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LA Wolves go from near extinction to Open Cup underdogs

LA Wolves FC was 24 hours from turning the lights off on the franchise.

With finances of running a fifth-tier franchise becoming increasingly difficult, the Wolves got a pair of major corporate sponsors to keep them afloat. Just over a year later, they're preparing to face off with PDL stalwarts Ventura County Fusion in the first round of the US Open Cup Wednesday at 7 p.m. PT at the Ventura College Sportsplex.

"We've not only been able to expand the first team to another level, but we have two reserve teams and we have a youth program," LA Wolves President and CEO Yan Skwara said. "In two years, we've gone from zero to 100 to almost out of business. Now we're rising again."

LA, which won the UPSL Western Conference for the seconds straight season, qualified for Open Cup thanks to a pair of 2-1 wins, first beating Del Ray City FC and then against well-known giant killers Cal FC on November 21.

The original LA Wolves were one of the founding members of the United Soccer Association in 1966 before the league merged with the National Professional Soccer League to form the NASL in 1967. Chick Hern, the legendary voice of the Los Angeles Lakers was also the voice of the Wolves. They played in the Los Angeles Coliseum and won the USA championship before folding in 1968

Skwara started the club two years ago, seeing there was a gap in competitive play after the youth level. LA dominated its first ever game, a 6-0 win against Orange County Crew in October 2014.

"Our goal from the get-go was to launch the Wolves into the market as a pro-development football club," Skwara said. "We like working with players that are at a high level and want to get to the next level. There's a huge amount of talent, especially in Los Angeles."

In UPSL winter action, the Wolves finished 11-1-4 and won the Western Conference and were led by Paolo Cardozo with 16 goals and Miguel Sanchez with 11. The defense, led by goalkeeper Kifi Kalani, had seven shutouts. In the last two years, LA has won 30 of its 36 UPSL games.

There aren't many players from the current iteration of the club that have gone on to play at the next level. Cameron Marlow played with the team last year before going to Scotland to play for Queen's Park Football Club in the Scottish second division.

While the Wolves are making their first ever Open Cup appearance this year, Ventura County has qualified for the tournament in each of the last six seasons and set a new PDL record with at least one win in the last five tournaments.

"They've been here before so this is old hat for them," Skwara said. "They have a core base of players who have been playing in the Open Cup for five years, so this is no walk in the park. Our guys are ready to take it on and we can come through the other side."

The winner of the Wolves-Ventura County game will host the OC Blues of the USL in the second round on May 18.

Despite the familiar opponent and underdog role the team has adopted, Skwara knows there's no room for mistakes. All in all, he said the Open Cup has been a wonderful experience for the young club thus far.

"The Open Cup, without a question, is great because you can feel the electricity in the air," he said. "The players are at a different level mentally. Regardless of who you're playing, it's going to be very intense and it's all business."