

Real Salt Lake

Winger thanks to a combination of speed and dribbling skills. And 23-year-old Brian Ojeda has turned into a stalwart athletic central midfielder, with better defensive instincts in his third RSL season.

Only 22-year-old Nelson Palacios has disappointed, but a 3-out-of-4 conversion rate on young prospects is still terrific. And there's more in the pipeline: 18-year-old Fidel Riquelme has already started four matches for the club.

To be honest, there's a real likelihood that all of these young players want to play overseas in Europe's biggest leagues at some point. But when RSL sells them, they should be able to garner significant transfer fees, and use that money to buy more young players and Chicho Arango-level stars. It's exactly what clubs like RSL should be doing.

Emeka Eneli beating the odds

But we haven't yet talked about my favorite RSL midfielder: Emeka Eneli.

I can't emphasize how little the MLS draft matters compared to the drafts in other sports. In soccer, the good youth players end up playing soccer for professional clubs, and only those with little professional interest choose to go to college. To wit: The No. 1 pick of the 2023 MLS draft was Charlotte's Hamady Diop, who has played a grand total of 35 MLS minutes in his first two seasons. This is typical.

The No. 25 pick of that same draft was Eneli. He's played 2,308 minutes — literally 65 times more than the No. 1 pick.

A college forward at Cornell, RSL has moved Eneli further back, first at outside back last season and now to a central midfield spot in his second season. Especially in RSL's system, central midfield is a demanding role. Players there have to get to spots all over the pitch, maintain the ball in possession, then look upfield or wide to advance the ball. When out of possession, they have to press short, but also decide when to stream back to provide support for their teammates. And Eneli's not only met those demands, but exceeded standards.

He's playing right now in the tradition of some of MLS's best controlling midfielders — like a Diego Chara or Kyle Beckerman without the penchant for yellow and red cards. For Ted Lasso fans, he's Roy Kent; he's here, he's there, he's everywhere. Eneli is perhaps RSL's best story — and perhaps Major League Soccer's best contract.

Pablo Mastroeni, a man changed

RSL manager Pablo Mastroeni has received his fair share of criticism over his tenure with the club beginning in 2021. In short, no one really questioned his ability to get his



Real Salt Lake's Emeka Eneli, left, celebrates his goal with teammate Cristian Arango during an MLS match against the Colorado Rapids on March 9 in Sandy.

best efforts from his players through motivation — but there were significant questions about his tactical acumen. To be frank, RSL played some dismal soccer at times.

But this year, RSL has changed how they play in a significant way. First, they've embraced pressing more than ever before, trying to force turnovers in the opposition half that can quickly turn into goals. In fact, they're second in MLS in terms of the number of times they've turned an opponent turnover within 40 yards of the goal into a shot — 23 times already this season, per Opta.

The usual risk-reward tradeoff of this strategy is leaving space behind the press, but RSL has done incredibly well at streaming back to prevent real counter-attacking chances from their opposition. Simply, the athleticism of the young pair of central midfielders, plus great positioning from Justin Glad and Brayan Vera mean great chances against other clubs turn into only decent ones against RSL.

Offensively, they're trying to build through the middle more frequently. Soccer's statistical revolution has de-emphasized crosses from outside the box and hoping an offensive player gets a head on the ball as a low-efficiency strategy; one Mastroeni relied on too often in the past. Now, RSL can build through the wings, but then is usually looking to get the ball back towards the middle through passes on the ground, giving Arango, Gomez, and others real shooting chances.

As MLS commentator Charles Boehm put it, "Pablo Mastroeni has graduated beyond the 'stats will lose to the human spirit every day' era." Now, RSL has a style of play that the analytics back up — and the results have rewarded that change.

The one risk is that heat and fatigue will make RSL's strategy, which relies on a lot of running, harder to keep up in June, July, and August.

But it's a case of "so far, so good" for the club — a first-place Western Conference spot, and a real chance to contend for the U.S. Open Cup, Leagues Cup, and even MLS Cup later this year.

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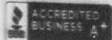
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