Remember the Cleveland Force? If you're over the age of thirty you probably do. The Force were one of the flagship franchises in the Major Indoor Soccer League, and in their heyday they were one of the hottest tickets in the area, packing them into the old Richfield Coliseum on a regular basis. For a period of several years in the early-to-mid

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Of course, the heyday was short-lived. Force owner Bart Wolstein abruptly folded the franchise following the 1987-88 season (following it's first-ever trip to the MISL Finals) and the entire circuit went under not too long afterward. Still the memory lingers, of packed houses at the Coliseum, in full throat for soccer- Cleveland style.

But there's at least one native Clevelander over the age of thirty who doesn't remember the Force- Drew Carey. The *fútbol*-loving comic is a part-owner of Sea

ttle Sounders FC
, a Major League Soccer franchise that began play in 2007. At one point Carey was approached by a group seeking to establish an expansion club in Cleveland
, but turned down the opportunity because, in his words,
"I don't think this could happen in Cleveland, honestly."

"The Browns, Indians and Cavaliers are so entrenched in that town, that's all you ever read about. Soccer would be a really tough sell there."

Now, Drew Carey has always been a proud Clevelander, and of course he has the perfect right to invest his money wherever he sees fit. But he's wrong here. Soccer *can* make it in this area. It has made it before, after all. And provided a few simple conditions are met, it can make it again.

To wit:

Go Where the Fans Are: That is, don't put the team in downtown Cleveland. Not only is there no adequate facility for top-level soccer in the city and no place to put it (I suppose Krenzler Field could be expanded, but to ask the hard-pressed taxpayers of Cuyahoga County to finance such a project is madness) it's away from the heart of soccer interest in the area. The epicenter of the game in Northeast Ohio is in the belt skirting Cleveland, from the East Side suburbs down through northern Summit County and up into the West Side suburbs. This belt- mostly white, mostly affluent- is Soccer Mom Central, the backbone of the Force's attendance surge in the ‘80s and the ideal location for an MLS franchise.

In short, a *Cleveland* soccer franchise probably wouldn't work. But a *Greater Cleveland*
soccer franchise certainly could.

Don't Compete With the Big Boys: As everyone knows, the Browns are the

alpha of Cleveland sports teams, and at the moment the Cavaliers are the omega. To ask a new franchise- a soccer franchise at that- to go head-to-head with the twin colossi of the Browns and LeBron is suicide. Fortunately, that wouldn't happen. Major League Soccer, unlike its top-level counterparts overseas, is a summer circuit, which means a Cleveland-area franchise would be competing with the Indians, one of the lesser draws in baseball for nearly a decade. And since, of course, this prospective MLS team would be playing twenty miles outside the city of Cleveland, even that competition likely wouldn't exist in fact. In terms of the area, if not the season, this franchise would be the only game in town.

Build it a Home: In recent years, Major League Soccer has adopted a league-wide trend away from playing in rented football stadiums and toward playing in smaller, soccer-specific stadiums . The Columbus Crew was the first to make the move, decamping from the massive Horseshoe to the comfortable, 22,000-seat Crew Stadium in 1999. Seven other MLS franchises have followed suit, with three more- Red Bull New York, the Kansas City Wizards and the expansion Philadelphia Union- building similar parks to open within the next two years. The new soccer-specific stadiums generally seat between 15,000 and 30,000 spectators and can accommodate concerts and high-school sporting events as well as soccer.

The Wolstein family's abortive bid to bring Major League Soccer to the area included a plan for a soccer-specific stadium to be located near Route 8 and Interstate 271 in Macedonia Township. That's a good location, right in the heart of Northeast Ohio soccer country and convenient to the wealthy communities of Summit County- Hudson, Twinsburg, Copley- as well as the West Side Suburbs like Strongsville, Brecksville and North Olmsted. But my modest proposal has another location in mind, one familiar to longtime area sports fans.

The former site of the Richfield Coliseum is today an empty meadow located alongside Route 303 and I-271. A large freeway interchange exists there, one that once served the motorists that made their way to the arena from all corners of the area. It's a quiet, pastoral place these days, but it can live and breathe again as a center of sports in the region, and in my proposal it will, as the site of a

20,000-seat soccer stadium, the home of Northeast Ohio's MLS franchise. The site is right smack in the middle of Soccer Mom Central, a quick drive from both East Side and West Side. There's no need to clear land, condemn buildings, or any of that unpleasantness- the site is already cleared, after all, and has been ever since construction of the Coliseum began in the early 1970's.

Located squarely between Cleveland and Akron, the Coliseum site is an ideal location for high-school playoff football and soccer games as well as large concerts (although I'm sure the owners of Blossom Music Center wouldn't be too thrilled to have another venue encroaching on its territory, especially one that doesn't take two hours to get in and out of.) The winter conditions that made navigating the roads to the Coliseum such an adventure wouldn't exist in the context of a spring-and-summer sport. It's a damned near perfect spot for the Beautiful Game, if I do say so myself.

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So now that we've laid down our conditions for making Major League Soccer a success in the area, let's move on to the business of giving the club a name. First off, keep in mind that this is *not* a Cleveland franchise per se. "The Cleveland Such-and-Such" wouldn't be an appropriate handle. This is a regional franchise, and the name should reflect the regional basis for its existence. This leads to my proposed nomenclature for the franchise: Cuyahoga Valley FC. "Cuyahoga Valley" captures the club's location as well as the source of its fan base, and "FC" has that pleasing *fútbol* ring to it. This is not a Cleveland team; it shouldn't have a Cleveland name.

Besides, maybe the "Cuyahoga Valley" designation would free the club from the negative karma that has seemingly draped itself all over teams with "Cleveland" in their names (including the Force, which annually ran up sparkling regular-season records only to come to grief in the playoffs- remember Tatu

and the Dallas Sidekicks knocking them off in the '87 Semifinals?) I'm not a believer in curses, hexes, and other varieties of superstition, but it couldn't hurt, right?

Now that we've got our stadium location and team name settled, Cuyahoga Valley FC needs a rival, because every club requires an arch-nemesis. Fortunately, for our purposes one already exists, ready-made: the Columbus Crew. C-Bus is the only nearby major city (the others being Pittsburgh, Cincinnati and Detroit) that doesn't have at least one professional sports rival to Cleveland; well, it would now. We could have our very own Ohio Derby , with busloads of raucous, banner-waving, pint-pounding supporters making the trek up and down I-71 to cheer on their clubs in a bi-annual battle for in-state bragging rights. It isn't exactly Celtic and Rangers (or Browns and Steelers, for that matter) but it's not bad for starters.

So there you have it- my idea for making Major League Soccer a winning proposition in the Greater Cleveland area. Drew, are you getting this?