



USA

Community FC

Football takes the lead as Minneapolis tries to rebuild

Minneapolis City Soccer Club are all about action – whether on the pitch in the shape of their successful National Premier Soccer League (NPSL) team, or off it through their work in local youth soccer and the community. They are a club whose valuable actions speak as loudly as their important words.

This is a rarity in North American soccer, where franchises are often built around the marketing of a brand and the hope that supporters will buy into it. Minneapolis City turned this on its head, going to the supporters and the community first and building a club from there.

This ethos has helped them through the recent turbulent times in the city of Minneapolis, where they have still been able to play their part despite the cancellation of the 2020 NPSL season.

Our member-driven ownership model has attracted the kind of people who are into the community, the action and the local efforts that are our DNA," says co-founder Dan Hoedeman.

"It's the community, and that includes players, staff and supporters, who are donating money, time and effort to the club. It's the community that made the club financially viable in 2020 despite us losing our season. And it's the community that keeps us going right now with our efforts to help South Minneapolis. We're not shut down, we're busier than ever!"

It's for this reason the club found itself uniquely placed when the city of Minneapolis entered a moment of turmoil following the death of George Floyd and the issues already arising on the back of the COVID-19 pandemic. Thanks to a community effort, this uncertainty turned into a solidarity that reverberated around the world. It's a local unity that stems from the club's natural ties with those South Minneapolis neighbourhoods.

The club shop, housed in a modest, quaint-looking building in the city's Standish area, was used as a base for clean-up efforts and food drives. "When COVID-19 hit, our fans lined up behind

the club and kept it fiscally sound," says Hoedeman. "And now, with what has happened in the aftermath of George Floyd's murder, we find ourselves raising money for impacted business, doing food drives and pop-up pantries for neighbours who don't have access to food, and cleaning up the city.

"We're just a soccer club so we understand that our role in making the world a better place is limited, but that doesn't mean we shouldn't do everything we can."

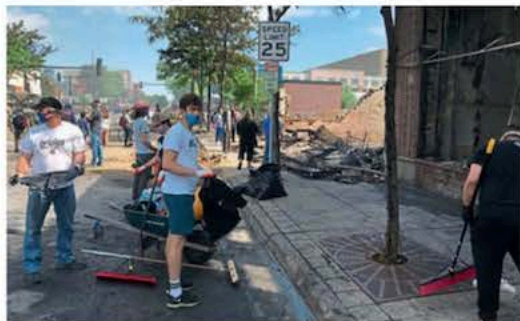
"In the aftermath of George Floyd's murder, we find ourselves raising money for impacted business, doing food drives and pop-up pantries for neighbours who don't have access to food, and cleaning up the city"

Club co-founder Dan Hoedeman

Football has taken hold in these communities, even if it hasn't attracted a national profile in the way some baseball, American football, ice hockey and basketball teams in the area might have. Its obvious potential has motivated groups of like-minded individuals to push the sport forward, and this has produced several teams throughout the years.

The Vikings of the NFL and Major League Baseball side the Twins both boast a higher national profile than the region's soccer clubs, but the average attendance at MLS outfit Minnesota United is now above that of the

Clean-up...MCSC have played an active role in cleaning and rebuilding Minneapolis after the protests over George Floyd's death



Minnesota Wild ice hockey team and the Minnesota Timberwolves NBA side.

When football has managed to organise itself in the city, it has been well supported. The now-defunct Minnesota Kicks boasted average attendances of over 30,000 during the 1977 and 1978 NASL seasons, while Minnesota United's NASL predecessor won two trophies and averaged crowds of over 8,000 in the three years prior to joining MLS, where they now regularly attract capacity crowds close to 20,000 per game.

Organisation has always been a stumbling block for football in the US, which means Minneapolis City's decision to build from the ground up, using the strength of the local community and, in turn, making it stronger again, makes lots of sense.

The club brand themselves as "un-corporate soccer". Indeed, it's less a brand, more a natural growth from football roots that have existed in the city since the 19th century. This emphasis on community facilitated the



club's involvement in the city's efforts during the COVID-19 pandemic, and has meant they are often among the first to react to a crisis. They have been able to take such an active role because the club are the community — and that isn't just a marketing slogan.

These principles also extend to local players and youth football. As a non-profit organisation, Minneapolis City are in a position to provide help to those in the area who might otherwise struggle to get into football due to the costs involved.

"We were founded by a group of people that expressly wanted to create a community soccer club," Hoedeman adds. "One that was run by regular people, that helped elevate local players, and worked to recruit players from beyond the typical pay-to-play development academies and suburban mega-clubs.

"We've done free clinics, we've worked with Minneapolis Parks to do free play time in underserved neighbourhoods, and worked with organisations like [youth

**United...MCSC
celebrate with
their fans**

**Local lads...the club
only picks
Minnesota-based
players**



mentoring organisation] Big Brothers Big Sisters and others.

"We are an all-volunteer club, so everyone involved is doing this by choice and they are emphatically putting their money (and time, and sweat, and effort) where their mouth is. It's incredible. And it's more important than ever, because together we can make this moment one that makes our city a better, fairer place."

At street level, the city of Minneapolis is undergoing a rebuilding process, quite literally in many areas, and its spirit and unity is growing as a result. On a sporting level, away from franchise football, something more organic is building from the grassroots. Minneapolis City are involved in both efforts. They are built to emerge on the other side of a crisis and to help others do the same.

Photo Credit: Daniel Miki

Face to face: Dan Hoedeman

How important has the club's ethos been in light of recent events in the city?

Nobody, least of all us, expected anything that 2020 has brought. Despite everything that has happened, we find ourselves in a place to help. It starts simply. We don't treat fans like "Brand Ambassadors" or revenue streams to be maximised. When we take action, we take it as a club: players, staff, fans, all together. So when COVID-19 hit, our fans lined up to help.

How has the club's work laid a foundation for the most vulnerable in these communities prior to recent events?

On the one hand, we're just a soccer club. On the other hand, there is power in bringing people together across generations, ethnicities, and socio-economic classes in a positive environment where we are working toward a common goal. Our part was small, the fans did the hard work, but we helped to raise awareness, raise money, and that makes a difference. We want to do more, and I know that we will. Right now, it's a lot of small steps. But we are moving in the right direction. Our fans share that desire to make a difference. We've had donations for our food drive, over 100 volunteers sign up for a pop-up pantry, and vocal support in spreading the word. It's been overwhelming, and shows what a group of regular people can achieve if they work together.

How have lower-league clubs such as yourselves been affected by the coronavirus crisis?

Our season was cancelled, and our U.S. Open Cup first-round match was postponed a week before we were to leave, so we paid all of the expenses like indoor training facilities, hotels

and kit, and then didn't play the game.

We were lucky though. We offered refunds to our supporters for their season ticket, and less than 2 per cent of our members took the refund. The rest turned it into a donation. Many of our players donated money as well. And, by dumb luck, we had done a kit launch before COVID that was really successful. The people carried the club through, and we'll be back stronger in 2021. Not all clubs are that lucky. Some have a higher cost structure, others don't have the



Food drive... donations at the club shop

supporters we do, and still others have owners whose other businesses, which make the soccer club possible, are badly impacted. Clubs lose a lot of money every year even when they're playing.

How does the restrictive structure of the US league system, with no promotion or relegation, affect the club's ambition?

We believe that promotion and relegation would make a massive difference in US soccer, but while that remains a pipe dream what drives us forward are the things we haven't done



Co-founder... Dan Hoedeman

Could you describe the context of the club's place in the NPSL?

The league is broken into geographically close conferences of teams. We play in the North Conference, which makes up teams from Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota and western Wisconsin. The top two finishers in conference move on to the regional play-offs. The Midwest region has clubs from Indiana, eastern Wisconsin, Michigan, Ohio, Pennsylvania and upstate New York. The regional winners (there are four regions) have a knockout tournament to determine the national champion. We've won the North Conference the past two seasons. There are and have been fantastic clubs in the league. Especially the past two seasons where we have seen professional outfits like New York Cosmos, Miami FC, Detroit City FC and Chattanooga FC. It's especially heartening to see how we have done given our people-powered club and only Minnesota-based player approach. We went toe-to-toe with the big guns and showed we belong.

at this level. For example, we may have won the conference, but we haven't won the post-season tournament. We have a crazy history with the U.S. Open Cup and are keen to make our mark on that stage as well. That said, there does come a point when you get a little wistful about what could be. There is no real pyramid here so the leagues are all fractured and there are a number of clubs we want to play regularly, and who we know want to play against us, but we're in different leagues. It's a ridiculous situation. It holds us all back.

