



Members of the Brickyard Battalion are fired up for the January 2013 announcement of the North American Soccer League team then known as "Indy Pro Soccer" (Indy Eleven photo).

# 'PITCHING' THE WORLD'S GAME

## Indy Eleven Scoring Early With Soccer Fans

Twitter was abuzz in April 2013 moments after Indianapolis' new professional soccer team – set to join the ranks of the North American Soccer League (NASL) – announced its nickname and logo. Some lauded the proclamation, while others expressed confusion over the Indy Eleven moniker.

By **Matt L. Ottinger**

“There was a mixed reaction, especially in the first hour of the announcement, as we monitored social media,” recalls Tom Dunmore, vice president of marketing and operations. He adds that early vitriol from some was soon mitigated once the historical ties to the 11th Volunteer Infantry Regiment during the Civil War were explained.

“But it built interest, and it was fun and engaging. I would rather drop something and get a huge response versus people not caring either way; that would be the worst that could happen.”

A year and a whopping 7,000 season tickets sold later, it appears any superficial apprehension fans may have had has waned. In fact, the team had to cap sales because its temporary field – Carroll Stadium on the campus of Indiana University-Purdue University Indianapolis – only seats 11,000 and the organization wants to allow group and single ticket sales.

“We could’ve sold 11,000 season tickets,” surmises president/general manager Peter Wilt, adding fans are paying \$25 to join a growing waiting list.

## Battlefield Indy

The initial support for the team has been driven by a group of enthusiasts referred to as the Brickyard Battalion – a collective pining for professional soccer in the Circle City. Wilt began interacting with the passionate group and soon a movement called “Build the Brickhouse” was formed.

“Our marketing strategy was not to come in and pretend the Battalion did not already exist, but continue to let them lead the way in how we thought about the identity of the team,” Dunmore reflects. “We used civic imagery in our logo, the checkers (in the design) pay homage to the Battalion, as well as the auto racing culture here, and we wanted to tie the team to the city. That’s critical for a soccer team to not be seen as minor league, but stand for the city and be proud to wear the colors and use that identity.”

Dunmore explains the team hired a Battalion member and professional designer (Patrick Cummings) to create the crest.

“We didn’t want to hire an agency to come up with a brand and use the latest trends

based on nationwide sports demographics; we wanted it to be authentic ... we wanted someone invested in the team and wanted it to represent him.”

Though marketing has been a focus, team officials understand the on-field action and environment must meet expectations.

“The atmosphere at the games needs to be cool and edgy too,” Dunmore offers. “We’ll have the Battalion section in the stands, singing and chanting and waving flags and jumping up and down – maybe doing things sometimes that aren’t 100% family friendly. But they’ll do it in their stands, and the families will be in their location. But it will drive the excitement.”

Wilt has over 25 years of professional soccer management experience under his belt. That has taught him that passion is what drives success in the sport – and latching onto a local identity is critical.

“There’s a tribalism, where the players are representing them – almost like college sports. Sometimes it takes generations to get that feeling ... but that sense of ownership has happened here in Indianapolis.”



The team’s name was announced (above; *photo by Bill Kruger/KrugerVisuals.com*) during an April 2013 ceremony on Monument Circle in downtown Indianapolis. Representatives from Honda and Diadora USA joined Indy Eleven in recognizing Honda as the franchise’s first corporate partner, as well as the unveiling of the team’s checkered jerseys and introduction of the first player in club history, Kristian Nicht, on October 1, 2013 (*Indy Eleven photos*).

## Leading the Way

Owner and Turkey native Ersal Ozdemir, a Purdue graduate and president and CEO of Keystone Construction Corporation, emanates a passion for the world's sport.

"For almost 99% of the world, soccer is their sport," he quantifies. "And it doesn't matter how good you are, you're a soccer fan. When I moved (to the United States) 21 years ago, it was difficult to watch soccer or follow European soccer."

Wilt helped Ozdemir survey and gauge support for a potential team in Indiana, and the interest pleasantly surprised him. He anticipates further ascension in the future.

"I think in 10 years, soccer will be in a different place in the United States (noting accessibility through television and the Internet adding to its popularity)," Ozdemir predicts. "Having local teams in the country now gives people a way to support the sport locally."

He concedes challenges arise during the launch of any business, but quality executive talent has helped Indy Eleven get the ball rolling.

"We need to make sure our front office and the team represent something that everybody's proud to cheer for," Ozdemir believes. "The pride component and character are big factors ... and of course we want to win. You have to really create an environment people want to be a part of rather than staying home and relaxing."

Meetings with other NASL owners have been productive and encouraging, he says. He's also focused on enhancing the team's on-field talent in order to capitalize on the game's national growth.

"This is the wealthiest country in the world. We think we can have one of the best soccer leagues in the world," Ozdemir contends. "We can be competitive and as fan support grows, we can get better and afford to pay more for players and hope to get to the same level as European and South American soccer. If we get to that point, we want to make sure we have one of the best teams in the U.S."



Indy Eleven owner Ersal Ozdemir developed a love for soccer while growing up in Turkey.

## Millennial madness

Wilt had served in the same capacity for Major League Soccer's Chicago Fire, among many other teams. He'd been evaluating interest in Central Indiana – and meeting with fans around the state (following our interview, he was heading to Muncie for the fifth time, in fact).

"People underestimate the size of the soccer community," he asserts. "They think it's just Hamilton County and a bunch of families. They don't get how big the Millennials are and to a certain extent the ethnic community – although that's not what's driving us."

"I could tell the market was here. When I first came down here, I knew there were a lot of soccer supporters, but I wasn't sure it would convert to support for a local team. To a certain extent, that's been a surprise."

America's young adults are now embracing soccer and it's carrying over into an enthusiastic audience, according to Dunmore.

"They played it and now want to participate, which wasn't the case a generation ago," he says. "Now they're watching English Premier League on weekends at (Indianapolis pubs) Chatham Tap or Union Jack, watching World Cup and following the U.S. national team. They're also playing the FIFA video game, which has been a huge part of soccer's rise, as odd as that sounds."

From a marketing standpoint, he anticipates the Indy Eleven brand will resonate with its supporters.

"Our look and feel are something that a 25-year-old in Broad Ripple will think is cool," Dunmore predicts. "That will make it appeal to kids who want to be like their older brother or sister, and for younger parents who still want to be cool."

He adds that merchandise sales have been "amazing" compared to expectations.

"We've been selling out on our online store, and jersey pre-orders have been in tremendous numbers. Scarves are selling like hotcakes."

Yet Millennials are just one of the three key demographics the team is marketing to. The others: youth soccer participants and their families, as well as the Hispanic community.

Local support from soccer fans of varying demographics was also reinforced last August when Lucas Oil Stadium hosted a Guinness International Champions Cup match between Chelsea and Inter Milan – an event that attracted nearly 42,000 spectators.

## Raising the bar

Businesses are also catching soccer fever. Larry Linde, director of corporate partnerships and broadcasting, explains the team will exceed budget by garnering over \$1 million in sponsorships.

"Generally speaking, sponsorships are going incredibly well, though we've announced very few of those (at the time of this interview)," he offers.

At the moment, the Indiana National Guard is on board and some other soon-to-be-named corporations have committed. One brand benefiting from a great deal of visibility will be jersey sponsor Honda. Greensburg-based Honda Manufacturing of Indiana, LLC (HMIN) and the Central Indiana Honda Dealers are partnering in the sponsorship.

"We feel this partnership provides a tremendous opportunity for our plant and the entire Honda family," explains Anita Sipes, HMIN corporate communications manager. "It gives us direct access to a broad range of Hoosiers to tell them about



Veteran German goalkeeper Kristian Nicht takes a goal kick during the team's scrimmage against Major League Soccer's Sporting Kansas City. Indy Eleven played three MLS teams during its first preseason training camp in Arizona in February (Reid Sprenkel photo).

our manufacturing facility, job opportunities and our Honda products.”

She adds that Honda will include its associates through ticket giveaways and events with the team.

Indy Eleven games will also be broadcast to a local audience on WNDY-TV. Television sponsors will gain exposure with the fans at the game as well.

“There will be a video board in Carroll Stadium,” Linde explains. “The feed will be the same as the broadcast feed – so the sponsors that buy television broadcasts of the games will also get in-stadium exposure.”

Broadcasting live soccer will signify a new venture in Indiana sports television.

“Indy Eleven has demonstrated popularity with ticket sales, and we felt it would attract some viewers to the station as something different and new,” reveals Jeff White, WNDY and WISH-TV general manager.

He understands broadcasting a sport on such a large field with constant action will pose new challenges and opportunities, but White believes the exposure will help all involved.

“We’re excited. I think there will be an extreme amount of curiosity about the team and professional soccer in general. Seeing the team (on TV) may motivate some people to say, ‘Let’s take the family and go down there next week and watch the game.’”

## A league of gentlemen

The NASL began in the 1960s, but was disbanded nearly two decades later and then rebirthed in 2009. It’s considered a second tier league – while Major League Soccer (MLS) represents the top division in the U.S. – and will feature 10 teams in 2014.

Wilt describes the complexity of the NASL now, noting its uniqueness.

“The league is a little dynamic and growing into an identity,” he articulates. “It’s a very independent, entrepreneurial identity, and it’s different than the MLS business model. The other division I and III leagues in the country are more centrally directed. This league allows

teams to create their own destiny a little bit. New teams, like ours, are making quite the impact locally.”

Rumors abound that the NASL may one day become affiliated with MLS or even operate in a promotion/relegation partnership that might work similarly to the English Premier League.

“That’s talked about within NASL, but it has to make sense for all parties – and at this point that doesn’t make sense for MLS,” he points out. “And frankly, NASL teams need to prove we can operate at a first division standard. But we’re well on our way; selling 7,000 season tickets months before the season starts is more than first division standards.”

He argues Indy Eleven’s corporate support also ranks similar to MLS teams, as well as the quality of its staff. There are concerns, however, that need to be addressed when it comes to facilities. Carroll Stadium, initially constructed for track and field events, has no showers or running water, and portable toilets and outside concession vendors will be brought in to accommodate fans during matches.

In early 2014, the team launched a plan for an \$87 million, 18,500-seat stadium – supported primarily by public tax money generated by the team’s operation.

“Our facility is not first division standard – but our vision of a stadium is,” Wilt states. “If we get there, that would go a long way in saying to U.S. Soccer – and it would have to be a critical mass of NASL teams, not just us – that we’re first division standard off and on the field.”

Indy Eleven will eventually get its shot at MLS competition in the U.S. Open Cup Championship, which allows the leagues to compete against each other in one tournament. (In fact, Wilt is the proud owner of four U.S. Open Cup rings – all earned with the Chicago Fire.)

With Indianapolis soccer history consisting of ill-fated franchises like the Twisters, Blast and many others, Indy Eleven hopes to build a new foundation and connection with fans.

“People were afraid to attach their heart to what might be another fly-by-night team. We had to prove that this is different,” Wilt concludes.

**RESOURCE:** Indy Eleven at [www.indyeleven.com](http://www.indyeleven.com). Single game tickets start at \$10, and Indy Eleven’s first home match is April 12 against the Carolina RailHawks | Anita Sipes, Honda Manufacturing of Indiana, LLC, at [www.indiana.honda.com](http://www.indiana.honda.com) | Jeff White, WISH-TV and WNDY-TV, at [www.wishtv.com](http://www.wishtv.com)