

In an announcement likely to turn some heads in both professional and youth soccer circles in America, club giants Chicago Magic have formed a partnership with French club AS Monaco.



AS Monaco President Jerome de Bontin

New AS Monaco President Jerome de Bontin, who has lived in Chicago and been involved with Magic since the days when his sons played for Magic Director of Coaching Mike Matkovich, said in a news release that the alliance will be a deep one, and not symbolic.

"This allegiance is groundbreaking for both sides. AS Monaco is committed to an alliance with all levels of soccer in the Chicago Magic program and their U16 & U18 youth academies will be the foundation of our combined efforts," de Bontin said. "The Magic is at the forefront of soccer in the United States."

Perhaps the most significant aspect of the partnership as it begins this summer is that Monaco will cover all expenses of players and coaches for the U16 and U18 USSF Developmental Academy teams. Among many positive responses to the new USSF venture, prohibitive costs have typically been a detracting factor. As with some MLS-affiliated programs, Magic will now be able to offer participation in the program free of charge.

Matkovich also said an exchange program, probably beginning this winter, will allow American players the chance to train overseas for possible identification as well as bringing Monaco coaches to the U.S. to conduct training and clinics for American players and coaches.



Magic Director of Coaching Mike Matkovich

Matkovich, speaking Monday from Los Angeles where he serves as an assistant coach with Chivas USA, was predictably enthusiastic about the announcement.

"It's something we've been talking about for a few years. It didn't happen overnight. It finally happened with Jerome's appointment (as Monaco chairman)," he said. "He's seen what we can do as a club and he's been impressed with our standards and methods. Jerome has also been involved in US Soccer quite a bit. He's had insights on the game at the grassroots level, so it's helped him get some insight and he's helped give us some vision."

Matkovich acknowledged that the French club's interest is primarily in helping develop and identify players who could become 1st team players for the professional club.

"They are going to put in an academy system in the U.S. Hopefully a player can move into the Monaco youth program itself or even the Monaco 1st team," he said. "Let's be realistic – most of the guys we produce are still going to enhance the American system – 97 percent of them will still be going on to get a college education and play there, so it's a win-win for everybody. It provides funding for a program that obviously we badly need. We need some outside sources taking pressure off the better players who otherwise have to pay to play."

While competing with free-of-charge MLS teams, including the Chicago Fire, has been an issue for some top youth clubs, Matkovich said that was not the impetus behind the decision to join forces with Monaco.



Magic players may soon benefit from partnership.

"From our club's standpoint, this evolved before MLS started funding their own programs. It didn't happen just because of them," he said. "But I think in some ways – the more soccer in the U.S. becomes free, the better it becomes for everyone. Individual clubs have to find ways to become creative, ways where funding comes from other sources other than the player himself. As this goes forward, there may be other youth clubs who join in something like this, whether through sponsoring or joining with professional clubs. Obviously at some point everybody looks for some return on the product, just like any business does. That will be the key at the end, to see if they can get some splash."

Matkovich added that some details of the partnership will still play out over the next few years, but added that the club teams will be called Chicago Magic/AS Monaco beginning with the fall academy season. He alluded to the possibility of bringing in top players from other parts of the country, but qualified that statement saying he's not convinced that removing a player from his family environment at a young age is always the best move, even soccer-wise.

"There aren't clear cut answers for everything," he said. "We'll be evaluating a lot of it as we move forward, but we are looking forward to it."