

# Why Freddy Adu Can't Save DC United

by Pete Sweeney

## The Ferris Bueller of the Soccer World

It's easy to go easy on Freddy Adu. His life, so far, reads like the American Dream unfurled. Born in Ghana playing informal soccer against grownups, barefoot on the beach; allegedly ate and slept with the ball. Came to America as a child, looking for a better life. Subsequently abandoned to poverty by his father. Now he's on his way to being a famous millionaire soccer star, and everything's all right, don't ya know?

"We didn't have anything," Freddy tells us. "We had an apartment and we didn't even have furniture. [My mom] had to work two jobs to take care of my brother and I, after the divorce with my dad. I never got to see her and soccer was my way out . . . I just wanted to make my mom happy." He grins a sweet grin at adversity overcome.

Because Freddy did just that. If Emelia Adu hoped winning the INS visa lottery would buy her son a slot in middle class American schmuckdom, she has some change left over. As things stand now, Freddy can retire to the land of single malt scotch and honey before he can legally drive there. He can have minions, strumpets, disco balls. He's already ensconced his family in Potomac, within wind-breaking distance of the horsey set. Poetic justice for deadbeat dads everywhere. And it was all an accident.

Freddy was discovered in fourth grade when a friend, David Hawk, told his parents about Freddy's recess tricks with the soccer ball. "I ended up guest playing for his under-ten club team and everything just started from there," Freddy says. Suddenly everyone was watching him as he tore through defense after defense. It didn't seem that anyone could stop him; he burned through women, children, grownups, and All-Star pros like a Viking, pillaging fullbacks, sacking the goal. All

with a wide smile and a nice word for the press.

At ten years old he was offered a \$750,000 development contract by Inter Milan, which his mother rejected, even in poverty, to retain control of her son's childhood. Momma made Freddy graduate from high school in an accelerated program, developing his manners and his mind. "She's still my mom," says Freddy, "she's still going to be in control no matter what." The results speak for themselves.



"As you can tell by talking to him, he's not just a great athlete," says Doug Hicks, VP of Communications for the DC United soccer team. "He is tremendously intelligent. He is a great communicator for being fifteen. Very observant. Very humble - still."

At fourteen he was offered \$500,000 per year to play for United, and this time mom let him out to

play. Making him the youngest professional player in soccer and the best paid in the American league; granted that isn't saying much. Despite higher offers from Europe, Freddy stuck with DC. He likes it here, and DC likes him right back. So do other cities, apparently; attendance figures spike wherever he plays. One report claimed attendance at home went up 20% when Freddy came on board.

Hicks dispute the 20% figure, but isn't contesting a degree of improvement. "I would never doubt," he says, "or be naïve enough to say that Freddy doesn't impact our attendance. He is a tremendous draw. We have had

some great players here, from John Harkes to Eddie Pope to Jaime Moreno. But we haven't had somebody that could grasp the attention of the everyday person in Washington as Freddy does . . . On the road, it is easy to see that we outpace the league by 7,000 per game." At some games that means that more than half the fans are there to see Freddy play.

So we went to see Freddy play. On a Wednesday evening, with rain threatening, we managed to get seats in the very first row, behind Colorado goalie Joe Cannon, a man whom United had allegedly never beaten. Freddy was playing attacking midfielder, a role he hasn't played frequently before, to great effect. The

moment we sat down, as if on cue, Freddy received a sweet touch from Joshua Gros, and pounded it into the net. His third goal of the season, and the fans went respectably ape, even if they didn't riot or set things on fire, alas. United went on to win the game 3-1. Freddy went on to sign autographs for the horde of fans, men, women, and children, who'd come to see him play. "Freddeeee!"

### "By no means the stats of a superstar"

However. Adu over Adu aside, DC United hasn't performed well since coach Bruce Arena left. Despite Freddy's road attendance figures, the team is the worst in the league on the road. "When you're on the road you have 20,000 people screaming against you, it's not easy," Freddy explains, or tries to explain. "For us, when we're here, we have it in our mind that we're not going to let anybody come into our house and beat us and push us around . . . I think we're beginning to realize that if we go with that same mentality on the road, we can do the same things." That realization has yet realize, alas. As this issue goes to press,

United's last two games on the road have ended in yawning ties. United is a weak team in a weak division in a weak league. They can't seem to convert a corner kick into a goal to save their lives, after nearly 300 attempts.

Nor is Freddy's individual record beyond approach, apparently. The August edition of World Soccer magazine asks whether it was "possible for [Freddy] to live up to all the glowing praise . . . We know a bit more now

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on trees. When Freddy moves on, how does United keep those 7,000 extra fans?

Because Freddy is going to move on. When Freddy turns 18, his United contract expires. He's already publicly stated his intention to play internationally. "You want to win the EU championship," Freddy told us. "You want to end up in Europe playing for a big club like Man U or

Real Madrid." By which he means *I want, I want*. So DC United gets to raise him, and then lose him. He may come back to play in the World Cup, but that doesn't do squat for MLS.

### To Live and Die in American Soccer

MLS does operate under some disadvantages. The main one is the state of the exchequer. In Europe, many of the teams are subsidized by their respective governments, or swamped in debt, or both. While many of them profit from cable TV packaging, they can also broadcast on government-owned TV stations, freeing them from the necessity of selling TV commercials. But MLS has to pay its own way like a bad dutch date. Life is unfair, but next time a European makes snotty comments about American soccer, please remind them that American soccer isn't on the dole.

Regardless, the MLS doesn't have enough money or stadiums. It's incredibly expensive to rent RFK. "The future of our league is based on brick and mortar," Doug Hicks says. "Not necessarily based on players." MLS plans to have 8 new stadiums under its control by the end of the next expansion round. (Despite RFK's unpopularity with the fan base, nothing is planned for DC.) "[Once we have the stadiums] we are a viable league," says Hicks, "and can mandate our own schedule." That's not just stadium schedule, that's TV schedule, where the money is, and the fans-to-be.

However, MLS does have to have some star players and that's the other challenge, although it is obviously related to the money issue. MLS can't afford to do what European teams do, and hire the best from everywhere and anywhere. In fact, learning from NASL's demise, they have intelligently decided to resist the urge. The MLS controls all contract negotiations centrally, pre-

and the answer is a clear 'no.'" They dryly note that his two (now three) goals and one assist are "by no means the stats of a superstar."

Freddy certainly has his challenges to overcome, and he knows it. He used to complain to the press about not getting enough playing time. He's lost his temper and cursed on the field. He's still small, at 5'8" and 140 pounds, so he gets pushed off the ball a lot. Perhaps for this reason, for a while Freddy had a habit of whining for cards from the ref whenever he was fouled. To be fair, as a hot, new, obnoxiously well-paid young player, he was fouled a lot . . . and American refs are notoriously—what's the word?—"shitty." A recent training video for refs used Freddy as an example of how refs need to call injurious fouling more aggressively.

And poise aside, Freddy is still a kid, something people have to continually remind themselves. For example, to address the size issue, his scientific diet plan is to eat an inverse Atkins diet called "momma's traditional Ghanaian rice." "It's so good," he says, "and it's so healthy!" But these days he tends not to whine or curse, at least in public, and he's developed an appreciation for the strategic aspects of the game. "I developed my individual skills in Ghana," he says. "When I came here, that's when I developed the team aspect, how to function within a team . . . that's where I got the balance I've got right now." More than you can say of too many professional adult athletes.

God bless him, this esprit de corps extends to his national team ambitions. When asked whether he would consider playing for the Ghanaian national team, Freddy made his priorities very clear. "No. I already committed to the US national team . . . The way this country has treated my family and I, what better way to repay the country than to help them win a world cup some day?" Sounds great, but while Freddy's fun to watch, he's no guarantor of victory, at home or in the World Cup.

Which shouldn't surprise anyone, but apparently does. "Adu is GREAT for the MLS [American Major League Soccer]," one fan told me. "But I hate the way mainstream press has reported his story. Basically there are a bunch of yahoos out there who know nothing about soccer who reported this as if Adu would come into the league and dominate." Adu has played very well, but he has not dominated.

Does it make any difference? Difficult to say. Even on a good day, United fans cheer surrounded by empty seats. At the Colorado match, the

front row seats sold for \$16. That's great for die-hard fans but bodes ill for the MLS. A true DC United fan is a fan through thick and thin, Freddy or no Freddy, but the MLS needs to attract "fair weather" fans as well. Soccer's prior outing in the US, the NASL, failed for entirely financial reasons, despite fielding global soccer superstars like Pelé and Diego Maradona. The question is, is Freddy's class of star what DC United really needs? Whatever you say about Freddy, his kind does not grow

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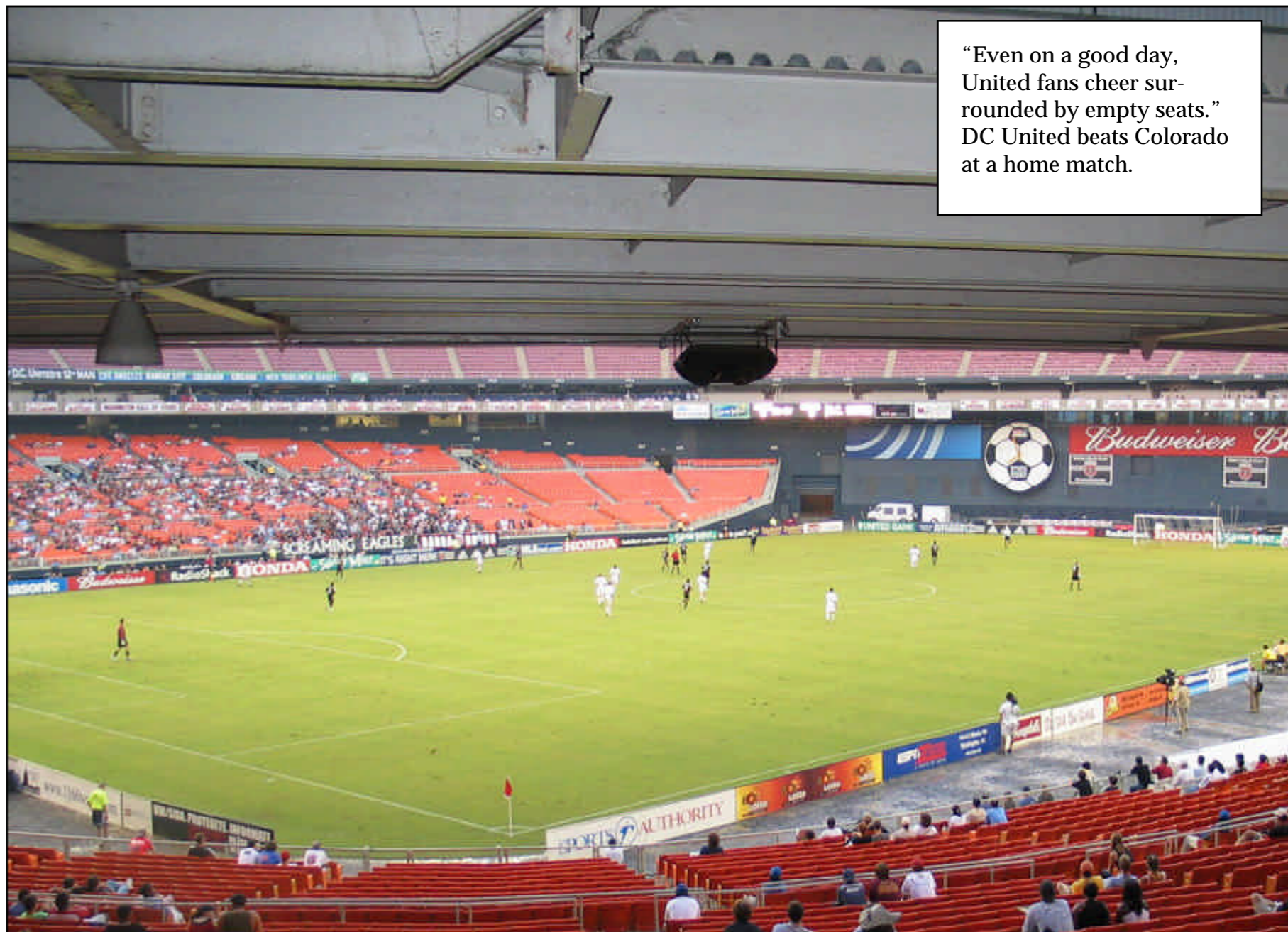
venting a repeat of the NASL fiasco when the Cosmos gave Pelé a record-setting \$3 million dollar contract while league finances tottered about with blood shooting out of their ears.

So the MLS is saving its cash for stadiums. They pay their players in glass beads and smelly blankets. They've made a virtue of frugal necessity and set a rule restricting the presence of foreign players on any given squad. MLS strategy sounds good, but they are nevertheless gambling that earnings from tickets, sponsorship, and TV time will increase dramatically once they control their own stadiums. Nevertheless, fans don't go to see the stadium, and at the rates MLS pays, the foreign players are almost guaranteed to be third-rate; United's latest foreign addition, Argentine Christian Gomez, has been described as talented but out of shape by teammates.

Nevertheless, Hicks is surprisingly blasé about the prospect of losing Adu. "Obviously, in the soccer market you can sell players," he points out. "If Freddy were to want to go, we would sell his rights and that would be a windfall for the league. So it is kind of a joint decision. Some players choose to go, like Bobby Convey did from us earlier this year. Some great players like Landon Donovan have always just chosen, you know, 'I would rather play in America.'"

Fortunately there's time. Freddy's contract runs until he's 18, and for all we know, that's as far as his career will take him. Child prodigies rarely become adult prodigies for many reasons, some sad, some happy. How ambitious will Freddy be after living the good life so young? What happens when his mom lets him start dating? The European leagues marry their players off young and maintain a Taliban-esque attitude towards partying. But Freddy's in DC. He's in our house. At some point, mamma's gotta look the other way, and The Party will leap upon him like a bandersnatch. For all we know Freddy's On Tap online right now, trolling for happy hours. Freddy could become rich, debauched, injured; he could be abducted by Pyongyang to juggle before the Man. As Freddy says, "I don't know *now*, I don't know *yet*. I've got a lot of time to think about it."

It doesn't matter much to us. Watching DC United play is a guilty pleasure, Freddy or no Freddy. United isn't always graceful; they can be tentative, mistake-prone, infuriating. But they are local and timely; you don't



"Even on a good day, United fans cheer surrounded by empty seats." DC United beats Colorado at a home match.

have to live like a bat or speak a second language to enjoy the games. The fans may be sparse, but commuting to RFK to watch soccer in the rain is an honorable derangement and those who exhibit it are worth drinking \$5 beers with. DC United may be the dive bar of Washington professional sports, but it shares the advantages of a great dive; the price is right, the regulars are engaging, and some fool is generally banging on a drum somewhere. You can dress like a superhero and curse like a sailor. I overheard one fan in a cape gently advising another to stop calling the ref a "dummy." "Dummy?" he asked, incredulous. "What's that? 'Asshole.' Call him an 'asshole!'"

And we're inarguably getting the best of the deal. Once

Freddy turns 18, he'll be, at best, another really good adult player in the European league who shows up for the World Cup. He won't be a Story anymore. He'll be statistics, not suspense. By then he could be Michael Jordan, he could be Gary Coleman, but he won't be Peter Pan. Either way, we get the juiciest and the best of it; the evolution of a child prodigy and the resurrection of American soccer, simulcast in Technicolor, right before our eyes.

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