

Anheuser-Busch flexing its muscle in MLS expansion game?

St. Louis brewing giant is Major League Soccer's largest sponsor and advertiser

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Jeff Cooper keeps piling up his options.

And while his latest, the transfer of St. Louis Soccer Park from brewer Anheuser-Busch to his St. Louis Soccer United group, could be an important one, Cooper was quick to point out Thursday that the move is indeed only that - an option.

Cooper's group is furiously trying to shore up its bid for a Major League Soccer expansion franchise for St. Louis. Part of that bid is a training facility to go along with a soccer-specific stadium that would seat around 16,000. A stadium deal has been in place for more than a year for a site near Collinsville at the intersection of Interstates 255 and 55/70. That deal is still in place, Cooper said.

"The Collinsville site for the stadium has never been a problem for the league," Cooper said by phone from the United Kingdom, where he's meeting with investors and potential investors for the possible St. Louis team.

"I think as much as anything, our group getting (Soccer Park) is about our group's credibility. Anheuser-Busch has established that facility as one of the best in the nation for training and playing soccer. Our group being able to obtain it is huge, mainly because it's a partnership between us and MLS' largest and longest-standing sponsor, Anheuser-Busch, which I feel is the best company in the country."

St. Louis Soccer United's bid is one of four under consideration by MLS. Others are from groups in Portland, Ore., Vancouver and Ottawa. The league plans to pick two cities from those four. March 31 has been considered to be the deadline for the announcement, but MLS Commissioner Don Garber recently indicated that if the league needs to extend that deadline, it will do so.

A-B has long been a major advertiser and sponsor of sporting events. And even though the company went through major changes within the past year when it was merged with Belgian-based InBev, that commitment is expected to remain in place.

What is not expected to remain the same is A-B's "non-beer" ventures, such as its theme parks - and Soccer Park, known officially as the Anheuser-Busch Conference Center. Shedding itself of the cost of operating the facility is not a surprise. The fact that SLSU will be at the helm is a plus for the local group.

"St. Louis has always been at the top of A-B's list," Cooper said. "And even through its recent changes, it's obvious St. Louis is still a No. 1 priority for them."

Soccer Park is located along Interstate 44 near the Meramec River, just past the I-270 interchange. The 27-year-old facility features six full-size soccer fields, including two with artificial turf. Its main stadium seats 6,000, but could be expanded to seat around 10,000 fans. That would still be far below the size stadium MLS requires for its teams, but would likely be sufficient for the St. Louis Athletica, Cooper's team that will begin play in the newly formed league, Women's Professional Soccer, this spring.

"We'll of course explore all the possibilities," Cooper said. "But there is absolutely no problem with the Collinsville location."

SLSU also has under its umbrella the largest youth soccer club in the nation following the merger of Scott Gallagher, St. Louis Soccer Club and Metro United of Edwardsville/Collinsville. The club was recently named the top club in the nation for its youth development program by ClubRank, based on points awarded for full and youth national team call-ups, college players, and domestic and overseas professional rosters for 2008.

"We are very committed to the youth club and developing young soccer players," Cooper said. "That's all part of our approach to (MLS)."

The fact that the top youth soccer club in the nation could be part of a St. Louis MLS franchise means the pro team could benefit from a league rule stating a team has automatic free-agent rights to any players from its own youth club.

SLSU already has offices at Soccer Park, since its main youth club tenant has always been St. Louis Soccer Club (formerly Busch S.C.).

"We'll continue to keep offices there," Cooper said. "Our goal is to make it available to every club and league, not just our club."