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# Women's pro soccer to return to Bay Area as NWSL awards team to star-studded bid

Four former U.S. national team stars — Brandi Chastain, Leslie Osborne, Danielle Slaton and Aly Wagner — have brought a National Women's Soccer League team to the Bay Area



The new National Women's Soccer League team is coming to the Bay Area, thanks in part to (from left) Brandi Chastain, Leslie Osborne, Aly Wagner and Danielle Slaton's efforts. (Photo courtesy of Allison+Partners Studio)



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Some of the biggest women's sports stars in Bay Area history are about to change the region's sporting landscape.

Four former U.S. national team stars and Santa Clara Broncos — Brandi Chastain, Leslie Osborne, Danielle Slaton and Aly Wagner — have completed their nearly three-year mission to bring a National Women's Soccer League (NWSL) team to the San Francisco Bay Area.

The NWSL announced Tuesday morning that the league has awarded expansion rights to its 14th team to an investment group led by the four former U.S. women's national team stars and Sixth Street, a global investment firm, and other prominent women executives and community leaders.

"This is a monumental occasion," said Chastain, a primary star of the 1999 World Cup. "The impact that women's soccer specifically is having on the sports landscape and business sector is something that we've been talking about for so long and we believed in. To see it coming back to the bay is truly incredible."

The team, which will announce its name and branding in the weeks ahead, will kick off in the spring of 2024. The club has not yet identified a home stadium, but it is likely to play at San Jose's PayPal Park, home of the Earthquakes.

The quartet of Chastain, Osborne, Slaton and Wagner — referred to as the "Founding Football Four" in the release announcing the news — has been working toward this moment and this team since the summer of 2020.

"I can't tell you how many hours and the amount of work that's been put in by us four and the team — countless calls, meetings, it was crazy," Osborne said. "But this has been our passion. This is what we wanted. The commitment that this team has been putting in, on top of everything else that we do with our other jobs and being moms and everything else, showcases what this group is about."

The roots of that passion go back all the way to their childhoods in San Jose, where three of the four grew up: Chastain, 54, went to Archbishop Mitty, while

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Wendy Slaton left 42nd Street Elementary in Oakland, 20 miles away, to attend the

Chastain and Wagner both remember Brazil taking over Los Gatos for months, practicing at Santa Clara, playing against the U.S. at Stanford on the Fourth of July. The San Jose natives got an up-close look at the fervor that soccer can bring to a community.

"I immersed myself in that situation not having any idea what I was getting into," said Wagner, who was 13 that summer. "The passion and the joy and really the connection to the game, it changed my life and it made me see the way the world saw football and what was possible in football."

The quartet's paths initially crossed when Wagner, Slaton and Osborne broke through and won Santa Clara's first national championship in 2001 with Chastain, a former star as a Broncos player, as an assistant coach under Jerry Smith.

Each played in dozens of matches for the U.S. women's national team. They all played professionally in both of the NWSL's preceding leagues, the Women's United Soccer Association (WUSA) and Women's Professional Soccer (WPS). Both of those leagues had Bay Area teams, but the San Jose CyberRays and the WUSA folded after three years, and FC Gold Pride lasted for only two seasons in the WPS, even though it won a title.

The NSWL has persisted and will enter its 12th year next spring, welcoming two new teams, with the Bay Area team and the Utah Royals bringing the league to 14 teams. All four women have done well for themselves off the pitch, but they knew they needed to find some financial help to pay the rapidly increasing expansion fee and fund the team.

They found that partner in Sixth Street, which already has a stake in the NBA's San Antonio Spurs and soccer giants Real Madrid and Barcelona. Co-founder and CEO Alan Waxman wants to be clear: The \$125 million total initial investment — including a record \$53 million expansion fee and \$35-\$50 million for a future training facility — is not a charity case.

"We're putting our money where our mouth is," Waxman said. "When you look at the trends and the data, five to seven years from now, this is going to look massively undervalued."

While Sixth Street is the majority investor and Waxman will be serving on the league's board of governors, Wagner will serve alongside him as co-chair on the club's board of directors.

"It was more about the institutional knowledge, the added value that these individuals could bring to the table," Wagner said of the board additions. "It's a really well-rounded group, and I think we're incredibly proud that we didn't cast a wide net. It was very selective."

After all of the work they've put in, reaching Tuesday is a triumphant moment for the "Founding Football Four." And yet, Tuesday is truly Day 1 of the rest of their lives.

"'Welcome to the starting line' is a little bit what it feels like, and yet we've already run a marathon in some ways," Slaton said. "But this is the fun stuff. This is like opening day of the World Cup, opening game of the Olympics. Nobody sees the work that goes into getting to that moment — they see the celebration, they see the fun stuff, and the fun stuff's coming our way."

They've achieved the dream of getting the team. The goals now are crystal clear to this group. When asked about building a team that can win championships on the pitch, Wagner retorted, "Can? Or will?"

"This group doesn't set out to do anything average," Wagner said. "This group, this collective group, if we're not winning, we're doing something wrong. And so we want to entertain but we want to bring championships to the Bay Area. We want to put out, on the field, a product that the communities of the Bay Area can be proud of.

"So we're going to win, but we're going to entertain when we do it. And that's a big ask, but I think, if there's anyone that knows how to do it, we've got some pretty good people in our back pocket."

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