big believer in the people who are on the field. Sure, coaching plays a role, but whether a player misses a shot or scores, it's on the player, not anyone else."

"Some people may say U.S. Soccer is [at fault], but I think the guys who are on the field need to get the job done when they should win. [Trinidad and Tobago] is a team we should beat 10 out of 10 times."

"The players were not good enough and forgot what it meant to wear the U.S. shirt. The coaches didn't look like there was a system in place. The whole

structure and the way they elect coaches -- some of the things they do -- everyone played a fair part in it."

Do young American players get sufficient playing time in MLS?

Yes: 51%

No: 43%

No answer: 6%



What the players said:

"There's an emphasis right now with this league on signing young players from abroad with the TAM money, which is good from a business perspective. But if we want our young players to develop, if we want our federation to develop, if we want our national team to develop, these guys need to get games."

"I think they will [get more chances] the better the youth system gets, but not now. There's still too many spots filled by international players."

IF YOU WERE COMMISSIONER FOR A DAY, WHAT ONE THING WOULD YOU CHANGE?



INCREASE/END SALARY CAP



GREATER FREEDOM OF MOVEMENT



CHARTER FLIGHTS



Other answers:

Abolish GAM and TAM: 6%

More chances for young U.S. players: 4%

Abolish artificial turf: 3%

Promotion/relegation: 3%

Change the calendar: 2%

Other: 13%

No answer: 6%

What the players said:

"I'd implement a rule [in which] a percentage of young Americans under age of 21 has to get a certain amount of minutes during the year. ... In Mexico, they have the 9/9 rule, where you have to have at least nine Mexicans on the game-day roster."

"I would remove all restrictions on how owners spend money."

Do you favor promotion/relegation in MLS?

Yes: 63%

No: 36%

No answer: 1%



Editor's note: [In 2017](#), those in favor of promotion and relegation numbered 54 percent of those asked, compared to 49 percent [in 2016](#) and 64 percent [in 2015](#).

What the players said:

"To play on a team that's fighting against relegation, it makes games mean something. In MLS, where we haven't made the playoffs, those games are dumb at the end of the year. Because people just tune out. Fans tune out."

"Fundamental changes need to happen in the league before pro/rel is feasible. A viable second division doesn't exist yet. Relegated teams would fold."

"It's something underneath you, a spark always on your butt. It makes every point so much more meaningful."

"It unstabilizes ownership groups and creates [a similar issue] for players."

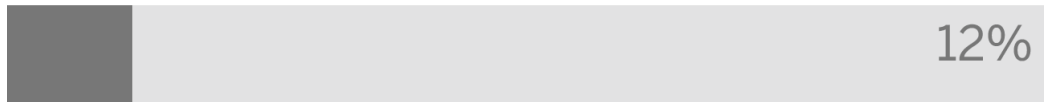
HOW HAS THE IMPACT OF VAR BEEN?



POSITIVE



NEGATIVE



TOO EARLY TO TELL



NO ANSWER



What the players said:

"It takes accountability away from referees and slows the game down."

"I like how it's not every aspect, so I don't have a problem with it."

"The one negative I have with it as a player -- and in the future, as a fan -- is not quite understanding when it's going to be used and the time it takes to be used."

Should the playoff system be revised?

Yes: 61%

No: 38%

No answer: 1%

What the players said:



"I would shorten the regular season by two weeks and keep the same number of teams that qualify for the playoffs, but schedule [postseason] games in consecutive weeks."



"It's way too long. I also think the regular season should be more rewarded, so the 12th-best team after 34 games can't win it all."



"It should be shorter because there are huge breaks, which kills the momentum, and you kind of forget the playoffs are going on unless you're an avid follower of the league."

WHO IS THE MOST OVERRATED PLAYER IN MLS?

GIOVANI DOS SANTOS

11%



Other answers:

Michael Bradley: 10%

Jozy Altidore: 7%

Gyasi Zardes: 7%

Paul Arriola: 6%

Benny Feilhaber: 4%

Tim Howard: 4%

Brek Shea: 4%

Other: 26%

No answer: 21%



What the players said:

"[Dos Santos] is a good player but I think the American media overhype him, based on his past experience with Barcelona and Tottenham Hotspur instead of his MLS performances. I think he's a player who sells a lot of tickets for the Galaxy because of the large Mexican community in LA but I don't think he has the same impact on the league as players like David Villa and Sebastian Giovinco."

"I would pick [Dos Santos] because he's the leader on the team that finished last in MLS in 2017."

"It was easier with Mix [Diskerud] and [Frank] Lampard and even [Andrea] Pirlo. Before it was easy. Me answering like that is probably a good sign for the league."

"If you look at it, Dax McCarty isn't far off [Bradley], and sometimes he's played better, and he makes a lot less."

"I don't think [Altidore] lived up to everything that people built him up to be. He was in the right place at the right time, and his career exploded, and he rode that wave."

(On Nemanja Nikolic, who polled 3%) "He's Golden Boot, so I know it's kind of an odd answer, but I think he could have a regression to the mean this year."

WHO IS THE MOST UNDERRATED PLAYER IN MLS?



Other answers:

- Dax McCarty: 6%
- Cristian Roldan: 5%
- Wil Trapp: 5%
- Ilie Sanchez: 4%
- Joe Bendik: 3%
- Darlington Nagbe: 3%
- Albert Rusnak: 3%
- Other: 54%
- No answer: 10%

What the players said:

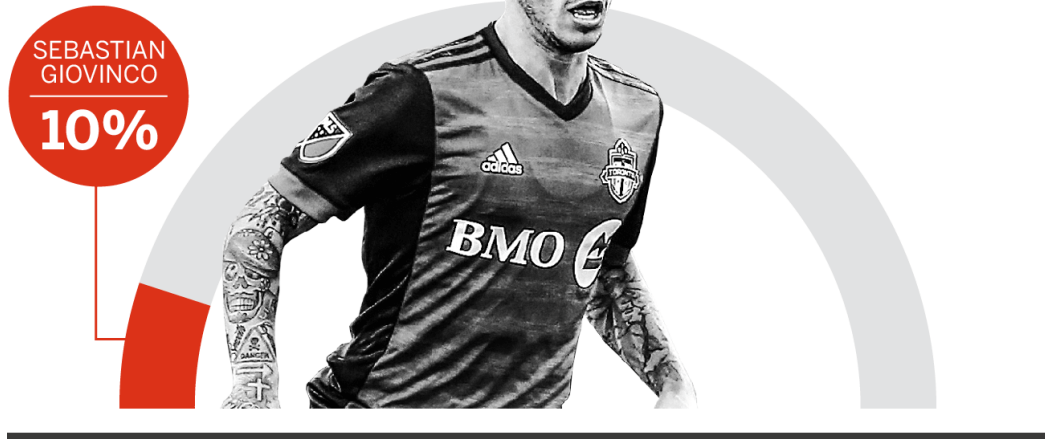
"[Chad] Marshall. He's never in the wrong place."

"I think [Piatti is] a top-five player in the league."

"The things [Trapp] does on the field don't get noticed. He's the gel that keeps things going."



WHO HAS BEEN YOUR TOUGHEST INDIVIDUAL OPPONENT IN MLS?



Other answers:

- David Villa: 10%
- Ignacio Piatti: 5%
- Kendall Waston: 4%
- Harrison Afful: 3%
- Diego Valeri: 3%
- Other: 54%
- No answer: 11%

What the players said:

"With Villa, his craftiness on the ball [means] you never know what he's going to do."

"It's always a mental game with [Parkhurst], even more than the physical duels. He does that better than anyone in the league."

"Ismail Elfath." (*Editor note: Elfath is a referee!*)

Do you understand MLS roster rules, as well as GAM (General Allocation Money), TAM (Targeted Allocation Money) and other acronyms?



Yes: 50%

No: 44%

Sort of: 6%

What the players said:

"I've heard people talking about it, and I've just been nodding my head, but I don't have a clue."

"I consider myself very literate with the roster rules and restrictions but still learn something new every week."

"MLS just made these rules to profit European or South American players coming, f---ing over the college players and the players who have been in the league for a while."

WHICH CURRENT COACH WOULD YOU MOST LIKE TO PLAY FOR?



PATRICK
VIEIRA
23%



Other answers:

Gregg Berhalter: 12%

Tata Martino: 12%

Bob Bradley: 10%

Jesse Marsch: 8%

Greg Vanney: 8%

Peter Vermes: 7%

Other: 18%

No answer: 2%

What the players said:

"Vanney. Toronto is a team of leaders and guys who are definitely invested in the direction of the team and drive that team forward, but it takes a certain type of manager to bring all those leaders together."

"Vieira because of all the experience he's had winning things."

WHICH CURRENT COACH WOULD YOU LEAST LIKE TO PLAY FOR?



Other answers:

Ben Olsen: 9%

Oscar Pareja: 9%

Peter Vermes: 8%

Sigi Schmid: 7%

Adrian Heath: 6%

Jesse Marsch: 6%

Veljko Paunovic: 6%

Other: 22%

No answer: 16%

What the players said:

"I don't think myself and a handful of players saw eye-to-eye with [Cabrera] and, in return, basically never saw the field. I think maybe he was a grudge holder."

"[Olsen is] a pretty good motivational, but I need someone to give me the tactics and X's and O's."

"Whoever is coaching New England -- doesn't matter which coach it is."



Are you happy with MLS' salary structure?

Yes: 16%

No: 82%

No answer: 2%

What the players said:

"It is getting better, but there are still huge gaps between players that might be coming from different countries that are getting paid more than players who have maybe contributed more to this league and are kind of getting screwed over in that sense."

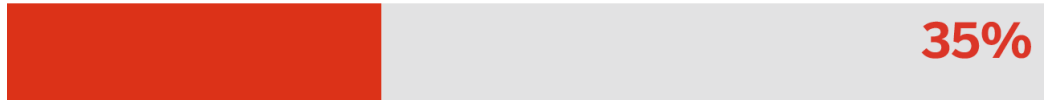
"I think the way they do it is good, actually. It's more fair. I came from [overseas] where you have [a few teams] with much more money than everyone else, so they win the league every season."

"There needs to be a higher cap and more compensation for players. It is ridiculous that a player makes \$70K. A pro athlete should be better compensated."

THE CONCACAF CHAMPIONS LEAGUE IS A ...



PRIORITY



BURDEN



SOMEWHERE IN-BETWEEN



NO ANSWER



What the players said:

"It depends on the team. Some take it very seriously, some not at all. There needs to be more of a financial incentive for players and teams."

"It should be a priority, but with the way things are scheduled, you've played for two weeks against a team that's been playing for months."

"I think if we won that, it [would] be more important than winning MLS Cup. You would just go down in history. Winning MLS Cup is huge, but nobody's won CONCACAF yet, so it would be a historic team."

"It's hard to get a new guy or 10 new guys coming into a new team in January pumped up about something that they didn't have any effort in making us get there."

If a stadium had an artificial surface, would it impact your decision to join that team?



Yes: 63%



No: 36%



No answer: 1%



What the players said:

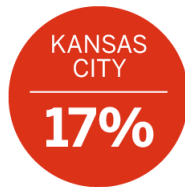


"No. As long as they train mostly on grass."



"Hard yes. I don't like turf, plain and simple. The times I played on it, it takes a day or two extra to recover."

WHERE IS THE HARDEST PLACE TO PLAY IN MLS?



Other answers:

- Atlanta: 14%
- Portland: 13%
- Houston: 12%
- Seattle: 12%
- Toronto: 6%
- New England: 5%
- New York City FC: 5%
- Other: 12%
- No answer: 4%

What the players said:

"[Kansas City because of] their fans. And the way they play: It's nonstop from the first minute 'til the end."

"Portland. It's the best environment in MLS."

"Houston. The heat, the humidity, no fans, the grass isn't great."

"I always think New England is tough because the crowds are pretty small, and the field's not great, and it's just a weird vibe going into that game."



Should MLS switch to the international calendar?



Yes: 37%



No: 58%



No answer: 5%



What the players said:



"Not unless Chicago/Minnesota/Toronto/etc. were forced to build indoor stadiums."

"There's more fluidity with it, and it runs parallel to every big country. We have to always be different in everything we do, and there's no reason to be different."

WHICH BIG-NAME DESIGNATED PLAYER DO YOU WANT IN MLS?



LIONEL MESSI
24%



Other answers:

- Cristiano Ronaldo:** 21%
- Zlatan Ibrahimovic:** 18%
- Neymar:** 11%
- Eden Hazard:** 3%
- Mesut Ozil:** 2%
- Other:** 16%
- No answer:** 5%

What the players said:

"Ibrahimovic would provide intensity and spark interest in terms of marketing. He would probably play more like [Didier] Drogba: dominate some games, sit others out."

"[Messi] because he's the GOAT. It would be a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity."

"He would bring some branding to the league, would make more people watch the league."

Do you care who the USSF president is?

Yes: 46%

No: 53%

No answer: 1%



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What the players said:

"It makes a huge impact on how we can grow as a nation and how to not make the same mistakes we have in the past."

"Over time, the whole struggle with World Cup qualifying and players they've picked, the coach we had with Jurgen [Klinsmann], it almost made me more distant from U.S. Soccer. I lost a little faith in the USSF."

"I didn't follow [the USSF presidential election] hardly at all. Part of me thought it was going to be rigged. Part of me thought: What are they going to do to change things?"

Reporting by Jeff Carlisle and Chris Wondoloski.



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LA Galaxy's Zlatan Ibrahimovic: Chance of Sweden return at World Cup 'sky high'



Zlatan Ibrahimovic marked his first MLS start with the winning goal in LA Galaxy's win over Bastian Schweinsteiger and the Chicago Fire. (2:00)



ESPN staff

10:49 AM ET



LA Galaxy striker Zlatan Ibrahimovic has given his strongest hint yet that he could be a part of Sweden's squad in this summer's World Cup in Russia.

Ibrahimovic has posted on his official Twitter account: "The chance of me playing in the World Cup is *skyhöga* ["sky high" in Swedish]."



Zlatan Ibrahimović

@lbra_official

The chance of me playing in the World Cup is skyhöga
[#FifaWorldCup2018](#)

10:38 AM - Apr 15, 2018

17.8K 5,435 people are talking about this

The 36-year-old retired from international football after Sweden's last match at Euro 2016, a 1-0 defeat to Belgium.

Ibrahimovic marked his first start for LA Galaxy with the winning goal in a narrow 1-0 victory over the Chicago Fire at Toyota Park on Saturday, after scoring on his debut against city rivals LAFC.

MLS will observe a nine-day break during the World Cup, from the opening match on June 14 running through June 22. Sweden have group-stage matches against Germany on June 23 and Mexico on June 27, with the Galaxy resuming play at the San Jose Earthquakes on June 30.



iamzlatanibrahimovic

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Last month, Ibrahimovic told Swedish media that "[the door isn't closed for anything](#)" and claimed that the Swedish FA was "[calling me every day](#)" to see if he would come out of retirement.

It has been reported that Ibrahimovic's commercial partnership with gambling platform Bethard is threatening to ruin his plans -- as a result of FIFA regulations on betting -- but he insisted last week that nothing would prevent him from being in Russia should he decide to go.



The former Manchester United and Barcelona forward [told Eurosport](#): "FIFA can't stop me. If I want to be there, I'll be there."



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