

Austin American-Statesman



Kirk Bohls
Columnist
Austin American-Statesman
USA TODAY NETWORK

Austin FC celebrates successes, though few on the pitch

The conditions were anything but inviting Wednesday night in north Austin. Dreary and forbidding.

Gray and, relatively speaking, bone-chilling.

Just flat-out ugly.

And the weather was bad, too.

The brisk temperatures and gusting wind and intermittent rain aside, that same gloomy description could apply to the disappointing Austin FC soccer team just as easily as the adverse weather conditions it faced as the city's first major professional sports team closed out its home schedule of its inaugural season. But disappointing only in the standings.

But disappointing only in the standings.

That said, the Verde wrapped up its 17-game home portion of its debut season in grand style. Austin FC didn't just beat Sporting KC. It dominated the Western Conference front-runner that had oh so much to play for since it was hoping to nail down a top seed in the upcoming MLS playoffs.

Austin, meanwhile, was supposedly just playing out the string in this rough expansion season, a long journey that began with sporting director Claudio Reyna gathering 30 players at the Fairmont in January, battling a generational winter storm in February and trying to



Austin FC fans became one of the loudest, most supportive groups in the entire MLS.

SCOTT WACHTER/USA TODAY SPORTS



Austin FC forward Sebastian Driussi, picked up late in the season, has energized the lacking Verde offense.
ANNE-MARIE SORVINO/USA TODAY SPORTS

Bohls

Continued from Page 1C

build some cohesion and momentum with a harsh schedule sending the team on the road for the first eight games.

Austin FC crushed Sporting KC 3-1 in a match it controlled from beginning to end to punctuate what has been a spectacular, off-the-pitch success with serious hopes of contending in 2022, which will open on Feb. 26.

"Austin FC has absolutely been a success," president Andy Loughnane said Friday. "I should probably say it three times. We think it was one of the most successful launches in the history of major league sports. And new heroes and these remarkable, indelible memories are formed and are causes for celebration."

From a fan experience standpoint, from a connection to the community, from a breathtakingly beautiful new, bathed-in-green Q2 Stadium, from merchandise sales and television ratings and from branding in the city, Austin FC blew away any and all expectations.

Was it perfect?

Of course not. The groundbreaking for the Cap Metro Red Line station at McKalla Place hasn't happened yet and won't be accessible until probably 2023. That said, parking complaints haven't been a big storyline.

But this is a franchise that has embedded itself in the city's consciousness, that has wedded local corporations like Yeti, Netblend and St. David's Health Care, has been embraced by its fans and is rising in popularity, its terrible record of nine wins and 20 losses aside. And the customers love the tacos, pretzels and pepperoni rolls.

As Loughnane said, "Some want louder music, and some want softer music. Some want more meat, some want less meat. We got to balance it."

Satisfying the vegetarians aside — and there are options for them and vegans — Austin FC was a runaway success story. Now about those standings.

The Verde & Black won nine matches all year to assure it wouldn't finish last below Houston, which won only six and just fired its coach, and Austin FC split its last eight games to offer major hope for next season.

Remember, they were forced to begin the campaign with eight road games amidst COVID concerns because Q2 wasn't ready. But they came home to a hero's welcome on June 19, unveiled a \$260 million stadium, hosted an exhibition by the women's U.S. national team and events like the Gold Cup semifinals and a U.S. men's World Cup qualifier and celebrated highlights like Brad Stuuuuuuer's brilliant goalkeeper play and the arrival of future star Sebastian Driussi.

And on a dark and stormy night in early November, a rabid fan base paid homage to its newly adopted team against KC.

"We do not have fair-weather fans," Loughnane said.

In front of them Wednesday, a jacked up Austin club needed just half a minute to score its first goal. No, it's true. You

"Austin FC has absolutely been a success. I should probably say it three times. We think it was one of the most successful launches in the history of major league sports."

Andy Loughnane
Austin FC president

can look it up.

This severely offensively deprived soccer club that has sorely needed a quality striker all season went up 1-0 on a beautiful header into the net from Driussi, the 25-year-old Argentinian late-season pickup, just 30 seconds into play. Austin would add another goal from Julio Cascante and a third goal — yes, three actual goals in the same game — on a rare put-in from Jared Stroud, an energetic midfielder whose playing time drastically diminished since the first half of the season.

So impressive was Stroud's performance that head coach Josh Wolff tabbed him as "the man of the match." But there were a lot of men of this match.

That includes the dynamic Driussi, who has five goals and as many assists and appears to be the answer to fans' prayers and should emerge as a linchpin in next year's attack along with Moussa Djitté, a physical specimen who could be the LeBron James of MLS, given his bullish stature if he learns not to settle and roam on the wings so much.

If the team can stay healthier than they did in 2021, losing center forwards Danny Hoesen and Aaron Schoenfeld for all but five games as well as left back Ben Sweat and right wing Rodney Redes, 2022 holds more promise. If it gets more out of Cecilio Dominguez — who was only slightly better than Tomás Pochettino of the two designated players — and develop talent like Diego Fagúndez and Jhohan Romáña and build some depth, there's no reason Austin FC can't contend in Year 2.

Wolff and Reyna appear to be safe in their jobs although the first-year head coach needs to be less rigid and work more on his oft-times confusing substitution patterns and second-half starts, and Reyna must upgrade a roster that could use a younger and quicker back line. Majority owner Anthony Precourt wasn't made available for an interview.

Stroud could actually be considered one of the poster boys for this franchise in its infancy. The Colgate flash bursts with energy but had so much interaction with the posts of the net, his kicks almost seemed magnetically attracted to them.

But he broke through on a soggy Wednesday night to not only score his first goal of the season in his 21 games but also register an assist on Driussi's

early score with green strobe lights enveloping a beautiful stadium.

"I have a lot of confidence in myself even when I'm not getting rostered or things are going difficult," Stroud said. "I was bringing it in practice every week, but that's not really something that people see every day, so I'm proud of my work ethic and it kind of all paid off tonight."

Stroud's effort epitomized a season that was long on promise but short on production. Austin FC's 35 goals, with a lone match remaining against playoff-bound Portland on Sunday afternoon, marked the fewest in the league, tied with Miami.

El Tree's bark, if you will excuse, was far worse than its bite. Or its might, as the club scored three or more goals just seven times in this star-crossed season. That said, five have come in the last three months of the season. That's a huge upgrade since it took three home matches before Jon Gallagher put one in the net for the first competitive goal at Q2.

But the team showed a flurry of improvement in the last two months, winning four of its final five home games at Q2. The Tree even had multiple goals in all four of those wins.

The crowd stayed to show support, and the players did likewise, showering the Supporters Section with thank-yous and standing behind a banner that read "Hasta la Muerte."

Until death.

Austin FC, on the other hand, is alive and kicking with a bright future.

"I think there's unbelievable thirst and excitement for Austin FC, in the community," Wolff said. "Certainly in and around the stadium, the sport of soccer in our country is clearly on the rise. And Austin has welcomed us and embraced us in an unbelievable way."

With that curtain-dropper, the show was complete as Austin FC finally revealed a glimpse of what could be for this franchise in 2022.

A talented roster that, given a few additions for next season, including the long-sought-after striker and some defensive help, could raise the bar quickly.

Some home-grown talent like Owen Wolff, the 16-year-old son of the head coach, from the team's academy will help.

Unwavering support from the community has been unconditional. The best, most raucous fan base in MLS made its presence felt.

Don't lose sight of that last factor.

This city has embraced its soccer team like few others, short of maybe Atlanta United, which draws fans in droves at mammoth Mercedes Benz Stadium with an average exceeding 43,000 fans a game. And remember, Atlanta won an MLS crown just four years ago.

According to SoccerStadiumDigest.com, Austin FC ranks fifth in average aggregate attendance at a full-capacity 20,739 a match, trailing only Atlanta, Seattle, Portland and Cincinnati, and sold out every ticket, the only MLS team to do so. Columbus and Cincinnati, by the way, both christened new stadiums in 2021 as well, but had just two sellouts between them.

"Our fans and our support, our com-

munity has been behind us from the outset," Wolff said. "It's been incredible to see that, to feel that and be part of this organization. Hopefully, tonight is an indication of what we can be and what we want to be going into next year. Again, nothing but love for all of our fans but certainly our supporters' section. They're the heartbeat of this team, certainly on the field, in the stadium and throughout our community."

Austin FC has been a huge draw from beginning to the very exciting end. As many as 250 Austin FC fans are expected to make the trek to Portland on Sunday. A whopping 750 traveled to Dallas for that first meeting. A loud 300 showed up in Colorado. Think that doesn't make a statement?

From Wolff to the last player on the roster, they have raved about the support they have received from their faithful fan base. It's been one gigantic bear hug from young and old in the 512, regardless of creed or color.

"I think it's really exciting," gushed 8-year-old Finn Patrizi, a towheaded blonde who attends Rawson Saunders Elementary and took in his first Austin FC match with his father, Drew. "I think the stadium is nice. It's real green."

And will get even greener in the future.

"Our goal is to make this the greenest stadium in the world," 62-year-old Gary Sutfin said.

Sutfin has a vested interest. He's worked for the last year and a half with Texas Disposal Systems, and he and Derrick James were on hand Wednesday to help gussy up the place by steering Austin FC fans to put their leftover food items and paper cups and plates in the proper receptacles, including those marked compost and landfill. The only other stadium he knows that is as environment-conscious is Mercedes Benz in Atlanta.

They also love soccer.

"I just love football," James said. "I love the pace of the game and how continuous it is."

Sutfin calls himself a "new soccer fan," something in large supply for an MLS team that is as popular as any of the 27 franchises. In fact, Austin FC claims it is the only MLS club that has sold every single one of its tickets this season.

As further proof of the success the team has had off the field, over 96% of Verde's season ticket-holders have already renewed for next season. So if you thought you'd wait until Year 2 to get your shot, you may be out of luck because the waiting list for a season ticket sits at 28,000, which is more than the full capacity of the stadium.

Austin FC trumpets its success in the stands and within the community, which is well and good. But the franchise wants to see that translate to the pitch sooner than later.

The way Central Texas has embraced the team gives hope for the future because it's already made serious inroads into the community's mindset. In the polling the club itself does in hopes of establishing itself as the flag-bearer for Austin, the soccer club has made a foothold in the city's consciousness.

In the team's initial polling in August 2020, the University of Texas was far and away the focal point for the majority of Austinites as the city's top attention-getter, followed by Austin City Limits and South by Southwest. Austin FC ranked sixth.

Gradually, soccer cut into the numbers and now ranks in a tie for No. 2 with ACL, according to team officials. A whopping 91% of those polled deep into the season — a losing season — said they had a favorable opinion of the team.

Austin FC was banking on the novelty of a large city without a major professional sports team with a strong, young demographic. It seems to have paid off in a big way because Verde has 77% brand awareness in Austin, ranks No. 1 in the league in merchandise sales and has among the strongest television ratings in the MLS.

In addition, the 4ATX Foundation's charitable event, "A Night in Verde" gala a week ago raised more than \$829,000 for Verde Leaders to support underprivileged students as well as the club's partnership with Austin Pets Alive!

Because Austin FC is the only MLS team that serves as the lone major-league sports property in a market that ranks only 29th in size, it has a clean slate from which to try to match other similarly situated brands.

"I recognize we have a long way to go before we build out a legacy," Loughnane said. "We're not the Green Bay Packers. We're not the San Antonio Spurs. But we aspire to one day be in a position to share that same kind of legacy."

That's one ambitious goal since those two franchises have a combined 18 championships. Now Austin FC just has to match the positive vibe that's been in the stands and the stores.