



Ready, Set, Goal

The man behind Atlanta's new and improved pro soccer team is ready to hit the field and make a difference.

| *By Lisa Horten* | *Portrait by Sarah Dorio* |

At age 34, Rodrigo Rios is living his dream. The former captain of the Atlanta Silverbacks has been tasked with the lofty goal of rebuilding the professional soccer team for its debut this spring as part of the North American Soccer League, and it's exactly what he's always wanted to do. "I always knew that soccer would end one day," Rios says. "My dream job was to be a director."

A native of Santiago, Chile, the Silverbacks' new director of soccer may look the part of international playboy, but he's equal parts business-minded professional, dedicated pro athlete and family man. "Soccer's been in my life since before I could walk," Rios says. "My dad took me to the stadium every weekend, no matter who was playing—it was about the sport, not the competition."

At the not-so-ripe age of 10, Rios told his parents that he wanted to play professionally. By 15, he was getting paid to play the game he loved, and at 16, he had gone pro on the Chilean national team. In 2005,

Rodrigo Rios at SilverbacksPark

Rios came to the United States to play for the LA Galaxy, but soon after, he moved to Atlanta and signed with a new team, the Silverbacks. "I fell in love with the

idea of starting something new," he says.

Rios' dedication to the sport is paying off in his career off the field as well. When the Silverbacks ceased play as part of the United Soccer League in 2008, Rios stuck around, continuing to manage Silverbacks Park, a mainstay of the community. And now that the team is resuming play as part of the more esteemed NASL, their go-to guy was an obvious choice.

"We're trying to build something more than a team here," Rios says. In the process of recruiting, he's working to achieve a balance of younger and more experienced players—a group that can grow together. At the time of our interview, the newly signed players were due to arrive (from around the world) in Atlanta within the week, and Jose Manuel Abundis, an Olympian and major soccer star in Mexico, had been named the Silverbacks coach.

"To be able to work and help players, especially young players, to see their dreams come true, it's really great when you can be a part of that," Rios says. The Silverbacks play their first game against the Minnesota Stars on April 9 at 7:30PM. ■