

NFL

Chargers chasing respect in sports-saturated LA

By GREG BEACHAM
Associated Press

LOS ANGELES — The Chargers were the biggest story in Los Angeles for about four hours.

On the same rainy Thursday that the Chargers announced their relocation up the Southern California coast, the Los Angeles Rams hired 30-year-old Sean McVay to become the youngest head coach in NFL history.

Welcome to LA, Bolts. You're no longer the greatest show in town.

While their franchise value soars and their stadium future becomes secure, the Chargers realize they face a lengthy struggle to gather respect, attention and a durable fan base among the roughly 19 million people who inhabit the five counties around Los Angeles, the nation's second-largest city.

Chargers owner Dean Spanos' first public comments acknowledged the difficulty of the task they've accepted in leaving



Bre Priest gives the thumbs down while wearing a t-shirt mocking the team at San Diego Chargers headquarters after the team announced that it will move to Los Angeles on Thursday in San Diego.

AP Photo/Denis Poroy

San Diego after 56 years.

"Our entire organization knows that we have a tremendous amount of work to do," Spanos said. "We must earn the respect and support of LA football fans. We must get back to winning. And we must make a meaningful contribution, not just on the field, but off the field as a leader and champion for the community. The Chargers are determined to fight for

LA, and we are excited to get started."

Indeed, the Chargers are entering quite a competition.

The Chargers relocated exactly one year to the day after the NFL's 21-year absence from LA ended with the Rams' official move back to town. The Southland will be home to two teams apiece in five professional sports after Major League Soccer's

expansion LAFC arrives downtown next year.

The wildly popular Lakers and Dodgers rule their respective calendar months. The Clippers, Kings and Anaheim Ducks are perennial playoff teams. The Los Angeles Angels drew 3 million fans last season while losing 88 games.

There are collegiate athletics powerhouses at USC and UCLA, along

with innumerable outdoor sporting pursuits around an entertainment-saturated metropolis that doesn't get obsessed with sports in the first place.

Even among die-hard NFL fans, the Chargers will be at least a distant third-place team in their two-team market next fall. The Rams have a generational fan base that never gave up on them during 21 years in St. Louis, and the Raiders are still wildly popular in Los Angeles from their 1982-94 run at the Coliseum — along with that outlaw franchise's status as a California lifestyle brand as much as a sports team.

But one intriguing aspect of the Chargers' machinations is their choice to play their next two seasons at StubHub Center, the LA Galaxy's compact soccer stadium in suburban Carson. Even with an expansion in capacity to 30,000 seats, it will be small by NFL standards — or even by some Texas high school football standards.

The Chargers and the

Galaxy's owners, sports conglomerate AEG, have plans for expansion and improvement of the modest facilities around StubHub. Yet playing in a small stadium should protect the Chargers from the unpleasant optics of thousands of empty seats while they attempt to build a fan base.

The Raiders' annual road game against the AFC West rival Chargers should be a fascinating sight this fall, but the Chargers hope they'll benefit from their temporary home by providing an unusually intimate setting for fans — and whatever ticket prices the market will bear.

"I would like to commend the Chargers on this bold and innovative decision to move to StubHub Center," AEG President and CEO Dan Beckerman said. "It is truly a testament to how strongly the Chargers feel about the fan experience and their willingness to create something special for people in Southern California."

SWIMMING: Teams still on target to compete in first meet this weekend

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happy that he has had a few competitions to fall back on with all the cancellations.

"Being able to go to some of the PSA swim meets has helped, and over school break I was able to swim mornings and evenings up here and I think that's helped me adjust with no school meets," Jennings said.

But even with a few options away from the team, Ashton-Williams said she can sense the anxiety increasing with every practice.

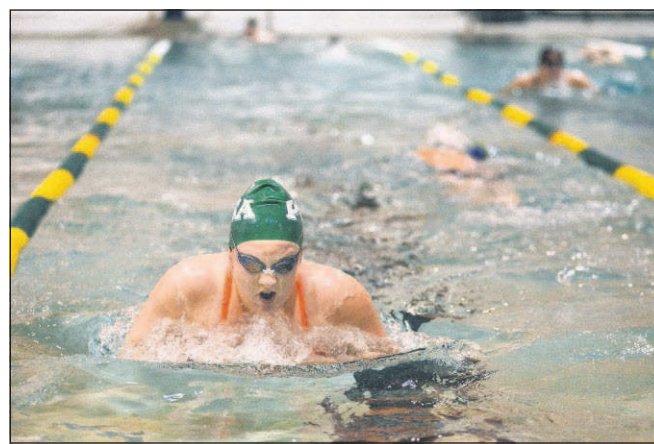
"The enthusiasm with the kids goes down because they want to get in the pool and race and have lots of fun," she said, "so we have to work

really hard in practice to try and keep it up as much as we can."

Hermiston finally got back into the practice pool on Thursday after five days off because of weather, and Hamblin added that he believes all the time off has affected his team more mentally than competitively.

"Well we were just getting into a rhythm and getting the kids into a routine," he said. "So once we got back I had to scale back intensity of practices to get going again. But my kids have worked really, really hard and I think they'll be alright."

Both teams have their fingers crossed that the weather stays clear enough to



Staff photo by E.J. Harris

Senior Olivia Broker swims the breast stroke during practice on Thursday in Pendleton.

travel to Madras on Saturday morning for what would now be the first meet of the year.

"Yes! We're finally going to be able to go hopefully," Jennings said emphatically.

"We're all anxious to get into the pool for a meet, especially the girls who haven't swam yet."

Hamblin said that he's just ready to see his team swim against people other than themselves for once.

"I'm excited to see my returners and how well they can do because they've all been practicing so well," he said. "And my beginners have done really well but they still have no idea what they're up against because of no meets. Ninety-five percent of my kids have no times yet, which is really unique."

BUCKAROO BALLERS GETTING RUSTY, TOO

The Pendleton girls and boys basketball teams have

felt the wrath of the winter storms as well, though they have seen competition, albeit minimal. As of Thursday, both Pendleton teams have played just seven games — the fewest in Class 5A. In total, the Pendleton boys have had a net of five games canceled to this point, while the girls have had four wiped out, and both teams have played just four games in the past month.

The boys' game scheduled for Friday at Sunset was called off on Thursday night due to road conditions in Portland.

Contact Eric at esinger@eastoregonian.com or (541) 966-0839. Follow him on Twitter @ByEricSinger.

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