THE REPRESENTATION OF BLACK AND LATINX COMMUNITIES AND WOMEN IN U.S. SOCCER
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1. PURPOSE OF RESEARCH
This report seeks to evaluate Black, Latinx, and women’s representation in U.S soccer as a means of establishing the diversity in key areas of the sport and to highlight inequities. The Fare network has launched this research as a response to the concerns expressed by players’ organizations, which formed as part of the #BlackLivesMatter movement and ongoing concerns about the lack of representation of the two biggest minority groups that play and participate in soccer in the United States within leadership positions.

The report presents publicly available data, accurate as of 1 August 2020, on senior leadership and coaching roles within Major League Soccer (MLS) clubs; National Women’s Soccer League (NWSL) clubs; the political, administrative and coaching leadership of the U.S. Soccer Federation; and the Executive leadership of the MLS league.

In addition, we conducted targeted interviews with Black and Latinx players within U.S. soccer to highlight their personal experiences of structural racism and sexism within U.S. soccer.

2. REPRESENTATION ON THE BASIS OF ‘RACE’ AND ETHNICITY
We understand the categories of Black and Latinx to be distinct from one another, even though the same individual may identify as both. For the purposes of this report, Latinx (plural, non-binary), Latino (male identified), and Latina (female identified) refer to people in the United States of Latin American background. We have used a broad geographical definition of Latin America, including the Caribbean, Central America, and South America. The category of Black encompasses people identified or perceived as having African heritage. The term African American would not account for Black players coming from outside the United States. The categories of Black and Latinx often overlap. Thus, Afro-Puerto Ricans would be deemed as both Black and Latinx. Given that the research purpose was to understand the relationship between racial hierarchies and success in professional soccer in the United States, we delineated Latinx as those with Latin American heritage whose formation in soccer was primarily in the United States. In the case of Latin Americans who came to the U.S well into their career and are not identified as Black, we did not categorize them as Latinx, but by their national origin. For example, LA Galaxy FC coach Guillermo Barros Schelotto grew up, played, and coached in his native Argentina, where he is considered White. While he may experience racism on the basis of anti-immigration sentiment, and anti-Spanish discrimination, we did not categorize him as Latino.
Diasporic and Immigrant Communities

A review of the makeup of U.S. Soccer highlights the rich contributions of immigrants and foreign nationals to the sport. While soccer in the U.S. has traditionally been most popular within White and European immigrant neighborhoods and suburbs, it is equally represented in Latinx and African diasporic communities. This has been reflected in the players’ and, to a lesser extent, the coaches’ data, particularly for the MLS. For many of these players, soccer has been a way to embrace and celebrate their identities as dual nationals and first and second generation Americans of Latinx or African descent. Considering that Black and Latino players constitute 25% and 33% of MLS clubs respectively, the underrepresentation of Black and Latinx’s in the front offices and executive positions is alarming. Additionally, the racial diversity of the players’ ranks is not reflected in the head coaching positions. For Black coaching candidates, it appears one of the minimum qualifications has been the unfair standard of having achieved international fame. For example, during the last five years in the MLS specifically, two out of the three Black head coaches have been Thierry Henry and Patrick Vieira (NYCFC 2016-2017). The structural racism that denies opportunities to Black coaches is not unique to MLS, however. There is only one Latino and zero Black coaches represented in the NWSL, including assistants.

Our research suggests that both formal and informal barriers to participation begin at the earliest stages of player development. Perhaps most glaring is that the data shows that Black and Latinx players encounter very few opportunities to move into administration and coaching. This is particularly acute when considering women players who are also Black and Latinx. Ali Curtis, the only Black General Manager of any MLS or NWSL club (Toronto FC), explained that the decision to hire coaches and administrators are made within certain social circles, but “historically Black people have been excluded from those circles.” A particularly troubling site of this phenomena occurs at the highest levels of the clubs, in the executive offices, technical staffs, and ownership groups. In the NWSL and USWNT, there appears to be very little racial diversity both in the player and executive ranks, a situation that also appears to be exacerbated by the financial demands of the grassroots structure of US Soccer. These structural inequities often result in youth players abandoning the sport due to its prohibitive cost. Utah Royals player, Tziarra King pointed out the important role of, “pay for play and the development academy systems that are exclusive monetarily, but also in terms of ethnicity.”

Moreover, we observed very little to zero Latinx representation in the players’ and front office or executive ranks, especially in the NWSL and USWNT. Mónica González, a former player and captain of the Mexican National team, ESPN commentator and analyst, an assistant coach in the NWSL, began a soccer nonprofit for girls in the U.S., Mexico, and Colombia, called GonzoSoccer. González sees community outreach, particularly in urban areas, as central to improving diversity in U.S. Soccer. Programs that encourage girls need, “to be taken into the communities,” rather than expecting them to seek out programs that are often expensive and located in suburbs. González notes, “There’s a lot of documented and undocumented Latinas in the United States that can’t afford transportation to the teams, and inside of the city [Houston], there are no club teams. Competing, good club teams are all outside in the suburbs. If you don’t have money, you can’t play. It’s discriminating against certain types of people.”

3.

Mónica González

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Gender Representation

Contrary to the historic success of the national team, women’s professional soccer has been met with gender-based discrimination and a subsequent lack of funding and development. Following two predecessor leagues with varying success – the Women’s United Soccer Association (WUSA, 2001-2003) and Women’s Professional Soccer (WPS, 2009-2012) – the National Women’s Soccer League (NWSL) has been in existence since 2013, and experienced increased popularity following the 2019 World Cup. Moreover, U.S. women’s soccer has emerged as a space that challenges heterosexual norms and discrimination based on gender and sexuality, particularly with the Women’s National Team’s lawsuit against the USSF (United States Soccer Federation) for equal pay, and many of the players themselves openly identifying as queer and lesbian. As a methodological note, we researched gender identification to the extent possible, recognizing the possibility for error, particularly of non-binary individuals.

While the success of women’s soccer on the field is apparent, men dominate positions within U.S. soccer, both in the men’s and women’s professional leagues, front offices, and national teams. While women make up a third of the executive positions in the NWSL (9) and 20% of the USSF board of directors (3), they make up less than ten percent of the top executives in the MLS (7).

Contrary to some other U.S. sports leagues such as the WNBA (Women’s National Basketball League), where women represent 30% of head coaches, there is only one woman that is a head coach of a NWSL team and zero in the MLS. Moreover, there is a lack of gender and racial equality in the front offices and coaching staffs of professional teams. Although the representation of Black women on the USWNT has improved over the years, the representation of Latina players is nonexistent both amongst players, coaching staff, and executive positions.

Our research suggests a lack of opportunities for women in the executive positions of MLS and NWSL teams. Sky Blue FC has a strong record of women’s representation in their executive front office and coaching staff, but they are the exception. During her short tenure in the NWSL, King quickly noticed the lack of diversity within the league when she attended a team event with corporate sponsors. She recalls feeling “very uncomfortable” because she was “at an event supporting a women’s soccer team,” yet had zero “women in positions of power” that were represented at the event. She applauded Royals GM (and one of only two women GMs in the NWSL), Stephanie Lee, and explained that it makes “a difference in the connection, conversation, and comfort level” within the team. It must be noted, however, that the women executives and head coaches throughout U.S. soccer are all White. King is hopeful that there will be increased representation of Black women in U.S. soccer, and wants to see the power brokers “use investments to be inclusive and bring more opportunities to Black kids” which would inevitably “open the doors for not only more Black kids in the sport, but even in the front office.”
5. 

PROFESSIONAL RANKS:

Owners: While most MLS and NWSL teams have one to three owners, some are owned by corporations or many minority owners. Only Inter Miami counts Latino representation in its majority co-ownership (4.3%) and none have Black owners. Of the nine NWSL teams, eight have identifiable owners, none with Latinx or Black representation. There is one (1%) woman, Tammy Murphy, represented amongst NWSL owners. Similarly, there is only one (3.8%) club in MLS, Columbus Crew, which is co-owned by women. There are what looks like a number of Black co-owners who hold minority shareholdings in MLS clubs, Kevin Durant and James Harden at Philadelphia and Houston respectively, are two examples. We have not counted minority shareholdings within the data.

League Executive Committees: The MLS Executive Committee, of which Don Garber serves as Commissioner, lacks racial diversity, while the representation of women proves somewhat better. Out of a total of 13 executives, there are three (23%) women, one (7.7%) Latino, and zero Black representatives. The Executive Committee of the USSF represents a slight improvement with three out of the five positions filled by two (40%) women, and one (20%) Black executive.

Head Coaches: Of the 26 teams in MLS, four (15.4%) have a Latino head coach and two have Black head coaches (77%). There are no women represented among head coaches in MLS. Of the nine NWSL teams, there is only one (11%) woman, Freya Coombe of Sky Blue FC, and zero Black or Latinx head coaches.

The MLS seems to have made some effort historically to address the lack of Black and Latinx coaches through the ‘coaching diversity initiative’ launched in 2007. The initiative was reported to have been modeled on the National Football League’s Rooney Rule. But references to the initiative cannot be found within MLS communications, or their list of diversity initiatives. Only one of the former players we spoke to was aware of it.

Assistant Coaches: The majority of MLS and NWSL teams have anywhere between two to five assistant coaches, including a goalkeeping coach. Of the 26 assistant coaches in the NWSL, nine (34.6%) are women, one (3.8%) is Latino, and zero Black. Of the 77 MLS assistant coaches, fourteen (18%) are Black, three (3.9%) are Latino, and there are zero women.

Club Administration: Despite a variation in structure, particularly in titles and responsibilities, clear patterns emerge from studying executive diversity. In brief, the administration of U.S. soccer does not reflect the diversity of players or the soccer community. Of the 73 total executives in MLS, Black representation is 13% and Latinx is 6.9%. There are seven women executives, constituting 9.6%. Of the 27 top executives in MLS, there are no Black or Latinx executives. Out of the 26 General Managers in MLS, one (3.8%) is Black, two (7.7%) are Latino, and there are no women. Of the 9 NWSL GMs, two (22%) are women, yet none are Black or Latinx. Other executive positions reveal similarly poor results for racial and gender diversity. There are no women represented in the top executive position of any MLS club. Of the 28 VPs/COOs, there is only one (3.8%) Latino, two (7.7%) women, and zero Black executives. While there is a slightly higher representation of women (15.3%) as CFO/Dirctor or VP of Finance, there are zero Black and Latinx executive heads of the financial departments of any MLS club. In the NWSL, there is only one (11%) woman represented amongst the presidents of the nine teams. There are no Black or Latinx presidents of any NWSL team. Given the disparate structures, we found it more accurate to simply take the top executives (the top 3, whenever possible, in MLS and NWSL), including the Presidents, CFOs, CEOs, COOs, Head of Operations, Managers of Finance, Chief Revenue Officers, Presidents of Business, Vice Presidents, Chair persons. A few individuals appear both in MLS and NWSL, club front offices (Portland Thorns/Timbers, Orlando City/Pride, Houston Dash/Dynamo, Utah Real/Royals), we have chosen to treat them separately, i.e. several appear twice. Women account for 30% of the top executives in NWSL, and occupy many more positions in marketing, human resources, and player administration. Sky Blue stood out in gender representation, with women occupying all three of the top executive positions.

Players: The MLS is a diverse league of players, with a strong immigrant presence. Black players have been estimated to comprise about 25% of MLS rosters, many recruited from the Caribbean and Latin America, Europe, and Africa. Using data from the “The 2019 Racial and Gender Report Card,” by TIDES; 33% of MLS players are Latino. We have not found a current and exhaustive report on the racial diversity of the NWSL’s players. However, it has been well documented that the pay-to-play system has not reflected the diversity of players or the soccer community. Of the 23 USWNT players, there are seven Black players or 30% and zero Latinas.

6. NATIONAL TEAMS/ U.S. SOCCER FEDERATION

Board members: Of 15 board members, there are two Latinos (men) (13.3%), three women (White) (20%) and no Black members.

Head Coaches: During the last six seasons (2015-2020), there have been zero women, Black, or Latinx representation in the USMNT head coach position, and no Black or Latinx representation in the USWNT position. In the case of the latter, Jill Ellis (English White woman) held the position from 2014-2019, followed by Vlatko Andonovski (Macedonian White man) in 2019-2020.

Players: Of the 22 people named by USSF for the USMNT, six are Latino (27%) and seven are Black (32%). While the diversity of the roster is impressive, questions remain about the relative underrepresentation of Latinos. If Brandon Servania is counted as Black as well, it would change to 16 Black players or 36%. Of the 23 USWNT players, there are seven Black players or 30% and zero Latinas.

7. METHODOLOGY

There is a wide variation in the structure of clubs, especially at the level of the Front Office. Executives, including owners, presidents, vice-presidents, and general managers frequently hold multiple titles. In regard to executive data, we selected positions to include based on their priority and description provided by the club’s website, read press releases, and consulted local press. There is inconsistency in the responsibilities of these positions. The MLS club Front Offices include directors of HR and Communications, with greater representation of women in these positions, however, they do not routinely appear as top executives in club websites or press releases. In addition, there are several NWSL clubs that operate in partnership with a MLS club, therefore, there is some redundancy in executive positions. Some clubs, however, like Utah and Orlando, have separate GMs for their MLS and NWSL teams. This structural variation extends to the technical direction of teams, as well. For example, while some clubs have three assistant coaches, others have two, or as many as five. We have included the top three assistant coaches as listed on the club’s website.
NWSL Club Presidents (out of 9 clubs):
- Men: 9 (66.7%)
- White: 9 (100%)
- Women: 1 (11.1%)
- Latinx: 0 (0%)
- Black: 0 (0%)

NWSL Club Top 3 Executive Positions (Total of 28):
- Men: 9 (69.3%)
- White: 22 (100%)
- Women: 9 (32.1%)
- Latinx: 0 (0%)
- Black: 0 (0%)

While women make up a third of the executive positions in the NWSL (9) and 20% of the USSF board of directors (3), they make up less than ten percent of the top executives in the MLS (7).

MLS Club Top 3 Executive Positions (Total of 72):
- Men: 66 (90.3%)
- White: 66 (100%)
- Women: 7 (9.7%)
- Latinx: 5 (6.9%)
- Black: 1 (1.4%)

MLS Club Chief Finance Officers (out of 22 positions):
- Men: 17 (77.3%)
- White: 17 (77.3%)
- Women: 6 (22.7%)
- Latinx: 0 (0%)
- Black: 0 (0%)

MLS Club General Managers (out of 9 clubs):
- Men: 7 (77.8%)
- White: 9 (100%)
- Women: 2 (22.2%)
- Latinx: 0 (0%)
- Black: 0 (0%)

* Denotes one individual of Afro-Latino heritage
### COACHES

#### MLS HEAD COACHES (OUT OF 26 CLUBS)
- Men: 26 (100%)
  - White: 20 (76.9%)
  - Black & Latinx: 2 (7.7%)
  - Other: 4 (15.4%)
- Women: 0 (0%)

#### NWSL HEAD COACHES (OUT OF 9 CLUBS)
- Men: 8 (100%)
  - White: 8 (100%)
  - Black: 0 (0%)
  - Latinx: 0 (0%)
- Women: 1 (11%)

#### MLS ASSISTANT COACHES (OUT OF 77 POSITIONS)
- Men: 77 (100%)
  - White: 60 (77.9%)
  - Black: 14 (18.2%)
  - Latinx: 3 (3.9%)
- Women: 0 (0%)

#### NWSL ASSISTANT COACHES (OUT OF 26 POSITIONS)
- Men: 26 (100%)
  - White: 17 (65.4%)
  - Black: 2 (7.7%)
  - Latinx: 4 (15.4%)
- Women: 9 (34.6%)

### U.S. SOCCER FEDERATION

#### BOARD MEMBERS (13 TOTAL)
- Men: 8 (60%)
  - White: 4 (30.8%)
  - Black: 1 (7.7%)
  - Latinx: 2 (13.3%)
- Women: 5 (40%)

#### EXECUTIVES (5 TOTAL)
- Men: 4 (80%)
- Women: 1 (20%)
The majority of MLS and NWSL teams have anywhere between two to five assistant coaches, including a goalkeeping coach. Of the 26 assistant coaches in the NWSL, nine (34.6%) are women, one (3.8%) is Latino, and zero are Black. Of the 77 MLS assistant coaches, fourteen (18%) are Black, three (3.9%) are Latino, and there are zero women.
Factors in the exclusion of women and Black and Latinx ethnic minorities in U.S. soccer

• The impact of wider race and gender exclusions within U.S. society are manifest within sports leadership

• Closed hiring practises that rely on mechanisms such as existing networks, personal recommendations and personal patronage act against open recruitment on the basis of merit, as the industry distributes leadership positions overwhelmingly to white, male candidates

• A reverence for the soccer centres of Latin America and Europe means that coaches and technical experts from these areas are over-represented and ethnic minorities/Black and Latinx candidates from the U.S. are excluded

• Diversity, equity and inclusion as organisational objectives are not given a priority within soccer institutions. No substantive diversity initiative exists among the clubs, the MLS or NWSL leagues, or the U.S. Federation, except the ‘MLS coaching diversity initiative’ of which there is no evidence of implementation. This has resulted in no sustained diversity focus and little or no attempt at inclusion is in evidence

• The experiences of Black and Latinx people in the sport are ignored and little or no attempt at inclusion is in evidence

• Negative stereotyping of Black and Latinx people and women characterises them as having insufficient skills, no relevant experience, and labels them as ‘risky’ appointments

• A lack of publicly available information on the coach education structure, such as the numbers and profile of qualified individuals, and the means of qualification attainment restricts access and understanding of the qualifications and therefore the pipeline into elite level coaching

Recommenndations for action

Our research highlights very clear areas for change which are addressed through the following recommendations. These recommendations for action should be applied throughout the U.S. Soccer industry from clubs, to Leagues, to the Federation

• A cultural shift in attitudes is required in the way that Black and Latinx ethnic minorities and women are viewed within the industry, a recognition that they are and should be part of the long term future of U.S. soccer

• There is a need to develop a wider base of interest and talent development in soccer through initiatives focused on and led by targeted Black and Latinx communities, and communities of lower economic status, that go beyond the limited and exclusive opportunities that pay to play creates. Investment in historically under-served communities is the only way that player development systems such as the new MLS elite player development platform can be inclusive

• Every soccer governing body, league and club should commission an independent and comprehensive review into culture and practice in relation to diversity and inclusion

• Every soccer governing body, league and club should implement comprehensive anti-racist and diversity and inclusion policies, and action plans at every level. These should include activities to evaluate internal structures, create cultural change, education programmes for all staff, the setting of recruitment targets, using positive action recruitment techniques (and where possible quotas), and public reporting on initiatives and diversity data

• Adopt the Rooney Rule 2.0 launched by the NFL in May 2020 as a recruitment technique as part of any future strategy

• The leadership bodies should use external partner organisations that can help with setting targets, keeping ready lists of qualified candidates for roles and to act as a means of communication to minority groups and women

• Understand both the performance gain and cultural arguments for diversity in coaching and make it more representative of the player pool of MLS clubs

• Develop an industry-wide leadership programme focused on developing Black and Latinx ethnic minorities and women for high level administration roles
During July and August 2020 the researchers conducted interviews with players and former players in the U.S. club soccer system, at MLS and NWSL clubs, of Black and Latinx backgrounds. They highlight different but very common experiences within the industry of people from these communities. Four of the interviews - with Ali Curtis, Monica Gonzalez, Tziarra King, Kendall McIntosh - are reproduced here.
ALI CURTIS

“THERE IS ONLY ONE PLACE TO GO, THAT’S UP, BECAUSE WE ARE AT THE BOTTOM OF THE BARREL IN TERMS OF REPRESENTATION OF BLACK PEOPLE WITHIN THE SPORT.”

Ali Curtis has been General Manager of Toronto FC since January 2019. He played professionally for three MLS clubs: Tampa Bay, DC United and FC Dallas. Later he worked in finance and then joined the MLS, becoming the Sporting Director of New York Red Bulls.

“I am hopeful that soccer in the U.S. is at a place of transition, I have to be optimistic that change will occur, because it’s needed, it’s necessary, and it has to happen. If things don’t change in this moment moving forward then I don’t know that they will ever change, at least in my lifetime.

“We are at the bottom of the barrel”

“The data you reference is something that every black person in soccer in the United States is aware of. There’s never been a black [club] President, there’s no one sitting at the Executive table that’s black. I am one of only a few GMs. Even when you look at the coaches, there are two black coaches now, but there have only been six black coaches in the history of the sport. Of those six, four of them happen to be the best football players that have literally ever played the game. If that’s the criteria that’s just a really high bar.

“There is only one place to go, that’s up, because we are at the bottom of the barrel in terms of representation of black people within the sport, not only on the men’s side but also on the women’s side.

“I’m optimistic, I’m hopeful. I’ve had some quality conversations within the MLS but also U.S. Soccer and the national team. It’s important that we create a real strategy and real programmes that result in action.

“My experience is biased towards my own upbringing within the U.S. soccer system and then also my experience playing and then working in MLS, but when you look at the stakeholders and the key stakeholders within the game in the U.S., there’s a lot of opportunity. There’s 26 teams in MLS, and of those 26 you’re looking at some of the most powerful white men in not just North America, but in the world. And when you think about the resources, and also the intellectual and political capital, there is an opportunity to change if we really are going to do this thing right.

“So I’m hopeful and optimistic. I have had good conversations with Don Garber, I’ve known him for a long time and I am hopeful that MLS will be a league that takes a leadership role and drives the change.

“We’ve been talking about a lot of these things and sharing my ideas and best practices with everyone because it’s systemic racism, discrimination, glass ceilings. The only way to really tackle them is if we do so in a collective way. I liken it to the pandemic, in order to really drive the type of impact and drive the type of change that we need everyone has to participate. It has to be national and from the top of the pyramid to the grassroots level.

“We all have our stories, I think storytelling is going to be a big part of the vaccine of the solution. I’ve been fortunate, I have had a chance to listen to a lot of people’s stories over the last couple of months, as we all have, and also to tell my story. Because we’ve never really talked about these things openly and so from a mental health perspective I have found being able to share my thoughts and feelings and experiences over a lifetime very useful.

“Responding to adversity”

“When the pandemic first hit I was on all these zoom calls with tons of people and I am the only black person, it’s incredible. I see that all the time.

“There was a period of time I was on a lot of sub-committees and I would make a statement or make a recommendation and I didn’t get any reaction. And then a GM that’s white says the exact same thing that I said, and it’s like, this is incredible. I remember it hit me so hard that I told myself, Ali, you got to be twice as good and you’re slipping. So I started to wear a collared shirt on every single zoom because I wanted at least control how I look.

“It’s a crazy way to think, but it’s a survival tactic that you have to take on. I think the first time I wore the shirt, one of the GMs on the call joked, you got a job interview to go to? It was that profound. I have to dress differently on these calls, just to be heard.

“I like to think that I do my homework. I read the materials that I need to read so that I’m prepared and thoughtful with what I say. But even when you have a ‘seat at the table’ it’s still really, really hard.

“There are different moments we all have as black people. We all have those moments where we’re called the N word, and I have all these stories where I feel invisible in a room, or I feel that people don’t have as much confidence in me. Or maybe I’m the one with experience but they look at the other guy and they ask him for his opinion or perspective.

“I have those experiences all the time. I’m hopeful that it’s changing.”

Ways of creating more diversity and equity within soccer hiring

“I think that it’s important that there is minority representation in all areas of the sport, not just on the sporting side but also on in the business side.

“Within the MLS there is the diversity initiative that is akin to the Rooney rule. That guideline needs to be changed before the end of this year. And it needs to be modified in such a way that it has greater teeth to it.

“It also needs to be modified in such a way that it affects the business operations of the game, which are important as well. And there needs to be an enforcement mechanism that is separate to MLS.

“I think the U.S. Soccer Federation can also look at creating different guidelines that will promote diverse interview and hiring practices, but for sure Major League Soccer could overnight modify and change that, which I think is super, super important. The other things are that you also could create coaching programs, you know, a lot of times the black candidates they’re just not in the social circles. A lot of the hiring of coaches and administrators are driven because you’re in certain social circles and, you know, historically black people have been excluded from those circles, and as a result, whether conscious or unconscious they’ve been excluded from roles and opportunities.

“So I think it’s important that we create programmes where it puts minorities within those circles and to create targeted opportunities. I think that’s super important. These are some of the things that I would probably address overnight and then the other thing is that you could create a task force or a committee to research, analyze and come up with recommendations and we move forward.

“When you have the right people at the table or in the room then those people are capable of creating the strategy, creating the programs that will affect change.

“I think it’s important we look at those types of things and ensure that we have the right committees, we have the right strategic hires that are focused on diversity, equity, and inclusion, so that we can build out the right programmes that make sense and that will result in change.

“The thing that we don’t want is to wake up in 5, 10, 15, 20 years from now looking back and the data looks the same, and the opportunities still look the same.

“Responding to adversity”

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“I have those experiences all the time. I’m hopeful that it’s changing.”
“TO GET ON COMPETING TEAMS AND ON ACADEMY TEAMS, YOU’RE PAYING MONEY. IF YOU DON’T HAVE MONEY YOU CAN’T PLAY. SOCCER IS DISCRIMINATING AGAINST CERTAIN TYPES OF PEOPLE. MY PARENTS WOULDN’T HAVE BEEN ABLE TO AFFORD IT.”

Mónica González is an analyst for ESPN. She played college soccer for the University of Notre Dame Fighting Irish and for the Boston Breakers in the Women’s United Soccer Association. She represented the Mexico women’s national football team between 1998 and 2011 making 83 appearances and scoring 10 goals.

“IT IS IMPORTANT I THINK TO TAKE SOCCER TO THE COMMUNITIES INSTEAD OF SAYING, HERE WE ARE, COME TO THIS PLACE OR THIS PLACE TO JOIN US AS THE BIG MLS OR NWSL CLUB.

“THERE’S A LOT OF DOCUMENTED AND UNDOCUMENTED LATINOS IN THE UNITED STATES THAT DON’T HAVE TRANSPORTATION, THEY CAN’T GET TO THE TEAMS HERE IN HOUSTON, WHICH IS WHERE I’M AT NOW. THERE’S NOTHING INSIDE THE 610 LOOP, THERE’S NO CLUB TEAMS. ALL OF THE GOOD CLUB TEAMS ARE ALL OUT IN THE SUBURBS. IF YOU’RE A LATINA GIRL AND YOU ARE GOING TO HIGH SCHOOL IN ONE OF THE LOWER INCOME AREAS THERE ARE NO SOCCER PROGRAMS THERE.

“TO GET ON COMPETING TEAMS AND ON ACADEMY TEAMS, YOU’RE PAYING MONEY. IF YOU DON’T HAVE MONEY YOU CAN’T PLAY. SOCCER IS DISCRIMINATING AGAINST CERTAIN TYPES OF PEOPLE. MY PARENTS WOULDN’T HAVE BEEN ABLE TO AFFORD IT.

“IF I’M A COACH, I SHOULD WANT TO TAKE ON THE RESPONSIBILITY MYSELF TO MAKE SURE WE SCOUT EVERYWHERE. LET’S MAKE SURE WE ARE BUILDING SOMETHING ALONG THE WAY. LET’S MAKE SURE WE ARE ORGANISING PROGRAMS OURSELVES.

“This builds pride in kids, it’s child development, it’s family development. There’s no reason not to do this. The clubs need to make sure they’re giving every child the opportunity to play.

“In Mexico and other parts of the world, there’s not as much disparity as here in the United States.

“Space is not what’s lacking, it’s the commitment from the people who have the spaces to provide for the people that don’t and to understand that’s going to make everybody better.”
Tziarra King

“In this country I think there are a lot of diverse players playing the game, but not necessarily a lot of opportunities to take the next steps, or move forward into higher levels.

“From an early age, if you’re excluded from getting into the game, it’s hard to then get into the coaching world.

“When I first started playing soccer, I started at my local township rec league. As I got older I started playing on one team and I think I was the only Black girl on the team, it wasn’t an ideal situation. So my Dad said he would start a team. He doesn’t even have a soccer background, but he started a team and we recruited all the Black girls in the area.

“When we first started we were probably 75% Black and we had a few Latinas. It was very unique from a lot of other peoples’ situations and really cool because we didn’t see that inclusion anywhere else. You saw a team that had maybe one Black girl, and then when we played them, the other team would say ‘Huh, this team has all Black girls on it!’ I played on that team from when I was about 7, 8, up until my sophomore or junior year in high school.

“In my junior year, when the team disbanded, I played a year for Princeton Soccer Association. Making that jump was totally different because you could tell the girls had money, and it was predominantly white in comparison to the team I had played for.

“With the increasing amount of representation that we see in various fields, I hope that Black girls can see that nothing is off-limits, the sky is the limit, and the options are unlimited.

“I hope that that with this current movement when people say they are committed to diversity that they will back up what they’re saying. I hope that the soccer world will use investments to become more inclusive and bring more opportunities to Black kids. That will open the doors for more Black kids in the sport and in the front office. Ideally in their hiring process people will be more willing to bring diversity to their organization.

“To have front office representatives that are people of color will better the situation for all players, the staff, the organisation.

“[Having a Black woman head coach] would mean a lot to me. We have the same capabilities, we have the same knowledge, so to see a Black woman opening the doors for new opportunities for years to come would break down barriers. And to know that somebody took a chance, someone invested in a talented individual, would be eye-opening and inspiring and awesome. I would love that.

“I went to our jersey unveiling, all of the sponsors, the donors were there but it was not very diverse in that building, the speakers that came up, there were no women. I turned up excited about the launch but I began to feel very uncomfortable being there. I thought ‘how are we at an event supporting a women’s soccer team, and we don’t have any women in positions of power to speak to us.’ That was one of the first eye-opening experiences I had in this league, because there’s not a lot of diversity.

“We have a woman GM at Royals, and even having her, you can feel the difference in the connection, conversation, comfort level. I don’t understand how people can’t see that bringing more women and bringing more diversity would be a beneficial thing. It’s mind-blowing.”

“I hope that Black girls can see that nothing is off-limits, the sky is the limit, and the options are unlimited”

Tziarra King plays as a forward for the Utah Royals in the NWSL and has represented the USNWT at U23 level. She made her league debut this June after a successful four-year collegiate career at North Carolina State University.
“There are moments where Black players are culturally misunderstood. Without people who have lived these lives and without people who have gone through similar situations and have gone through the same kind of trials and tribulations, there will always be that gap in understanding, and gap in representation.”

Kendall McIntosh is a goalkeeper for New York Red Bulls and has represented the USNMT at U17 and U20 levels. He was a member of the San Jose Earthquakes Academy before spending his college career at Santa Clara University. In 2016, he signed a professional contract with Portland Timbers 2, in 2019 he was selected by the Red Bulls.

The importance of representation
“There are moments where Black players are culturally misunderstood. Without people who have lived these lives and without people who have gone through similar situations and have gone through the same kind of trials and tribulations, there will always be that gap in understanding, and gap in representation.”

“Messias Souza was my first Black soccer coach in Santa Rosa, California, he was a Brazilian goalkeeping coach. He really shaped me. He really understood some of the difficulties that I was going to face as a goalkeeper, but also as a Black goalkeeper and also a Black soccer player. So he was a really powerful figure in my soccer development, if I didn’t have him, I’m confident that I would not be where I am because of the skills he taught me and the mental side of having to deal with a lot of the things, both, as a goalkeeper and as a Black player.”

“One of the pre-eminent goalkeepers at the time was Dida. So I got to have a Black goalkeeper that I could be like, ‘Whoa, okay, that’s what it looks like.’ And then I had a Black Brazilian coach that was teaching me how to become that person. So then everything could kind of come together. I saw myself in this player.”

What can be done to increase racial diversity in U.S. soccer
“It definitely starts from the beginning. So if at the youth level, the only coaches that Black and Latinx players are dealing with are white, they get this sense that ‘the coach doesn’t understand me.’ I’ve heard that so often as a youth player, and in college, and just coming through the ranks.

“There’s a misinterpretation of cultures. There’s an inability to relate to certain situations. So I think starting with youth coaches, academy coaches, so these kids don’t fall out of the system immediately. They have people that they can relate to coming up that are going to lift them up that are not going to label them as ‘problem players’, and give them the moniker of having ‘bad attitudes,’ or ‘he’s lazy’, ‘he doesn’t want to work hard.’

The financial costs of playing soccer
“That’s definitely a factor. My family was fairly well off. So the cost associated with playing wasn’t a hindrance, but I know for some of my teammates it was. My parents would get a hotel and people would stay in our hotel. We would have extra players staying with us, just so they could come on the trips, because otherwise, their parents wouldn’t be able to afford it. And I don’t think that’s how it should be, I think if you have the ability to play, you should be able to play.

“I’d love to see us as a country move away from the pay to play system. It’s definitely a hindrance for Black and Latinx players, but it’s also a hindrance for poor white players.

On the representation of gender in U.S. soccer
“In men’s soccer, there’s a gender bias but I think it’s wrong. I think that it would make sense to have more female coaches. There really isn’t any reason why there shouldn’t be more female coaches all over. I think within the men’s game, there’s definitely going to be a huge, huge mountain to climb, but it’s not insurmountable.”

“The more we can push for gender equality... within the game, and especially within the women’s game, I think the better off women will be in the sport.

“It’s the job of male players to listen to the women. It’s not our job to explain to women how things need to be done for them. It’s really important that within the women’s game and within the men’s game, we listen better and then we take action, so that we can be a part of progressing the game and progressing the game in a way that’s more equal and just.”

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