

Mesa could get professional soccer team in 2017



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(Photo: Ben Moffat/The Republic)

For most of his life, Chandler businessman Scott Taylor wasn't much of a soccer aficionado.

When he got the bug last year, it wasn't the players who awed him. It was the fans.

"My wife and I went to Scotland and England and ... we were sitting watching (professional Scottish soccer teams) Aberdeen play Dundee," Taylor said. "Fifteen to 20 minutes before the game, at least 5,000 or 6,000 fans and people started chanting loud, and I thought, 'What a passionate sport this is. How can I bring this back to the East Valley?'"

"I've spent the last year and a half working out a plan," he said.

Earlier this month, Taylor formally announced the founding of Football Club Arizona, a new pro soccer team he expects to have playing at Mesa Community College by March 2017.

So far, the fledgling team has a skeleton staff and only one signed player, and the league in which it will play won't be released until next month. But the concept is generating buzz in the southeast Valley, where the sport's growing popularity has city recreation departments struggling to meet demand for playing fields and tournament facilities.

"This is our opportunity right here to bring the (region) together as a soccer community," said Tim Barmettler, director of soccer operations for Football Club Arizona.

"Right now, everything's on the west side" — including [Peoria-based Arizona United Soccer Club \(/story/sports/soccer/2016/06/21/arizona-united-something-different-luke-rooney/86193444/\)](#), the Valley's more established professional team — "but this is going to be soccer country for us," he said.

Challenges lie ahead

Building a successful pro soccer team isn't an easy task, or even a very lucrative one, according to industry experts. Many would-be founders fail.

Startup expenses can include everything from franchise fees and player salaries to facility rentals, youth academies, equipment, jerseys and a ticketing system.

Taylor, a 38-year-old insurance-company owner, declined to say how much he planned to invest in the venture. He said he'd "spent a year and a half writing up a business plan I feel is sustainable."

Taylor drew attention for more than \$25,000 in unpaid campaign expenses during a 2012 Chandler City Council bid but said he has "done well" over the past four years and is on solid financial footing.

"I have the money, and I'm running this on a budget," Taylor said. "I think one of the reasons some teams haven't been successful in the past is that these guys (founders) get these grandiose ideas and bite off more than they can chew. I'm not doing any of that."

Once an owner has an operational team, he or she must compete for fans' time and money — particularly in a market like Phoenix, where there are several high-profile sports teams.

"We've been around three years, and people still want to say, 'I didn't know the Valley had a pro soccer team. I don't know where you play,'" said Kyle Eng, founder of Arizona United Soccer Club in Peoria. "You really have to earn the bond with the community, and that doesn't happen overnight."

Jason Gomez, a former sports journalist who covered soccer for the Bleacher Report, World Soccer Talk and other outlets, agreed.

"If the community's not committed, then it's not going to be a success," he said.

Taylor said he will make tickets affordable, at about \$10 each, and "focus on the game atmosphere" to draw hardcore and casual fans alike.

"It's about the culture, the pre-game happy hours, the supporters' groups, the drums, the mascot, the dance team, the Jumbotron," Taylor said. "What I want is somebody that's never been to a pro soccer game, or that's never even watched a pro match before, to go to one of these games and say, 'You know, that was a ton of fun. I want to go back.'"



Andrew Weber, a former Major League Soccer player, poses for a portrait at Pecan Grove Village park in Tempe on Friday, Aug. 12, 2016. Weber is the first signed player with Arizona's latest professional soccer team, which is expected to play at Mesa Community College. (Photo: Ben Moffat/The Republic)

As for the team roster, Taylor said he wants to recruit a mix of ex-pro, college and younger "up-and-coming" athletes. FC Arizona's first signed player is Tempe native and former Major League Soccer goalkeeper Andrew Weber, who said he was drawn to the idea of "building up something grassroots" that would be within reach for people in his hometown.

A boost for west Mesa

If Taylor can get the team off the ground, its immediate impact will be one of convenience.

"It's another entertainment option and another sporting option for the East Valley, where people won't have to drive to Phoenix or the West Valley," Taylor said.

City officials also believe the team could boost the ongoing revitalization of southwest Mesa's Fiesta District, home to MCC. The sector has struggled in recent years as developers and tourists set their sights on the city's east side.

"FC Arizona could ... generate positive economic-development activities in the district in terms of potential visitors to the area, food and entertainment venues, and hotels," said Mesa Vice Mayor Dennis Kavanaugh, whose council district includes the Fiesta area.

PREVIOUSLY: [Nearly 1,500 new jobs for Mesa's Fiesta District \(/story/news/local/mesa/2015/11/02/nearly-1500-new-jobs-mesas-fiesta-district/75066186/\)](http://www.azcentral.com/story/news/local/mesa/2015/11/02/nearly-1500-new-jobs-mesas-fiesta-district/75066186/)

"In tourism-industry parlance, this is yet another 'mousetrap' set out to attract visitors to Mesa and the East Valley," he said. "Sports tourism is an increasingly important sector for East Valley communities."

Ultimately, Taylor hopes the the team and its fan base will expand to a level that would warrant the building of a new stadium, though he acknowledges that could be several years out.

"I'm humble enough to know that I don't know everything, but I'm surrounding myself with people who are experts," he said. "We really want to just focus on building ... a quality product on the field that (residents) will be happy to come and support."



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