

After shock World Cup exit, US women's soccer begins fragmented rebuild

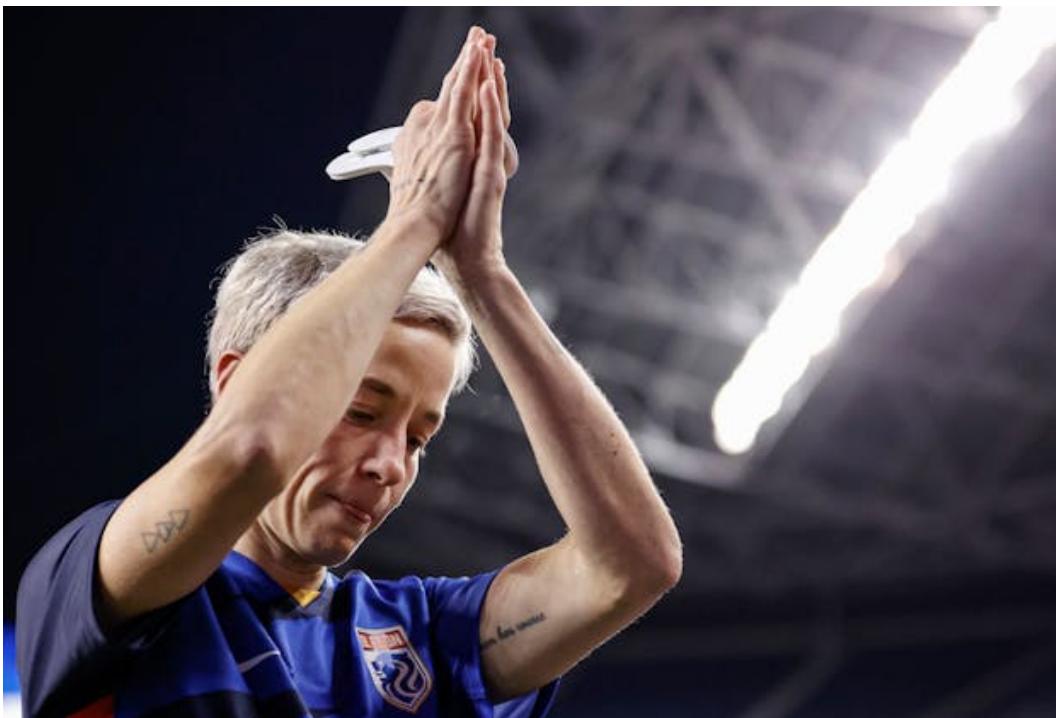
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(Steph Chambers/Getty Images)

- **US women's soccer will have two separate top-tier leagues from 2024: the NWSL and the USL Super League**
- **Concurrent top-tier leagues rarely thrive in US sport, but often lead to successful mergers**
- **USL Super League chief Amanda Vandervort aiming to provide additional opportunities for players and fans**

Women's soccer is surfing a wave of fresh popularity during the 2023 Fifa Women's World Cup, but the US's early exit from the tournament marks the start of a complex rebuild for America's top-tier domestic game as it prepares to run two concurrent division-one leagues from 2024.

The National Women's Soccer League and the USL Super League will both claim to be the country's top division next year, with some USL Super League and NWSL teams even sharing the same metropolitan area. It will present a mostly unwanted challenge to clubs in those markets, but particularly for NWSL franchises that have worked to build up their market share since the league launched in 2013.

After a statement confirming the USL Super League's division-one status by its administrator and commercial rights-holder, the United Soccer League, the NWSL's response was brief: "We welcome more opportunities for women to play professional soccer in the United States."

However, one NWSL club executive that spoke on the condition of anonymity told *SportBusiness* that their league's clubs aren't looking forward to the prospect of co-habiting.

"I'm sure they're scared shitless," the executive said.

The USL Super League will begin with at least four teams that share a state with existing NWSL clubs. A new team in Lexington will live next door to the NWSL's Racing Louisville; the USL Super League's Washington DC team will co-exist with the NWSL's Washington Spirit; a new team in Charlotte will be a 2.5-hour drive – palatable for many in America's southeast –from the NWSL's North Carolina Courage; and a future team in Tampa, Florida will be situated less than 100 miles from the Orlando Pride of the NWSL.

The close proximity of these clubs has caused plenty of concern among US soccer stakeholders, but Amanda Vandervort, president of the USL Super League and former chief women's football officer at FIFPRO, told *SportBusiness* that the new USL Super League will bring much-needed additional opportunities for players and fans in the US.

"We believe there's an opportunity gap in this country," Vandervort said. "There's only 12 professional women's teams, there will be 14 next year in the other league [NWSL], and there's over 100 men's professional teams in this country. For us, it's about closing that gap and creating more jobs for more players, more staff, more coaches and more women who haven't had the opportunity or the access in the game before."

The NWSL is expanding from 12 to 14 teams in 2024, while the USL Super League has announced eight initial franchises — the minimum required to be in Division 1 by the United States Soccer Federation — but plans to have 10-12 teams by the time the first ball is kicked next year.

It's always surprised me: industries that serve women have a bunch of guys sitting around the table making decisions. It can't be that way.

Tim Riester, Vice-chairman of Phoenix Rising

The USL Super League's application for Division-1 status – pending approval by US Soccer – could make it a direct rival to the NWSL, but there will be some room for both leagues to breathe despite multiple teams having to share a home market.

The USL Super League will run alongside European women's soccer leagues, sparing itself and the NWSL from direct competition as the latter's season currently runs from late March until mid-October. In addition, it's likely that most of the teams in each league will serve different markets, at least for now. The NWSL has teams in some of the largest metropolitan areas in the US such as Los Angeles, New York and the San Francisco Bay Area, while the USL will operate in smaller cities outside the country's largest major metropolitan areas.

Vandervort did not rule out players competing in both US domestic leagues, or even loans between leagues so that players can compete year-round for US-based clubs. She and the USL spoke with players about these possibilities as they sketched out the broader details of how the Super League will operate.

"We'll work with all leagues around the world," Vandervort told *SportBusiness*. "I think we'll be active participants in the global marketplace and that includes the United States too, as well as the Women's Super League in England, or the Mexican league, or the French league."

The USL Super League hopes to benefit from freer movement of players, with no draft and either no salary cap. The NWSL operates an annual draft similar to those seen in other American sports and Major League Soccer, with players drafted from US college teams. But with a booming global women's soccer market, many young players have foregone college soccer and moved abroad, skipping the draft altogether.

The player pathway is another way the USL is approaching women's soccer differently. USL academies added girls' divisions in 2023 and launched its pre-professional league, the USL W, in 2022. Such infrastructure has not existed in the US women's game, even with the 11-year-old NWSL.

The NWSL team executive warned of a feasible scenario that they feel would hurt both leagues: The USL Super League does not have a draft, which may allow college players to enter the USL Super League directly to a team of their choosing, play for several months, and then bypass the NWSL Draft by getting a transfer to the NWSL team of their choice. In theory, the NWSL club executive pointed out, this could be done by going to play for a team abroad, but the USL Super League route would be much easier for American college players.

While this is possible to do by going abroad straight from college or bypassing college altogether in the current format, playing in the USL Super League allows these American players to stay stateside early in their careers.

In this scenario, the NWSL club executive mentioned, money would be leaving the league's ecosystem and benefitting a rival league, rather than the current system of intra-league transfers and trades that keep revenue in the NWSL.



US fans react after Megan Rapinoe's missed penalty sends them out of the Fifa Women's World Cup. (Photo by Ed Zurga/Getty Images for USSF)

USL Super League vision

Just weeks after the announcement of its first eight markets, the USL Super League staff and its inaugural team owners flew to the Uefa Women's Champions League final in early June. They met with the Dutch football federation (KNVB), FC Utrecht and packed in Uefa programming during a three-day trip designed to build bridges with European football stakeholders. Vandervort says that the USL Super League's ambitions were met with positivity.

The league's first clear step to joining the global soccer space is its alignment with the global soccer calendar. Due to the league's spring to fall season, NWSL players leave for international duty during the middle of the domestic season for Olympic Games, World Cups, and European Championships. Soon, Concacaf will begin a women's Gold Cup that also runs through the summer. Players in the USL Super League will avoid playing in major tournaments in the middle of their seasons as the league will conclude prior to summer tournaments by running along the European soccer calendar. It is still yet to be announced how many matches will be featured in the USL Super League season and how much the two league's will overlap.

Vandervort, who joined the USL in 2021, has long-standing relationships with international women's soccer players as a result of her time at FIFPRO and is aiming to mould the league with guidance from the players who will be playing in it.

"The summer months are a period where we want our players to have the ability to represent their countries at the next level and have more time with their clubs in market," Vandervort said. "Not only is that a player opportunity but a fan one, too, so fans can have access to their players on a more consistent basis in markets."

The USL Super League's global ambitions include going after top international talent. US national team and other international stars may elect to play in Europe where there are no salary restrictions, as there are in the NWSL. The USL says that more information about salaries will be announced later, but it is understood the league's current plan is to have a free market for spending in order to attract the best talent.

The NWSL club executive said the league has "had trouble" signing international players due to the NWSL's calendar, which runs through World Cups, European Championships and Olympic Games.

"There's a lot of American players playing abroad who have reached out to me who want the opportunity to play in the United States and there's a lot of internationals who I think will find great value playing here," Vandervort said. "From a player perspective, I think the Super League will offer a lot from a global engagement and fan perspective."

Beginning with eight teams with a plan for expansion — the league must have 10 by year six according to USSF regulations for fulfilling Division 1 status— Vandervort would not be drawn on what expansion fees might look like for teams looking to be added. The NWSL has added Bay FC in the San Francisco, California area and a Boston, Massachusetts team for \$53m a piece, up from the \$3m-\$5m teams paid two years prior.

The USL Super League plans for its clubs to participate in a women's edition of the US Open Cup, American soccer's domestic cup competition that has run since 1914, and compete in the soon-to-be launched Concacaf cup competition. As part of the USSF's requirements for a first-division women's league, teams must participate in any Concacaf club competitions they are eligible for.



Chloe Ricketts of the NWSL's Washington Spirit signs autographs after a match.
(Photo by Elsa/Getty Images)

Commercial rights

The league is already thinking international when it comes to media rights too. Working with Sportfive, the USL Super League is aiming to land international rights deals while working with agency Octagon domestically. The NWSL has grown its international media presence recently with deals with DAZN and Tigo for select countries, while the league's website airs games on a free direct-to-consumer platform powered by Endeavor Streaming.

The USL Super League's domestic rights will not go to an open tender, but Octagon will administer a formal bidding process. Daniel Cohen, EVP of global media rights consulting for Octagon, told *SportBusiness* that the agency is working to land a deal that runs from three to five with both English and Spanish broadcasts in the US. The USL also recently announced a renewal of its audio broadcast deal with Sirius XM — which includes select USL Super League games — that runs the end of 2025.

As the ongoing Women's World Cup and an upcoming Olympic Games precede the league's start, Cohen believes the hype around the tournament and the men's World Cup in 2026 will transfer to the USL Super League.

"I see the rise in women's sports viewership and brand investment as a continuing trend here in the US," Cohen wrote. "The Super League will benefit from both broadcaster and sponsor demand for high quality women's sport and the WWC will aid in continuing to earn editorial and consumer attention for women's football."

Phoenix, one of the originally-announced eight USL Super League markets, already has a local broadcast deal with a local affiliate of commercial broadcaster CBS for its men's USL Championship team, Phoenix Rising. The club hopes to be able to sell local rights for the women's team as well but will have to wait until the national broadcast deal is set before finding out.

Tim Riester, vice president of Phoenix Rising, told *SportBusiness* that the club is aiming to have some sponsor overlap between the men's and women's teams, but also some sponsorship exclusive to the women's team, with brands already reaching out about the women's team. The club is also aiming to add female investors and create a separate front office for the women's team that, ideally, would predominantly consist of women.

"We think that historically there have been efforts to create gender equality and you get a bunch of guys around," Riester said. "I spent a lot of my career in marketing. It's always surprised me: industries that serve women have a bunch of guys sitting around the table making decisions. It can't be that way."

As for league-wide sponsors the USL Super League says that there has been an "outpouring" of interest from current and non-current sponsors who are interested in the USL Super League individually and the USL as a whole. In 2022, the NWSL's sponsorship revenue increased by 90 per cent from the year prior.

"It's certainly opened up a lot of conversations for some new opportunities for us and it's just a matter of moving those forward and figuring out what's the best for the USL Super League," Vandervort said.



Former Chelsea star Didier Drogba in action for Phoenix Rising FC in 2017. (Photo by Jennifer Stewart/Getty Images)

Can two leagues co-exist?

Women's soccer is undoubtedly on the rise in the US, but two co-existing top-tier leagues are unlikely to maximise the sport's potential – at least if history is an accurate guide.

Even without competition, women's soccer leagues have struggled to stay in business. The Women's United Soccer Association (WUSA) played games between 2001 and 2004, and Women's Professional Soccer (WPS) played games between 2009 and 2011. Both leagues folded after three years, making the lasting success of the NWSL and the consistent growth in its fanbase women's soccer's first period of lasting stability.

The NWSL club executive expressed their discomfort with the USL Super League landing on the scene: "You don't see success with two leagues at the same level. Historically, we've seen that it doesn't work out."

However, Vandervort believes the wave of momentum behind women's soccer in the US and around the world will be more than enough to ensure the USL Super League's success.

"We have a ton of experience running leagues and building leagues and I think because of that we have been able to foresee challenges and navigate successfully," Vandervort said. "We run such a professional operation here. There's nothing but a ton of support and excitement about what we're doing."

Concurrent top-tier US sports league have often resulted in either one league prevailing over the other, or in leveraged mergers. While there are plenty of successful mergers in the past — the NFL, NBA and MLB were all the result of merged top-tier leagues — there are no recent tales of successful top-tier leagues running concurrently.

Most recently, the Premier Hockey Federation (PHF) was bought by the Professional Women's Hockey Players Association's (PWHPA) financial backers to form one unified women's professional hockey league in North America. The PWHPA told *SportBusiness* that some brands — and the National Hockey League — were hesitant to pick a side when the two organisations were separate but, now that they've combined, have found brands are ready to back the project.

Whatever the future holds, Vandervort hopes the USL Super League will have enough support to go the distance.

“We’re building for immediate viability and long-term sustainability,” Vandervort said. “We’re thinking about the next decade. We’re thinking about those little girls growing up to be professional players for their hometowns or whatever city they choose to be in. I carry a lot of responsibility for that, we at the USL do. We know that.”

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