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MLS' Garber: Packed crowds for Messi 'everything we wanted this sport to be'

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(Sean M. Haffey/Getty Images)

Lionel Messi and Inter Miami's traveling show made its way to Los Angeles for the LA Galaxy's season opener on Sunday in a star-studded match that featured a late equalizer from the Argentine World Cup winner.

Prior to the match, MLS commissioner Don Garber spoke to media briefly about a variety of topics from Messi to the referee lockout to Las Vegas expansion. Some fans arrived six hours before kickoff prior to witnessing the 1-1 draw.

“To see a crowd here that was packing the stadium 45 minutes before game time, it’s emotional,” Garber said. “It sort of represents everything that we wanted

this sport to be and what we've worked so hard for so many years."

The match between the Galaxy and Inter Miami drew a record regular season crowd for the Galaxy, which opened up its grass berm and added temporary bleachers to accommodate the 27,642 fans that packed in. More than 200 media credentials were granted, with some missing out despite the 4x increase compared to usual Galaxy matchdays.

The Galaxy also had to accommodate an influx of celebrities ranging from musical artists to actors to pro athletes. Inter Miami co-owner David Beckham, who has a statue outside of the Galaxy's Dignity Health Sports Park where he won two MLS Cup titles, was on the pitch prior to the match with Garber and Philip Anschutz, an MLS founder, Galaxy owner and AEG founder. Even Messi was involved in the celebrity hype, with the Miami captain accompanied to the pitch by Saint West, the child of Kim Kardashian and Kanye West.

However, the sellout attendance to watch Messi take on the most decorated MLS

club in history was not the only highlight of the weekend for the league. Charlotte FC's opening match drew 62,291 while Messi was on the opposite coast.

"Everybody's working hard to build on this momentum," Garber said. "I was in Columbus yesterday and Charlotte and here today. A good kickoff [weekend]."

How MLS seeks to capitalize on Messi's momentum in season two — his first full season in MLS — is yet to be seen. Global media partner Apple's broadcasts heavily feature him, two documentaries are available on the platform that feature him. But with Copa America, Club World Cup and the men's World Cup coming to the US across the next three years, the league has an opportunity to take itself to the next level.

"I feel this league has so much momentum and had it last year before Leo was signed," Garber said. "We were on track to have our best year ever and we did. We launched our Apple partnership, launched Leagues Cup, had so many exciting things and then Leo comes in and takes it to another level. We've all

learned that it's never really about one player but we should all cherish the great experiences when legends come into your league. With David, to me, this is very much about where we were in 2007 and where we are today."

Garber also revealed that MLS is meeting with 12 owners over two days to work out how roster rules could be shaped going forward, allowing for possible salary increases that would permit more international stars to make their way to the league. Garber said "I can count on one hand the number of players we haven't been able to bring into our league because of our roster rules," citing the past arrivals of Beckham, Thierry Henry, Zlatan Ibrahimovic and others.

"We have to continue to be thoughtful to invest strategically and thoughtfully to continue the growth of Major League Soccer to become more competitive and I think we're doing it in a way that's working out in what we're trying to achieve, and believe me, we've got ambitious owners and ambitious club CEOs," Garber said. When we're ready to have more flexibility we will."

As for expansion, Garber shut down any chance of Las Vegas expansion in the near future given the lack of infrastructure in place in the desert city. San Diego will be [joining MLS in 2025](#) for a record \$500m (€461m) as the league's 30th franchise.

"I don't think we're going to see Vegas any time soon," Garber said. "I still love the market. We need to get a stadium built that can manage a soccer team and probably have a roof or retractable roof and I don't know if we're ready for that yet."

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