

CLUB HISTORY 1: THE FOUNDING YEARS, 1995-2003

By Jim Shine

The Screaming Eagles (SEs) were formed in 1995 by our first president, Matt Mathai. Matt spent his early childhood in India and learned to play soccer there. He continued to play (and then referee and coach) after moving to the United States in 1970.

Matt began following the United States Men's National Team (USMNT) during qualifying for the 1990 World Cup, the first one that the US qualified for in 40 years. He attended his first USMNT match in 1992 at RFK Stadium, where the US upset Ireland, 3-1. He became active in following the national team, joining the Sam's Army US supporters club.

After the 1994 World Cup in the USA, plans developed to form Major League Soccer (MLS), a new American professional soccer league. The organizers had originally hoped to begin play in 1995, but logistics delayed the start until the spring of 1996.

Matt was excited that MLS was going to have a club in Washington, DC, and he hoped that the support culture of Sam's Army at the national level could be replicated at the MLS club level. When no one else stepped up to organize this, Matt decided to do something about it himself. He called up the New York office of the Washington MLS team (still not named) and spoke to future DC United General Manager Kevin Payne, asking how he could support the new team in DC. Kevin was surprised, but wanting to work with local support, talked regularly with Matt throughout the rest of 1995. As the opening of the league grew near and Kevin's responsibilities grew, Stephen Zack (also in the DC United front office) began to talk with Matt as well. Kevin sent Matt emails at least once a week through 1997. This sort of interaction between the fans and the franchise was unusual (and wonderful) in professional sports dynamics.

Meanwhile, Matt had started a local website and rounded up 100 or so people willing to support the new team. This group became the core of the Screaming Eagles.

The league began in April 1996, and the Screaming Eagles sat in Section 113 at RFK Stadium that year, near the tunnel where the players entered and exited the field. At the start of the 1997 season, at the suggestion of original SE David Goodwin, the Eagles bought the front row in section 134 (right at midfield) and purchased a long banner, stretching over three sections, saying "Screaming Eagles". This ensured that the SE name would be front and center on TV broadcasts. Eventually the Eagles section expanded to nearby sections 133 and 132, so our three-section banner covered three sections of standing, chanting SEs, and became known as "The Nest". The rowdiest members of the club remained in these seats until DC United left RFK at the end of 2017. (See Figures 1 and 2.)

We also eventually annexed two other sections. Section 139 became known as "The Aerie" and was originally for youth soccer families but was later expanded to other fans who liked being near the goal and away from the jumping. Also, when Section 134

became General Admission, we annexed Section 232 (right above 134) for people who liked assigned seats, and this became “The Perch”.

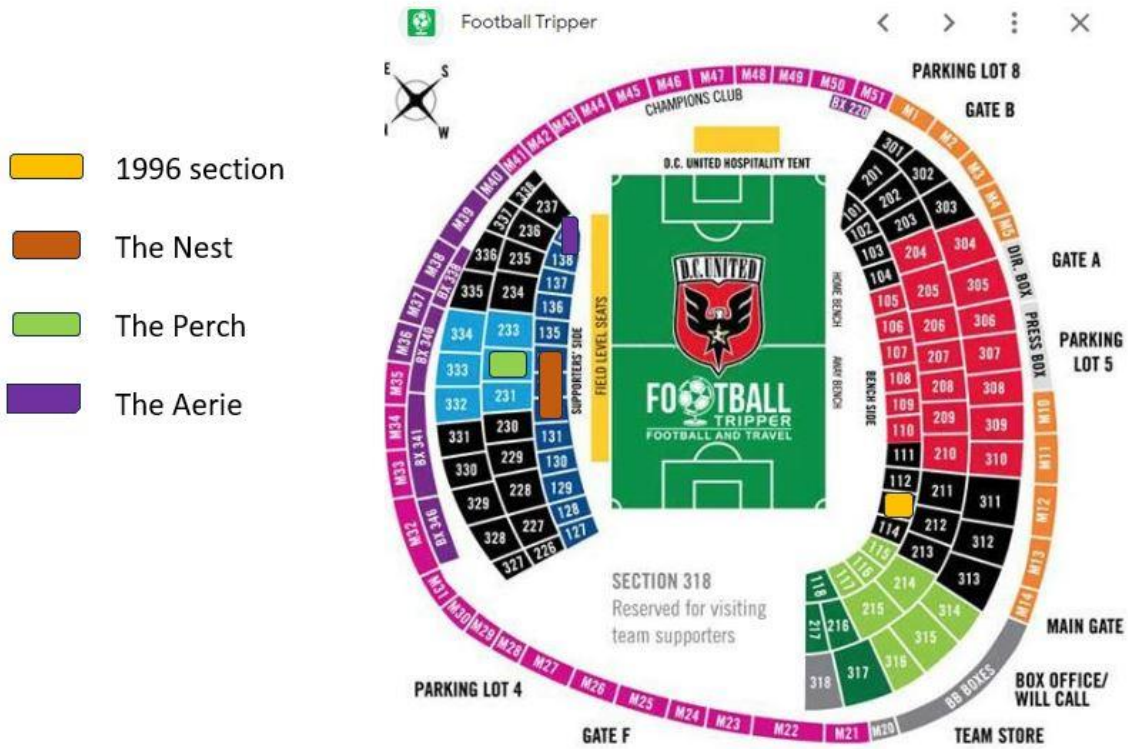


Figure 1: Layout of RFK Stadium (after 2005; from 1996-2004 there were seats at the bottom) with Screaming Eagles sections marked.



Figure 2: One view of the gigantic “Screaming Eagles” banner from the RFK days.

Ticket Sales

Part of the unique relationship between the club and the fans was ticket sales. DC United, through their then Ticket Sales Director Fred Matthes, worked with the Screaming Eagles to allow them to sell tickets for their designated sections directly to fans. The Eagles had their own ticket booth for match day sales at RFK. Matt was the original ticket seller, but soon turned over the operation to his assistant, Nicole Gara, who became our “Ticket Mistress” (a position she still holds, although sales are now handled digitally rather than in person).

Tailgates

The SEs had tailgates before home games since the first games in 1996. The first tailgates were in Lot 5 at RFK (right next to the stadium on the south side) and were run out of Matt’s truck. After a few years, the tailgates moved to the much larger Lot 8 and became increasingly sophisticated, with charcoal grills, then gas grills, a splendid buffet, and PODS to store equipment between games. There will be more details on the tailgates in later sections; a lot of wonderful people made them possible.

Road Trips

Road trips were a part of SE culture from the very beginning. The club went to every game, and organized buses for trips to geographically close rivals, in particular the New York Metrostars (now known as the New York Red Bulls). In fact, the first official SE road trip was a 7-passenger van (driven by Matt, of course) to East Rutherford NJ to watch a DC United vs Metrostars match in the spring of 1996.

SE road trips also included games for the US national team, as well as every MLS Cup from 1996 to 2011 (when the game was played at a neutral site determined months in advance). Two notable trips were the “NAFTA” trip (games in US, Canada and Mexico within a one week period) and a New England trip that went to a DC United vs New England Revolution game, followed by a US Men’s National Team game. The SEs went to Mexico City several times for US vs Mexico World Cup qualifiers. Again, more details to follow in later sections.

Charitable Activities

The SEs started charitable activities in 1997, deciding that it was too large a group to just cheer for a soccer team; it could make a difference in other ways. The SEs created the Capital Soccer Ball and ran it for many years, reaching out for donations and memorabilia from other MLS clubs as well. The SEs also began a partnership with the local charity DC Scores in 1997, donating \$1500 to DC Scores that year; the partnership with DC Scores continues to this day. Again, look for more details to follow in future sections.

Inclusivity

The SEs have always welcomed a wide range of people. At one point in the early years, the age range for members was 8 months to 80 years. One of our mottos is “All welcome, all united.”



Matt was president of the SEs for 8 years, between 1996 and 2003. He stepped back from club leadership at the end of the 2003 season because of sheer exhaustion but left the club in a lot of good hands. Matt continued to support the team; he missed only 8 home games between 1996 and 2018. He retired and moved to New Mexico in 2019, but still watches the club on TV and attends the occasional game.

Thank you, Matt; you've enriched so many lives (including my own).

