



MLS CUP FINALS

1996 - 2006

| Presented By
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US11 present

I'M MIO RISTIC MIO RISTIC – FOUNDER OF US11

I am Mio Ristic, the founder and editor of US11, a platform dedicated to exploring and writing about Major League Soccer (MLS). My passion for football, particularly American soccer, has driven me to focus on the most progressive football league in the world – Major League Soccer.

This is my first book, a product of years spent following MLS finals, both live and through recordings. Through this experience, I've gained insights and developed a personal perspective on how to present the essence of MLS not only to its existing fans but also to those who have yet to discover its magic.

WHY MLS?

The MLS is currently the fastest-growing football league in the world. Once overshadowed by more popular American sports, soccer in the United States is now experiencing a true renaissance. The league not only attracts global superstars but also serves as a vital platform for nurturing domestic talent and creating a unique sports culture.

In this trilogy, I focus on MLS finals – moments where emotions, tactics, and passion collide in their most beautiful form. Through detailed analysis and storytelling, I aim to bring you closer to the magic of these matches, showcasing how this league combines the traditional values of football with the modern American approach to sports and entertainment.

WHAT TO EXPECT?

This book offers a unique perspective on MLS, aiming to bring this league closer to a wider audience – both football enthusiasts and those just beginning to explore its world. Through match analyses, key highlights, and stories about players, teams, and fans, I want to demonstrate why MLS is becoming a global phenomenon.

Join me on this journey through MLS finals, where we'll uncover all the beauty and charm of this extraordinary football competition together.

Preface

I began this book with the idea of sharing my passionate love for Major League Soccer (MLS), a league that was initially viewed with skepticism but has grown over the years to become an integral part of the American sports landscape.

In this book, I want to take you on a journey through the evolution of MLS finals. This is not just a story about soccer – it's a story about transformation, challenges, and triumphs that have shaped the league. My goal is to present not only the matches themselves but also the deeper narratives behind them: the ambitions, the development of young talent, the strategic decisions by coaches, the birth of rivalries, and, of course, the making of history.

The first part of this trilogy focuses on the years 1996 to 2006 – a time when MLS was still in its formative years. These were years filled with challenges, but also with boundless enthusiasm and hope. Through those early finals, marked by both their most beautiful and most difficult moments, the league laid the foundation for what it would become.

The Beginning of the Journey

When MLS was founded in 1996, many doubted its survival. Soccer in America was on the fringes, often ignored by mainstream sports media, and the idea that a league could succeed raised a pressing question: Could soccer survive in a country dominated by American football, baseball, and basketball? Yet, from its inception, MLS was destined for a transformative journey, with each final representing a deliberate step forward as the league grew and evolved, no matter how great the challenges.

In 1996, during the first final held at the Rose Bowl Stadium, D.C. United became the first MLS champion. It was a final that demonstrated the league could not only exist but could also create teams capable of dominating. With their triumph, D.C. United proved that even in uncertain times, there was potential to build soccer legends on American soil.

During those early years, the league faced numerous issues – from financial struggles to smaller stadium capacities – but every match, every final, was a step toward strengthening the identity of MLS. While clubs like the Kansas City Wiz (later Wizards and Sporting) and the San Jose Clash (later Earthquakes) had their moments of glory, the league was still in its infancy, and the finals became a true battle for recognition and stability. As the years passed, MLS began to change. In 1999, the league underwent its first major shift with the introduction of the Designated Player Rule, allowing teams to bring in international stars and raise the quality of play.

his was a pivotal moment, as the league started attracting broader talent, even though the finals of those years still heavily relied on fierce competition among teams primarily built from domestic players.

During this period, clubs began to gain real strength. The Los Angeles Galaxy, led by seasoned players like Carlos Ruiz and Landon Donovan, emerged as a major force in the league. In the 2002 season, the Galaxy clinched the MLS Cup by defeating the New England Revolution. This moment was significant because it showcased how a team that built a stable roster, combining young players and experienced leaders, could compete and dominate.

Through 2003 and 2004, MLS reached a point where it became clear the league was no longer merely surviving; it now had to compete with global leagues for attention. The Chicago Fire, with standout performances in 2003 led by goal-scorers Ante Razov and Chris Armas, raised the level of competition within the league.

In the final year of this period (2006), MLS experienced another turning point. The Houston Dynamo, previously relocated from San Jose, became a serious contender. They defeated the New England Revolution in the final, laying the foundation for a new era of dominance in the league.

After a decade, the changes were evident. MLS had progressed, and the finals from these years showed that the league was no longer in an experimental phase. Over these ten years, each final allowed the league to grow its profile, and every new champion added value and significance to the sport in America. This first part of the book explores those formative years – from 1996 to 2006 – when MLS finals played a critical role in defining the league's path. It was a time when teams, players, and fans were learning what it meant to be part of something that was still growing but already competing at a serious level. While the league was far from perfect, it steadily advanced and became more stable, with each final bringing new questions, challenges, and hopes. During this period, MLS discovered its inner rhythm – the struggle between past and future legends, between immediate triumphs and the climb toward greater heights. Step into these early years of MLS through the finals that shaped its story.

MLS Cup 1996: First final ever

D.C. UNITED VS LOS ANGELES GALAXY

On the evening of November 16, 1996, at the Rose Bowl Stadium in Pasadena, California, the world witnessed what many believed to be nearly impossible. Soccer, a sport that had dominated Europe and Latin America for centuries, had finally found its place on American soil. But this was no ordinary match. It was a moment of birth—a moment when Major League Soccer (MLS) proved it could be more than an experiment, a moment when the sport began its journey toward becoming a legend on the American continent. At the heart of this story was the championship match, the MLS Cup 1996, which brought together two teams: D.C. United, led by the legendary coach Bruce Arena, and the LA Galaxy, a team carrying the sunny Californian spirit, guided by coach Lothar Osiander. It was more than just a final—it was a clash of past and future dreams.

FIRST HALF – A FIGHT FOR SURVIVAL:

The Rose Bowl was packed. The sound of fans, songs, and whistles resonated through the stadium, united in a single moment. The sun was slowly setting, and the crowd knew this was the day history would be made. D.C. United was a team built on a solid defense, with players like Eddie Pope and Marco Etcheverry—the team's "brain," whose brilliant passes could break down any defense. On the other hand, the LA Galaxy had their own stars: the young and dynamic Cobi Jones, explosive forward Luis Hernández, and experienced goalkeeper Zach Whitbread. Although the Galaxy were not ready to give up. Coach Osiander knew his team needed to recover quickly.

SECOND HALF – REVENGE FROM THE DEPTHS:

In the second half, the LA Galaxy came out with renewed determination. Cobi Jones led the attack with incredible energy, and Luis Hernández, a forward with nerves of steel, inched closer to scoring. In the 63rd minute, their efforts paid off—Luis Hernández equalized with a stunning shot from outside the box, sending the ball into the top-right corner of D.C. United's goal.

The stadium exploded. 1-1.

But D.C. United was not a team to retreat easily. Etcheverry orchestrated another attack in the 70th minute, which ended with a powerful long-range shot by John Harkes. However, Galaxy goalkeeper Whitbread made a brilliant save.

The drama reached its peak.

Coach Bruce Arena knew he needed to adjust the strategy. In the 85th minute, Raul Díaz Arce, having one of his best days, delivered a cross that was out of reach for the Galaxy defense. Harkes was there again, this time providing a remarkable assist, allowing Jaime Moreno to score his second goal of the final.

D.C. United took the lead once more, 2-1. The signs of victory began to emerge. The Galaxy players no longer had the strength to stage a comeback.

As the final seconds ticked away, D.C. United closed off all paths to their goal, holding onto their lead with unyielding determination. The final score of 3-2 for D.C. United marked a moment that became a symbol—MLS was born.

The players celebrated, Coach Bruce Arena stood on the sideline with a smile, listening to the first notes of a budding legend. In the closing moments, Marco Etcheverry turned to face the stands, gazing into the uncertain yet brilliant future of MLS. It was clear: this was just the beginning.

EPILOGUE:

The 1996 MLS Cup Final was more than just a sporting event. It was the moment when MLS established itself on American soil. For D.C. United, it was a triumph that helped them become one of the most successful teams in league history. And for Marco Etcheverry, it was validation of his pivotal role in American soccer.

What began as an experiment had become a successful model, and the 1996 MLS Cup remains forever etched in history as the symbol of the league's promising start.

At that final, soccer in America caught a glimpse of its future.

MLS Cup 1997: Supremacy in the Early Era

D.C. UNITED VS COLORADO RAPIDS

A sunny October day in Washington, D.C., the capital of the United States, set the perfect stage for the second-ever Major League Soccer final. At RFK Stadium, on October 26, 1997, the crowd eagerly awaited the moment when the fate of the MLS Cup would once again be decided. D.C. United, led by the brilliant Bruce Arena, was ready to defend their title. Their opponents, the Colorado Rapids, coached by Marcelo Balboa, were determined to end the dominance of the capital's team. This final was more than just a football match; it was a battle for prestige and a statement that MLS was evolving into a serious league, showcasing diverse styles and talent from around the world. This match promised not only spectacle but another step toward legitimizing soccer in America.

FIRST HALF – A FIGHT FOR SURVIVAL:

The voices of over 57,000 fans echoed from the stands of RFK Stadium. D.C. United took to the field with a clear goal: to confirm their dominance. The Colorado Rapids, on the other hand, had a plan to withstand the pressure and surprise the crowd with their resilience. The first 15 minutes of play were dominated by D.C. United. Their star, Marco Etcheverry—known as "El Diablo"—orchestrated the game with his characteristic vision and precise passing. In the 37th minute, after a brilliant play down the left flank, Tony Sanneh delivered a cross that found Jaime Moreno. With a calm header, Moreno put his team ahead, 1-0.

Colorado tried to respond. Forwards Chris Henderson and Paul Bravo gave their all to break through the home team's solid defense. Yet every attempt was thwarted by the ever-reliable Eddie Pope, who was unstoppable in D.C. United's backline.

SECOND HALF – PRESSURE AND RESISTANCE:

In the second half, the Colorado Rapids came out more aggressively. Their coach, Balboa, made a crucial substitution, bringing in a fresh player who injected energy into their attack. In the 53rd minute, Henderson created a perfect opportunity, but his shot went just over the crossbar.

D.C. United found themselves under pressure, but their organization and discipline remained unshaken. In the 68th minute, Marco Etcheverry stepped up once again. His pass found Raul Díaz Arce, who fired a precise shot from the edge of the box, extending the lead to 2-0.

The crowd erupted in celebration, but Colorado was not ready to give up. In the 75th minute, Paul Bravo capitalized on a defensive error and reduced the deficit to 2-1. That moment reignited the energy of the visiting team, who pushed hard for an equalizer in the final minutes.

In the closing minutes of the match, D.C. United controlled the rhythm. The crowd was on its feet, counting down the seconds to the final whistle. When the referee blew the whistle, the celebrations began. D.C. United was once again on top, claiming their second consecutive MLS Cup.

Bruce Arena, a coach already cementing his legacy in American soccer, lifted the trophy alongside his team. Marco Etcheverry, with two assists, was named Man of the Match, while Jaime Moreno reinforced his reputation as one of the league's best forwards.

EPILOGUE:

The 1997 MLS Cup Final was more than just a sporting event. It was proof that MLS was growing and establishing its own identity as a serious league. D.C. United set a standard for future generations, while the Colorado Rapids demonstrated their ability to rise to major challenges.

This match not only marked a milestone in the league's history but also inspired new generations of soccer enthusiasts across the United States. As the players left the RFK Stadium field, one sentiment was clear: this was just the beginning of a great story for MLS.

MLS Cup 1998: Redemption and Glory

CHICAGO FIRE VS D.C. UNITED

November 15, 1998, in Foxboro, Massachusetts, saw the stage set for the third-ever MLS Cup, with the atmosphere electric and full of anticipation. The match would take place at the renowned Foxboro Stadium, where a passionate crowd gathered to witness a clash that would define a season of resilience, struggle, and redemption. The defending champions, D.C. United, returned to defend their crown under the guidance of Bruce Arena, but this time, the challenge would come from the Chicago Fire, a new but formidable force in the league.

This final wasn't just about a title; it was about proving the continued growth of Major League Soccer, its expansion beyond the dominance of the early years, and the emergence of new teams ready to claim their place in the history of American soccer.

FIRST HALF – RISING TENSIONS:

Foxboro Stadium was alive with the roar of over 50,000 fans, buzzing with the excitement of the occasion. D.C. United was poised to defend their dominance, and the Chicago Fire, led by their inspiring coach Bob Bradley, were ready to challenge their reign. The first half unfolded with both teams determined to set the tone. Chicago's defense, led by players like Peter Nowak and Lubos Kubik, was rock solid, preventing D.C. United's attacking threats from finding a rhythm. In the 39th minute, after a period of sustained pressure, Chicago's striker, Hristo Stoichkov, delivered a

beautiful cross to the head of the veteran forward, Roy Lassiter, who connected perfectly to give the Fire a 1-0 lead. D.C. United had their chances, but Chicago's disciplined defensive approach and goalkeeper Zach Whitbread's sharp reflexes kept the champions at bay. United's Marco Etcheverry, a maestro in midfield, struggled to break through the well-organized defense.

SECOND HALF – CHICAGO'S SURGE, UNITED'S RESPONSE:

The second half saw D.C. United regroup, determined to fight for the equalizer. However, Chicago's intensity didn't subside. The Fire's attack continued to build, and in the 58th minute, they were rewarded with another opportunity. The quick-thinking of Ante Razov and the skillful dribbling of Stoichkov proved to be a dangerous combination, but United's defense, led by Eddie Pope and Jeff Agoos, held firm, preventing the Fire from doubling their lead. In the 67th minute, D.C. United finally broke through. Marco Etcheverry, who had been quiet for much of the game, orchestrated a brilliant play, threading a pass to Jaime Moreno. Moreno, with his calm composure, slotted the ball past Whitbread to level the score at 1-1. The fans erupted as United gained renewed hope.

But Chicago wasn't done. With the game on a knife's edge, the Fire pushed forward in search of a winner. D.C. United had to dig deep, but their effort would be put to the ultimate test.

As the final minutes of regulation ticked away, both teams continued to trade blows, neither willing to give an inch. However, it was Chicago who had the last word. In the 89th minute, following a set-piece from deep, the ball found its way to the head of defender Lubos Kubik, who powerfully directed the ball past D.C. United's goalkeeper, Scott Garlick. The Fire took a 2-1 lead, and the stadium was sent into a frenzy. With time running out, D.C. United pushed for an equalizer, but Chicago's defense stood resolute. When the final whistle blew, Chicago Fire had secured a 2-1 victory and their first MLS Cup in their inaugural season. The achievement was a testament to the club's resilience and the remarkable foundation laid in such a short time.

EPILOGUE:

The 1998 MLS Cup Final was a defining moment in the history of Major League Soccer. For Chicago Fire, it was a story of redemption and glory, as they marked their arrival as a championship contender. D.C. United's reign had been broken, but their impact on the league continued to be felt.

This match highlighted the growth of MLS, with a new team coming to the forefront and demonstrating that the league had truly become competitive. The 1998 final also showed that while legends of the past could continue to shine, new heroes would emerge on the field, with Chicago's victory marking the beginning of a new chapter in MLS history.

As the players left the field, the sentiment was clear: The league was evolving, and a new era had begun. This was a pivotal moment for MLS, showing that the future of American soccer was bright.

MLS Cup 1999: The Return of D.C. United

D.C. UNITED VS LOS ANGELES GALAXY

In the first half, the match was filled with tactical duels and intense moments. D.C. United, under coach Bruce Arena, continued their tradition of disciplined and solid play. Marco Etcheverry, not only as the leader but also as the creative force of the team, drove his teammates forward. On the other hand, Galaxy was ready for the challenge, with Cobi Jones showing his dribbling and playmaking abilities, leading their attack fearlessly. Though D.C. United controlled most of the possession, Galaxy fought back with relentless pressure. In the 43rd minute, during the final moments of the first half, D.C. United managed to score the crucial goal, thanks to an excellent pass from midfield and a precise shot by a player who laid the foundation for another championship.

FIRST HALF – THE BATTLE OF THE TITANS:

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SECOND HALF – RISING PRESSURE AND RESISTANCE:

In the second half, Los Angeles Galaxy came out more aggressive, creating several chances, but D.C. United maintained control. Marco Etcheverry continued to dominate in midfield, while D.C. United's defense, led by Eddie Pope, held firm against the Galaxy's attempts.

In the 75th minute, with support from Cobi Jones and other attacking efforts from Galaxy players, the match grew even more exciting. However, D.C. United's disciplined play and tactical approach allowed them to maintain their advantage and secure the victory.

Final Moments – Synergy and Triumph: When the referee blew the final whistle, D.C. United celebrated once again. This victory was not only a championship win but also signified the continued dominance of the team in MLS, while simultaneously highlighting the rising competition in the league. Galaxy had proven themselves to be formidable challengers, setting the stage for future rivalries between the two teams.

EPILOGUE:

The 1999 MLS Cup final was a match that not only changed the course of MLS but also solidified D.C. United as one of the most dominant franchises in the league's history. For Los Angeles Galaxy, although they fell short of the trophy, it was a defining moment in showing that the league was evolving and would become even more competitive than ever before. This encounter marked the beginning of an enduring rivalry between two powerful teams and set the stage for MLS to continue its rise as a serious soccer league in the United States.

MLS Cup 2000: Wizards' Glory

KANZAS CITY WIZARDS VS CHICAGO FIRE

On November 5, 2000, the Foxboro Stadium in Massachusetts played host to one of the most tense and hard-fought MLS Cup finals in league history. The match saw Kansas City Wizards take on Chicago Fire in a contest that promised to be a display of grit and determination. Both teams had a compelling story leading to this moment: Kansas City, under head coach Bob Gansler, sought to make history by claiming their first-ever MLS Cup, while the Fire, led by coach Bob Bradley, aimed to secure their second championship in just four seasons after their triumph in 1998.

Kansas City Wizards, with players like Preki, who had been a central figure throughout the season, and Tony Meola in goal, were poised to fight for the title. Chicago Fire, featuring stars such as Peter Nowak, Zach Whitbread, and Ante Razov, were determined to repeat their success. This match was anticipated to be a tactical battle, with both teams showing their defensive strengths throughout the season.

FIRST HALF – TACTICAL BATTLE AND DEFENSES SHINE:

The match began with both teams playing cautiously, each focusing on controlling the midfield. Kansas City's Preki and Chicago's Nowak battled for dominance in the center of the pitch, while both defenses stayed resolute. The Fire had the better of the early chances, but Kansas City goalkeeper Tony Meola made a series of key saves to keep his team in the game. Despite several attempts from both teams, neither side could break the deadlock in the first half. The match was becoming a tactical chess game, with both

shutting down any promising attacks. As the first half ended, the score remained 0-0, leaving both teams to reassess their strategies for the second half.

SECOND HALF – A MOMENT OF MAGIC FROM KANSAS CITY:

The second half started much like the first, with both teams struggling to create clear-cut chances. However, in the 82nd minute, a moment of brilliance from Kansas City's Preki turned the game on its head. The veteran midfielder made a perfect pass to Josh Wolff, who was in space near the penalty area. Wolff took a calm touch before firing a low shot into the bottom corner of the net, past Fire goalkeeper Zach Whitbread, to give Kansas City a 1-0 lead.

The Fire responded by increasing their pressure, but Kansas City's defense, led by the rock-solid duo of Frank Klopas and Uche Okafor, stood firm. Chicago came close to equalizing late, but Meola was in superb form, making a series of key saves, including a particularly critical stop on an Ante Razov header.

Kansas City Holds On to Win First MLS Cup: As the final whistle blew, Kansas City Wizards emerged as MLS Cup 2000 champions, defeating Chicago Fire 1-0. The victory marked the Wizards' first-ever championship, and they celebrated a well-deserved win after a season filled with hard work, discipline, and determination.

EPILOGUE:

Kansas City's 1-0 victory in the MLS Cup 2000 final was a historic moment for the club, giving them their first-ever championship title in Major League Soccer. The team's resilience and organization throughout the match, along with key performances from Preki, Wolff, and Meola, were critical in their success. The Fire, while disappointed with the loss, had put up a valiant fight but were ultimately undone by a well-taken goal from Wolff.

For MLS, this final showcased the league's growing competitiveness, with two teams playing a high-stakes, intense final that left fans on the edge of their seats. The Wizards' victory was a sign that the league was maturing, with teams no longer content to simply compete but to push for glory on the biggest stage.

MLS Cup 2001: Triumph Over Galaxy

SAN JOSE EARTHQUAKES VS LOS ANGELES GALAXY

On November 11, 2001, the Home Depot Center in Carson, California, was the stage for one of the most thrilling MLS Cup finals in history. The match featured San Jose Earthquakes, aiming for their second MLS Cup title, and Los Angeles Galaxy, looking to claim their second championship as well. San Jose, under coach Frank Yallop, had impressed throughout the season and sought redemption after their near miss in the past seasons. Los Angeles, with their talented roster and strong performances, were determined to prove themselves once again on the biggest stage. Both teams were familiar with each other's strengths and weaknesses, making this final a highly anticipated showdown. The atmosphere at the Home Depot Center was electric, with fans from both teams filling the stadium to cheer for their clubs. This was more than just a championship match; it was a battle of wills, with both teams looking to cement their legacies in MLS history.

FIRST HALF – GALAXY'S DOMINANCE:

The match began with Los Angeles Galaxy quickly establishing control, dominating possession and creating several chances. In the 15th minute, Galaxy's Carlos Ruiz almost opened the scoring with a header, but Earthquakes goalkeeper Joe Cannon made a fantastic save. San Jose, though on the back foot early, began to find their rhythm. In the 30th minute, the Earthquakes capitalized on a breakaway. A long pass from midfielder Ronnie Ekelund found Dwayne DeRosario, who calmly slotted the ball past Galaxy keeper

Kevin Hartman to give San Jose a 1-0 lead. The Galaxy struggled to recover, as the Earthquakes' defense, led by central defender Jeff Agoos, held firm.

Los Angeles came close to an equalizer several times before the halftime whistle, but their efforts were thwarted by both Cannon's heroics and poor finishing. As the first half ended, San Jose led 1-0, much to the delight of their supporters.

SECOND HALF – GALAXY'S FIGHT BACK AND THE DRAMA

Second Half – Galaxy's Fight Back and the Late Drama: The second half began with the Galaxy pushing harder for an equalizer. Los Angeles continued to control possession and created more chances, including a brilliant cross from Cobi Jones that found Ruiz, but his header sailed over the crossbar. San Jose's defense held strong, with players like Agoos and Eddie Robinson providing a commanding presence at the back.

In the 60th minute, Los Angeles finally found their breakthrough. A well-timed through ball from Cobi Jones set up Ruiz, who coolly slotted the ball into the net to bring the score level at 1-1. The goal energized the Galaxy, and for a moment, it seemed as if they had seized control of the match.

However, San Jose refused to back down. In the 81st minute, they launched a counter-attack that saw Landon Donovan deliver a perfectly weighted pass to Dwayne DeRosario. DeRosario calmly finished again, putting San Jose back on top, 2-1. This goal stunned the Galaxy, and despite their best efforts to push for an equalizer in the final minutes, the Earthquakes held firm. In the final minutes of the match, Los Angeles threw everything they had at San Jose, but Cannon made key saves, and the Earthquakes' defense continued to block Galaxy's attempts. As the referee blew the final whistle, San Jose Earthquakes emerged victorious, winning their second MLS Cup in club history.

EPILOGUE:

San Jose Earthquakes' 2-1 victory over Los Angeles Galaxy in the 2001 MLS Cup was a historic moment for the club, as they confirmed their status as one of the league's most formidable teams. The Earthquakes' resilience, teamwork, and excellent individual performances, particularly from Dwayne DeRosario and Joe Cannon, were key to their success.

For Los Angeles Galaxy, despite the loss, this final was another chapter in their storied history. The Galaxy's strong performance throughout the match showed their continued competitiveness and hunger for glory, but it was not enough to overcome the Earthquakes on that day.

The 2001 MLS Cup further solidified Major League Soccer's growing reputation as a legitimate and competitive league in North America, with exciting soccer and passionate fans creating memorable moments.

MLS Cup 2002: The Galaxy Shined

LOS ANGELES GALAXY VS NEW ENGLAND REVOLUTION

Sunday, October 20, 2002, marked a defining moment in Major League Soccer's history as the Los Angeles Galaxy faced off against the New England Revolution at Gillette Stadium in Foxborough, Massachusetts. It was the culmination of the league's seventh season, a clash between two teams hungry for glory. The Galaxy, a powerhouse team since the league's inception, had suffered heartbreak in previous finals, falling short in 1996, 1999, and 2001. Now, under the guidance of head coach Sigi Schmid, they were determined to finally capture the elusive MLS Cup.

The New England Revolution, meanwhile, were on home turf and riding the momentum of a thrilling postseason run. Coached by Steve Nicol and fueled by the passionate support of their fans, the Revolution aimed to secure their first championship and cement their place among the league's elite. The stage was set for an unforgettable final, filled with tension, passion, and the promise of redemption for one side.

FIRST HALF: A TACTICAL CHESS MATCH:

The match began with a cautious approach from both teams, each aware of the stakes. The Galaxy, led by the dynamic attacking duo of Carlos Ruiz and Cobi Jones, looked to control possession and exploit gaps in New England's defense. The Revolution, anchored by midfielder Steve Ralston and forward Taylor Twellman, relied on quick counterattacks to threaten the Galaxy's backline.

As the half wore on, Los Angeles began to impose their rhythm, with Ruiz coming close to breaking the deadlock in the 25th minute.

His powerful header from a pinpoint cross by Jones forced an acrobatic save from Revs goalkeeper Adin Brown, who was in sensational form. On the other side, New England's best chance came in the 40th minute when Twellman's curling shot narrowly missed the top corner. Despite the back-and-forth action, the first half ended scoreless, with both teams showing flashes of brilliance but failing to find the breakthrough.

SECOND HALF: GALAXY TAKE CONTROL

The Galaxy emerged from the halftime break with renewed intensity, pushing forward with determination. Their midfield trio, led by Simon Elliott and Mauricio Cienfuegos, began to dominate the center of the park, creating more opportunities for Ruiz to work his magic.

In the 63rd minute, Los Angeles thought they had taken the lead when Jones found the back of the net, only for the goal to be disallowed due to a narrow offside call. The near-miss only fueled the Galaxy's resolve, while the Revolution dug deep defensively, with Brown continuing to frustrate the Los Angeles attack.

New England created a golden opportunity of their own in the 75th minute when Twellman's close-range effort was blocked by Galaxy goalkeeper Kevin Hartman. The tension in the stadium was palpable, as both teams edged closer to finding the decisive moment.

EXTRA TIME: RUIZ WRITES HISTORY

The Galaxy emerged from the halftime break with renewed intensity, pushing forward with determination. Their midfield trio, led by Simon Elliott and Mauricio Cienfuegos, began to dominate the center of the park, creating more opportunities for Ruiz to work his magic. In the 63rd minute, Los Angeles thought they had taken the lead when Jones found the back of the net, only for the goal to be disallowed due to a narrow offside call. The near-miss only fueled the Galaxy's resolve, while the Revolution dug deep defensively, with Brown continuing to frustrate the Los Angeles attack. New England created a golden opportunity of their own in the 75th minute when Twellman's close-range effort was blocked by Galaxy goalkeeper Kevin Hartman. The tension in the stadium was palpable, as both teams edged closer to finding the decisive moment.

EPILOGUE:

For the Galaxy, the 2002 MLS Cup victory was more than just a trophy—it was the culmination of years of perseverance and heartbreak. Sigi Schmid's tactical acumen, the brilliance of Carlos Ruiz, and the resilience of the entire squad combined to deliver a historic triumph. Ruiz, with his extra-time heroics, was named the match's MVP, cementing his place as a Galaxy legend.

The Revolution, though heartbroken, earned respect for their valiant effort in front of their home crowd. Their journey to the final showcased their growth as a team and set the stage for future success.

This match not only marked the end of one of MLS's most compelling seasons but also symbolized the league's growing competitiveness and the ability of its teams to deliver moments of pure drama. For the Los Angeles Galaxy, the 2002 MLS Cup was the beginning of a new chapter—one defined by championship glory.

MLS Cup 2003: A High- Scoring Thriller

SAN JOSE EARTHQUAKES VS CHICAGO FIRE

The 2003 MLS Cup final promised fireworks, and on November 23, it delivered. At the Home Depot Center in Carson, California, two of the league's most dynamic teams clashed for the ultimate prize. The San Jose Earthquakes, led by coach Frank Yallop and a brilliant roster, aimed to claim their second MLS title. Standing in their way was the Chicago Fire, coached by Dave Sarachan and riding a wave of momentum after a stellar season.

The final wasn't just a game—it was a statement of intent for both franchises. With the Fire aiming to recapture the glory of their 1998 triumph and the Earthquakes determined to solidify their dominance, the stage was set for a battle of titans.

FIRST HALF – EARLY GOALS AND MOMENTUM SHIFTS

The match began with a frenetic pace, and it didn't take long for the action to ignite. In the 5th minute, Landon Donovan, San Jose's talisman, made his presence known. A slick one-two combination with Dwayne De Rosario opened up space, and Donovan coolly slotted the ball past Chicago's goalkeeper, Zach Thornton, to give the Earthquakes an early lead.

However, Chicago Fire wasn't ready to back down. Only 10 minutes later, Damani Ralph, one of the league's breakout stars, responded with a moment of brilliance. Picking up a pass near the top of the box, Ralph unleashed a thunderous strike that soared past Pat Onstad, leveling the match at 1-1.

The first half continued with both teams exchanging blows. In the

San Jose supporters. But just before halftime, the Earthquakes found their rhythm again. A perfectly timed cross from Richard Mulrooney found De Rosario in the box, and his header restored parity at 2-2.

The first half ended in a deadlock, leaving fans on the edge of their seats.

SECOND HALF – SAN JOSE TAKES CONTROL

Coming out of the break, San Jose Earthquakes looked like a team on a mission. The Fire struggled to match the pace and precision of the Quakes' attack. In the 71st minute, Landon Donovan struck again. After a perfectly orchestrated counterattack, Donovan received a through ball from Mulrooney and calmly rounded Thornton to give San Jose a 3-2 lead.

With Chicago chasing the game, spaces began to open up in their defense. San Jose capitalized once more in the 80th minute when Jamil Walker, brought on as a substitute, added the fourth goal. A clever backheel pass from De Rosario set up Walker, who smashed the ball into the back of the net, effectively sealing the victory.

Final Whistle – A New Chapter for the Quakes

As the final whistle blew, the San Jose Earthquakes celebrated a historic 4-2 triumph. Landon Donovan was the undisputed star of the match, contributing two goals and showcasing his ability to deliver on the biggest stage.

For Chicago Fire, the defeat was bitter. Despite their spirited efforts and strong individual performances, they were undone by a relentless San Jose side that peaked at the right moment.

EPILOGUE:

The 2003 MLS Cup solidified the Earthquakes as one of the league's premier teams. With their second title in three years, San Jose demonstrated that they were a force to be reckoned with. For Landon Donovan, it was another chapter in a storied career that would see him become one of the greatest players in American soccer history.

For fans, the final was a spectacle—a six-goal thriller that encapsulated the growth of MLS as a league capable of delivering world-class entertainment. As the Earthquakes hoisted the trophy, it was clear that their legacy in Major League Soccer had only just begun.

MLS Cup 2004: A Classic Final

D.C. UNITED VS KANSAS CITY WIZARDS

The MLS Cup final of 2004, held on November 14 at the Home Depot Center in Carson, California, brought two powerhouses together in a match for the ages. D.C. United, seeking their fourth MLS title, faced the Kansas City Wizards, who had fought their way to the final with grit and determination. With contrasting styles of play and a history of thrilling encounters, the stage was set for a dramatic showdown.

FIRST HALF – FIREWORKS FROM THE START

The match exploded into action early, with Kansas City taking a shock lead in the 6th minute. Wizards' forward Davy Arnaud struck a thunderous shot from outside the box, beating United's goalkeeper Nick Rimando to give his team the advantage.

However, D.C. United quickly found their footing. In the 19th minute, Alecko Eskandarian equalized with a sharp finish following a well-placed cross from Jaime Moreno. Just three minutes later, Eskandarian struck again, capitalizing on a defensive error to give United a 2-1 lead.

The momentum continued to swing in United's favor when Kansas City's Alex Zotinca scored an unfortunate own goal in the 26th minute, extending the lead to 3-1. Despite the setback, the Wizards refused to back down, maintaining pressure as the half progressed.

SECOND HALF – WIZARDS’ FIGHTBACK

Kansas City came out stronger in the second half, determined to claw their way back into the match. Their persistence paid off in the 58th minute when Josh Wolff converted a penalty, narrowing the deficit to 3–2 after a foul in the box.

As the game wore on, both teams created chances, but the defenses stood firm. Kansas City pushed hard for an equalizer in the closing moments, but Rimando’s crucial saves ensured United held onto their slim advantage.

EPILOGUE:

When the final whistle blew, D.C. United celebrated a hard-fought 3–2 victory, claiming their fourth MLS Cup and solidifying their status as one of the league’s greatest dynasties. Alecko Eskandarian’s performance earned him the MLS Cup MVP, while Kansas City left with their heads held high, having delivered a valiant effort in a thrilling final.

For fans, the match was an instant classic—a testament to the passion and quality of MLS. As D.C. United lifted the trophy, it was clear their legacy continued to shine brightly.

MLS Cup 2005: Triumph at Last

LOS ANGELES GALAXY VS NEW ENGLAND REVOLUTION

The MLS Cup Final of 2002, held on October 20 at Gillette Stadium in Foxborough, Massachusetts, brought together the Los Angeles Galaxy and the New England Revolution. For the Galaxy, this was a chance to finally claim the elusive championship after several near-misses. For the Revolution, playing in front of a raucous home crowd, it was an opportunity to capture their first MLS title.

The atmosphere was electric, with over 61,000 fans packed into the stadium, braving the chilly New England weather to witness history unfold.

FIRST HALF – TACTICAL STALEMATE

The opening 45 minutes were marked by a cautious approach from both teams. The Galaxy controlled possession early, with midfield maestro Mauricio Cienfuegos orchestrating attacks, but New England's defense, led by Carlos Llamosa, stood firm.

Taylor Twellman, the Revolution's talisman, had a couple of half-chances, including a header that narrowly missed the target. Meanwhile, the Galaxy's Carlos Ruiz tested Matt Reis with a sharp effort from distance, but the goalkeeper was up to the task.

Despite the efforts on both sides, the first half ended scoreless, with neither team able to carve out a decisive moment.

SECOND HALF – OPPORTUNITIES MISSED

The tempo increased in the second half, with both teams showing more urgency. Cobi Jones became a constant threat down the right flank for the Galaxy, delivering dangerous crosses into the box. In the 65th minute, Ruiz had a golden opportunity but sent his shot inches wide.

The Revolution responded with a sustained period of pressure. Steve Ralston's creativity opened up space for Twellman, whose curling shot forced a spectacular save from Kevin Hartman.

As the clock ticked down, both teams continued to push forward but couldn't find the breakthrough. Regulation time ended 0-0, setting the stage for extra time and the possibility of a golden goal.

EXTRA TIME – RUIZ BECOMES THE HERO

With the golden goal rule in effect, the tension in the stadium was palpable. In the 113th minute, the Galaxy finally found their moment of glory. A precise long ball from Tyrone Marshall found Carlos Ruiz, who made a deft touch to control it before calmly slotting it past Matt Reis.

The Galaxy bench erupted in celebration, while the Revolution's home crowd fell silent. Ruiz's goal was a fitting end to an intense contest, securing Los Angeles their long-awaited first MLS Cup title.

EPILOGUE:

The 1–0 victory marked a historic moment for the Los Angeles Galaxy, who shed the label of perennial runners-up and finally captured the ultimate prize. Carlos Ruiz’s decisive goal cemented his legacy as one of the league’s greats, while Kevin Hartman’s heroics in goal were instrumental in the triumph.

For the New England Revolution, the defeat was heartbreaking, but their journey to the final signaled the emergence of a formidable contender in MLS.

This final was more than a game—it was a testament to resilience, determination, and the growing stature of Major League Soccer on the global stage.

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MLS Cup 2006: A Gritty Battle for Glory

HOUSTON DYNAMO VS NEW ENGLAND REVOLUTION

On November 12, 2006, the MLS Cup Final descended upon Pizza Hut Park in Frisco, Texas. Houston Dynamo, in their inaugural season after relocating from San Jose, had defied expectations to reach the championship game. Facing them were the New England Revolution, making their third appearance in the final, still in pursuit of their first MLS Cup triumph.

The match promised an intense showdown between the Dynamo's resilience and the Revolution's hunger for redemption.

FIRST HALF – A TACTICAL CHESS MATCH

The opening half was a tightly contested affair, with neither side willing to cede an inch. Houston Dynamo's attack, spearheaded by Brian Ching, created early pressure, but New England's defense, marshaled by Michael Parkhurst, absorbed the onslaught.

The Revolution responded with sharp counterattacks led by Clint Dempsey, who tested Dynamo goalkeeper Pat Onstad with a long-range strike in the 28th minute. However, both teams struggled to find clear-cut chances, and the first half ended in a stalemate, setting the stage for a more dynamic second half.

SECOND HALF – LATE DRAMA UNFOLDS

The intensity ramped up in the second half as both teams searched for the breakthrough. In the 63rd minute, Taylor Twellman nearly gave New England the lead with a powerful header, but Onstad's quick reflexes kept the game level.

It wasn't until the 113th minute that the deadlock was finally broken. Twellman latched onto a precise cross from Steve Ralston, steering the ball into the net to put the Revolution ahead. New England's players and fans erupted in celebration, believing they were on the brink of their first title.

However, Houston Dynamo answered almost immediately. Less than a minute later, Brian Ching connected with a pinpoint cross from Brad Davis, heading the ball past Matt Reis to equalize. The swift response sent the match to penalties, with the title hanging in the balance.

PENALTY SHOOTOUT – CHING'S DECISIVE MOMENT

The penalty shootout was a nerve-wracking affair. Both teams displayed composure under pressure, but it was Houston Dynamo who prevailed. Brian Ching converted the decisive penalty, sealing a 4–3 shootout victory. Pat Onstad also emerged as a hero, saving Jay Heaps' crucial spot-kick to secure the championship.

EPILOGUE:

Houston Dynamo's triumph was a fairy-tale ending to their inaugural season, cementing their legacy as a team capable of defying expectations. Brian Ching's heroics and the team's never-say-die spirit earned them a well-deserved place in MLS history.

For the New England Revolution, it was another heartbreaking loss in the final, leaving them still searching for their first title. Despite the defeat, their performance underscored their status as one of the league's most competitive teams.

This MLS Cup was a gripping contest that showcased the drama and unpredictability of soccer, further solidifying the league's growing reputation.

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MLS Cup Finals Results: 1996 – 2006

1996: D.C. United 3–2 Los Angeles Galaxy (AET)

1997: D.C. United 2–1 Colorado Rapids

1998: Chicago Fire 2–0 D.C. United

1999: D.C. United 2–0 Los Angeles Galaxy

2000: Kansas City Wizards 1–0 Chicago Fire

2001: San Jose Earthquakes 2–1 Los Angeles Galaxy

2002: Los Angeles Galaxy 1–0 New England Revolution (AET)

2003: San Jose Earthquakes 4–2 Chicago Fire

2004: D.C. United 3–2 Kansas City Wizards

2005: Los Angeles Galaxy 1–0 New England Revolution (AET)

2006: Houston Dynamo 1–1 New England Revolution (4–3 on penalties)

Conclusion: A Decade of Growth and Glory in MLS

From its inception in 1996 to the dramatic conclusion of the 2006 season, Major League Soccer (MLS) has carved out a unique and impactful place in the landscape of American sports. Over a decade of intense competition, the league has showcased thrilling finals, celebrated unforgettable players, and witnessed the rise of some of the most iconic teams in North American soccer.

The early years were dominated by D.C. United, whose unparalleled success set a standard for excellence in MLS. Under the leadership of Bruce Arena and with the creative brilliance of Marco Etcheverry and Jaime Moreno, D.C. United became the first dynasty of the league, capturing multiple championships and cementing their place in history.

The late 1990s and early 2000s saw a shift in power. The emergence of teams like the Chicago Fire and San Jose Earthquakes introduced new rivalries and compelling narratives. Each final brought its own flavor, from Chicago's stunning debut victory in 1998 to San Jose's resilience and flair, epitomized by their dramatic victories in 2001 and 2003.

Kansas City Wizards and Los Angeles Galaxy also left their mark during this period. The Wizards' disciplined approach in 2000 earned them their maiden title, while the Galaxy's persistence paid off with championships in 2002 and 2005. Each of these teams

like the Chicago Fire and San Jose Earthquakes introduced new rivalries and compelling narratives. Each final brought its own flavor, from Chicago's stunning debut victory in 1998 to San Jose's resilience and flair, epitomized by their dramatic victories in 2001 and 2003.

Kansas City Wizards and Los Angeles Galaxy also left their mark during this period. The Wizards' disciplined approach in 2000 earned them their maiden title, while the Galaxy's persistence paid off with championships in 2002 and 2005. Each of these teams added unique chapters to the evolving story of MLS, proving that success in the league demanded both tactical acumen and individual brilliance.

By 2006, the league had grown in stature and competitive depth. Houston Dynamo's triumph in their debut season after a gripping penalty shootout exemplified the drama and unpredictability that had become hallmarks of the MLS Cup. This victory also underscored the league's increasing parity, as newer franchises demonstrated their ability to compete at the highest level.

Off the field, MLS matured in parallel with its on-field product. New stadiums tailored for soccer, growing fan bases, and a steady influx of talent from both domestic and international sources propelled the league forward. The foundations laid during these formative years set the stage for MLS to become a fixture in the global soccer conversation.

As the league moved beyond its first decade, it carried with it lessons learned, stories of triumph and heartbreak, and a vision for the future. The MLS of 2006 was no longer an experiment—it was a testament to the enduring passion for soccer in North America and the determination to establish a professional league that could stand shoulder to shoulder with its global counterparts.

The journey from 1996 to 2006 was only the beginning. As fans celebrated the milestones of the first decade, they also looked ahead with anticipation, ready to embrace the next chapter in the ever-evolving saga of Major League Soccer.