

Seattle Sounders add a little democracy to MLS with fan vote on GM

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Sounders fans are voting on whether Hanauer should be retained as GM, although his success in running the club means the outcome is likely a foregone conclusion.

Tim Booth

SEATTLE—Inside a voting stall adorned with all the usual trappings of the election process, Bill and Chris Schlittenhart let their voices be heard.

The Schlittenharts spent their time before a recent Seattle Sounders home game helping decide the fate of general manager Adrian Hanauer, whose future employment as the man in charge is now in the hands of season-ticket holders and fan supporters.

"It makes more of a complete team. We're all part of the team," Chris Schlittenhart said. "It's not a matter of other people telling us what we can do."

As part of the bylaws instituted when the franchise started, the club stipulated that every four years the performance of the GM would be put to a vote of season-ticket holders and members of the Sounders' fan alliance. All season-ticket holders, or those who pay \$125 per year to be part of the fan alliance, get to have a say in the direction of the organization, which means voting to keep Hanauer or kick him out of office.

For some franchises in other corners of the world, this is common practice. In North America, it's unheard of.

Consider it a bit of democracy in the sporting world.

"I've gotten calls from other owners of other teams in other sports who tell me I'm out of my mind," Sounders majority owner Joe Roth said. "Which tells me it's probably a pretty good idea, actually."

There are no stump speeches for Hanauer to make or political ads. The product he's put on the field, coupled with incredible fan support not seen in a North American soccer market since the early days of the NASL, can be seen as a strong enough argument for giving Hanauer another four years running the organization.

Seattle again smashed attendance records this season, averaging 43,144 per game. The Sounders drew more than 66,000 for a home game against rival Portland and reached the Major League Soccer playoffs for the fourth straight season. In four MLS regular seasons, the Sounders are 59-32-37 with a playoff trip each year, not to mention three U.S. Open Cup titles and a fourth appearance in the Open Cup final this year.

Hanauer has been involved in all aspects of Seattle's success. Along with being the GM, he's a part owner of the franchise. So no matter the outcome of the voting, he'll retain a role in the organization.

Yet come Dec. 7, when the voting results are announced, Hanauer could theoretically be out of a job — even though that's highly unlikely. The coaches who work under Hanauer, along with other members of the ownership group, also have a vote.

"I'm not telling you," Roth laughed when asked for his vote.

Hanauer, though, isn't worried about what the outcome will be. Perhaps because the resumé he's created is so strong.

"This is not a paid gig for me. It's full time. I still own a third of the team. I'm comfortable I've done what I can do to make us successful," Hanauer said. "If there is someone better out there and the fans think there is someone better, I'm very comfortable living with that. So I'm at peace with this whole process."

The idea of giving fans a say came from co-owner Drew Carey. During his time in Spain, Carey became enamoured of the organizational structure of FC Barcelona, whose supporters have the ability every five years or so to vote for the president of the club.

Carey was adamant when he met with Roth to discuss becoming part of the Sounders ownership group that fan rights — which included the GM vote, allowing fans to name the team and pick their seats — be part of the franchise's bylaws. Roth was intrigued by the idea and eventually agreed with Carey. They then turned to Hanauer to take on the role with his experience running the USL Sounders from 2001 until the MLS Sounders made their debut in 2009.

"It was a way to really integrate the fans as much as possible in the team and give them, if not ownership, as close to ownership as possible. At least emotional ownership," Roth said.

Voter's Guide For Sounders GM Vote (from the Sounders website)

By Dave Clark, *SounderAtHeart.com*

There are many reasons why a Seattle Sounders FC Alliance Member should exercise their voting power. The biggest of those is probably just because they have it and in American sports that's a unique thing. How the individual votes is up to them.

Adrian Hanauer has served as the General Manager of Seattle Sounders FC since the moment it was announced that the club would be joining MLS. During that time in his role as GM he is in charge of both talent evaluation (Technical Director Chris Henderson) and coaching (Coach Sigi Schmid). Hanauer's responsibilities are in final talent judgment, managing the salary budget and presenting the coaching staff with the best possible players for gameday selection within MLS' unique rules and structure.



Since 2009 the Seattle Sounders have been praised as the best expansion team in American sports history. This is not just due to the massive crowds and support of the fans, but also because of the team's record. That record is not without blemishes though. The MLS Cup and Supporters' Shield are still lacking, though there are three Lamar Hunt US Open Cups in the trophy case (11 MLS teams have fewer cups).

Here are some of the reasons one would vote either way in the first ever General Manager vote.

Retain Hanauer

Some reasons to vote to "Retain" Adrian Hanauer

- Four Straight MLS Cup Playoff Appearances
- Three Straight US Open Cups
- Two Straight Appearances in CONCACAF Champions League Quarterfinals
- Tied Second Most Regular Season Wins 2009 to present, Most All Competitions Wins
- Signed 2 Newcomer of the Year, 1 Keeper of Year, 4 USOC Player of Tournament

No Confidence

Reasons to vote "No Confidence" for Adrian Hanauer

- Yet To Advance In MLS Cup Playoffs
- Lack Of Home Grown Player Signing
- Lost Players Every Season In Expansion Drafts
- Over-Emphasis On Depth Rather than Top End Talent

It is up to you, the Alliance Member and voter to decide how to weight those items. If a majority of voters vote No Confidence and there are at least 10,000 total votes case Adrian Hanauer will lose the role of General Manager. Any other combination of votes is a show of support for how Adrian Hanauer has managed the team in his first four years.

This is not a referendum on his ownership stake.

Frequently Asked Questions

What is the vote?

Sounders FC season ticket members will be asked to vote "retain" or "lack of confidence" for the current Sounders FC general manager.

What does a retain vote mean?

A vote to retain the general manager is a sign of approval from the season ticket members of the direction of the team.

What does a lack of confidence vote mean?

A lack of confidence vote signifies that season ticket members are not pleased with the job of the general manager and direction of the team.

Why should season ticket members vote?

The vote provides an opportunity for season ticket members to make their voice heard and increase their credibility. Sounders FC season ticket members have the opportunity to set the tone and lay a foundation for future season ticket members.

This is an unprecedented vote in U.S. professional sports and the vision of Sounders FC owner Drew Carey.

Who is eligible to vote?

All 2012 Sounders FC season ticket members, designated season ticket holders and anyone who has paid the \$125 alliance membership fee prior to October 7, 2012.

How many votes does each season ticket member receive?

One vote per seat. For example, if a season ticket member has two seats, they will have two votes.

If a season ticket member has appointed any individuals as a "designated season ticket holder" this fan will receive one vote.

What is a designated season ticket holder?

In June 2012, season ticket members were invited to disclose the contact information of fans who share their season tickets. These fans would then receive information directly from the club and be referenced as a "designated season ticket holder" and get a vote as well.

What if a season ticket member did not provide contact information for fans that share their season tickets?

The season ticket members' vote will be counted for all the seats within their season ticket package or account, i.e., four seats will equal four votes.

What if a season ticket member would like to add a designated season ticket holder now?

Unfortunately, the window to add designated season ticket members has closed for 2012.

Isn't a membership available for \$125?

Fans interested in becoming members of the Alliance can pay an annual fee of \$125. Fans that pay the membership fee prior to October 7, 2012 will be eligible to vote.

When does voting begin and when does it end?

Voting begins at noon (PT) on Sunday, October 7 and concludes on Friday, December 7 at 11:59 p.m. (PT).

How will season ticket holders be able to vote?

Sounders FC season ticket members will have the option to vote online at SoundersFCVote.com or in-person at one of the October league matches at CenturyLink Field, October 7, 17, or 21. Voting at the stadium will be open 90 minutes before first kick through halftime.

What information is needed to vote?

Sounders FC season ticket members will need their primary email address, which is registered with the team, and their account ID.

How do season ticket members confirm their account ID?

Season ticket members can find their account ID located at the bottom of every season ticket. During the voting timeframe at the stadium, representatives from the Sounders FC will be on-site at all voting locations to assist.

How many season ticket members need to vote for validation?

The bylaws require a minimum of 10,000 votes for validation.

What happens if 10,000 votes are not cast?

The entire vote will be invalid.

How do I know this vote is authentic?

Sounders FC will work with a local third-party accounting firm who will authenticate both the vote and results.

When will the results be announced?

The results of the vote will be announced at the annual business meeting on December 13 at the WaMu Theater.

Does the Sounders FC organization have an official stance on whether to retain the general manager?

The Sounders FC hopes all season ticket members who have the opportunity to vote will exercise their right. The organization does not have a stance in the affirmative nor negative.

What should I do if I run into challenges while voting?

Season ticket members are encouraged to review the criteria of eligible voters and instructions. If challenges persist, please contact a Sounders FC customer service representative at 877-MLS-GOAL (877-657-4625).

Sounders GM vote just part of staying connected with fans

By Joshua Mayers
Seattle Times staff reporter

Let the fans do the dirty work.

That was Drew Carey's pitch to Sounders FC majority owner Joe Roth four years ago, when the infant MLS franchise was still months away from its first game.

The concept: democracy in sports.

The centerpiece: a vote to retain or remove the team's general manager after every fourth season, an unprecedented idea in American sports inspired by models at world powers FC Barcelona and Real Madrid.

Well, it's time.

"This is it. This is the fourth year," Roth said. "You've got to put your money where your mouth is, right?"

Starting Sunday, Sounders FC season-ticket holders can vote — as promised — for or against keeping general manager Adrian Hanauer, who is part-owner of the team with Roth, Carey and Paul Allen. More than 10,000 ballots must be cast, either in person or online, for the vote to be valid, and Hanauer needs a simple majority to keep his job.

Voting ends Dec. 7, and the result, as authenticated by a local third-party accounting firm, will be announced at a business meeting Dec. 13. Non-season-ticket holders are also eligible to vote by paying a \$125 fee to join the members association.

"I got calls from owners in other sports telling me I was out of my mind," Roth said.

The idea was made public four years ago, but is just starting to receive attention across the country. The upcoming vote has been covered this week by The New York Times, ESPN radio and Deadspin, among others.

More is expected throughout the two-month-long process, but this isn't just for publicity.

It's part of the franchise's commitment to treating fans like partners, not customers.

"It's in the back of our mind with every decision that we make about the team: the idea that the fans come first," said Carey. "What do the fans think? Let's see what the fans like.

"It's really important to us that we get fan feedback ... but it doesn't mean we're going to do everything the fans want all the time."

A strong case

By all accounts, Hanauer has nothing to fear. The team has abstained from an official endorsement, but supporters groups — notably the Emerald City Supporters, with more than 4,400 members — have come out in support of Hanauer.

"It's pretty simple: We believe he's done a good job as general manager," said Greg Mockos, ECS co-president. "It's just that. It's not a matter of loyalty or anything else."

"He's going to win, no doubt about it," said Carey, who joked that a more malfeasant Hanauer would have been better for the vote's widespread publicity.

On the field, the Sounders were an instant success when they joined MLS, and they've sustained it. The team has qualified for the league playoffs all four seasons — including this year — won three U.S. Open Cups and twice advanced to the CONCACAF Champions League quarterfinals.

Off the field, Seattle continually breaks league attendance records and boasts the league's highest TV ratings and merchandise sales.

Hanauer's track record isn't flawless — disappointment in the playoffs and inconsistency in retaining designated players are a few negatives — but overall the complaints haven't been overwhelming.

"I guess my campaign speech will be very simply, 'We've done what no other expansion team has done,' " coach Sigi Schmid said. "We made the playoffs four years in a row, and continue to play among the top three, four teams in MLS.."

Even if Hanauer, who doesn't take a salary for his general manager duties, is voted out, he would still retain his 32.5-percent ownership stake.

"He would obviously be a part of the decision-making about a (new) GM," said Roth, who hasn't bothered to think of replacement candidates.

And while there might not be a lot of drama going into the vote, there's still a bit of fun.

"I've got six votes. I'm going to ask (Hanauer) how much I can get for my six votes," joked assistant coach Brian Schmetzer.

More than just a vote

How important was democracy in sports to Carey?

Well, he wasn't interested in joining any ownership group of a sports franchise without it.

Disaster nearly struck, however, the day Carey was supposed to introduce the idea to Roth over lunch. During a rehearsal for "The Price is Right," Carey, the show's host, had his arm catch in a rotating platform.

Carey thought his arm was broken, and the paramedics told him to go straight to the hospital. But he couldn't. He had a lunch meeting.

"So I showed up like 15 minutes late with a big ice pack on, throbbing in pain," Carey said. "I got some aspirins from the EMTs and I was in really bad shape, but I didn't miss the lunch because I wanted to talk him into doing this thing. This was my big chance.

"The lunch was like an hour and a half. At the end of it, I talked him into it ... and I went straight from there and drove myself to the hospital. That's how important this was to me."

Roth has never had second thoughts, and the relationship with the fans has been about more than just a vote every four years.

An elected fan council meets with the team every three months. That partnership has decided the name of the team, the name of the team band ("Sound Wave"), the name of the members association ("Alliance"), seating sections at CenturyLink Field (from family friendly to more boisterous) and more.

Season-ticket holders and Alliance members can petition for a GM vote in any year with a 20 percent approval.

"I have a lot of faith in the fan base," Roth said.

A model to follow?

Carey, who's also known for supporting Cleveland sports teams, would love to see the maligned Browns of the NFL adopt democracy, though it might be a while before other professional franchises follow suit.

And while healthy, the relationship between the Sounders and fans also will need time to mature.

"I think it's a great start," Mockos said. "I understand the vision and I like the vision, but you have to also understand that we're not going to have what Barcelona has (right away)."

One of the newer collaborations has been including the fans in the design of next year's season-ticket holder's scarf.

"I think it's a really interesting story to take something that's clearly a capitalistic venture and turn over essentially all of the nonfinancial decision-making to the fans," Roth said. "To me, it'll be an interesting experiment."

For Carey, the ultimate goal is keeping fans connected with the club. Losing often leads to a disconnect, leaving limited options for fans to express frustrations — letters to newspapers and websites, calling sports-talk radio, refusing to buy tickets, etc. A vote, on the other hand, encourages more involvement.

And while the team is just approaching its most obvious landmark in sports democracy, Carey's vision is longterm: "25, 50 years, or 100 years down the road."

"It's going to take a while to catch on," said Carey, adding with a smile, "like all great ideas."

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FAN DEMOCRACY: MOB RULE OR SOMETHING MORE?

Posted by Reeves Wiedeman

In late September, early voting began to determine whether Barack Obama gets to keep his job. Last week, in a slightly smaller but more revolutionary election, voting began to determine whether Adrian Hanauer, the general manager of the Seattle Sounders soccer club, gets to keep his. It would seem to be the first true moment in American professional sports that fans have been able to act out the demand they've written on so many stadium signs: Fire the Bums!

The vote is part of the Sounders' attempt at fostering a form of radical fan democracy—radical for the United States, that is. Europe's been far ahead on the issue, dealing out liberties that American fans could only dream of. Sounders co-owner Drew Carey—yes, that Drew Carey—came up with the voting scheme while travelling in Spain, where he noticed that teams like Real Madrid and Barcelona held elections to determine the fate of their management. (Apropos of nothing, save light humor: Carey, who replaced Bob Barker as the host of “The Price is Right,” got his arm stuck in one of the show's rotating platforms, and wore an ice pack to his first meeting to discuss the idea with one of his co-owners; his arm is fine, and he tells the story to explain his devotion to the cause.) The team has formed a fan council, which has determined everything from the team's name, to the team band's name (“Sound Wave”), to the team's scarf design.

The most significant power, however, is the potential ability to control the team's front office. Like the White House, Seattle's general managership will come up for a vote every four years. (The team's official fan group, Alliance, can petition for a vote at any time, with twenty per cent approval from its membership.) The Sounders are somewhat conservative when it comes to voter-registration laws—only season-ticket holders, or dues-paying members of Alliance, will be allowed to vote—and a minimum of ten thousand votes is required to make the count official. That shouldn't be a problem: the Sounders average more than forty-three thousand fans per game, almost double the next closest Major League Soccer team. Votes may be cast at home, or, unlike in the Presidential election, online. Fans don't, however, get to pick a replacement—if they kick out Hanauer, they will have to wait for their chance to vote the next bum out. Carey told the Seattle Times that he expects other American teams to pick up on the idea “twenty-five, fifty, or a hundred years down the road.” “It's going to take a while to catch on, like all great ideas,” he said.

But how great is it? Two cheers for democracy, sure, but at what cost? Put more bluntly: would you trust Mike Francesa's callers to make actual decisions on behalf of the Yankees, Knicks, or Giants? For the Knicks, maybe, but otherwise, that sounds dangerous. The trouble, of course, comes from finicky, impatient fans: What would have happened if, say, the New England Patriots' supporters had the opportunity to can Bill Belichick after his first season as the team's coach, when the Pats went 5-11? Fans are fond of criticizing a team's management, but it's hard to say how much better run a team would be with greater oversight from the masses: there are smart fans and dumb fans, just as there are smart and dumb G.M.s, and it's hard to say who would outweigh whom.

But for a league like M.L.S., still working its way into the ordinary fan's consciousness, any effort at outreach seems wise. Diehard Sounders fans seem to like the plan, which is predicated not so much on the idea that fans know more than team executives, but simply that they are the team's lifeblood and should have some say in how the whole operation runs. It seems likely that Hanauer will pass this test and retain his job. (He is part of the ownership team that approved the voting model, and, if he loses, he'll still retain a third of the team and have a say in picking his replacement.) The Sounders have already clinched a playoff berth, and Hanauer has won over important constituencies. The Emerald City Supporters, an unofficial group with more than four thousand members, has endorsed him for a second term. Several fans with another group, Gorilla F.C., have gotten into the election spirit with a T-shirt. They replaced Uncle Sam with Civ, the group's mascot, and encouraged their fellow fans: “Civ wants YOU to vote for Hanauer!”