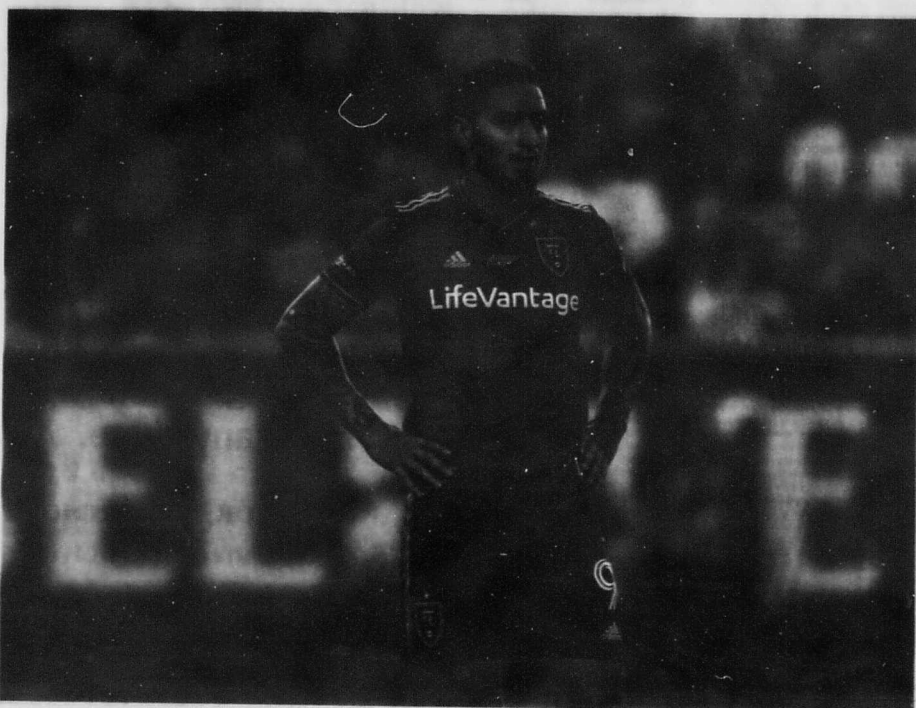


SPORTS



Forward Cristian "Chicho" Arango, who scored his ninth goal in 11 games in Saturday's 1-0 win over Sporting Kansas City, has led Real Salt Lake to the top of the Western Conference standings.

Best in the West

How has Real Salt Lake turned it around to become MLS Western Conference's best team? Four key factors.

This is the best Real Salt Lake has been in over a decade.

For the first time since 2013 — the last time the team competed in Major League Soccer's Cup final — RSL stands alone at the top of the Western Conference, undefeated in its last seven games.

That last decade has been filled with mid-level MLS soccer, as the team struggled to deal with the departures of Jason Kreis, Javier Morales, Kyle Beckerman, and Nick Rimando. But now nearly a third of the way through the season, RSL looks legitimately quality, with some of the best talent in MLS at their positions playing a fan-friendly attacking style of play.

How did this turnaround happen? Here's what to know.



ANDY LARSEN

Chicho's brilliance up top — and a bit withdrawn

To be sure, the number one factor in RSL's resurgence has been the acquisition of Cristian "Chicho" Arango. After making a name for himself with LAFC and then a stint in Mexico, RSL purchased Arango for \$6 million. It was RSL's largest transfer spend on a player ever — a clear statement from the club that the

penalty-pinching Dell Loy Hansen

days were over. He's proven to be worth every cent of that transfer fee. If Lionel Messi didn't exist, he'd be the best player in MLS this season.

Arango scored his ninth goal in 11 games in Saturday's 1-0 win against Sporting Kansas City. He's also added seven assists. The two stats indicate just how effective Arango's been at both jobs as a forward — he can poach in and around the penalty box, but he's also proven himself adept at creating plays from deeper in the midfield.

In consecutive weeks, and consecutive wins, he played both roles. Against Chicago, he scored off a defender's backpass and from a corner, snuffing out chances and finding space close to the keeper. But against Philadelphia

the next week, Arango played the role of playmaker, especially in making RSL's first goal. Then, he received the ball in the midfield circle, beat a defender, and started a break with multiple RSL men running in front of him. In the end, a no-look pass to Andres Gomez was the final ball before the goal.

RSL's never really had a forward who was this adept in creation and goalscoring before. It's made a huge difference.

Betting on young talent

Back in 2021, MLS created a new salary cap loophole to encourage teams to acquire young players. It's called the U22 rule, and it allows teams to pay up to three players under the age of 22 an unlimited amount of

salary while only charging between \$150,000 and \$200,000 against the salary cap. Using this loophole to the greatest effect has been a huge differentiator in which MLS clubs succeed and fail in the last couple of years.

In the first year-plus of the rule's existence, RSL underused it. But in the last two years, they've acquired some excellent prospects using the loophole — spending some not insignificant money to do so — and they've become some of the franchise's best players.

Twenty-year-old Diego Luna has become RSL's best midfielder, tucking in on one wing to create chances. The 21-year-old Gomez, acquired for \$4 million, was iffy at first — but he has grown into RSL's most dangerous

Photo by REAL SALT LAKE, 82



Hockey fans filled the Delta Center for an event introducing the Utah NHL team on April 24. What the team's name will be has yet to be determined.

There are nine trademarked names for Utah NHL team. Which is best?

OK, let's get serious about this serious business of seriously naming Utah's seriously new NHL team. No more fooling around. According to a whole lot of folks, this is the most important matter in Utah sports these days. And as former Jazz player Greg Foster once so famously put it when talking about the team: needing to hit the throatle hard when the NBA playoffs came around, back when the Jazz actually made the playoffs. "It's just-cutting time." That reference, I'm told, had nothing to do with castrating sheep or any other critics, or cutting the bolts off



GORDON MONSON

the sides of a ship's hull in the final stages of construction, and everything to do with collecting nuts at the end of the fall season, before the animals wandered off with them all or before they were buried in the first layer of winter ice.

Where were we? Ah, yes, ice, and Utah's name for its team that skates on it. We've all bandied about a hundred ideas, thousands of them, some serious, some middling, some on the far edge of lunacy. Although the Utah Lunatics hasn't really shown up on any lists that I've seen. We'll do away with the goofiness now and get right down to the leading number of candidates, the ones that have been trademarked recently by a certain power center, for what the darn name should be. Utah Ice — Utah might be the winter sports capital of the world, or at least of the United States.

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