



# It's business as usual for TFC as the Reds open the post-season against the Red Bulls

Sports psychologists suggest the MLS Cup hopefuls trust what has gotten them this far.

TFC forward Jozy Altidore is certainly familiar with the New York Red Bulls. He got his start with the organization, then the MetroStars, as a 16-year-old. (RICK MADONIK / TORONTO STAR)

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The beginning of Monday's two-leg Eastern Conference semifinal between Toronto FC and the New York Red Bulls is the resumption of a long history between the New Jersey-based club and the Reds' two American stars.

Michael Bradley and Jozy Altidore were both 16 years old when they joined the organization — then the New York MetroStars — in 2004 and 2006, respectively. It's where they got their first taste of professional football, and where Altidore score his first playoff goal.

But while both players have fond memories of their time with New York, the history has little significance on the road to what they hope will be an MLS Cup.

“It’s two big games, a playoff series with everything on the line,” Bradley said. “That’s a lot, so I’m not sure there’s any room for anything extra.”

The team is taking that same attitude when it comes to being favourites to win the biggest title of the year. Toronto has a 27 per cent chance of winning the MLS title, according to data analysis website FiveThirtyEight. The next closest team, last year’s winner, the Seattle Sounders, is listed at 16 per cent. But the numbers mean little around the Reds’ camp.

“We want to win,” Bradley said. “We want to go after every game, go after every moment. We want to be the last ones standing and all of the rest is just waste of time, ultimately.”

Going after every moment is the advice sports psychologists would suggest to ward off the pressure that comes with high expectations.

Brenley Shapiro, a sports psychology and mental performance coach who founded Toronto-based Heads Up Mental Game Coaching in 2011, said the team knows it can win. They need to trust the processes that helped the Reds to a regular-season title and a single-season points record.

“Who’s winning the whole cup is irrelevant right now,” Shapiro said. “Nobody’s going to predict the future. So what’s important right now? What do I have to do now? I have to keep my body in shape, I have to keep hydrated, I’ve got to focus on the game plan.”

At the end of the day, she said, it’s the same game Toronto has played all year.

“The ball doesn’t know their record . . . the game is just the game. So play the game, trust in the game and trust in your ability because the ball doesn’t know who’s supposed to win.”

Who is “supposed” to win hasn’t always played out in Major League Soccer. Only six teams in the league’s 21-year history that finished with the best regular-season record went on to win the MLS Cup, the last squad being the Los Angeles Galaxy in 2011. The Supporters’ Shield curse, as some have come to call it, has been a talking point around the Reds since they clinched the title in late September.

Ted Kays, a sports psychologist and president of the Ohio-based sports and performance consulting firm Athletic Mind Institute, has worked with the Columbus Crew and individual players around the league. He’s familiar with the so-called curse, but reminds history doesn’t have to repeat itself.

“I would invite the curse into the room, so to speak,” he said. “I would say, ‘Let’s just deal with this word curse. Let talk about it.’ What does it mean to your guys? When we talk about it and get it out, it takes its power away.”

Talking things through is particularly important during the playoffs, Kay believes. While mental

strength is not something teams and their players can cram for, Kay said it could make or break a post-season run.

“From here on out, it’s the mind, it’s the human part that’s going to dictate how far anybody goes,” he said. “Their fitness is their fitness; that’s not going to change dramatically over the next few weeks. Their soccer skills are their soccer skills; that’s not going to change dramatically.”

Inside Toronto’s camp, the team is relying on its recent experience at the top of the league to help them live up to those expectations.

“By and large, we played the whole season (as the hunted) so I don’t think it makes the playoffs any different,” TFC coach Greg Vanney said.

The Reds don’t plan to play any differently, either. They managed a win and a draw against the Red Bulls this season, tempering New York’s famed high press and the attacking potential of Bradley Wright-Phillips and Sasha Klejstan.

So if it ain’t broke, why fix it?

“I think we’ve played them in the past and what we’ve done has worked so I don’t think there will be too much to change,” Altidore said. “Obviously it’ll be a different game, more at stake, but I think it’ll be a lot more of the same from us. I don’t think we should change much, we’ve had a great season.”