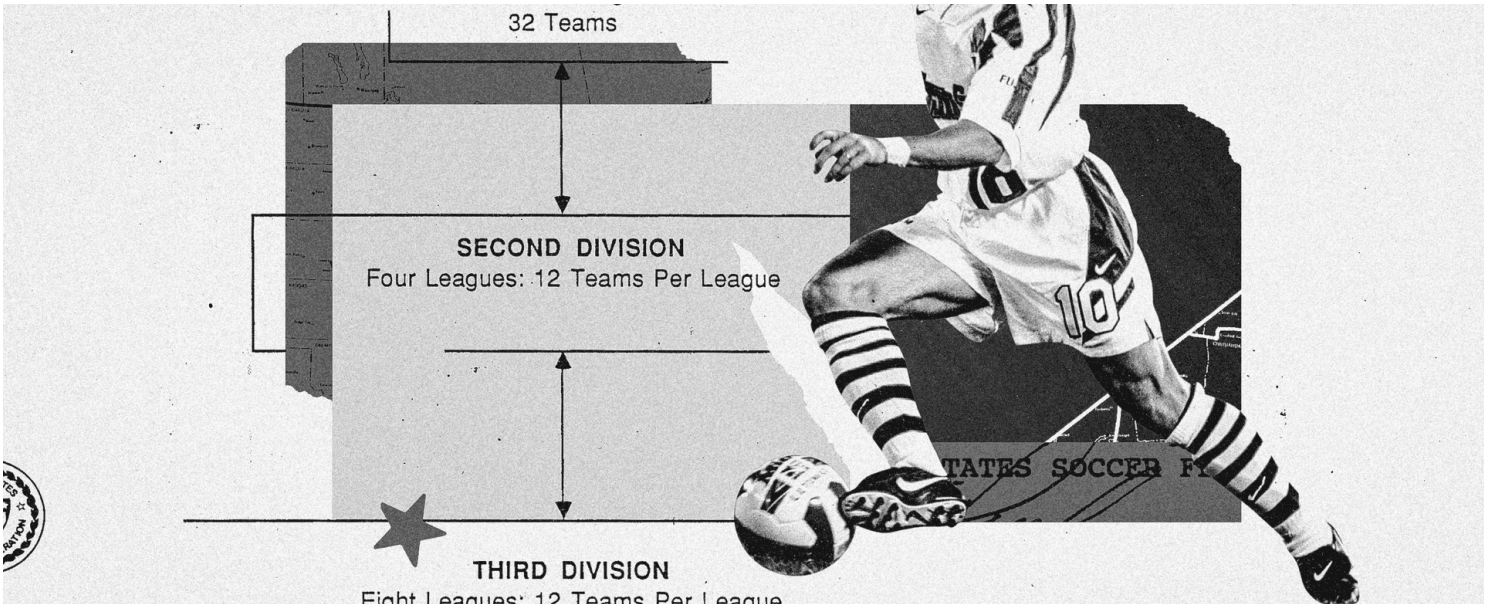

Long before USL's vote, U.S. Soccer had visions of promotion and relegation

Pablo Maurer
April 3, 2025

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The National Soccer Hall of Fame's storage warehouse in North Carolina is like something out of "Raiders of the Lost Ark," a veritable treasure trove of American soccer gems. Anything and everything that's not on display at the Hall of Fame in Frisco, Texas, lives in this dusty old room.

The shelves at the place contain thousands of relics from American soccer's lengthy history. Some are valuable — patches and uniforms worn by long-dead players and teams — and others are less impressive, like the collection of Alexi Lalas CDs, or a murder mystery (supposedly) penned by Pelé.

On the left side of the room, not far from the disembodied head of Striker, the 1994 World Cup mascot, there's a collection of bankers boxes. In one of them lives a curious document. It's a four-page press release written on behalf of U.S. Soccer Federation president Werner Fricker. It's undated, but contextual clues probably put it somewhere late in 1989 or early 1990.

The U.S. had just been awarded the 1994 World Cup in 1988, but FIFA's blessing came with a stipulation: by 1992, America would need a top flight soccer league. The country hadn't had one to speak of since the North American Soccer League collapsed after the 1984 season and FIFA wasn't keen on hosting the world's biggest football event in a country that couldn't support a soccer league of its own.

The press release is full of the usual American soccer platitudes, bragging about the popularity of the game amongst American kids and the diversity of the U.S. populace. A few pages in, though, things get interesting.

It's there where the federation lays out, in the broadest of strokes, a plan for America's brand-new soccer ecosystem. Those details were gleaned from a longer, 18-page plan – one that hasn't been publicly seen in years – authored by a pair of young U.S. Soccer executives: Scott LeTellier, and now-former U.S. Soccer president Sunil Gulati.

Former U.S. Soccer president Sunil Gulati. (Photo by Robin Alam/Icon Sportswire/AP Images)

"The U.S. Soccer Federation has developed a plan for the reorganization of professional soccer in the United States," reads the press release. "The plan calls for a First, Second and Third Division professional structure, with a system of promotion and relegation that will be unique to American professional sports. Under the new system, any community in America, provided it meets the proper standards, could field a team in the new professional league."

The USL recently became the first American professional league to adopt promotion and relegation, a potentially historic move that could significantly alter the landscape of the game in the U.S. The league is aiming to adopt the new structure in 2028, right as it launches a new first-division league.

Forty years earlier, though, the USSF, under Fricker's leadership, tried to make it a fundamental tenet of any professional league that would receive its blessing. How seriously that concept was taken has been the subject of debate for years.

Like so many figures in the early history of the American game, Werner Fricker, who passed away in 2001, started his life elsewhere. Born in Yugoslavia, Fricker and his family fled Europe during the upheaval that followed World War II, landing in Philadelphia. He became a fixture on the area's ethnic teams and featured for the U.S. men's national team in the mid-60s. In the 70s, he joined the federation and became its president in 1984, not long after the U.S. lost its bid to host the 1986 World Cup.

Fricker was by most accounts a serious man, almost singularly focused on the game of soccer. His view of the sport was formed by his early years in Europe, and he never really let go of it. He'd witnessed the rise and fall of the NASL, along with a host of smaller leagues, and Fricker often struggled to wrap his head around the wholesale Americanization of the sport itself.

"His reason for existence was to see the United States national team fully flourish and to win a World Cup in his lifetime," LeTellier, who had gotten his own exposure to the sport of soccer as a student in Germany, told *The Athletic*. "Both of us, and I think others at the federation, understood how the game was played abroad and we'd both been exposed to how exciting pro/rel was, both to the teams getting promoted and to the teams going down."

Fricker had been instrumental in the bid to host the 1994 World Cup, but that task paled in comparison to the road ahead. The American club soccer landscape, at the time, was bleak at best, composed of a collection of regional lower leagues alongside the once-popular Major Indoor Soccer League (MISL), by then on life support. The

public consciousness.

It was in this environment that U.S. Soccer took a swing at laying out its vision for what America's future soccer ecosystem would look like. They did so, in part, at the behest of FIFA, who'd come back to the federation after awarding them the World Cup with two requests: lay out your television plan for the tournament itself, and lay out your plans for your national and club teams.

Fricker turned to Gulati, among his closest advisors, and to LeTellier, a lawyer at the federation who'd assisted with the World Cup bid. The two, along with a handful of others, were tasked with crafting a plan forward for the federation. In Fricker's view, the plan focused on three main goals: developing the national team, building out a developmental system for the USMNT and, lastly, "the development of a sophisticated professional league structure encompassing three divisions in a promotion and relegation system."

United States Soccer Federation
World Cup **USA** 1994

TO THE MEMBERS OF THE NATIONAL COUNCIL: July 30, 1988

Some time ago, I asked a number of individuals to work on the development plan for soccer in the United States. In general terms, the purpose of such a plan must be to raise the competitive level of soccer in the United States. The attached document, while being far from comprehensive, is a first step which deals with three important parts of this program.

In terms of development, three distinct periods must be delineated. Number 1, the short run which is perhaps best marked by the period through the 1990 World Cup; number 2, the medium term which incorporates the period from 1991 through the 1994 World Cup; and number 3, the long run, which, of course, takes the game into the 21st century.

For each of these periods it is essential to set realistic goals and do everything within the power of those within the game to see that these goals are met and that soccer is brought to the highest possible level. It must be clear that while winning the World Cup is the ultimate goal of any Federation development program, other goals and targets must also be set and realized.

This development plan will primarily emphasize the short and medium term periods discussed above while the long terms goals although, of course, equally important, will necessarily require much more time and careful nurturing at the grass roots level.

Thus this document will deal primarily in three areas: 1) the development of a highly competitive National Team in the near future; 2) a multi-layered development system to enable the National Team to be competitive through the '90's; and 3) the development of a sophisticated professional league structure encompassing three divisions in a promotion and relegation system.

The future holds many challenges as we all strive to take the game to higher levels in the United States. I ask all of you to join me in accomplishing this end.

Sincerely yours,
UNITED STATES SOCCER FEDERATION

Werner Fricker
President

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across the entirety of the U.S. A second division would feature four regional leagues of 12 teams each, while a massive third division setup would feature 96 teams divided across eight leagues. The second and third tiers of the proposed pyramid would be regionalized, much like the lower leagues in Germany that Fricker had grown up watching in the mid-20th century.

The federation left itself plenty of wiggle room within the plan, allowing for each league to ramp up to the eventual total and operate with as few as six teams and to thoroughly evaluate the financial viability of any new team it admits. In the second and third tiers of the pyramid, only 24 of the 144 teams would be professional, with the remainder being amateur sides. It's also worth noting that, until the envisioned goal of 32 first- and 12 second-division teams was met, any ownership group could buy its way into the first division. Only after both leagues were at full capacity would promotion and relegation commence.

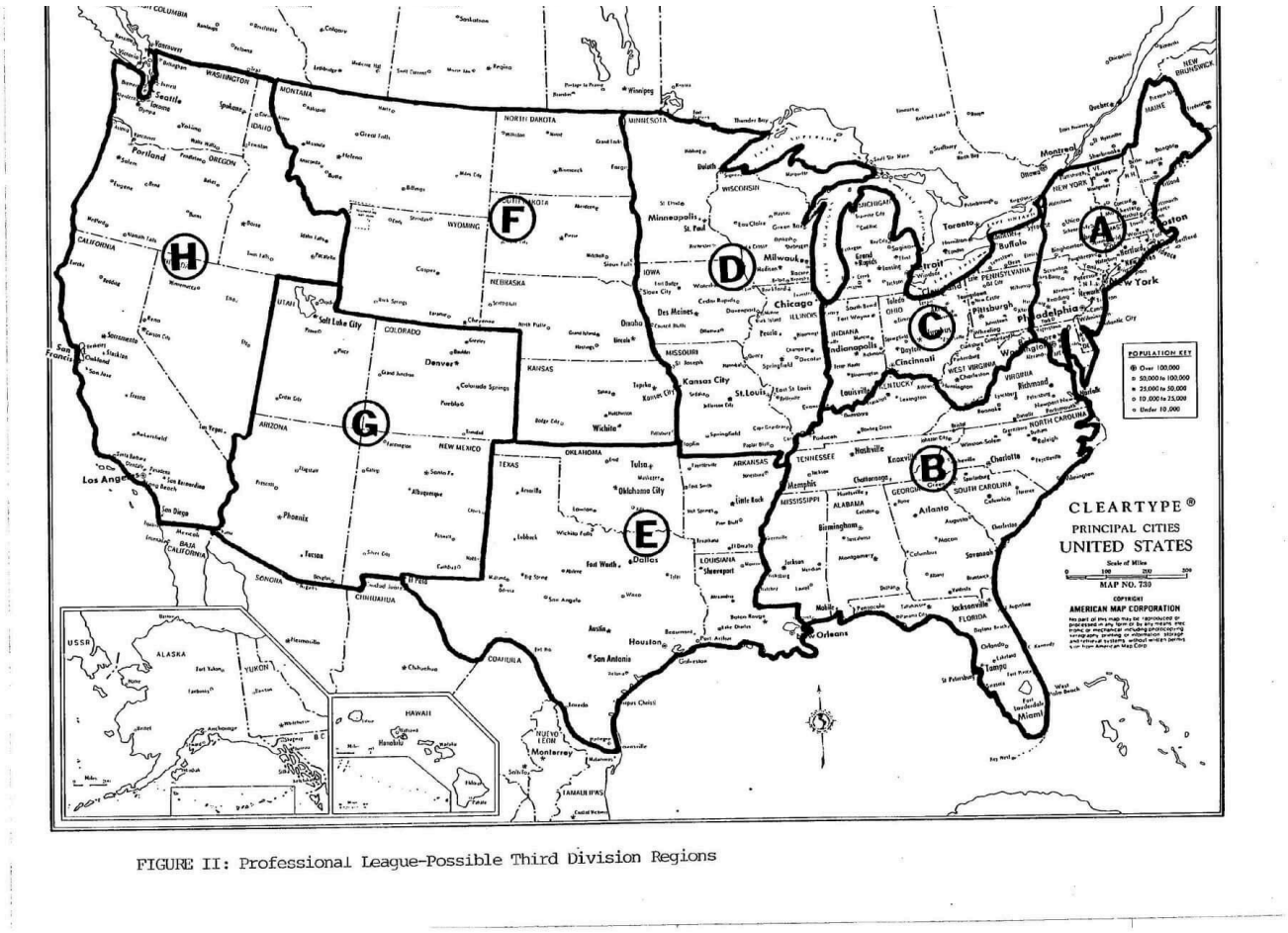

FIGURE II: Professional League-Possible Third Division Regions

How U.S. Soccer envisioned splitting up the country for its regionalized third-division leagues. (Courtesy of National Soccer Hall of Fame archives)

As is the case globally, teams that earned promotion to the first division would have to meet certain standards in terms of economic viability, stadium size and condition and youth development. The plan added a curious caveat as well, that teams in the first division would be subject to "standards with respect to the number of non-United States citizens eligible to play" on any given team.

"Part of my thinking, at the time, was that we had this unique situation where there was no real existing league to speak of," LeTellier said. "So our thinking was that if you form this league with promotion and relegation in mind, that's what people would buy into, they'd put that in their calculus when they're paying expansion fees and whatnot. And secondly, it really did give us an opportunity to distinguish ourselves from other leagues in the United States."

brutal reality faced by anybody starting a professional league in the United States.

"When you're doing stuff on a blackboard and you don't have real people with real money involved, you can draw it up any way you want," Gulati said, nearly four decades later. "Then, when theory and desire hit practice, which is what happened afterward — we went out and tried to figure out how to get people to invest in a league — things can end differently."

With the rough outline of a plan in place, Gulati, along with others at the federation, set out to find potential investors to bring the vision to life. Those conversations started in the late 80s, and were largely fruitless, Gulati remembers, until the group that would eventually become MLS came along.

The group was led by Alan Rothenberg, an L.A.-area lawyer who had his own history with the game of soccer. Rothenberg was the former owner of the NASL's Los Angeles Aztecs and he'd watched that league collapse.

Curiously, Rothenberg was by then the federation's president as well. Fricker was by all accounts a giant of the game in the U.S. and he's still considered one — U.S. Soccer's annual award for off-field contributions to the game of soccer bears his name — but he was never particularly concerned with making any friends, particularly in

"Werner's life was soccer, and he didn't suffer people who did not share that enthusiasm. Particularly with journalists. He didn't like doing interviews, he didn't understand what their job was," LeTellier recalled. "He thought they should all be promoting the national team, like an external public relations department. He made a lot of enemies in a way, with that attitude, and in some ways he invited the opening that allowed Alan to run for office in 1990. He was a really tough guy, even if I greatly enjoyed working with him."

Former U.S. Soccer president and MLS chairman Alan Rothenberg. (Photo by Darrell Ingham/Allsport/Getty Images)

That's where Rothenberg came into the picture, and where many elements of Fricker's plan went out the window, pro/rel included. With the strong backing of FIFA, Rothenberg was a late entrant into the 1990 race for USSF president. Rothenberg was charismatic and business-savvy, a far cry from the old guard that had run the

"I don't beat up people because I enjoy beating up people," Rothenberg once told the Los Angeles Times. "But if I have to leave some strewn bodies in order to win, within the rules, that's the way you have to do it."

Promotion and relegation, Rothenberg remembers, was never part of the plan for MLS, and neither was an expansive, three-tiered system.

"I can't say promotion and relegation was seriously considered by our group," Rothenberg, now 85, said. "We did talk about it, though. There were several problems. First of all, it was foreign to the American sports fan and we weren't sure how anybody would take it. Second of all, there wasn't any good structure in place, there was no second-division league, and we were just getting our own league going."

Rothenberg had other concerns: if a team in a major media market, like Chicago, Los Angeles or New York, was relegated, how would that impact television viewership of the league as a whole? Among the many reasons the NASL collapsed was the lack of a major broadcast package, something Rothenberg was keen to avoid.

The MLS bid eschewed the typical model of an American sports league in favor of what they called "single entity," a setup where teams and player contracts were centrally owned by the league. Each team has an owner-operator, so to speak, that holds a share of the league.

the single-entity model, a way of minimizing losses, frankly. We talked to people prior to the MLS bid but in a much less advanced way. Those talks got nowhere until the MLS stuff started."

Gulati said the federation itself did not give promotion and relegation much thought, initial plans aside.

"Was it given a ton of consideration by U.S. Soccer?" Gulati said. "Given the amount of money that needed to be raised, there was simply no one who was investing in that sort of league at the time, or that sort of structure."

The federation, he added, was never in any position to force any potential league to institute promotion and relegation, certainly not after the fact. By 2006, Gulati had risen through the ranks at U.S. Soccer, becoming its president. He'd often find his inbox full of comments and complaints filed by fans and supporters.

"The thing I got more emails about than anything else was about promotion and relegation," Gulati said. "My view on it, in general terms, was agnostic. There are positives and negatives. What I was never in a position to do, was force that on the system. To say to MLS 'You must do this' — there would have been a lawsuit and we would have lost it. We can't nationalize the industry. What people bought into was one structure, and to have the governing body come in overnight and change that structure would have led to a lawsuit."

Rothenberg, LeTellier and Gulati all see the appeal in some form or another to promotion and relegation, but none feels confident MLS will institute it anytime soon. Maybe internally, Gulati said, if the league ever hits 40 teams or so. Rothenberg said he's interested to see how the USL's attempt pans out.

"It certainly keeps fans of every team engaged, as their teams either try and stay in the league or get promoted," he said.

For now, though, Fricker's vision of professional soccer in America remains a curious footnote to it, tucked away in a box on a shelf in the archives. The idea of an egalitarian, promotion-and-relegation-based pyramid in America still feels distinctly foreign, especially to owners of MLS clubs. As Ian Ayre, formerly of Liverpool and now the CEO of MLS's Nashville SC, once put it:

"Asking MLS owners to vote for promotion and relegation would be like asking turkeys to vote for Thanksgiving."

WHAT YOU SHOULD READ NEXT

Why USL owners took the leap to vote for promotion and relegation

It took years of discussions, but the status quo will go and pro-rel will be implemented once USL launches its first-tier league.

(Top illustration: Dan Goldfarb/The Athletic; Player photo by Simon Bruty/Allsport/Getty Images)

focus on the history and culture of the game. His writing and photography have been featured in National Geographic, Smithsonian Magazine, Gothamist and a variety of other outlets. Follow Pablo on Twitter **@MLSist**
