CHAPTER 3

World Cup 1994: Everyone’s a Fan

The mandate from Rothenberg was simple: stage the best World Cup ever and leave a lasting legacy for soccer in America. Pretty simple really and easily tripped off the tongue when said quickly – and, by the way, we are going to launch a Division One Professional League on the back of it: not so easy!

It’s hard to overstate the importance World Cup 94 had on US soccer and to over praise those that actually pulled it off. Sometimes in life you get one shot at greatness, one punch to knock out the “champ” and claim the title: well for soccer, this was it – get it right and the sport would explode, “screw it up” and it was over, the world once again retrenching into the position that soccer would never make it America. While 1994 would turn out to be a spectacular success, no one in 1991 had any sense, or indeed confidence, that it would be.

Headed initially by Chuck Cale and Scott Parks LeTellier, the original headquarters for World Cup 94 was established close to the nation’s capital, Washington DC. With Rothenberg’s election however the center of power was moved back to Los Angeles and new offices opened in the prestigious Century City Towers, just one block from Beverly Hills. This was Rothenberg’s backyard, a place from which he could control every aspect and monitor every move, a place where he had a network of contacts and supporters stretching back to the 1984 Olympics and further. It was also the scene of American soccer’s greatest success, the France versus Brazil Olympic Final and the 101,000 fans that convinced FIFA the USA was ready.

Staging “the best World Cup ever” was pretty much something the USA does for a living, there being little doubt that when it comes to running and operating major events the US has few equals. Of course, it had a head start: stadia were in place, plenty of hotels, airports nearby, infrastructure developed and security tough! So the real success of the events and the
challenges faced centered on the “softer” elements of ticketing, sponsorship, marketing and broadcasting. Get these right and there might be a financial legacy to leave behind for the future good of the game, but get them wrong and there would be nothing. It would be little good to the USA if World Cup 94 made a healthy profit, but which left in a suitcase (a big one mind you) on a flight back to Zurich with FIFA. The USA had to ensure it developed a model that gave it every chance to secure significant revenue for itself. It was to start by staking out the patent office in Washington DC.

Kill the lawyers

Shakespeare once proclaimed “kill all the lawyers” – pretty strong words! Had we listened however, the US Soccer Foundation (recipients of a $60m windfall from World Cup 94) would have been left with about $20m less to invest. For it was a lawyer, Scott LeTellier, who recognized that important changes were imminent in US patent and trademark law, changes that if used to their advantage could secure millions in additional revenue for the World Cup Organizing Committee.

While in 2010, the legal ownership and delineation of marketing rights between FIFA (owners of the World Cup) and the local organizing committees (countries given the right to stage the event) is clearly set down in volumes of legal language and “line by line” contract definition, in 1990 it was not. In fact it owed more to the Wild West than efficient Zurich banking and LeTellier knew it. John Wayne movies taught us how the “West Was Won” and just who claimed it and from everything I saw it certainly wasn’t a bespectacled Swiss banker with a pen and calculator in hand! (It also wasn’t by LA lawyers but that gets in the way of the point.) The point being that the US took a very proactive, aggressive, “possession is 9/10ths of the law” approach to acquiring and securing marketing rights in a move it knew may be contentious. On the morning the legislation came into being LeTellier had a team of attorneys register with the Trademark Office every iteration available, in English and Spanish, of World Cup 94, including US 94, USA 94, USA 1994, USA World Cup 94 (you get the picture).