

# The Rise of MLS

An Interview with Anastasia Danias Schmidt,  
Executive Vice President and General Counsel, Major League Soccer



LAFC's Banc of California Stadium

**EDITOR'S NOTE** Anastasia Danias Schmidt is a key member of the league's strategic and operational leadership. In addition to serving as a core member of the labor bargaining team, she oversees legal and business affairs, including corporate governance, policy, litigation, expansion, player matters, intellectual property and commercial transactions. Prior to joining MLS, Danias Schmidt made history as the most senior woman ever in the National Football League's



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(NFL) legal department, serving as SVP and Deputy General Counsel and overseeing the league's most high-profile litigation. She advised on key legislative priorities, and counseled the Commissioner, ownership and senior management on every aspect of the league's business. Danias Schmidt has been honored for her work by being named to Sports Business Journal's 2012 Forty Under 40 class, recognized as the 2014 Lawyer of the Year by the Hellenic Lawyers Association of NY, included in the Legal 500's GC Power List (2016-17) and receiving the Women's Legal Award at the 2019 Women, Influence and Power ceremony. Danias Schmidt has also been featured in several publications, including Fortune, Modern Counsel, and Marie Claire. She has taught sports law as an Adjunct Professor at New York Law School and as a lecturer at Cardozo Law School and Fordham School of Law. Danias Schmidt graduated from Rutgers College and Fordham School of Law, and prior to joining the NFL she was an associate at the law firm Hughes Hubbard + Reed.

**ORGANIZATION BRIEF** Headquartered in New York City, MLS ([mls.com](http://mls.com)) features 29 clubs throughout the United States and Canada, including future expansion teams in Austin, Miami, Nashville, St. Louis and Sacramento. With players from more than 72 different countries, MLS is the most diverse sports league in the world and has become a league of choice for dynamic players in the prime of their careers. The talented players, combined with a passionate, millennial-fueled supporter culture, provide an exhilarating live sports and entertainment experience for fans of all ages.

**What excited you about the opportunity to join Major League Soccer?**

I started at the NFL as a very junior lawyer and I was primarily focused on litigation and intellectual property (IP). Over time, my reach and responsibilities grew. My role expanded from IP and litigation to focusing on matters that spanned all of the league's business – from media strategy and business prioritization to the on the field product. I was also able to work closely with senior league and club executives on a wide variety of legal matters.

The role at MLS was attractive because I am able to leverage my nearly 20 years of experience in sports to help shape the rise of one of the most exciting, competitive and successful leagues in the world. Having a leadership role that focuses on the league's strategy and operation will allow me to dive into issues in a much deeper way – all before the 2026 FIFA World Cup, which will be hosted by the United States, Canada and Mexico, and will be one of the most powerful sporting events in the history of North America.

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**Will you highlight MLS' growth and expansion?**

MLS has expanded significantly more than any other major global sports league since 2005, adding 19 teams. As we approach our milestone 25th season in 2020, we will be welcoming Miami and Nashville to the league. In 2021, Austin will join and then St. Louis and

Sacramento will be taking the pitch in 2022. One incredible outgrowth of that expansion is the development of soccer-specific stadiums. It's been game-changing for the league and for our fans. MLS will have a minimum of 27 soccer stadiums in the next few years and the investment in these state-of-the-art facilities will be in excess of \$3 billion.

**MLS has a deeply engaged fan base. What is it about the sport and the league that has built such a passionate and engaged fan base?**

MLS fans are different than other leagues – they are young, tech savvy, diverse and deeply engaged in the soccer community. Our clubs and the league have done an incredible job of embracing that fan enthusiasm – not only seeding it, but then growing it at the local level and as part of our national initiatives as well.

**Will you discuss MLS' commitment to diversity and inclusion?**

Our player population and our fan base is among the most diverse in North America. MLS WORKS, the league's community outreach initiative, has a platform called "Soccer for All" that is dedicated to providing an environment in which staff, players, partners and fans are treated with dignity and respect. Those values are at our core and are reflected in our front office as well. Commissioner Garber has built an inclusive corporate culture that prioritizes integrity, respect, diversity and teamwork and that has really made this a place that I love to be a part of.

MLS is among the most diverse workplaces where 40 percent of our staff are women. Our President and Chief Administrative Officer, JoAnn Neale, is a senior leader in this organization and I'm just thrilled that I can be a part of this culture and workforce.

**How important is it for you to be a part of an organization that is purpose-driven and deeply engaged in the communities it serves?**

It's incredibly important. One of the many reasons that I love being in sports is how deeply we can connect with and support the communities where we live and play our games. The impact that MLS WORKS has and the ability for sports and leagues to support local communities and to support social justice causes is among one of the key reasons that I love being in this industry. We are able to support positive social change in a way that very few other industries can. ●