

# 2024 REAL SALT LAKE GAME PREVIEW

UPDATED: 25 April 2024

2023 PERFORMANCES:	MLS 14W-12L-8D (50 points, 5 <sup>th</sup> West); 48 GF / 50 GA Open Cup 4W-1L (Semifinal Loss @ HOU, 1-3 AET) Leagues Cup 2W (3-0 v SEA, 3-1 v Atlas FC) 2L (0-3 v Monterrey, 0-4 @ LAFC) Playoffs 0W-1L-2T (eliminated by Houston, 4-3 aggregate)	
SPORTING DIRECTOR:	Kurt Schmid (4 <sup>th</sup> season with RSL – 1 <sup>st</sup> full season as Chief Soccer Officer)	
HEAD COACH:	Pablo Mastroeni [4 <sup>th</sup> season with RSL – 3 <sup>rd</sup> full season as RSL HC; 8 <sup>th</sup> overall in MLS (COL 2014-17)]	
ASSISTANT COACHES:	Nate Miller (1 <sup>st</sup> season – formerly USL San Diego Loyal); Anthony Pulis (1 <sup>st</sup> season – formerly USL Miami FC); Jamison Olave (1 <sup>st</sup> season – formerly MLSNP Real Monarchs); Mirza Hrambasic – GK (1 <sup>st</sup> season – formerly MLSNP Real Monarchs); Sean Buckley – performance (1 <sup>st</sup> season – formerly Minnesota United)	
INCOMING TRANSFERS:	M/F Fidel Barajas (Charleston Battery – USA – signed Jan. 11, 2024); DF Alexandros Katranis (Piast Gliwice – Poland – signed Feb. 2, 2024); FW Matt Crooks (Middlesbrough – England – signed Feb. 9, 2024)	
KEY DEPARTURES: (2023 All Comp Stats)	FW Jefferson Savarino (11 goals, 7 assists → Botafogo – Brazil); FW Danny Musovski (9g, 4a → Seattle – MLS); M/F Damir Kreilach (8g / 1a → Vancouver – MLS); MF Jasper Löffelsend (1g, 2a → Colorado – MLS)	
OUT ON LOAN:	FW Rubio Rubin (3g, 2a → loaned to Queretaro – Liga MX); D/M Jaziel Orozco (loaned to Larne – No. Ireland – through May 2024); DF Delentz Pierre (loaned to Colo. Springs – USL through 2024 season); D/M Kevon Lambert (loaned to San Antonio – USL through 2024 season)	
ACADEMY HOMEGROWNS: * (incl. Playoffs)	DF Justen Glad (232 MLS* games, 13 goals, 1 assist); DF Andrew Brody (94 MLS* games, 2g / 14a); DF Erik Holt (42 MLS games, 1g / 1a); D/M Bode Hidalgo (40* MLS games, 1g / 1a); GK Gavin Beavers (9 MLS games, 675 min, 17 saves, 16 GA, 2.13 GAA); D/M Jaziel Orozco (4 MLS games) FW Xavier Gozo (1 MLS game); FW Axel Kei (1 MLS game)	
	DF Tommy Silva DF Luis Rivera MF Jude Wellings	DF Delentz Pierre DF Zack Farnsworth MF Luca Moisa

## AVAILABILITY REPORT (for 27 April @ Philadelphia):

**OUT:** DF Kevin Bonilla (knee injury suffered 2/14 v TOR)  
MF Pablo Ruiz (knee injury suffered 3/5/24 in training)  
DF Marcelo Silva (hamstring injury suffered 4/2/24 in training)  
DF Erik Holt (hamstring injury suffered 4/3/24 in training)  
MF Diego Luna (calf injury suffered 4/20/24 at CHI)

**QUESTIONABLE:** DF Brayan Vera (hip contusion suffered 4/13/24 v CLB)  
DF Justen Glad (adductor strain suffered 4/17/24 in training)

**REAL MONARCHS:** FW Matthew Bell, DF Zack Farnsworth, FW Bertin Jacquesson,  
(MLS NEXT Pro Duty) FW Axel Kei, MF Luca Moisa, FW Ilijah Paul, MF Jude Wellings



## ***ROAD-HEAVY STRETCH CONTINUES AT SUBARU PARK IN CHESTER ::***

Real Salt Lake (4-2-3, 15 pts., t-2<sup>nd</sup> West MLS) resumes its 2024 MLS regular season – the Club's 20th and Major League Soccer 29th – Saturday night in Philadelphia with a 5:30p MT kickoff against the Union ... RSL last played under the gaze of the Commodore Barry Bridge in May, 2018 – losing 1-4 in a match that saw Damir Kreilach pull one back after an 0-2 halftime deficit, but the Union dominating late ...

Saturday's match gives RSL an opportunity to extend its active unbeaten run to six consecutive games, seizing upon the momentum of last week's 4-0 dominance in Chicago ... A point earned Saturday would give RSL five consecutive matches away with results, as Head Coach **Pablo Mastroeni**'s side looks to improve its current road record of 2-1-2 / 8 points earned in five matches, losing only the 2024 opener at Miami back on Feb. 24 ...

This week's Philadelphia trip continues a stretch that could see RSL play 9 of 13 matches from April 20 – June 19 on the road, the Claret-and-Cobalt preparing for a potential 8-game May gauntlet ... Following a brief home respite on May 4 against Kansas City, RSL will then travel for road contests on May 8 (Open Cup @ New Mexico), May 11 (@ LAG), return home on May 15/18 against SEA/COL, then back on the road for a potential May 22 road date (Open Cup R16 possibility), May 25 (@ DAL), May 29 (@ SEA), a home date on June 1 v. Austin, finishing the stretch away on June 15 (@ MTL) and June 19 (@ KC) ...

## ***IN-FORM / ON-FIRE CHICHO CONTINUES TO LEAD RSL ::***

RSL Captain FW **Chicho Arango** led RSL's dominant 4-0 win at Chicago with the Club's first-ever 2-goal/2-assist performance, rebounding from a rare goose egg the week prior against Columbus ...

That zero against the Crew on April 13 meant that Arango saw his three-game, six-goal / two-assist streak snapped in the scoreless home draw despite a dangerous first half against the Crew ...

Chicho – the reigning MLS Player of the Matchday – enters Subaru Park this weekend atop the MLS “goal contribution” table, with eight goals and six assists thus far this season, in nine games played ... Those numbers are buoyed by his MLS Player of the Matchday performance in Matchday 7 – recording all three goals in the Utah side's come-from-behind 3-1

win over St. Louis on March 30 ... That RSL hat trick by Chicho was the Club's first since September 17, 2018 (Damir Kreilach) ...

Chicho's three-goal performance is just the seventh in RSL's now 623-game MLS history, the Colombian joining Alvaro Saborio (three hats – two in 2012, one in 2013), along with Robbie Findley (2009), Javier Morales (2014) and Kreilach ... Former Captain, head coach and current Club director Jason Kreis also had a hat trick, albeit in the 2005 U.S. Open Cup ...

Arango now has two hat tricks in his MLS career – his first was for LAFC in late 2021 against Dallas – and boasts 107 goals as a professional, including 51 goals in 84 games across all competitions since arriving in MLS for LAFC and RSL ... Since arriving on the Wasatch Front last July, Chicho now boasts 16 goals and eight assists in 27 MLS appearances for the Claret-and-Cobalt, with those numbers increasing to 18 goals and 10 assists in 32 RSL games across all competitions (incl. Leagues Cup, Open Cup, Playoffs)

...

All-told, Chicho now garnering way-too-early MVP talk, as his combined goal contribution numbers – 8 goals, 6 assists – leads MLS entering this weekend at Philadelphia ...

## ***MLS SCORING LEADERS CHICHO / LUNA TOP THE TABLES ::***

RSL playmaker **Diego Luna** is now second in MLS amongst assist leaders with five (5) in eight games this young season, trailing only teammate Arango, the legendary Lionel Messi and Red Bull standout Dante Vanzeir, tied with Cincinnati star Lucho Acosta ...

Luna provided the primary helper on Chicho's third goal three weeks ago, the four-goal/two-game performances v STL / at MIN launching Arango atop the MLS Golden Boot race with six (6) goals this year ... Chicho's goal on April 6 at Minnesota pushed the Colombian sniper into a tie with NYRB's Lewis Morgan

...

MLS Golden Boot leader **Chicho Arango** is also now top in MLS in assists with six (6), the RSL Captain dominating the chance creation game through the first nine matchdays ...

Can the dynamic duo keep the momentum going Saturday at Philadelphia? ...

## ***ROAD WARRIORS DO IT AGAIN ::***

With last week's 4-0 dismantling at Chicago, RSL brings a 2-1-2 record with eight points away from home this year, also winning on the road in Vancouver on March 23, while settling for draws at St. Louis on Feb. 24 and at Minnesota on March 30, following a season-opening loss at Miami on Feb. 21 ...

A year ago, Head Coach **Pablo Mastroeni**'s team amassed 12 road wins and five away draws across all competitions, against just eight losses, by far the most successful road campaign in Club history ...

A pair of debutants making their first-ever RSL starts on March 23 at Vancouver provided the heroics, as 17-year-old playmaker **Fidel Barajas** assisted on both second-half goals – coming after he himself hit the woodwork twice – for **Anderson Julio** and **Alex Katranis** ...

With his outstanding two-assist display, Barajas became just the sixth player in MLS' 29-year history to tally a multi-assist game at 17-years-old or younger, joining such past MLS luminaries as Bobby Convey, Santino Quaranta, Alphonso Davies, Cade Cowell and Freddy Adu ...

## ***BACK ON THE ROAD ::***

RSL spent nearly all of February away from home, with a preseason trip from Jan. 29 – Feb. 10 in Portugal, a quick Feb. 13/14 jaunt to Santa Barbara for games against Columbus and Toronto, prior to a Feb. 19 trek to Miami, where it began 2024 a few days earlier than most of MLS ...

RSL then suffered an 0-2 loss during a standalone kickoff on Feb. 21 at Chase Stadium in South Florida, the first time the two sides have ever met ... A month and a half ago, as part of a full slate of "MLS is BACK" matches across the League, RSL traveled directly from Miami to St. Louis for a CITY Park tilt, ultimately drawing 1-1 ...

RSL settled into a bit of rhythm with three of four at home in March, capturing 9 of a possible 12 points ahead of an April that sees three of four away ending with the Chicago / Philadelphia trips ...

In League action, May starts out with three of four at home, not including two potential U.S. Open Cup road dates on May 8 (at New Mexico in the Round of 32) and May 22 (potential Round of 16 match at Colorado Springs or New York City II) ahead of a late May week that sees RSL travel at Dallas and at Seattle ahead of a June 1 home match against Austin ...

## ***UNEXPECTED CLEAN SHEET DOUSES FIRE IN CHICAGO ::***

Despite a centerback injury epidemic that has seen RSL lose its top four central defenders in the last three weeks, utilize an emergency callup AND trade for a young DF on Friday, RSL was able to notch a second consecutive shutout last week, extending its active shutout streak to 183 minutes entering the Philadelphia trip ...

18-year-old GK **Gavin Beavers** – starting due to a pre-planned rotation with incumbent **Zac MacMath** – did not have the usual tandem of **Justen Glad** (adductor) and **Brayan Vera** (hip) to calm his nerves in the eighth MLS start of his career ...

Instead, RSL boss **Pablo Mastroeni** inserted Costa Rican veteran **Bryan Oviedo** – typically a left back, sometimes a left wing – and RSL Academy graduate **Bode Hidalgo**, a 22-year-old converted winger who has seen time mostly at right back in his 38-game / 19-start MLS career – in the middle of the back four in place of Glad/Vera ...

Beavers made five saves and controlled his box aggressively in earning the first-ever MLS clean sheet of his career (Open Cup May 2023 at Colorado), becoming the youngest-ever RSL goalkeeper to post an MLS shutout, eclipsing David Ochoa by nearly two years ...

## ***ANOTHER DEBUTANT FINDS THE FIELD ::***

Saturday night at Soldier Field, capping off an insane 30-hour period, newly-acquired DF **Philip Quinton** joined four others to have made their RSL debuts in 2024 ... This young season, RSL has also seen teenage playmaker **Fidel Barajas**, MF **Matt Crooks**, DF **Alex Katranis** and MF **Noel Caliskan** make their MLS debuts for the Club ...

Quinton was acquired Friday morning in a trade from Columbus, meeting the team in Chicago Friday night, participating in group and individual video sessions on gameday, and appearing in the final 16 minutes of the eventual 4-0 victory ...

The 22-year-old centerback out of Notre Dame was drafted by the Crew with the 25<sup>th</sup> overall MLS SuperDraft pick – a pick originally owned by RSL and sold to Columbus for \$50,000 GAM – and won an MLS NEXT Pro title in 2022 prior to being a part of the Crew's MLS Cup 2023 championship side ...

Quinton had started the weekend prior at America First Field, a pivotal figure in RSL's 0-0 home crew with the Crew on April 13 ...

## ***IRON MEN ALL OVER THE PARK ::***

Three RSL players – MF **Emeka Eneli** (810), DF **Andrew Brody** (809) and FW **Chicho Arango** (805) – have played nearly every minute of the Club's 9-game season so far in 2024, with only second-year man Eneli perfect from a minutes standpoint ...

DF **Bode Hidalgo** is the fourth player to have appeared in all nine games, while five RSL players have appeared in eight games, missing just one match this year – **Diego Luna**, **Anderson Julio**, **Braian Ojeda**, **Andrés Gómez** and **Matt Crooks** ...

GK **Zac MacMath**, **Justen Glad**, **Brayan Vera** and **Fidel Barajas** have each appeared in seven of nine contests thus far ...

## ***DEPTH ON DISPLAY AS ROTATION INCREASES ::***

As RSL gets into a heavy May slate – six MLS reg. season games, potentially two U.S. Open Cup contests, four possible midweek matches out of eight total – the expectation is that Mastroeni will implement additional squad rotation ...

With last year's mid-year success inspired by the Open Cup fresh in mind – RSL went from mid-April to mid-August losing just three of 24 matches prior to the Pablo Ruiz injury – the upcoming glut could provide ample opportunities for **Gavin Beavers**, **Bryan Oviedo**, **Philip Quinton**, **Nelson Palacio**, **Fidel Barajas**, **Anderson Julio** and maybe even young Academy products **Zavier Gozo** or **Tommy Silva** ...

## ***PABLO PROMISES TACTICAL EVOLUTION ::***

RSL has moved to 4-2-3-1 in 2024, after playing mostly a flat 4-4-2 last season ... Head Coach **Pablo Mastroeni**, now in his fourth season with RSL (third full year as manager) and his crew – an entirely new staff of four on-field assistants [former USL head coaches **Nate Miller** (San Diego), **Anthony Pulis** (Miami FC) and **Jamison Olave** (Real Monarchs), along with GK Coach **Mirza Hrambasic**] and a new performance/fitness coach (**Sean Buckley**, formerly of Minnesota United / Cruz Azul) for 2024 – looks to increase possession, create more central penetration (i.e., not as wing dependent as 2022/23) and utilize overlapping outside backs in the attack to involve both pivots and two 10s when RSL has the ball ...

In theory, this leaves iconic striker **Chicho Arango** up top, **Diego Luna** in a free role starting on the outside and coming in, **Andrés Gómez** with the sizzling pace

to stretch and get behind allows new attacking mid **Matt Crooks** and some combination of **Braian Ojeda** / **Nelson Palacio** / **Emeka Eneli** to involve themselves in the attack, all while protecting what is basically a back three of **Brayan Vera** / **Justen Glad** and one other as either **Alex Katranis** / **Bryan Oviedo** move up the left side, or **Andrew Brody** bombing forward on the right ...

## ***CORE CONTINUITY REMAINS ::***

For 2024, RSL returns 10 of the 11 starters (Savarino) from last year's shootout-laden playoff series with Houston, a series that saw RSL without the services of star striker **Chicho Arango** (relegated to spot duty off bench in Legs 2 and 3 following late-season hamstring injury) and metronomic midfielder **Pablo Ruiz** (August 8 meniscus tear in Leagues Cup Round of 16 match at LAFC) ... Overall, nearly 26,000 combined minutes return for RSL from 2023 to 2024, despite the losses of nearly 45 combined goal contributions from the departed Savarino, Kreilach, Musovski & Rubin ...

Several critical contributors from last year – GK **Gavin Beavers**, DF **Brayan Vera**, DF **Emeka Eneli**, MF **Nelson Palacio**, FW **Andrés Gómez** and FW **Chicho Arango** – are first-year RSL players no longer, while several others – DF **Bode Hidalgo**, DF **Brayan Oviedo**, MF **Braian Ojeda**, MF **Diego Luna** – vault into 2024 for their second full seasons in Utah ...

## ***IT'S CHICHO TIME ON THE WASATCH ::***

As Real Salt Lake embarks on the early days of its 20<sup>th</sup> season in Club history, famed Colombian striker **Chicho Arango** is named the sixth Captain for the Claret-and-Cobalt, assuming the armband and related duties vacated by the recent departure of beloved leader Damir Kreilach, now in Vancouver ...

### **ALL-TIME RSL CAPTAINS:**

**Chicho Arango – 2024 -**

Damir Kreilach – 2022-23

Albert Rusnák – 2021

Kyle Beckerman – 2008-20

Carey Talley – 2007

Jason Kreis – 2005-07

Arango arrived on the Wasatch Front last July as the Claret-and-Cobalt's most acclaimed acquisition ever ... the former LAFC / Pachuca striker becoming the fifth-ever RSL player to score in his debut – a 4-0 home win over Orlando – and the only RSL man to find the back of the net in his first 4 appearances with the Club (three MLS, one Leagues Cup) ...

Joining a locker room that has also seen veteran leaders **Marcelo Silva** and **Zac MacMath** serve as Captain – as well as **Justen Glad**, the first-ever and only Homegrown to wear the armband in recent years – Chicho would have to remain at an elite level with RSL through the 2037 season to eclipse the longevity of the man who changed RSL's competitive culture, Cup-winning former Captain and all-time Club legend Kyle Beckerman ...

### ***RESOLUTE RESILIENCY IN "BOUNCEBACK" SITUATIONS ::***

RSL snatch-and-grabbed the three points in Vancouver back on March 23 to avoid back-to-back losses yet again in the 109-game **Pablo Mastroeni** era, improving now to 18 wins and 10 draws against just 9 losses when taking the field following a loss ... Amazingly, four of those nine "back-to-back" losses occurred in the first month following Pablo Ruiz' mid-August 2023 knee injury ...

Since August 2021, RSL has now posted an 18W-9L-10T mark in matches following a loss, suffering back-to-back losses just nine times in **Pablo Mastroeni**'s 109 games at the RSL helm ... Even with the shootout results recorded officially as draws, the Claret-and-Cobalt have now earned a result in 28 of 37 matches following a loss in the "Pablo era" – a run which now includes a pair of USOC 2023 elimination wins, the postseason dub against Houston and the bounceback win over León following the Monterrey home loss during the late July Leagues Cup slate ...

RSL's mentality also abounds in bouncing back from losses during the Mastroeni era, with its collective resilience and the "never say die" attitude on full display in leg two of the Audi 2023 MLS Cup Playoff series at Houston, once again avoiding consecutive setbacks ...

The trend continued with the 1-1 draw Feb. 24 in St. Louis following the season-opening loss at Miami, as well as the March 23 2-1 win in Vancouver following the rare home loss to Colorado on March 9 ...

### ***A CENTENARY FOR CHICHO ::***

As he welcomed his former MLS side LAFC to Utah on March 2 for the first time since his arrival on the Wasatch, RSL Captain **Chicho Arango** was honored pre-game for scoring his 100<sup>th</sup> professional goal Feb. 24 at St. Louis ... Chicho faced LAFC twice last year, once in Leagues Cup (0-4 loss) and once in MLS (1-0 win), both at BMO Stadium in Los Angeles ...

That fateful March 2 match saw Chicho provide the third of a stellar opening 45 for RSL, giving him 101 for his career and two goals in the first three games this

year, outpacing his personal preseason prediction of 17 goals in 34 MLS games for RSL in 2024, precisely one goal every two matches ...

### ***THE CHICHO EFFECT ::***

As the Summer 2023 window opened, Colombian star and former LAFC and Pachuca FW **Chicho Arango** got off to an historic start with RSL, as the new Designated Player announced his presence in Utah and his return to MLS with authority July 8 against Orlando, finding the back of the net just 23 minutes into his Claret-and-Cobalt debut, providing the game-winning goal in a dominant 4-0 win over Orlando ... Arango became just the fifth of 200 players in RSL's 19-year history to score in his debut (Dunseth, Tarley, Findley, Julio) ...

Arango followed up his debut goal with an assist on July 12 in Kansas City just seconds after coming on, setting up former LAFC teammate Danny Musovski for a critical goal early in the second half ... Arango joined Rubio Rubin (2021) as the only two RSL players to score or assist in their first two matches with the Club; when Chicho earned his way onto the scoresheet with an assist on **Diego Luna**'s July 15 opener against New York Red Bulls, he became RSL's first-ever player with goal contributions in his first three games upon debut, a mark extended to four with his isolation slammer in the Leagues Cup opener against Seattle to make it 2-0 for RSL in the 51<sup>st</sup> minute of an eventual 3-0 win ...

Arango's first two weeks on the field last summer for RSL saw him become the first-ever player in the then 19-year, 200-player, 604-game MLS history for the Utah MLS side to score or assist in his first three League games ... Arango's arrival benefitted several RSL players – including Musovski, along with FW Jefferson Savarino, MF Diego Luna, Captain Damir Kreilach, FW **Andrés Gómez**, FW Rubio Rubin and others – who each saw their attacking space, time, quality and opportunity increase ...

Arango, the former LAFC striker – named the 2021 MLS Newcomer of the Year and part of the 2022 MLS Cup and Supporters Shield championship runs in LA with the Black-and-Gold – returned to MLS last summer after six months at Pachuca in Liga MX ... Arango – with two caps for the Colombian national team – boasted 32 goals in 58 all-time appearances with LAFC, and had been training with RSL since his June 10 arrival in Utah ...

Chicho pulled his hamstring on Oct. 7 at home 25 minutes into a 2-3 loss to Kansas City, forcing the striker to miss three full games, and only partially participate in legs two and three of last year's postseason series with Houston ...

## ***ROCKY MOUNTAIN DISAPPOINTMENT ::***

Back on March 9 at home, RSL fell 1-2, against Rocky Mountain Cup rivals Colorado, with the Rapids reversing an early 1-0 deficit at America First Field in Sandy ...

Despite the first professional goal from second-year rock MF **Emeka Eneli** – who joins Andrew Brody as the only two players to have appeared in nearly every minute this season – and a strong performance from 18-year-old GK **Gavin Beavers**, RSL was unable to finish its chances and fell at home to Colorado for the first time since 2020, and for the first time on Utah soil with fans in the building since 2007 ... just the fifth RSL loss overall in 29 MLS regular-season visits by Colorado to the Beehive State since RSL's inception in 2005 ...

On that day, RSL opened the match electrically with fast-paced passes, runs and strong defensive play ... The breakthrough goal came in the 21<sup>st</sup> minute from aggressive counterpressing by second-year MF Eneli ... The ball fell to the feet of Captain **Chicho Arango**, who patiently distributed the ball out to a surging **Andrés Gomez** ... After taking three touches and awaiting a runner, Gómez drove a ball across the mouth of the goal, finding the diving feet of Eneli for the first goal of his professional career, making him the 102<sup>nd</sup> all-time scorer in Real Salt Lake's 618-game history in Major League Soccer (now Katranis is 103<sup>rd</sup> in 623 MLS contests) ...

Colorado equalized in the 43<sup>rd</sup> minute courtesy of a Rafael Navarro penalty kick ... Navarro was awarded the spot kick following an adjudged handball on Eneli, who was pushed in box and as he retained balance, saw the ball strike his outstretched arm ... Navarro took the penalty to the right side of the goal, past 18-year-old GK **Gavin Beavers** ... Colorado's 70<sup>th</sup> minute game-winner similarly came against the run of play, dominated by the home team, as Colorado's Cole Bassett picked up the rebound off a **Brayan Vera** backheel clearance from a Keegan Rosenberry cross, the Rapids captain firing a shot to the left of Beavers through traffic ...

RSL saw strong performances, promising chances, loud support from the 20,147 fans in the stands and plenty of areas of improvement ... Beavers had two important saves keeping Real Salt Lake in the game, while Eneli and Monarchs MF **Noel Caliskan** played the double-pivot together for the first time, with strong performances picking up the ball in the midfield ...

Gómez had promising runs on the wings and good delivery into the box, narrowly missing out on several chances to build upon his stellar two-goal, one-assist

performance from a week earlier in the 3-0 win over LAFC ...

## ***WINTER WONDERLAND ON MARCH 2 ::***

In its season-opening home contest nearly two months ago, RSL rode a pair of first-half goals and an assist from FW **Andrés Gómez** to dominate a weather-delayed and weather-affected 3-0 result against visiting LAFC back on March 2 ... FW **Chicho Arango** also scored to add to his legendary career (106), MLS (51) and RSL (16) goal-totals, the Colombian now with eight goals in nine MLS matches this year ... Arango and **Diego Luna** each tallied assists as well, while GK **Zac MacMath** registered his first clean sheet of the season ...

## ***THE ANDRÉS SNÓ-MEZ GAME ::***

RSL winger **Andrés Gómez** – the 21-year-old Colombian who arrived to Utah a year ago from Millonarios (Colombia) having never even SEEN snow, much less having played a competitive game in it – doubled his 2023 goal total in the first half, scoring not once but twice against LAFC ... To top it all off, five minutes into first-half stoppage, Gómez found countryman **Chicho Arango** for the third RSL goal of the first 45' to notch his first assist of the season ...

A year ago, Gómez arrived on the Wasatch Front amongst great fanfare, the most expensive acquisition in Club history – just under \$3 million – prior to the \$6 million Chicho purchase five months later ... Across all competitions in 2023, Gómez scored once and added six assists, with five of those setups earning “game-winning” status ...

The former U22 signing has now been moved to “Young DP” status following the departures of Jefferson Savarino and Damir Kreilach, as well as **Diego Luna's** new contract extension, which adds the up-and-coming USMNT / USYNT Olympic standout to a U22 trio that also boasts Paraguayan international **Braian Ojeda** and Colombian destroyer **Nelson Palacio** ...

Both Gómez and Palacio were late reporting to RSL's preseason festivities due to their participation in December with the full Colombian National Team and January's U23 Olympic qualifying side for *Los Cafeteros* ...

## ***EXORCISING LAFC DEMONS ::***

RSL has now won two consecutive games against LAFC, the 3-0 home win following up on last October's 1-0 road victory ... Previously, RSL could only boast an early-season 2020 home win over LAFC as well as the

2018 postseason shocker prior to the two recent wins, which improve RSL's all-time record against LAFC to 4 wins against 12 losses across all competitions ...

LAFC had always been comfortable in Sandy, winning at the typically road-resistant RSL venue in each of its six seasons ... RSL was just 1W-6L-0T against the Black-and-Gold at America First Field prior to Saturday, the teams splitting both LAFC visits during the Covid-affected 2020 season ... In now eight MLS reg. season matches on Utah soil, LAFC has still outscored RSL 18-9, by far the worst home goal differential in Claret-and-Cobalt annals ...

Despite dropping its home opener a year ago, 1-2, against visiting Austin FC for just its second home-opening loss ever, RSL has enjoyed great success in season kickoffs on Utah soil over the years, posting an all-time 8-2-6 (W-L-T) record in Sandy at the venue now known as America First Field, outscoring opponents 30-19 on aggregate ... Prior to last season's stumble, the lone previous home-opening setback was a brutal 1-5 performance in 2018 against expansion LAFC ... During the entirety of the Club's 20-year history, RSL is now 9-2-9 overall (35-23 on aggregate), including the early Rice-Eccles years ...

### ***RUIZ OUT FOR YEAR ::***

The elation from the dramatic March 2 rollercoaster in the wind, lightning and snow came to a screeching halt in the following Tuesday's training session, as MF **Pablo Ruiz** suffered a contact injury to his left knee, with an MRI later that day revealing an isolated ACL tear ... Ruiz underwent surgery early the following week, with the procedure performed by RSL Team Orthopedic Surgeon **Dr. Dain Allred** of Intermountain Hospital in Provo ...

A 25-year-old Argentine who has often been on Chile's preliminary rosters in the last several FIFA windows started each of RSL first two games this season – a road loss at Miami and the away draw in St. Louis – before coming off the bench for the final 20 minutes of the March 2 3-0 win over visiting LAFC ... In the days before the injury, Ruiz had just signed a new long-term contract with RSL that will keep him on the Wasatch Front through the 2026 season, with Club options for 2027/28 ...

### ***DIEGO LUNA EXTENDED LONG-TERM ::***

RSL starlet **Diego Luna** – whose assist totals have skyrocketed with the addition of secondary assists from the early Feb/March games – joined Ruiz in signing a long-term contract extension with the Club in early March this month, keeping the affectionately known

“Moon Boy” with the Utah side through the 2026 season, with Club options for 2027/28 ...

Luna – who received his first-ever USMNT cap in January's friendly with Slovenia in San Antonio and was at the Olympic camp roster last month – is now considered a U22 roster designation for RSL, joining **Braian Ojeda** and **Nelson Palacio**, as winger **Andrés Gómez** is moved into the “Young DP” slot, alongside **Chicho Arango** and newcomer **Matt Crooks** (TAM-able in MLS' secondary window this summer) ...

### ***RISING STAR LUNA SHINES BRIGHT ::***

RSL playmaker **Diego Luna** emerged last season as a late-season talisman for the Claret-and-Cobalt, scoring critical goals in each of the final five matches – two MLS reg. season contests, providing the equalizers in both leg one and leg three of the Playoffs at Houston, and scoring the game-clinching PK in the leg two elimination match at home ... Luna recently earned his first U.S. Men's National Team appearance in the January friendly in San Antonio against Slovenia, starting and playing 77 minutes in the very same free role drifting off left wing that he has made his own at RSL ...

2024 should be a big year for Luna, whose role within the team is certain to expand after he has now started 26 of 31 games following his return from USYNT qualifying last summer ... This year, Luna will have to juggle his Club obligations with potential U.S. Men's National Team duty, June's Copa America and his almost certain Olympic Team duty in July ... The Paris Olympics schedule dovetails nicely with the Leagues Cup slate, minimizing Luna's potential absences from MLS reg. season contests ...

Last year, Luna's goal scored in the first leg at Houston saw him find the back of the net for a third consecutive match, his late equalizer back on Oct. 14 at LA Galaxy starting the run which continued on Decision Day in Colorado with his game-winner ... That 54<sup>th</sup>-minute goal in Houston made Luna the youngest playoff goal-scorer in RSL history, usurping Yura Movsisyan by about 16 months ... Luna's accomplishment also made him the 12<sup>th</sup>-youngest player in MLS history to find the back of the net in the postseason ... Luna then asked for the opportunity in the leg two home game to be the decisive fifth shooter against Houston, envisioning and ultimately delivering the series-extending score ...

Luna ended up with seven goals across all competitions in his first full season with RSL, the USA U-20 playmaker starting 21 of the Club's last 25 games of the 2023 season since returning from the FIFA Youth World Cup in Argentina ... The USA U-20 playmaker acquired in May, 2022, from USL Championship side El Paso Locomotive was named the MLS Player of the Matchday for Matchday 26, courtesy of his brace in the



3-1 home RSL win over New York Red Bulls on July 15 ... Luna's 2<sup>nd</sup>-minute goal in that game off a Savarino assist marked RSL's quickest goal since March 2022 (Bobby Wood), while his eventual game-winner off an intricate give-and-go with Musovski made him the youngest player (19 years, 311 days) in RSL history to register a multi-goal goal (Olmes Garcia, June 2013 v LA Galaxy, 20 years, 282 days) ...

Last June 21 in St. Louis, Luna became the 98<sup>th</sup> player in RSL's 19-year history to find the back of the net in MLS reg. season action for the Claret-and-Cobalt, scoring in the 15<sup>th</sup> minute and assisting on goals in the 48<sup>th</sup> and 66<sup>th</sup> minutes ... While he is only the 6<sup>th</sup>-youngest player to score for RSL, Luna did become the absolute youngest in Club annals to score and assist in the same game, No. 599 all-time for the Club ...

### ***LA QUINCEAÑERA DENIED ::***

On Feb. 21 in Miami, RSL dropped an MLS season opener for the first time since 2009, registering a 14-game unbeaten run on MLS Opening Weekends from 2010-present with 7 wins and 7 draws in that time ...

With only two of those matches played at home (2014 – 3-0 W over Toronto and 2017 – 0-0 with Toronto), RSL was 6W-0L-6T away in openers since 2010, including two previous visits to Florida – both draws at Orlando (2016 – 2-2 and 2020 – 0-0) ... That 2016 tilt at what was then Camping World Stadium in Orlando saw RSL take a 2-0 lead on a pair of Joao Plata goals (26' / 66'), before conceding a pair in 94+/95+, forcing the Claret-and-Cobalt to settle for a disappointing draw ... Incidentally, RSL won MLS Cup 2009, so hope is alive despite the Feb. 21 loss ...

### ***2023 IN REVIEW ::***

The 2023 RSL side amassed the Club's seventh 50-point season all-time (out of 19 years in MLS), just the second year with 50 or more since the 2014 campaign ... Finishing 11<sup>th</sup> overall out of 29 teams, RSL crashed out of the postseason by the thinnest of margins for a second consecutive year (Austin 2022, Houston 2023), dropping a road shootout tiebreaker in Texas ...

RSL smashed its previous incoming transfer record on two occasions a year ago, spending nearly \$3 million on U22 initiative signing **Andrés Gómez** from Millonarios in Colombia in January, later doubling that acquisition cost to bring heralded striker **Chicho Arango** back to MLS following a six-month stint at Pachuca (Liga MX) ...

RSL also spent significant funds to sign two other young Colombians – DF **Brayan Vera** (América de Cali) and MF **Nelson Palacio** (Atlético Nacional), while

also making the one-year loan of Paraguayan international **Braian Ojeda** a permanent transfer from Nottingham Forest permanent in mid-summer ... All-told, RSL ownership dropped nearly \$16 million in player acquisition costs in 2023, with an expectation for those seeds to bear fruit in 2024 and beyond ...

Thirty-two (32) different players saw action for RSL in 2023, including then-15-year-old FW **Axel Kei** and 16-year-old **Zavier Gozo** making their Homegrown MLS debuts late in the season, along with fellow Academy products GK **Gavin Beavers** and DF **Delentz Pierre** also making their first-ever first-team appearances; a trio of collegiate picks – D/M **Emeka Eneli**, FW **Bertin Jacquesson** and FW **Ilijah Paul** – also made their professional debuts, while the international quartet of FW **Andrés Gómez**, MF **Nelson Palacio**, DF **Kevon Lambert** and DF **Brayan Vera** notched their first-ever MLS appearances last season ...

### ***TRIO OF NEWCOMERS LOOKING TO MAKE IMPACT ::***

Newcomers **Alex Katranis** (Greek left back), **Matt Crooks** (English midfielder) and **Fidel Barajas** (17-year-old Mexican-American playmaker) – collectively acquired for approx. \$1.5 million – should contribute greatly this season across all competitions, with the two veteran foreign transfers expected to start in **Pablo Mastroeni**'s ideal RSL XI, and the extremely-talented, poised and precocious teenager ready to surprise and delight off the bench ...

### ***SUMMER SURGE IN 2023 ::***

During a nearly four-month span from mid-April to early August, RSL dropped just three of 24 games across all competitions, including MLS reg. season action, its Open Cup run to the Semifinals and its initial Leagues Cup foray ... In the ninth minute of the Aug. 8 Leagues Cup Round of 16 match at LAFC, a non-contact knee injury to metronomic MF **Pablo Ruiz** snapped the run of good form and changed the trajectory of RSL's campaign, the Club eliminated that day from Leagues Cup and falling in 120 minutes the next time out at Houston in the Lamar Hunt U.S. Open Cup Semifinal at Houston two weeks later ...

Following the Ruiz injury, RSL lost six of its next seven games, essentially learning how to play anew; RSL then went 3-1-1 down the stretch – including the Club's first-ever reg. season win at LAFC, with an 81<sup>st</sup>-minute dagger by former Black-and-Gold icon **Chicho Arango** – to stabilize the ship entering the Audi 2023 MLS Cup Playoffs as the fifth seed, just three points out of second place ... A hamstring injury suffered by Chicho in a bitter 2-3 home loss to Kansas City in the year's penultimate contest brought massive repercussions in

the three-game series with Houston, which saw RSL drop leg one, 1-2, at the Dynamo, win at home via shootout in leg two, and ultimately drop another shootout in leg three away to end a once-promising campaign ...

### ***MASTROENI THE MAGICIAN ::***

RSL boss **Pablo Mastroeni** leads the Utah side into 2024 for his third consecutive FULL season at the helm, the former USMNT star named interim manager in late 2021 ... During his time on the Wasatch Front, Mastroeni has led the Claret-and-Cobalt to three consecutive postseasons, **the ONLY Western Conference side with that distinction** ... Last year, RSL advanced to the MLS Cup Playoffs for the fifth time in the last six years (2020 Covid campaign the lone exception) and for the 13<sup>th</sup> occasion in the last 16 seasons since the Club's initial playoff foray in 2008, its fourth season in existence ...

Mastroeni, now 47 years old – an icon as an MLS player from 1998-2013, most of those years with RSL's Rocky Mountain Cup rival Colorado Rapids – arrived on the right side of the Rockies as an assistant coach prior to the 2021 season, before being elevated to the interim head coaching role that August ...

During Mastroeni's 109 games at the RSL helm across all competitions, the Claret-and-Cobalt now own a 44W-39L-26T mark, RSL outscored 152-162 in MLS, playoffs, Open Cup, Leagues Cup and exhibition play over the last 27 months ... Only former HC Jeff Cassar (2014-16) reached 100 career reg. season points in the same number of League games (70) in RSL history as Mastroeni, after inheriting the **Jason Kreis** powerhouse a decade ago ...

The RSL job is Mastroeni's second head coaching stint, as the Arizona native amassing a 40W-55L-37T record with Colorado from 2014-17 ... This period includes the Rapids' all-time best reg. season in 2016, which saw the Mastroeni-led side go 15W- 6L-13T and allow just 32 goals in 34 games, finishing 2nd in the West behind Dallas before falling in the West Final to eventual champion Seattle ...

In 2020, Mastroeni spent one season as Tab Ramos' assistant in Houston, then matriculating to Utah a year later, where he quickly changed the mindset and culture of the locker room, growing a tight-knit culture built by pride, belief and dedication to the group ...

Mastroeni's RSL side has dropped back-to-back games just nine times overall in 105 games coached, displaying resilience and tenacity admired across North America for its collective "xDAWG" persona ...

As a player, Mastroeni served as a mentor to RSL icon **Kyle Beckerman**, when both shared the Miami Fusion FC locker room in the late 1990s, and shortly thereafter in Colorado ... Mastroeni became a breakout star of the United States' 2002 World Cup Korea/Japan Men's National Team, barely appearing during qualifying to start at centerback against Portugal, Mexico and Germany in the USA's thrilling run to the quarterfinal stage, its deepest progression ever on the world's largest sporting stage ...

Four years later, Mastroeni started each of the first two games for the 2006 USA World Cup side in Germany, against Czech Republic and Italy ... All told, the Phoenix, Ariz. native appeared in 65 games for the Stars-and-Stripes between 2001-09, playing for Bruce Arena and Bob Bradley ...

### ***PERENNIAL PLAYOFF PARTICIPATION ::***

Last year, RSL advanced to the postseason for a third consecutive season under the guidance of Head Coach **Pablo Mastroeni** ... As a Club, RSL was playoff-bound for the fifth time in six seasons – missing only the Covid-affected 2020 campaign – and for the sixth time in the last nine seasons (2015 / 2017) ... Mastroeni and staff used 32 players across 46 games in all competitions during 2023, as RSL advanced to the final four of the annual Open Cup tourney and to the Round of 16 in the inaugural Leagues Cup, prior to its Round One / Best of Three ouster at Houston last November ...

Overall, RSL has qualified for the postseason in 13 of its 16 seasons played since first advancing to the postseason in 2008, RSL's fourth season in existence ... RSL won MLS Cup in 2009, defeating the star-studded LA Galaxy via penalty-kick shootout in Seattle ... Four years later, RSL fell via the same tiebreaker in MLS Cup 2013 at Kansas City ... Overall, RSL has advanced in 11 of its 23 postseason series, with last year's playoff meeting with Houston marking RSL's 12<sup>th</sup> different opponent in 16 campaign qualifications ...

Real Salt Lake is one of three Western Conference teams and just five overall to have qualified for the Audi MLS Cup Playoffs in at least five of the last six seasons (2018-23), overcoming both internal and external volatility in the last six years through three different ownership situations and three different head coaches, as well as four different MLS Cup Playoff formats during this period ...

Two perennial postseason obstacles for RSL – LAFC and Seattle – join the Claret-and-Cobalt with the 5-out-of-6 qualification distinction, while two East teams – Philadelphia and New York Red Bulls – have qualified for the Audi MLS Cup Playoffs in six consecutive years from 2018-23 ...

The perennial nature of RSL's 13 postseason appearances in 16 years is remarkable when considering the League's growth and change dating back to 2008 ... Since RSL's first postseason appearance in 2008, the Utah side has advanced to 10 Conference Semifinal rounds and 5 Conference Finals – only SEA has reached more (12 Semis, 6 Finals) ... LA Galaxy also with 5 Conference Final appearances to match RSL ...

### ***ROAD WARRIOR RESOLVE ::***

In 2023, RSL enjoyed historic success on the road, developing a new standard and seeing its steely mentality manifesting in numerous “bounceback” moments under **Pablo Mastroeni** ... The Club's 2023 performance saw RSL accumulate an all-time RSL-best road record with 12 results in 17 away MLS matches, posting an 8W-5L-4T mark – with 28 of its 50 reg. season points amassed on the road ... RSL's previous road bests were recorded in 2012 and 2013, with identical 6W-7L-4T marks ... Additionally, RSL's 2023 U.S. Open Cup run saw the team win three matches away at Las Vegas, Portland and Colorado, prior to its road loss at Houston in the tourney semifinal ...

### ***MASTROENI MENTALITY EQUALS ROAD SUCCESS ::***

Since **Pablo Mastroeni** arrived at RSL for the 2021 season, first as an assistant coach and later as interim and then permanent head coach, the historically bad road performances that dogged the Club during its first 16 years have seemed to dissipate ... While there have been the periodic flameouts – an 0-5 loss at Portland in 2021, the 0-6 Easter massacre at Yankee Stadium in 2022, and the 0-4 at Columbus earlier in 2023 – RSL has simply never been more competitive or expected road points more frequently than it has in the last 36 months under Pablo's culture-building and leadership, evident with last year's Open Cup road run, featuring its first three away USOC wins in Club history, as well as its first two victories against MLS opponents in the competition ...

Since Pablo's arrival, RSL is now 18W-25L-17T (71 points) in MLS reg. season road matches following the last week's victory in Chicago, along with a 1W-1L-4T (7 points) in MLS Cup Playoff matches on the road ...

In 2023, RSL was 3W-1L-0L away in U.S. Open Cup (9 points), giving RSL a total of 85 road points (1.27 points per game) earned in the 2021-2024 campaigns ... You'd have to go back to the 2012-14 seasons (62 total road points) to find a period with similar road results (1.22 points per game) ... With a strong 2024

on the road, RSL has the potential to put the 2012-14 success far away in the rear-view mirror ...

### ***WHERE WILL THE 2024 GOALS COME FROM? ::***

For yet another season, the big question for RSL remains – who will find the back of the net? ... So far this season, RSL has scored 15 goals, with Chicho contributing 14 (8g/6a) ... **Andrés Gómez** boasts 3g/3a so far this year following his game-winner last week in Chicago ... **Emeka Eneli**, **Alex Katranis**, **Anderson Julio** and **Diego Luna** have also found the back of the net ... Expectations are also high this year to see **Matt Crooks** and **Fidel Barajas** contribute to the attack, while centerbacks **Justen Glad** and **Brayan Vera** combined for eight goals a year ago ...

This group lost three of the top seven scorers from a year ago across all competitions (Savarino, 11 goals; Musovski, 9 goals, Kreilach 8 goals), putting the pressure for 2024 onto **Chicho Arango** (8 goals / 1 assist in 2023), **Diego Luna** (7 goals / 1 assist), **Anderson Julio** and **Justen Glad** (5 goals each), **Pablo Ruiz** (4g / 4a), **Brayan Vera** (3g / 2a) and **Andrés Gómez** (1g / 6a) to step up this season, along with recent acquisition **Matt Crooks** (23 goals in 115 games with Middlesbrough since Summer 2021) ...

Last year – as in 2022 as well – RSL truly employed a “goals by committee” approach, as the team saw 44 goals scored by 10 players during the final 22 games, with **Chicho Arango**, **Justen Glad**, **Jefferson Savarino**, **Diego Luna**, **Anderson Julio**, **Rubio Rubin** and then **Brayan Vera** each finding the back of the net...

The 4-0 over Orlando in Chicho's debut on July 8 provided RSL's largest margin of victory in three seasons, dating back to a July, 2021 win over Vancouver ... That particular 4-0 win boasts the unique circumstance of RSL playing as the visitors at what is now America First Field, due to the Whitecaps tenancy during the Covid-19 pandemic ...

Last week's 4-0 win at Chicago was the Club's largest margin of victory away from home since August, 2018, in a 6-0 win at Colorado ... Meanwhile, Chicho's 2g/2a performance marks the second time in RSL's 623-game MLS history for a four-contribution game, as Javier Morales had 3g/1a in May 2014 at Houston ...

## **WHO ELSE NEEDS TO STEP UP IN 2024? ::**

In addition to the larger roles that **Diego Luna** and full-season availability for **Chicho Arango** should bring, U22 winger **Andres Gómez** – who a year ago had never been outside of Colombia and had never even seen snow – is also expected to take a massive leap forward, assimilating off the field and seizing his role in the new 4-2-3-1 setup ... Last season, across all competitions, Gomez had one goal and six assists, with five of the helpers registering as game-winning assists ...

Three key RSL players in recent years – homegrown defenders **Justen Glad** and **Andrew Brody**, along with fleet-footed super-sub **Anderson Julio** – need to bounce back from subpar 2023 year and return to their 2022 standards ... Despite establishing a new career-high with five goals scored last year, Glad struggled in the back half of the season, while Brody was hurt in preseason and while solid, seemed a touch less dynamic than RSL had seen in 2022 ... Julio provided moments of brilliance at both the 9 and out wide, but did miss long stretches of the year due to injury ...

Two of the midseason 2022 additions – holding mid **Braian Ojeda** (Paraguay / Nottingham Forest) and left back **Bryan Oviedo** (Costa Rica / Copenhagen) – also are expected to even out their 2024 campaigns after a choppy 2023 ... Ojeda felt more stable and could focus on football after Forest agreed on the sale to RSL in late July, his security evident on the field down the stretch with his immense two-way presence; Oviedo overcame a rollercoaster year to start the final 11 games of the reg. season and playoffs, now battling with Greek outside back **Alex Katranis** for the presumed starting nod on the left side for 2024 ...

## **OFFSEASON ADDITIONS ::**

With the primary MLS incoming transfer window closing earlier this week, RSL bolstered its outside back group with the addition of 25-year-old former Greece youth international **Alexandros Katranis**, while adding high-level experience and industry with attacking midfielder **Matt Crooks**, formerly of EFL Championship side Middlesbrough ...

Prior to those early February moves, RSL also made yet another domestic transfer, bringing 17-year-old Mexican-American playmaker **Fidel Barajas** to Utah from the Charleston Battery (USL Championship) ... Barajas – a native of Sacramento, Calif., and a catalyst for the Mexican U17 National Team – follows in the footsteps of new teammate **Diego Luna**, and will be eager to earn minutes for RSL as early as the season opener in Miami ... The youngster enjoyed a standout

preseason in Portugal, and looks to create selection headaches for Mastroeni with potential impacts on the wings or centrally in midfield or up top ...

At the opposite end of the spectrum, the veteran Crooks brings a depth and breadth of experience to RSL, the former Middlesbrough attacker now joining RSL veterans **Marcelo Silva** (35 years, 41 days at kickoff @ PHI), **Maikel Chang** (33-009), **Zac MacMath** (32-267) and **Tomas Gomez** (30-346) as one of five 'over-30' players on the roster ... The 2024 RSL group also boasts several teenagers, including: [**Luca Moisa** (15-060), **Luis Rivera** (16-163), **Axel Kei** (16-133), **Zavier Gozo** (17-040), **Fidel Barajas** (18-016), **Jude Wellings** (18-014) and **Gavin Beavers** (18-353), in addition to 20-year-old Olympic hopeful **Diego Luna** (20-206)] ...

## **YOUTH MOVEMENT ABOUNDS ::**

While RSL's trio of U22 players **Diego Luna**, **Braian Ojeda** and **Nelson Palacio** have been considered for the last year as the future starlets alongside both emerging GK **Gavin Beavers** and the ascendant **Bode Hidalgo**, it was swiss-army knife **Emeka Eneli** – a college draft pick out of Cornell – that perhaps surprised the most a year ago, playing 2,265 minutes (1,494 MLS reg. szn/playoff, 501 U.S. Open Cup and 270 Leagues Cup) ... Eneli played the second-most rookie minutes in MLS (Duncan McGuire, Orlando) and stabilizing numerous lineups as a versatile right back and/or holding midfielder ... Another pair of Eneli's fellow 2023 first-round picks – FW **Ilijah Paul** and winger **Bertin Jacquesson**, both signed to Generation adidas contracts – also provided both quality depth and flashes of brilliance in 2023, setting the stage for increased workloads this season ...

Looking to make their mark as college-experienced standouts for RSL are 2024 first-round draft pick **Matthew Bell**, a 21-year-old Jamaican international out of Marshall; now-injured right back **Kevin Bonilla**, a dual U.S./Honduras international out of the Univ. of Portland, along with former RSL Academy and UCLA homegrown signing **Tommy Silva** ... Another draft pick – FW **Damien Barker John** from St. Johns – could see action in Open Cup due to his outstanding Real Monarchs performances ... Teenagers **Fidel Barajas** and former Academy / Monarchs winger **Zavier Gozo** are also poised to further develop their games with a mix of MLS and MLS NEXT Pro action for Real Monarchs this year ...

MLSNP excellence should also blaze the MLS trail ahead for both Bonilla and T. Silva, as well as the much-heralded Academy standouts **Axel Kei**, and HG signings **Luis Rivera**, **Jude Wellings**, **Luca Moisa** and GK **Fernando Delgado**, amongst others ...

## ***HARD WORK PAYS OFF:***

During a whirlwind 5-day span in late January, 2024, 16-year-old FW **Aiden Hezarkhani** exemplified precisely the developmental player pathway that the RSL Academy has long imagined ... On a Wednesday, minutes prior to the Academy's monthly "tournament day," the Irvine, Calif., native was honored as one of 14 players to have logged a perfect 4.0 grade-point average last semester, receiving a commemorative jersey presentation from RSL Head Coach **Pablo Mastroeni** and RSL Asst. GM **Tony Beltran** ...

During that afternoon's tournament – a series of 5v5 and 6v6 games – Aiden not only starred individually, but proved throughout the competition that he raised the level of his teammates, regardless of age, status or skill level ... Upon the day's conclusion, Aiden was named "Player of the Tournament" and invited to participate the next day in first-team preseason training in Herriman, alongside several RSL and Monarchs players ...

In that Thursday training, second-year Generation adidas winger **Bertin Jacquesson** separated his shoulder, opening the door further for young Aiden to seize this opportunity ... He continued to flourish, and was invited back to Friday's first-team session ...

At the end of the day Friday, RSL's coaching staff and front office had seen enough – Aiden would travel for the two-week Atlantic Cup trip to Portugal, where he not only held his own, but raised eyebrows with his skill, industry, learning capacity and daily improvement ... Hezarkhani – who also traveled to Santa Barbara with the team and logged the final 25 minutes in a 1-1 draw with Toronto FC – could see time with RSL daily in 2024, training with the globally-known veterans and pursuing his pathway to professional status through Monarchs games and potentially much, much more ...

Hezarkhani was slated to join Xavier Gozo in next week's U.S. U-17 Youth National Team camp, but an ankle injury suffered in last month's MLS NEXT Academy match will limit the Irvine, Calif., native for the rest of March ...

Aiden traveled to this week's GA Cup with the RSL U17s, advancing to Friday's Quarterfinal Stage against San Jose ...

## ***COPA AMERICA OCTET? ::***

A perfect storm could end up seeing the top half of RSL's roster represent their respective countries for this summer's Copa America to be held in the United States ... Two-way midfielder **Braian Ojeda** (Paraguay) is the most likely lock, while other potential expected candidates include: **Anderson Julio** (Ecuador), **Bryan Vera** (Colombia) and possibly **Diego Luna** (United States) ... RSL midfielder **Pablo Ruiz** had a shout to represent Chile prior to this month's ACL tear, while Colombian Olympic-age RSL men **Andrés Gómez** and **Nelson Palacio** are also in the expanded mix following their December/January performances with *Los Cafeteros* ... Could **Chicho Arango** force his way into the Colombia conversation with a red-hot start to the MLS campaign and add to his pair of caps?

## ***FOR CLUB AND COUNTRY (YOUTH EDITION) ::***

In addition to those eight, two standout RSL teenagers – **Fidel Barajas** (Mexico) and **Gavin Beavers** (USA) – also regularly represent Youth National Teams for the CONCACAF powers ... Barajas retains eligibility to switch his allegiance to his U.S. home, amidst Mexican media speculation that he will play for "El Tri" in the FIFA 2026 World Cup to be held in North America ... Barajas just returned from Mexico's U20 camp earlier this week, but will join Beavers in a USA U20 camp later this month ...

Beavers is often joined with invites to various USYNT camps – including the late March U20 setup in Morocco – by his former Academy and current Monarchs teammates, such as **Omar Marquez**, while another Monarchs player – **Juan Gio Villa** – has participated in Mexican setups ... Newly-signed RSL Homegrown **Luca Moisa** is included in USYNT U-17 camps, while Monarchs GK and former RSL Academy GK **Fernando Delgado** competes for Mexican YNT time in those camps ...

A frequent short-term call-up from the Monarchs, **Daron Iskanderian**, is a youth international for Armenia and will join their Olympic camp later this month as well ...

## ***HOMEGROWN JUSTEN GLAD EXTENDED LAST YEAR ::***

RSL announced in late September that now 27-year old Homegrown DF **Justen Glad** signed a contract extension to keep the 10-year veteran in Claret-and-Cobalt through the 2027 season ... The longest-tenured player on the current Real Salt Lake squad, Glad first signed with the Utah side on April 7, 2014, at the age of 17, as the Club's sixth all-time Homegrown Player, out of the 40 signed all-time ... Throughout his career, Glad has gone on to set countless Club records, including being the first Homegrown to don the Captain's armband, as well as the first to reach both the 100-game centenary and 200 games played milestones ...

In 2022, Glad became the first Homegrown to be named Real Salt Lake's Most Valuable Player, as voted by his locker-room peers ... Currently, Glad is the third-most capped active Homegrown Player still with their original club, having appeared in a total of 222 MLS reg. season matches for Real Salt Lake, trailing only Jonathan Osorio (276, Toronto FC) and Russell Teibert (254, Vancouver Whitecaps FC) ...

In the 60<sup>th</sup> minute of RSL's 0-0 home draw with Columbus on April 13, Glad surpassed legend Javier Morales to move into fifth place in MLS minutes played for RSL, with 19,256 ...

Pending health and fitness concerns, Glad could pass Morales in MLS starts next week against Kansas City with 224 for his career ...

Additionally, Glad's 222 MLS reg. season appearances ranks sixth all-time behind Club legends Nick Rimando (369), Kyle Beckerman (350), Chris Wingert (247), Tony Beltran (245) and Morales (240) ...

## ***HOMEGROWN KIDS MAKE MLS DEBUTS ::***

Last Oct. 14 at LA Galaxy, a pair of RSL Academy products made their MLS debuts, as FW **Axel Kei** (15 years, 289 days) and FW **Zavier Gozo** (16 years, 206 days) played the final six minutes plus stoppage in a 2-2 match in Carson ... Kei's debut made him the fourth-youngest to appear in MLS history, and the youngest in RSL's 19 years, eclipsing DF Nik Besagno's 2005 appearance at 16 years, 201 days ... Gozo, who hails from Eagle Mountain, Utah, is the third-youngest debutant in RSL history, just five days older than Besagno ...

Each player recovered from early-season injuries to participate in the back half of Real Monarchs' MLS NEXT Pro 2023 season, and were added to RSL's roster last week via the "Extreme Hardship"

mechanism, as RSL was missing 11 first-team players due to injury, international duty or disciplinary suspension for that rescheduled Galaxy match ... With their participation, RSL used 32 players in 46 matches across all competitions last season in MLS, Open Cup and Leagues Cup action ...

Gozo had a brace in last month's 2-1 Monarchs win over Minnesota United 2, and has been critical to the RSL Academy U17s GA Cup run a few weeks ago ...

## ***ERASING THE GLITCH IN HOME FORTRESS MATRIX ::***

On the flip side from RSL's recent road respectability, RSL's 2023 home form dipped to nearly unprecedented lows, as last year's RSL's home mark of 6W-7L-4T was its worst since 2007, when a 4W-7L-4T record on the Rice-Eccles turf marked the 19-year nadir ... This preseason, RSL players, coaches and leadership have openly discussed the goal of making its Sandy-based America First Field a fortress once again ...

From 2017-22 (barring the 2020 Covid year), RSL posted an MLS mark of 50 wins against just 17 losses and 18 draws, with a +61 goal differential ... During RSL's emergent heyday of 2008-14 – the "Golden Years of RSL" if you will – the Kreis/Lagerwey-built teams were dominant at home, with 70 wins against just 13 losses and 30 draws in MLS action ...

With a spike in 2024 season ticket sales, could RSL return AFF and the RioT fan base to its critical place as a difference-maker, taking advantage of the altitude with increased tempo and possession on the field? In 2022, the Club's first year under its new Blitzer/Smith ownership group, RSL sold out all 17 MLS contests, averaging 20,470 in the 20,000-seat building ... Last year saw just 9 sellouts due to weather and other concerns ...

## ***FINDING FORM AT AFF ::***

While RSL has been a historically elite home team during its 15 years here in Sandy, averaging nearly 2.00 points per game and a .700 win percentage, it took a five-win, two-draw, one-loss aggregate performance elevation during the Summer to even out dismal 2023 start/finish on Utah soil ... RSL started the season with back-to-back home losses in March, including a visit from St. Louis that saw the 4-0 scoreline emanate from four second-half goals for the second-worst home loss EVER ...

Between the league loss to LA Galaxy on May 31 and the 0-3 setback to Monterrey on July 26, RSL dominated visitors by a 15-5 scoreline in that 4W-0L-

2T run, including the 10-1 suffocation three wins against U.S. sides ORL, NYRB and SEA ... The second 45 minutes of the 3-1 win over León recalibrated the recent success at home, despite the 0-3 setback on August 26 against Houston ...

The 2-0 home win over Colorado on Sept. 2 provided a ray of light, with late Sept. matches against Dallas and Vancouver split, RSL going down 0-1 in each; coming back to win against the Whitecaps after allowing 3 in second half to Dallas ...

The Oct. 7 loss in the 2023 reg. season finale against Sporting Kansas City dropped RSL to 6W-7L-4T at home in MLS last year, RSL's worst home campaign since 2007 and its second-worst ever (expansion 2005 season), somewhat counteracting the Club's historically-elite road form, with RSL finishing just 3 points out of 2nd in the West and 6 points from STL atop the Conference ...

In Open Cup, Leagues Cup and the MLS Cup Playoffs, RSL posted a home record of 3W-1L-1T (w/ a shootout win in that draw) to bring the home mark to 9W-8L-5T overall, hopefully stoking the fires for nearly 14,000+ season ticket members to renew, recruit and grow their base for 2024 and beyond, reestablishing America First Field and The RioT fan group as a force within both MLS and CONCACAF ...

### ***DOMINANCE AT AMERICA FIRST FIELD TO RETURN IN 2024?::***

Despite last season's stumbles, RSL's overall performance in Sandy remains dominant over its history, with a 144-47-66 W-L-T mark in MLS action since moving into the suburban Salt Lake venue 15 years ago ... Across all competitions, RSL is now 171-63-77 (W-L-T) at the place now known as America First Field and affectionately housing the "RioT" fan clubs, with a 6-2-3 mark in the MLS Cup Playoffs, 8-1-2 in CONCACAF Champions League, 9-5-2 in the Lamar Hunt U.S. Open Cup, and 2-3-0 in various Leagues Cup competitions ... In international exhibition play, RSL is only 13-8-9 (W-L-T) ...

That perennially-consistent excellence on Utah soil provides RSL fans an incredible value proposition in North American major-league sports, with 2024 season tickets starting at approximately \$16 / match for a club that has proven to win nearly 70% of its home games over 15 seasons ... Visit [www.RSL.com](http://www.RSL.com) for season tickets and more information on the Club's 2024 Major League Soccer campaign, as the Utah side looks to build upon the last two years' 26 MLS sellouts and the 2022 Club-record average attendance of 20,470, RSL's new standard after 19 MLS seasons ...

### ***LEAGUES CUP OPPORTUNITY ONCE AGAIN ::***

Based on last year's fifth-seeded West finish (14W-12L-8T, 50 points, 48 GF / 50 GA), RSL will be grouped with both Houston and Liga MX side Atlas F.C. in Leagues Cup 2024 this year ... RSL will again host Atlas on August 1, last facing the Atlas club in the 2022 Leagues Cup "Showcase" match in Utah, dropping a 1-2 decision despite former DF Aaron Herrera's wondergoal from 65 yards away over the retreating goalkeeper ...

On August 5, RSL will once again travel to Houston for a group stage LC match in addition to its two MLS reg. season games against the Dynamo, with RSL now winless in its last six games against Houston – all last year – across all competitions ... Prior to the active six-game streak without a win against the South Texas side, RSL had seen great success against the Dynamo, which defeated RSL for the first time in 11 games dating back to 2017 in last year's Lamar Hunt U.S. Open Cup Semifinal ...

That 3-1 win over 120 minutes in the Lamar Hunt U.S. Open Cup Semifinal, which saw RSL FW **Anderson Julio's** 56<sup>th</sup>-minute equalizer overcome by a pair of extra-time goals after the 106<sup>th</sup> minute, also saw the final stanza marred by DF **Brayan Vera's** late red card ... All-time, RSL owns a 3W-12L-6T mark away at Houston, while boasting a 10W-3L-7T mark against the Dynamo on Utah soil ...

### ***DEEP OPEN CUP RUN IN THE OFFING? ::***

A week ago Thursday, RSL discovered its 2024 Lamar Hunt U.S. Open Cup path, starting in Albuquerque on Wednesday, May 8, at Isotopes Park against USL Championship side New Mexico United in a Round of 32 matchup ... Should RSL – the first-ever MLS side to appear in Albuquerque, the home of the Lobos – advance, it will face the winner of Colorado Springs (USLC) and New York City FC II (MLS NEXT Pro) on May 22 ...

A year ago, RSL utilized the rhythm and rhyme of its deep and mostly road Open Cup run to engage the full roster, rotate fresh legs in a stretch from late-April to mid-July that saw RSL play Saturday / Wednesday / Saturday in 10 of 13 weeks ... The congested run in multiple competitions galvanized RSL, the team dropping just three games – May 13 at home to LAFC, May 31 at home to LA Galaxy, and July 26 at home to Monterrey – between its April 22 win over San Jose and the August 4 win over León ... During that run, RSL went 14W-3L-7T in 24 games across MLS, Open Cup and Leagues Cup ...



In early March, RSL was identified as one of eight MLS teams to participate in this year's LHUSOC, based on its Supporters Shield ranking from last year ...

### ***HOMEGROWN FACTORY ::***

RSL's roster boasts a League-high 15 homegrowns on its roster, including one young player who did not attend the vaunted RSL Academy during either its Arizona or Utah iterations but do occupy "homegrown" roster status – MF **Diego Luna** ... A pair of presumed RSL starters on the backline – DF **Justen Glad** and DF **Andrew Brody** – each own HG status, as do backups DF **Erik Holt** and DF **Bode Hidalgo** ... RSL has inked several young Academy standouts in recent years to MLS deals, including DF **Jaziel Orozco**, DF **Zack Farnsworth**, GK **Gavin Beavers**, FW **Axel Kei**, MF **Jude Wellings**, MF **Luis Rivera** and DF **Delentz Pierre** ...

The latest duo to join the list of a League-high total of 39 Homegrown players signed over the last decade-plus are FW **Zavier Gozo** – who saw six minutes of action as an emergency call-up late last year at LA Galaxy – and 15-year-old MF **Luca Moisa**, the youngest player to join RSL in each of the last two preseasons ... Former UCLA DF **Tommy Silva** signed with the Club in December to push the all-time league high HG signing record to 39 players since 2011 ...

Another signing from 2023 – Generation adidas FW **Ilijah Paul**, drafted 7<sup>th</sup> overall in the 2023 MLS SuperDraft from the Univ. of Washington – spent five months at the RSL Academy in Utah as an Arizona native but was unable to sign an HG contract due to not having spent 12 consecutive months prior to his 18<sup>th</sup> birthday as part of the RSL Academy program ...

### ***#GENNASTRONG FOREVER ::***

RSL kicks off its first season since 2013 without former Club Vice President **John Genna**, the former executive who passed away last August following a years-long battle against ALS ... John's generosity of spirit, infectious smile and love of helping others, as well as his tireless work ethic and ability to mediate solutions for all parties, will forever permeate the "RSL Family" ... Please visit <https://www.RSL.com/news/Genna-Strong-Always> for details regarding the Club's continued fight for an ALS cure, as well as other ongoing community initiatives in John's memory ... The Genna family asks that we continue to display our **#GennaStrong** spirit and send donations to [www.projectmainst.org](http://www.projectmainst.org) on Genna's behalf ... Just hours prior to John's passing, RSL Head Coach **Pablo Mastroeni** talked during his Leagues Cup post-game on August 4 following a victory against León about what his relationship with Genna has provided since arriving in Utah during the 2021 season:

<https://mls.imagencloud.com/record/~36a7d2f895> ...

[www.RSL.com](http://www.RSL.com) / [www.MLSsoccer.com](http://www.MLSsoccer.com)