

The 300-pound gorilla gets into the game - at long last

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The 300-pound gorilla has flexed its muscles. And you can bet it has the attention of Major League Soccer.

Anheuser-Busch, the St. Louis brewing giant that pumps millions of dollars each year into sports leagues around the globe, has stomped its feet and cleared its throat in the battle to see if its hometown will be awarded an expansion MLS franchise.

The timing is good. With the economy sliding to and fro, MLS Commissioner Don Garber has indicated that he's been concerned with the group of investors being assembled by Jeff Cooper's St. Louis Soccer United. Evidently there are plenty of millionaires, but not enough billionaires. Or maybe Garber doesn't like how the investors acquired their money. Who knows? The league has made Cooper jump through so many hoops, it puts Cirque du Soleil to shame.

And each time the league raises another hoop, Cooper obliges - he jumps through. Pretty soon, the league is going to run out of reasons to keep taking St. Louis for granted.

Hopefully, that will mean an MLS franchise.

To his credit, Cooper keeps a positive face on the process.

"MLS officials are great to work with," Cooper has said. "It's a great league and they are doing what they need to do to make sure it stays that way."

Wednesday it was announced that A-B is transferring ownership of its 27-year-old soccer park in Fenton to SLSU. Much has been made about the site being a possibility for a St. Louis MLS team's stadium. Cooper and his people will of course examine the possibility - after all they own it now and it wouldn't be good business to do otherwise.

But in the end, the stadium will be in Collinsville. It will be built on the acreage set aside in the stadium agreement between Cooper and the city.

Soccer Park will continue to be a great spot for youth clubs to play and train. But for an 18,000-seat stadium to be built there would, I'm afraid, not be feasible. And besides, a good portion of the site floods when the nearby Meramec overflows its banks.

Cooper is probably frustrated - most every soccer person in St. Louis is frustrated. But you would never know it from his demeanor. The guy is always positive.

"This is a turning point," Cooper said of the transfer of Soccer Park. ".....it shows the league how serious we are."

Cooper and I spoke via cell phone from the U.K., where he's visiting investors and potential investors, doing what Garber said he needs to do - shore up the investment group.

Jumping through another hoop.

After Miami's group bowed out of the running last week, the list of cities vying for the next two teams included St. Louis, Portland, Ore., Vancouver and Ottawa. The good money says that one team will go to Canada (likely Vancouver) and the other to a U.S. city.

So has it come down to St. Louis vs. Portland? Cooper doesn't like to look at it that way.

"I hope all the cities get teams," he said. "That's good for soccer and good for the league.

"At the end of the day, I hope even the folks who bowed out of this round get teams sooner or later.

"I just hope we get our team sooner."

The good news in all this is that A-B is in the game.

You want solid money, MLS? How about the world's largest brewer? A-B might not be on the official list of investors. You won't see either Anheuser or Busch on the list that includes Albert Pujols.

But the brewery is there and you don't have to squint to see it. After all, a 300-pound gorilla takes up a lot of space.