

Atlanta goes for a rare sports title in MLS Cup final

By PAUL NEWBERRY
Associated Press

ATLANTA — A city that has known plenty of sporting heartbreak is one win from a championship.

It sure has been a while.

Atlanta hasn't won a major professional title since the Braves captured the 1995 World Series. A 2-year-old soccer team has a chance to end the drought when Atlanta United hosts the Portland Timbers in the MLS Cup final Saturday night before an expected crowd of 73,000 at Mercedes-Benz Stadium.

"I was texting the mayor the other evening," United owner Arthur Blank said. "She's already planned on a parade, so she's ahead of me. We haven't (had) a parade in Atlanta, a sports-related parade, since 1995. God willing and play willing, we'll be in position to do that again next week."

The Braves are recognized by many as Atlanta's only true sports champions — and even their accom-



Atlanta United midfielder Miguel Almiron has a shot defended by Portland Timbers defender Larrys Mabiala in the second half of an MLS soccer match in Atlanta.

AP Photo/Brett Davis, File

plishment came with a giant caveat. The team won an unprecedented 14 straight division titles, but became known mostly for its post-season failures, losing four

times in the World Series and every other year but one in the earlier playoff rounds.

Blank was on hand for perhaps the city's biggest disappointment. He also

owns the NFL Falcons, who reached the Super Bowl for just the second time in franchise history in 2016, only to squander a 25-point lead late in the third quarter. The New

England Patriots rallied for a 34-28 victory in overtime.

"I'm as excited about this as I was about the Super Bowl," Blank insisted, before quickly adding, "I don't want to end up with the same feeling we had several years ago."

Since big-league sports arrived in Atlanta more than five decades ago, the only other team that can claim a major title is, in an interesting twist, a soccer club.

The Atlanta Chiefs won the championship in the North American Soccer League's very first season in 1968, but that event is remembered by only the most devoted fans. The Chiefs lasted a total of 10 seasons over two incarnations, but both times went out of business for lack of support. The entire league expired after the 1984 season.

Enter United, which has quickly built a fan base in Major League Soccer that would fit right in with the Premier League or La Liga.

MLS FINAL



Portland Timbers

Atlanta United FC

Saturday, 5 p.m.

Mercedes-Benz Stadium

TV: FOX

Atlanta has broken essentially every MLS attendance record during its short existence, averaging more than 53,000 per game this season. Seattle posted the next-best attendance figure at just under 41,000; no other team in the 23-team league averaged as much as 27,000.

"We've set a new bar for performance in Major League Soccer, both on the pitch and off the pitch," Blank said. "You are what you dream about. You have to be able to visualize it to be able to execute it. We've been able to do that to the highest possible level."

NFL: Big game for where both Minnesota and Seattle sit in the NFC standings

Continued from Page 1B

It's far from a foregone conclusion Seattle is headed to the postseason after missing the playoffs last year. But a win over the Vikings would be a huge step in locking up a postseason berth.

"Keeping your head down and grinding is really what it's all about at this point," Seattle coach Pete Carroll said. "We're upbeat and we're positive. We know that we can win every game and we're going out to get that done."

If the Vikings want a chance at catching Chicago in the NFC North race, a win in Seattle is almost a must. Far easier said than done, especially when it comes to night games. Seattle is 15-2 at home in Thursday, Sunday or Monday night games dating to Carroll's arrival in 2010.

Minnesota is currently in the No. 6 spot in the NFC and its tie earlier this season against Green Bay could end up being a hindrance — or a benefit. The Vikings are a half-game ahead of Philadelphia, Washington and Carolina entering the week.

"It's big. It's very big. It's a road game. We want to go out there and put a full game together as a whole team on the road," Vikings RB Dalvin Cook said. "This is another game to go out there and do that to show that we're still in this thing. We're still fighting. We've got to just put it together."

Here's what else to watch as the teams face for the first time since the 2015 NFC wild-card game:

Russell's role

Is anyone going to be able to slow down the effi-

ciency of Seattle quarterback Russell Wilson?

Through 12 games, Wilson has 29 touchdowns and just five interceptions. He's thrown at least two TD passes in eight straight games and 11 of 12 this season. Last week against San Francisco, Wilson had three touchdowns passes on four completions in the first half.

And it's not just underneath throws or short passes that are turning into touchdowns. Wilson has six TD tosses of 30 or more yards.

"He is moving around a little bit. The guys take off. They are second in the league in red-zone touchdown percentage," Zimmer said. "A lot of that has been obviously they run the ball well. He moves in the pocket and guys get open. They've had some guys where they had been pretty open, too."

Playing catch

Minnesota's Adam Thielen and Stefon Diggs are the only receiver duo in the NFC each with more than 80 catches. Thielen has 98 receptions and Diggs has 84. They'll be facing a pass defense that has been struggling of late, allowing 315 yards per game passing over the past three weeks.

Revenge game

Revenge might be a strong word, but Minnesota defensive tackles Sheldon Richardson and Tom Johnson might have a little bit more incentive for the game. Richardson played for the Seahawks last season before signing with Minnesota in free agency. Seattle

couldn't match the money offered by the Vikings, so Richardson found a new home in Minnesota.

Johnson's situation is a bit stranger. He signed as a free agent with Seattle during the offseason with the intent of being part of the defensive line rotation. He started Week 1 with Seattle, then was released before the Week 2 game at Chicago because of Seattle's need for a roster spot. The Seahawks believed they would be able to re-sign him the following week, but Johnson chose to return to Minnesota and rejoin the Vikings, the team he had spent the previous four seasons with.

Johnson has played in nine games with the Vikings

and has 3 ½ sacks.

Winning record

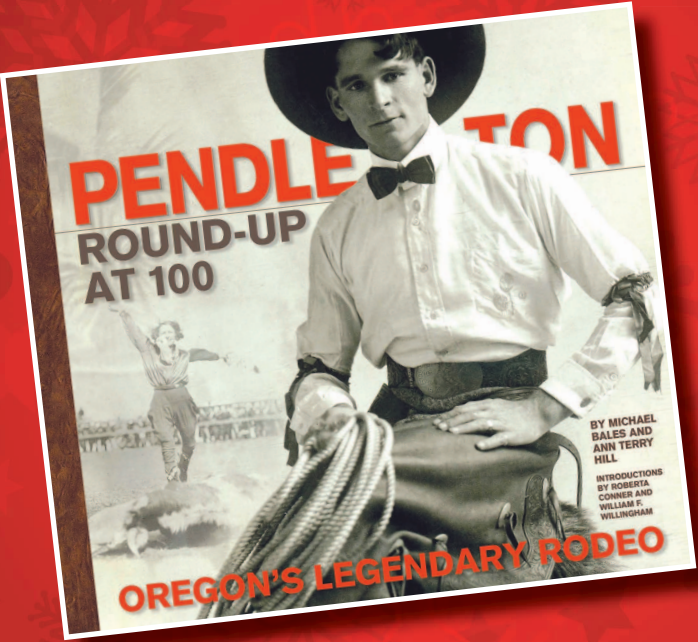
Carroll already owns the team record for most victories, regular season and playoffs combined. He can claim the franchise record for most regular-season wins with his next victory. Carroll is currently tied with Mike Holmgren for the top spot with 86 regular-season wins.

Asked if he had a regular season win that stuck out, Carroll immediately went to a 2012 overtime victory at Chicago. It was the start of a five-game win streak to close the regular season that got Seattle into the playoffs.

"We haven't been the same since," Carroll said.

Looking for the
Perfect Holiday Gift?

Purchase a 1-year subscription to the East Oregonian and receive this highly collectable book, "Pendleton Round-up at 100," absolutely free!



Makes a great gift or a wonderful addition for your own coffee table.

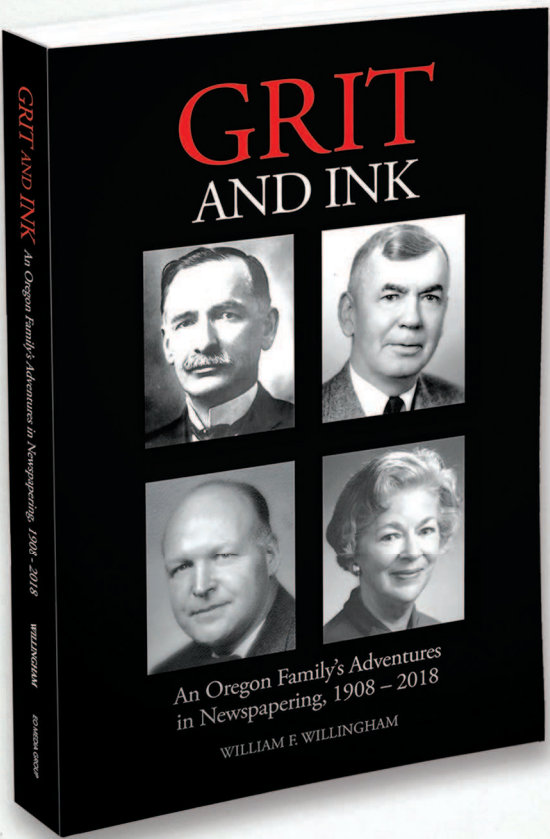
CHOOSE:
1-year subscription \$173.67
Home Delivery + 24/7 Online access

Call 1-800-522-0255 or stop by our office at
211 SE Byers Ave in Pendleton or 333 East Main Street in Hermiston

EAST OREGONIAN

Read this book, and you'll understand a lot about what makes Oregon Oregon.

— Jackman Wilson, Editorial Page Editor, The Register-Guard



"Grit and Ink" tells a story that is very worthy of being told.

— Kerry Tymchuk, Executive Director, Oregon Historical Society

Small-town family business history at its best.

—Richard Baker, U.S. Senate Historian Emeritus

NOW AVAILABLE AT
amazon.com

IN PRINT AND eBook FOR KINDLE

Also available from local booksellers or call 800-621-2736
books.eomediagroup.com/grit-ink