

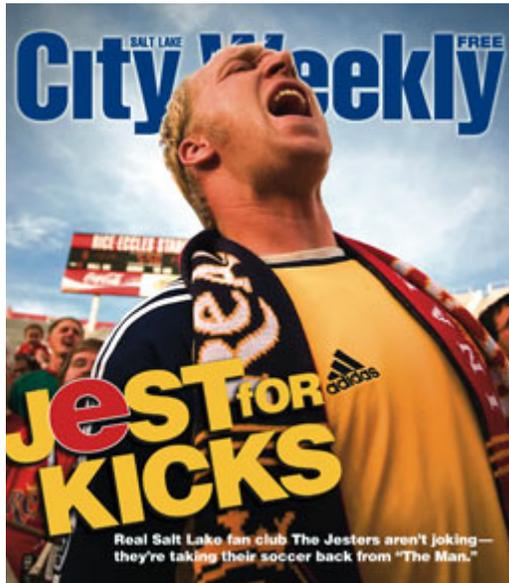


EDITORIAL

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Jest for Kicks

Real Salt Lake fan club The Jesters aren't joking—they're taking their soccer back from "The Man."



by [Duncan Moench](#)

More than a decade has passed since international soccer's highest competition was held in football stadiums across America. After the 1994 World Cup final at the Rose Bowl ended in a 0-0 tie, journalists yawned and reiterated what they had surmised for decades—soccer would never take hold in the land of the free and impatient. In a drive-through culture where people can't wait 10 minutes for a hamburger, how are they going to wait more than 15 minutes for a point to be scored?

However, in the land of Saints and Salt nearly 18,000 fans routinely show up every 10 days to watch professional soccer matches at the University of Utah's Rice-Eccles Stadium, the start-up home of Major League Soccer's Real Salt Lake.

A sport based on unity, subtlety and collective intensity just won't catch on in America's hyper-individualist culture, critics said. Yet, Salt Lake City fans show up to watch a team most experts dub among the world's sixth-tier (at best) professional soccer circuit. And they watch in a stadium designed for football.

When the U.S. national squad played a key World Cup qualifier match against Costa Rica earlier this summer, more than 40,000 red-blooded Utahns cheered their hearts out for the home team. It was a rarity in international competition, even at matches held on U.S. soil. Mainstays of the national squad repeatedly talked about how the crowd was one of the best they'd ever witnessed.

This March, state Sen. Curt Bramble, R-Provo, sponsored a bill effectively banning use of state tax money to help fund RSL's new soccer stadium. Days later he awoke to find the message "YOU HAVE DECLARED WAR" scrawled in chalk on his home's driveway. This took place more than a month before RSL played even one official game.

How has soccer frenzy taken hold in a city where Wonder Bread has a major presence?

Soccer isn't supposed to be American, and few states are thought of as more American than Utah. Is RSL's marketing strategy responsible for the franchise's success? Or did the team walk into a ready-made soccer culture as aberrant to the rest of America as polygamist clans? The best way to answer these questions is to look at the stories of the businessmen who brought the team here, the management they hired, and the fans who already plan their lives around RSL games with churchlike devotion but lie outside the demographic RSL has targeted so carefully, and in such a sanitized fashion.

Six blocks west of Rice-Eccles Stadium a youth soccer coach sets up two large red, blue and yellow banners in front of his modest brick duplex. Coach Josh Dennis is in his late 20s. He has short white hair, a sun-etched face, and chew in his mouth. He and a handful of other youth soccer coaches bought RSL season tickets the moment they went on sale last October.

If not for the thick black stripes of a Newcastle United jersey tucked into his khaki shorts, Dennis' white lamb chops might remind you of someone who drives with a gun rack and throws horseshoes in his back yard. Actually, Dennis does throw horseshoes in his front yard now and then. But given the three youth soccer teams he coaches, he has little time for it.

Dennis and a handful of fellow RSL season ticket holders call themselves "The Jesters"—a derisive counter to the group of RSL fans known as "The Loyalists." Striving to establish the first traditions of Salt Lake City soccer fandom, and even a version of Salt Lake City soccer hooliganism, The Jesters see The Loyalists as rivals.

The Loyalists have RSL management's official blessing, a Website for discounts on parking and ticket packages and are even registered as a legal nonprofit group. The Loyalists started with seven or eight hard-core, middle-aged fans that religiously attended

the games of the Utah Blitz, RSL's minor league predecessor. The group began coordinating with RSL officials as early as last fall in an effort to construct a presentable group of soccer fanatics that could display loud (but polite) enthusiasm for their club.

The group has bylaws and a code of conduct stating that their mission is to "make the atmosphere as family friendly as possible." The code of conduct stipulates no foul or offensive language, no consumption of alcohol and encourages swift reporting of anyone who throws objects onto the field or violates any of Rice-Eccles' rules (which prohibit consumption of alcohol) so they can be "promptly ejected."

All this breaks with the European and Latin American tradition of fanatical soccer supporters, being as much a menace as they are a blessing to the clubs they "support." Dennis and the Jesters find The Loyalists' code of conduct particularly offensive, but also believe in the importance of creating their own soccer traditions, rather than complying with cookie-cutter codes acceptable to RSL management. "We have our own idea of what a soccer fan should be," Dennis said.

It's 4:40 p.m. on a recent Saturday. The barbecue in back of Dennis' brick duplex is cooking steaks, Negro Modelo is chilling in the fridge, and Monterrey vs. Cruz Azul is on the living room TV screen. The big match between RSL and fellow expansion team CD Chivas USA begins at 7:30 p.m. Reggae music creeps through Dennis' open door out to the front yard where his red-and-blue checkered banner reads "WE ARE REAL" in white, hand-stenciled letters. Above every "e" are four yellow spikes resembling the floppy top of a royal jester's hat.

Another member of the Jesters, Eric Bliss, pops in through the open doorway. No knock is necessary. A bearded indie-rock guitarist, Bliss co-coaches two Firebirds teams and West High School's varsity girl's squad alongside Dennis. Dennis and James Hull, a roommate, chant in unison as Bliss enters:

"WE ARE..."

DAH – DAH

"REEE- AAL!!"

Bliss puts his fist in the air, bobs up and down with his knees in halfhearted enthusiasm, and quietly announces he has no sticks for the snare drum hanging over his shoulder. Dennis puts a finger to his lip, which bulges with a bit of chew.

"Maybe you could use hangers, man," Dennis replies in a half-serious, half-mocking tone.

Between bites of steak, Dennis asks if I had heard about the opposing player hit in the head during RSL's match against the San Jose Earthquakes two weeks earlier.

“I was sitting there watching the fight [between star RSL striker Clint Mathis and Earthquakes defender Craig Weibel] and then I saw the object—and it was really going ... And I was thinking to myself, ‘It might make it,’ and then ‘CLANK’ right into the dude’s head,” Dennis said. “I think it was a lighter.”

When I laugh at his story, Dennis looks me straight in the eye, and then points the fork for emphasis, “By the way—that’s *not* cool, we don’t condone any of that.”

The thumping BOPDWAH—BOPDWAH— BOPDWAH reggae beat of “Where is your love?” together with the rhythms of Mexican soccer on the TV is a hypnotically soothing combination, but it fails to prepare The Jesters for their trip to the stadium.

Finishing his steak, Dennis stands and announces with authority that in order to make the 6:45 p.m. train they needed to leave “five minutes ago.” The crew is slacking, Jesters must move out.

Real Salt Lake CEO Dean Howes was convinced pro soccer would succeed in Salt Lake City because it meshed well with the cultural cleanliness The Jesters reject.

“A wholesome family sport—a check. An educated base—a check ... and a growing Hispanic community—if you were building a Franklin scale of factors, we would have hit three stars,” Howes said in a South Temple conference room.

Utah consistently produces the highest percentage of children per capita in America. No surprise. But of those children, more are raised kicking soccer balls than in any other American city. The Utah Youth Soccer Association has an astounding 35,000 players—in addition to 80,000 parents and coaches—involved each year. Salt Lake City’s not known for ethnic diversity, but the valley’s Latino community is sizable. For them, soccer isn’t one of their favorite sports—it’s *the* sport. The sum of this population equation equals ... lots of young people playing soccer.

Howes’ office belongs to RSL’s sister company, SportsWest Productions. SportsWest is what Howes calls a “syndicator” of college sports broadcasts for most of the Mountain West region and the Western Athletic Conferences (NCAA). Howes worked in New York with Dave Checketts, RSL’s principal owner, at Sports Capital Partners (RSL’s main ownership group) for six years before returning to Salt Lake City to manage SportsWest. One of his primary tasks here was researching the possibility of acquiring rights to a major sports team’s marketing, and the more remote possibility of acquiring a team itself.

“We’d looked at baseball, a number of NBA teams, and NFL, NHL teams—everything except soccer really,” Howes said with a small chuckle.

Since they already controlled a sports media firm, Howes and Checketts sought the ideal “media bundle.” One night, the pair ran into the commissioner of MLS at a banquet and the gears slowly slid into place. Howes spent the next year meeting with Mark Abbott,

COO of MLS, whenever he could. Many times the only space available in Abbott's schedule was at various airports around the country.

Through those brief meetings with Abbott, and what Howes calls "doing diligence on the league," he became convinced that professional soccer could work in Salt Lake City. Howes admits the MLS is still "the little brother of the other major sports," but fervently believes there is something that distinguishes soccer from the rest of "the bigs" which soon will lead to its rise, and the others' eventual decline.

"If you look at all the major sports, they are scrambling to keep every fan they can get, whereas with soccer it has only begun—we've just got to figure out how to reach the people out there that are already interested," Howes said.

There are two keys to American soccer's eminent ascension: "The baby boomers are on the decline. Their children are just starting to get power ... and money. They didn't grow up playing soccer, but their kids did, and they appreciate the sport. One of the nice things here is—our fan base is locked in."

The second key is reaching America's Hispanic community, which the U.S. Census Bureau estimates will grow from 36 million to 102.6 million by 2050. Most of that growth will happen in the West. In Salt Lake County, Latinos currently make up 13.5 percent of the population. Howes believes the best way to reach Latinos—and bring them to MLS games—is to "treat them with respect." Howes adamantly believes the RSL organization is doing that. Most of RSL's advertisements and all its promotional literature—as well as game introductions and announcements—are bilingual.

Howes sees a unique soccer culture on display in Rice-Eccles Stadium. Most big city soccer games—like the ones he watched at Giants Stadium—are "totally segregated," he said. Howe argues that's not the case in Salt Lake City's soccer culture.

"At our crowds you'll have a family of five with their kids sitting right next to the 20-something fan, and three seats over you have a Hispanic family. The crowds are speckled and the fans interact directly," Howe said. "We don't have a naïve soccer population. There is great maturity going on."

Similar to the American tradition of bringing poster-board signs to professional basketball games, draping cloth banners behind the goal is a long-lived international tradition. There isn't a single soccer stadium in Europe or South America not plastered with them. Only six fan-made banners have been displayed at every RSL game so far. Dennis and his friend "Geoff Granger," who wishes to withhold his real name, made three of them.

Emulating the traditions they saw on the Fox Soccer Channel, Granger and Dennis constructed their banners during nightly get-togethers three weeks before RSL's April 16 opener.

They spent almost \$100 on the banners' construction, plus an indefinite amount on "coordinating" expenses in "business" meetings at Junior's Tavern on 500 South. They wanted a message—and lettering scheme—that was "somewhat whimsical, yet bold."

European banners tend to be straightforward pronouncements through symbols rather than language. They communicate the designer's identity and sympathies through regional emblems.

In America, the digital gaze of "jumbo-tron" culture has had strange effects on sporting traditions, creating a culture where signs boast quirky, greeting-card-like messages. Most are lighthearted plays on words that attract airtime from arena camera crews: "Deflate Air Jordan" or "The Mailman don't deliver on Sunday."

American signs are one-time-use only. European soccer banners are used for years on end. A fan goes to the local stadium expecting to see the same banners nearly every time. Granger and Dennis' banners are the intersection of these two traditions. Their banner "Fuerza Real," translated from Spanish, means "Royal Force." However, its intended meaning is more sarcastic, something along the lines of: "use the force ... the Royal force."

Granger hatched the idea for the banner last fall after becoming frustrated with Checkett's choice to give his franchise an "authentically inauthentic" nickname. The team's name, Granger said, has "nothing to do with Utah but reflects a great deal upon a state with a bit of an insecurity complex."

They hope the banner illustrates some of the "strange inconsistencies" reflected in what they see as Checketts' pandering to "populist Latin iconography." The "Real" moniker was borrowed from Real Madrid CF, arguably the world's most successful Hispanic soccer club. According to Granger, the nickname's populist appeal is contradictory with the "elitist connotations" entailed by royal imagery.

Dennis said it's important The Jesters create their own individual traditions around RSL games. "Future fans will look to what we do, it's an opportunity to establish something," Dennis says. Sports traditions create not only a sense of belonging, he said, but an "ownership over our own experience with the team."

If RSL officials are smart, they won't stand in their way.

Before Major League Soccer's 12th franchise had a name, Howes had a general manager in mind for the top spot at the new Trolley Square-based headquarters.

"I think since the beginning, the league has tried to be family oriented. We realize that so many of our supporters are so young. We have to coordinate around a soccer moms' mini-van schedule, practically. All that is a natural fit for Utah," RSL General Manager Steve Pastorino said. "It's one of the things that made me comfortable that things could work here."

Pastorino tells the story of how he was approached in the summer of last year to join the then-unnamed MLS franchise based in a city he'd never seen.

"I heard Salt Lake was going to get a team, but I admit I wasn't even thinking about it. Then Dean Howes called me on a Thursday and said, 'Frankly, we know more about you than you know about us. Can you be here on Tuesday for an interview?'— the conversation was about two minutes," Pastorino said.

After spending the past seven years in Chicago commuting an hour-and-a-half each way to his suburban home, those two minutes were enough. "The place sells itself, seeing the mountains was just about all it took for me," Pastorino said with a wide smile.

While the mountains might have sold his family on living in Salt Lake City, the "manageable" size of Salt Lake's market was not so immediately inspiring. "I hope the market is big enough," Pastorino remembers thinking when pondering Howes' offer.

In early 2004, the MLS created a list of 13 prospective cities that might receive an expansion franchise the following season. Houston, Seattle, and even some niche markets like Rochester got a mention. Salt Lake City was not on the list.

"Salt Lake came out of nowhere. It went from no mention, to an announcement 'Salt Lake's got a team,' " Pastorino recalled. He attributes that transformation to the power of Checkett's strong connections to the city and his resume as a national sports powerbroker.

One of RSL management's first tasks was coordinating with the Utah Youth Soccer Association (UYSA), which could bring hordes of children and parents to games. Scott Harward, UYSA's technical director, has been thrilled with RSL's interest and believes it gives children inspiration. However, he accepts that RSL's interest in UYSA is not altruistic. Harward says his organization provides RSL with "access to a great commodity—soccer-crazy moms and dads."

As a Salt Lake City native, Checketts was likely intuitively aware of the area's extensive soccer community. Pastorino said that Checketts believed "there has always been a great affinity for soccer in Salt Lake, but simply no outlet for it." While those beliefs are likely genuine, it seems that a key part of Checketts' decision to bring a team to Salt Lake City was his – and Howes' – belief that it would be easy to garner taxpayer funds for a soccer-specific stadium. With the enthusiastic support of Salt Lake City Mayor Rocky Anderson, that process appeared as if it would be straightforward until March, when Bramble's bill passed.

Howes admits Bramble's move at the Legislature was an "unpleasant shock" to RSL management. But he knows "with absolute certainty" no one in RSL was involved in chalking graffiti at the legislator's house. Despite Bramble's bill, Howes believes a reasonable compromise to build a soccer stadium remains possible. Whether that stadium

lands in Murray, Salt Lake City or Sandy depends in large part on which local lawmakers offer RSL the best deal.

Howes said that “in his heart” he would like to see the stadium built in downtown Salt Lake City. “Just close your eyes and you can envision it downtown, it’s a beautiful image, but we’ll make whatever choice is best from a business standpoint—and that could be at 9400 South, it could be 4400 South, and it could be downtown,” Howes said. “We could make any of them work.”

Salt Lake County Councilwoman Jenny Wilson questions why Rice-Eccles shouldn’t remain RSL’s home. A new stadium will cost upwards of \$60 million, and RSL wants taxpayers to fund almost half of it. Wilson asks why the Rice-Eccles field can’t be made wider for soccer. Creating the appropriate field for the players, and visuals for the fans, is a major priority to RSL. However, one of the main reasons the organization wants its own stadium is so it can control secondary revenue in the form of parking and concessions. Currently, the University of Utah gobbles up almost all of this money. This hurts RSL’s ability to turn a profit. Part of this issue is alcohol sales, which are a large part of any sporting-event revenues.

The University of Utah campus prohibits the sale of alcohol. Chris Hill, the U’s athletic director, appears unwilling to challenge this issue at all. Surely, one of the quickest ways to ruin the good will of the Legislature is by pushing the boundaries of alcohol laws.

Minutes before the U.S. National team’s first World Cup qualifier in Salt Lake City begins, a security guard in an orange golf shirt helps Dennis attach his “Fuerza” banner to the wall behind Rice-Eccles’ north goal. In front of metal-detector curtains left over from the Olympics, security officers at the entrance make Dennis open the bag containing his banner. Security officers stick their fingers inside the cylindrical bag but don’t find any weapons, nor do they find the flask Granger had hidden in the center of the banner.

Some members of The Jesters know how to sneak small amounts of alcohol into Rice-Eccles. However, they’ve no idea who might have “graffitied” Bramble’s house. They also have no idea how building a soccer stadium at 9400 South makes any sort of sense.

The Jesters don’t like the idea of sitting in a section of Rice-Eccles that offers a less-than-optimum soccer experience. Technically, their seats are located in the cheaper north goal area of the stadium, but so far The Jesters have been migrating toward where the loud and rowdy sit in the northeast corner. Fans don’t necessarily sit where their tickets indicate, and security officers passively allow anyone who wants to join the standing, shouting, and raucous drumming in what’s dubbed “The Loyalist section.”

Today they join “Sam’s Army,” the unofficial group of soccer supporters following the U.S. national team around the country in Deadhead fashion. The Jesters join them, first, by guzzling beers on tailgates before the game, and then by screaming and leaping up and down on bleachers in the south corner of Rice-Eccles. While Sam’s Army is the largest group of traveling supporters to the U.S. National squad, they are “unofficial” and

unbound by any codes of conduct. Granger believes there's a lot The Jesters can learn from Sam's Army. He's even brought a digital voice recorder so he can review their chants later with Dennis at Junior's Tavern.

Granger and Dennis are excited The Loyalists won't dominate today's section of hardcore fans. They can't identify with The Loyalists' compliant attitude. To The Jesters, The Loyalists are goose-stepping geeks. The night before the big match, the Jesters make group uniforms so their idols won't mistake them for RSL's officially approved fans.

Friday night was spent designing a Jester hat logo matching the embroidery of their "We Are Real" banner. In Dennis' back yard, inches away from an open Corona Light, Hull targets yellow "indoor/outdoor" spray paint through his stencil onto a generic blue T-shirt.

Ten feet away from Hull, in mock Superman pose, Granger runs across the tall clover weeds of Dennis' unplanted dirt. While at the Smith's superstore, Granger picked up a 5-foot American flag, now held across his neck by a duct-tape necklace slipped through the flag's brass ringlets.

Granger's wife shakes her head, teasing her husband that his outfit "works especially well with the cowboy hat."

With yellow spray paint still wet on his new uniform, Granger smiles wide. "I know," he says.

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