

How European Football Clubs will take Advantage of the 2026 World Cup



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With the 2026 FIFA World Cup now firmly in the crosshairs of this country's public discourse, it will be interesting to track both the expected and unexpected knock-on effects this tournament's hosting may bring. As much excitement has been generated here on home soil in the U.S. for all the potential growth domestic soccer will experience leading up to 2026, that same fervor and drive is being exhibited across the Atlantic in Europe for a different reason.

At Sportsology Group, we have been engaged by several European teams to explore what different international expansion strategies exist and how to best employ them to both grow and improve their brand around the globe. One such feasibility study that we led looked to explore the best path forward for a La Liga club looking to grow their presence in the U.S. market. Our key takeaways were the following:

- **The best teams use a 10-step program to get them from the hypothesis phase to execution**
- **There are more possible ideas and activities than you think (about 42 by our count)**
- **As with most things, it comes down to Location, Location, Location**

Major European football clubs will now begin (if they haven't already started) the process of creating their own international brand expansion strategies to penetrate the U.S. market, in an attempt to piggyback off the energy and enthusiasm generated by the World Cup.



10 Steps to consider when deciding upon an International Expansion plan

One of the most common cautionary tales we heard from both our clients and other team personnel we engaged with for this project were of highly anticipated foreign growth initiatives that were not well thought out and/or were contrived somewhat haphazardly.

Best-case scenario: the team got lucky. Their brand was so powerful, or they threaded the needle on timing, and thus achieved some form of success. Though the worst-case scenario entailed massive resources being put into a project that would be shut down before it even was implemented, leaving behind a trail of severe confusion and several "Wait, why did we say we were going to do this?" type questions along the way.

After collating the notes and thoughts of these experts in the field, we were able to discern and later confirm with them what a "best practices" plan of attack looked like [See diagram opposite].

International Expansion Plan: 10 Steps to consider

- Step 01 Define the Overall Strategy
- Step 02 Define the Realm of Possibilities
- Step 03 Conduct Competitive Benchmarking
- Step 04 Identify Region / Country of Interest
- Step 05 Target Specific Markets
- Step 06 Review Existing In-Market Partnerships / Assets
- Step 07 Establish Criteria / Metrics for Success
- Step 08 Prioritize and Group Initiatives
- Step 09 Develop Execution Roadmap
- Step 10 Assign Resourcing Needs and GTM

Step 01

Define the Overall Strategy – You need an objective. You need a goal. It's not enough to say "We want to grow our presence in the U.S." There must be a more targeted mission. An example of one such vision we heard used by a major European club was a rising tide lifts all boats approach for their target country. This plan entailed that they would grow the sport, the league, and the club, with a central objective to build an international brand which is locally important. Furthermore, regardless of what vision you set, another important consideration here is making sure you and your team are clear on what your club's brand even is. It will be much more difficult down the line to sell a narrative if you can't align early on this.

Step 02

Define the Realm of Possibilities – To know what you could and should do, it's first helpful to catalog what's been done before. More on this list of potential solutions later.

Step 03

Conduct Competitive Benchmarking – Once you've created your set menu of options, look to some of your close peers and competitors to check and see if they've employed similar initiatives before and if so, were they successful?

Step 04

Identify Region / Country of Interest – Although this seems like a step that should be done sooner, we found that using it both as an initial part of the targeting process and as a filter for shortening your now created list of ideas was effective. Even if you need to remove some potential solutions given a certain region or country's specific conditions, there might be some ideas that you can carry over.

Step 05

Target Specific Markets – Advice that we consistently got, especially when entering the U.S. market, was that you needed to be more precise. It's not enough to say you want to grow across the whole country. Although that could be the objective, the execution will begin at a smaller level. In the case of the U.S., we cover later in this article the more targeted locations you should consider homing in on.

Step 06

Review Existing In-Market Partnerships / Assets – More often than not, the clubs we advise already have existing agreements with companies in the U.S. Therefore, before you begin enacting any project, it would be prudent to examine these agreements and see if you can utilize them for some of your proposals.

Step 07

Establish Criteria / Metrics for Success – Any good plan is essentially worthless without set KPIs and criteria for its success, a tenet that is true for almost any business. Whether it's the number of in-market visits you want your team to make, or the number of U.S. based social media followers you want to amass, defining these metrics is a crucial precursor to execution.

Step 08

Prioritize and Group Initiatives – Not all ideas merit the same level of resources or timeline to be enacted. Find your “Quick Wins” and “Low Hanging Fruit”. Determine what projects will deliver high impact. Estimate the amount of personnel and time needed. By accomplishing this, you will have a clearer picture for the next step.

Step 09

Develop Execution Roadmap – With your stated priorities and understanding of your allowed resourcing, map out each initiative's targeted delivery date and length of time required. It most likely will not be possible to launch all your selected initiatives at the same time, thus failure to stagger the work properly could result in failure to realize any of your objectives.

Step 10

Assign Resourcing Needs and GTM – Once you have your roadmap in place, the final step is to assign specific personnel who will be responsible for owning the various initiatives you've set out to undertake. Unclear accountability was an Achilles' heel mentioned several times during our interviews as a weakness that could be debilitating to project completion.

So, what are your options?

As part of our client work, we conducted a deep dive into the marketplace to find and record each unique idea that had been used by European clubs seeking to expand their presence in international markets. Combined with our interviews and conversations with the experts in this space, we created this “menu” of 42 different options divided into three buckets and six categories:

Football Operations

First Team	Academy
Club Acquisition	Academy Partnership
Club Partnership	Academy Establishment
Preseason Tour / Tournament	Consultancy: Youth Development
Postseason Tour / Tournament	International Tournaments
Knowledge Exchange Platform	Women-specific: Youth Club Partnership
Player Acquisition from Target Country	Licensing
Crowdsourcing of Freelance Scouts	
Training Camps	

Commercial

Marketing	Operations
Broadcasting Rights	Knowledge Partner in Target Country
Target Country Sponsorship / Partnership	Fan Club / Watch Parties in Target Country
Streaming Platform	Target Country Apparel / Retailer Deal
Enhanced Social Media Content	Office in Target Country
Target Market Media Deals	Non-Match Day Events in Target Country
Virtual Advertising Display Systems	International Membership Benefits
Content via OTT Platform	Events / Summits / Conferences
Licensing	Commercial Exchange of Best Practices
Press Contributions	E-Sports Team
	Ticket Provider Sponsorship
	Partnerships with non-Soccer Teams

Corporate Social Responsibility

Community	Government
Identity Centric Campaigns	Economic Partnerships
Targeted Cause Efforts	International Campaigns
International Awareness Trips	Targeted Institution Partnerships
Educational Partnerships / Events	
Women-specific: Youth Club Partnership	





This extensive list of initiatives is not meant to be a “pre-fixe menu” that should be executed in certain groupings and in a defined manner. This is a buffet of brand-bolstering brainchilds supplied by organizations across Europe that is meant to be selected according to the needs and wants of the specific entity. Each of these has an established and/or creative case study behind it of a club that chose to use that strategy. A few examples:

- **Target Country Sponsorship / Partnership** – AS Monaco’s selection of Yabo Sports as their regional betting partner in Asia bolstered their brand’s growth in China and eventually became the leading club in Ligue 1’s China Night.
- **Target Country Apparel / Retailer Deal** – PSG’s partnership with the Jordan brand has been one of the most successful collaborations in club soccer history, with sales of the jersey increasing by a staggering 470% in the U.S.
- **Targeted Cause Efforts** – Inter Milan’s Inter Campus project, whose mission is to support social programs in favor of children in need, using football as an educational tool, has been implemented in 29 countries around the world while serving around 10,000 children between the ages of six and 13.

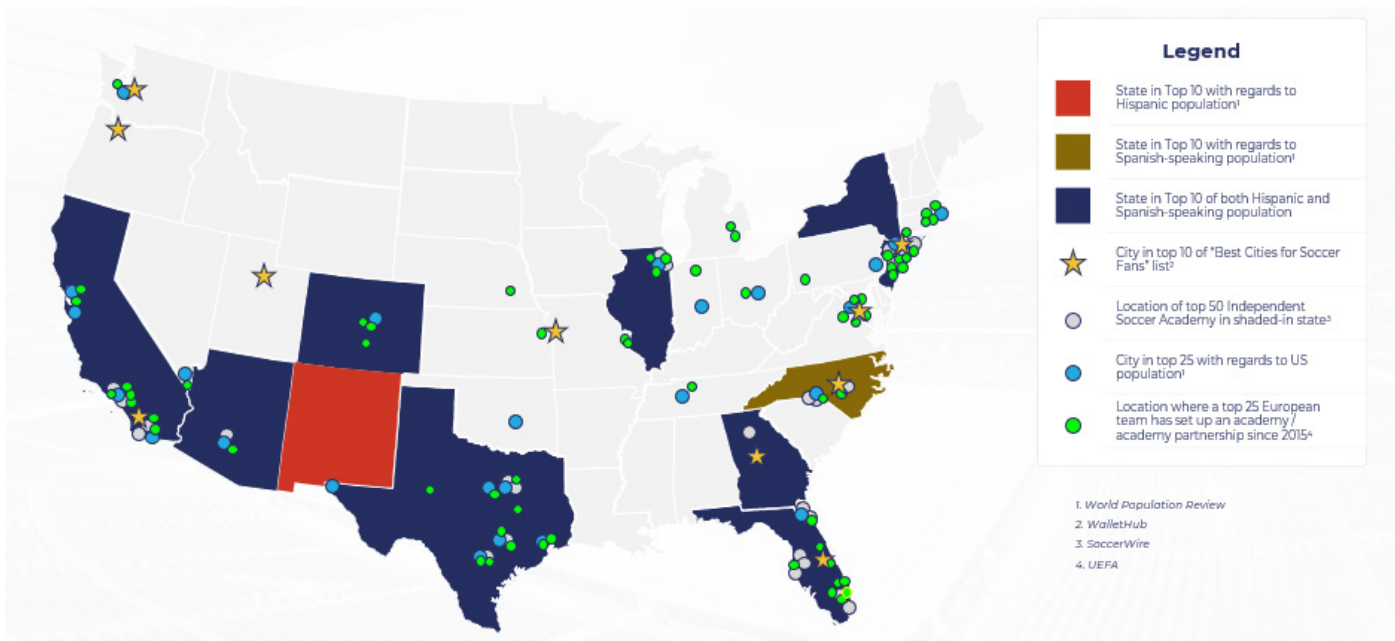
Some of these activities make sense to do in partnership (content via OTT platform and enhanced social media content). Some of these activities might be on opposite ends of the spectrum but can work together in a defined strategy (academy establishment and economic partnerships). Furthermore, some of these activities will be more aligned to different objectives. While a club partnership / acquisition could reap serious financial benefits, an international awareness trip can boost a team’s ESG profile. Regardless, the point is that this array of opportunities is meant to be an exhaustive starting point from which your organization can begin selecting certain routes based on your pre-defined vision.

Lastly, another important thing to consider when selecting which initiatives to employ is how much of a presence you can sustain in your target market. A familiar pitfall in building an international presence that was mentioned to us multiple times was the inability to provide year-round engagement for the audience in question. The classic example being a team that will tour in the U.S. every two years yet do nothing else in between. A lack of consistent activity in your selected market indicates a set of initiatives that are arbitrarily bundled together and not ones that are part of a clear strategy. In advising our clients, we deliver this in a somewhat brutally honest way: if you are not able to plan and accommodate for a consistent presence in your target market, it may not be worth doing anything at all there.

The #1 rule in real-estate should also be a Top Consideration for International Expansion

For some of the bigger global markets, such as the U.S., an aimed approach for specific localities has proven to be effective in enacting a broader strategy. For example, a club personnel who had held a senior role at one of the biggest Premier League teams in their commercial department explained to us the comprehensive process through which their group placed some of the major U.S. states into tiers based on demographics, viewership, attendance, and other criteria, in combination with this club's specific footprint in each of those locations to provide a clear priority list of markets to target. It was their view that this was a necessary step in their overarching plan and was the agreed-upon superior alternative to using a "broad strokes" approach.

Thus, as part of our feasibility study generated for our client in La Liga, we created this initial view to help orient senior leadership towards what the landscape for potential interest and engagement for their club in the U.S. looked like [See diagram on the following page].



As you can see in the diagram above, given how this was intended as a preliminary view, we used a variety of different attributes to plot out the different "hot spots". We identified these categories as possible indicators for the following reasons:

- *Spanish speaking population* – potential link for the Spain-based La Liga
- *Hispanic population* – fan interest measurement given that Liga MX games attract more viewers in the US than any other domestic league
- *Best Cities for Soccer Fans* – third-party research to demonstrate high soccer engagement cities
- *Location of top 50 independent soccer academies* – youth soccer engagement measurement given the perceived translation of youth sports participation into adult fandom
- *City in top 25 of U.S. population* – general population metric
- *Location where a top 25 European club has set up an academy or partnership* – shows where peers and potential competitors have already laid their footprint within the U.S.

The conclusion to this club-agnostic map? The usual suspects stick out as prominent soccer communities worth targeting: Southern California, Texas, New York, and Florida. Though North Carolina and Washington D.C. also emerge as focus areas worth exploring further.

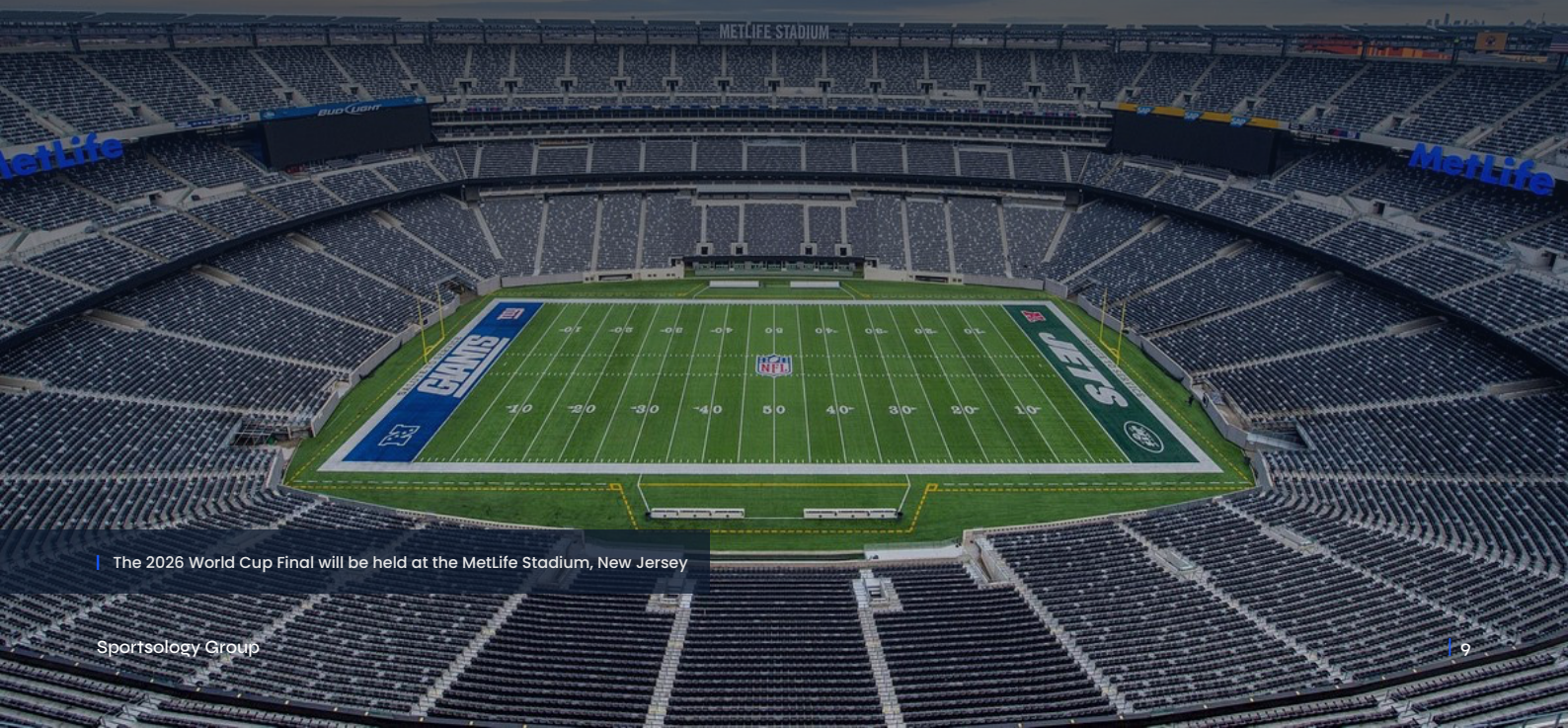
Regardless though, this map is incomplete. What this version is missing is the application of a specific club's requirements based on their overall expansion strategy. As mentioned earlier, a successful international expansion project necessitates a concise vision and objective. Based on that mission, one can apply their own criteria and attributes to determine the best geographies to aim for.

In Conclusion

The 2026 World Cup is already generating buzz and excitement in the U.S. within soccer and sporting circles. It is being discussed as a generational moment that will supercharge soccer engagement, participation, and fandom in this country. While within public discourse this excitement has so far been geared towards the domestic benefits the tournament will bring, European clubs have already begun mapping out the different strategies they will choose to employ to their own benefit.

It is our opinion that the organizations which will be most successful are those that will use a calculated and well-thought-out approach, utilize creative and effective initiatives that fit their specific goal, and focus in on precise locations to build-out their vision.

These clubs, who are proactive and aggressive in their implementation, will be able to craft their own narrative and story in a country filled to the brim with a captive audience waiting to be swept off their feet.



| The 2026 World Cup Final will be held at the MetLife Stadium, New Jersey

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