

For Hartford's Would-Be Pro Soccer Players: No Paychecks, Uncertain Futures



Professional soccer player Joey Tavernese holds a Hartford City FC scarf on the day in late September when he signed with the team. Tavernese was among 10 players let go when the soccer club disbanded. (Tavernese family)

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After bouncing for years from city to city and country to country, professional soccer player Joey Tavernese thought he had a plan for the future.

After a standout season with the now-defunct Rochester Lancers last winter, multiple teams reached out to the midfielder. But a new club in Hartford offered an enticing mix of benefits: a location not far from his family on Long Island, plans for indoor and outdoor leagues, nearby coaching opportunities, plenty of colleges to pursue an advanced degree; in short, a chance — rare for a professional athlete outside the major leagues — to put down some roots.

"I was invested," Tavernese said last week, as he was packing up his belongings and preparing to leave Connecticut. "This was going to be my thing — play for three or four years, get my master's, do some coaching, build up a resume, and have fun playing indoor and outdoor year-round in one spot, rather than moving all over the world.

"And then things come crashing down. And I mean, obviously, it's tough."

Hartford City FC, the indoor team that was set to bring professional soccer to the capital city, collapsed last week, doomed by a criminal investigation into its finances just days before its planned inaugural game. While many are ruing the loss — or at least the delay — of pro soccer in Hartford, it is perhaps most disappointing to the young players hoping to leave their mark on the field.

"I was very excited," said Cromwell native Patrick Boucher, who was making his debut appearance on an indoor squad. Hartford City FC was the ideal team for the 25-year-old, allowing Boucher to balance playing soccer with his day job at a property management company in the area.

"It was close to home, worked out with my job, we had a great coach, so everything was going in the right direction," he said.

Even when players began reading news stories about issues with the team's management, "we continued to train in hopes that it would work itself out," Boucher said. "Unfortunately, it didn't."

Local and federal investigators are working to track hundreds of thousands of dollars that may have gone astray. But there is a misfortune in the downfall of the team that is measured in much smaller figures: The players who uprooted their lives a month or two ago to build a soccer team from scratch say they have not received the modest paychecks promised under their contracts.

As players scramble to find a Plan B, the question of whether they will be paid for their time in Hartford remains unresolved. The team was formed by James Duckett Jr. and Mitch Anderson.

Duckett, who on Wednesday announced he had stepped down as the team's majority owner, said in a text message: "I do feel the players' situation should be addressed." But he said player contracts and day-to-day operations of the team were handled by Premier Sports Management Group, the firm headed by Anderson that became a subsidiary of Duckett's Black Diamond Consulting Group. A lawyer for Anderson said he had no information on whether there was a plan to pay the players.

Tavernese, 26, said he hopes he sees a paycheck, but says he has become accustomed to the ups and downs of minor-league sports. "I know what lower-level soccer is like. I know this has happened with other teams and other organizations, and it's just the reality of it," Tavernese said. "Is it unfair and does it suck? Yeah, of course it does. But you kind of just got to roll with the punches and go with it."

Tom Williams, a veteran British soccer player who signed on to play with Hartford City FC and also help manage the team, said he had broken the news to his 5- and 9-year-old sons that he would be away for a while, but promised them long visits to America during the season.

"I've had to tell my two boys that Dad's going away for a bit, but don't mind, you're coming over for 10 days in October and then 10 days in December,"

Williams said. "And then they're asking why are they not going, and what's going on, and for me, it's not fair on them."

Williams, 35, said he gave up other offers to come to Hartford, seeing it as an opportunity to transition from a player to a manager. That leaves him especially disappointed, even in a field where near-deals frequently fall apart. "It happens all the time," he said. "But something like this is just — I've never seen anything like it in 15 years. Nothing like it."

After coming on board in August, Williams said he spoke frequently with Anderson and Duckett. Now, he said, he can't get a call returned. "Something's gone wrong somewhere, and I don't even know what that is yet," he said. "There's some people that need to come out and be counted and give some answers, to not only the city, but 15, 16 players and staff that have been left wondering what's going on."

Hartford City FC had signed at least 10 players to the team. Five, lured from New York Ecuador FC, a high-level amateur club, moved to Connecticut to play.

"They all had day jobs," said Shawn Mecchi, the team's former vice president of operations and goalkeeper coach. "They left those behind, and I don't think they'll get them back."

Mecchi left a good job, too, working for SoccerPlus, which runs youth camps in 18 states. He helped hire his replacement, so he says there's no going back.

Mecchi began working informally with the team in August before signing officially on Sept. 15. "This was seriously the perfect job for me," he said. "This one was the culmination of everything that I've done; everything that I'm passionate about and have some experience with."

His first child was born two weeks later. But two weeks after that, following revelations about the team's owners, Mecchi quit, giving up his salary and his

family's health insurance. He signed up for Husky insurance from the state last week.

"I'm disappointed. People were clearly careless — at best," Mecchi said.

Major Arena Soccer cut ties with Hartford City FC on Wednesday, formally releasing players and allowing them to try to connect with another team. Some will get decent offers, Mecchi said. But with rosters already filled and some teams already having played games, lesser players face a tougher prospect. If they get offers at all, Mecchi said, "they're going to go for pennies on the dollar because they're not in a position to negotiate."

Boucher isn't sure of his plans, but said he would probably look to rejoin the Western Mass Professional Soccer Club in Ludlow, Mass., where he previously had played outdoor soccer.

"I would love to keep playing. I'm at that point where if the opportunity arises, I would love to do it, but I'm also happy with my job," Boucher said.

What really pains him, he said, is the fate faced by some of his teammates. "I'm disappointed mostly for the other players and the coaching staff," he said. "I personally am upset, but I'm more upset for the other guys who picked up their lives, moved to Connecticut, signed with a team to start over and have a good opportunity ... They kind of got the short straw."

Williams said he, too, feels for the young players hoping to break into professional soccer. "I've spoken to a few of the boys and they're really, really, really let down and hurt," he said. "For some of them, it was an opportunity they had been waiting for their whole lives."

Tavernese's future, at least, is clearer than many of his teammates. "I had a very good year last year, so once I got released, I had a bunch of calls to play elsewhere," he said. "I'm actually heading out to California to play."

But that means going back to a schedule that has made him miss countless weddings, birthdays and other family gatherings. When he played for Siena College in Albany, his father drove up for every game for all four years. Since he went pro, his parents have barely seen him play and were looking forward to road trips to Hartford.

"My dad was already talking about driving up to all the home games. He was joking about putting miles on the car again. So they were excited," Tavernese said.

The cross-country move also might mean Tavernese is back to hopping around the globe to connect with an outdoor team in warm-weather months and an indoor team during the winter. Since graduating from college in 2011, Tavernese has played in several states, as well as Australia, Guatemala, China and Hong Kong.

Tavernese said he readily accepts the sacrifices to pursue a sport he calls "the love of my life." But he concedes: "It's tough to move. I mean, every six months you've basically got to pack up and ship off to the next place."

That was the draw of Hartford. And he said he might be drawn back if the team is around next year. Supporters say they have identified new potential owners, and the Major Arena Soccer League has been receptive to having the team rejoin for the 2016-17 season.

Would Tavernese return?

"I would definitely be more cautious about coming back if they did have a team. But I would like to settle down in one place. And I like Hartford. I think it's a good place, I think there'd be a great fan base, and a good place to have a good indoor and outdoor team," he said. "I never rule anything out, as long as this time I made sure I wasn't making the same mistake twice."

Mecchi loves the thought of the team rising from the ashes of this year's controversy. He's confident support for soccer is there, if the team, in his words, can "start again and tell the story correctly" under a new management group.

"Everybody likes a comeback, right?"