

# Laredo Morning Times



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## Heat leave PDL, will not play in 2016

For 11 years, scorching Laredo summers have been filled with drums, scarves and fans changing in unison while watching red and black jerseys run up and down the field. But next summer, that will all be silenced.

The Laredo Heat, coming off the first full season in which it didn't make the playoffs, will not field a senior team for the 2016 Premier Development League campaign. All other aspects of the club including the youth player development, which includes more than 300 players in Laredo and surrounding areas, will not be affected and the club plans to field a senior team again in 2017.

"We've been promised for the last three years that (the PDL is) going to do something about our division to make it more competitive and more fan friendly with more teams coming in and we see it going in the opposite direction," Heat owner and president Shashi Vaswani said. "If we don't take a stand, I think it will just keep doing that."

While many other teams in the PDL have the advantage of multiple clubs within a relatively close radius, Laredo does not have that luxury. The closest PDL team, the Houston Dutch Lions, is more than 300 miles away. The Mid-South division is the smallest in the league with only four teams.

"Laredo was one of our longest-serving clubs in the PDL and we will be disappointed to not have the Heat as part of the league moving forward," PDL senior director Todd Eason said in a statement. "We do wish them every success in the future."

Last year, the Heat finished 5-7-2, good for third in the division. The PDL schedule came in three chunks. Back-to-back games at home against the Mississippi Brilla started the year. Laredo then went on the road for a month straight and visited Mississippi, Houston, Midland and Albuquerque before finishing the year with five straight home games.

Attendance at the Texas A&M International Soccer Complex was down more than 100 fans per game from 611 in 2014 to 504 last season. Laredo's highest attended year, other than the shortened inaugural 2004 season, was in 2009 after making it to three straight PDL finals when 1,228 people showed up each game ranking seventh in the league.

While the Heat hopes to resume play in 2017 in the PDL, there are other options on the table. That includes the National Premier Soccer League, a much newer league founded in 2003.

Vaswani said at this point he believes the PDL to be the better league in terms of quality, but the geographical benefits of the NPSL are enticing. The NPSL has five teams from Texas and eight franchises in the South Central Conference. He added the PDL told the Heat if they were to come back in 2017, they would have to pay the franchise entry fee again they paid 11 years ago.

“(The NPSL) basically rolled out the red carpet if we wanted to come in,” he said. “If we ever (joined the NPSL), we’d elevate the bar there too because we want to have teams at the same level as we are. We love the PDL, but if they make it hard to come back then we have other options.”

The current version of the PDL was founded in 1995. Of the 57 American and six Canadian teams in the league, only nine clubs have been a member of the league for longer than the Heat.

Laredo is one of the most successful franchises in PDL history having made it to the championship game four times and becoming the first team in history to make it to the title game in three straight years from 2006-2008. The Heat won their one and only PDL championship in 2007.

Their success isn’t exclusive to the PDL. Laredo made it to the U.S. Open Cup five times and is tied with five other teams for the deepest Open Cup run in PDL history when it made it to the fourth round in 2014 before losing to the Houston Dynamo of the MLS.

There will be repercussions on the rest of the division because of the decision. Heat general manager J.J. Vela said the support from other franchises in the division has been positive. While it’s up to the other teams and the league, Mississippi would most likely get shifted to another division while Midland and Houston would be left in limbo as the only two PDL teams in Texas.

The shift in focus away from the senior team will allow the Heat to focus on their youth, and Vaswani said no Heat employee will be let go due to the decision to abstain from the 2016 PDL season. Heat head coach Daniel Galvan is a coach for the youth team and other members of the technical staff will all continue to work in and around Laredo youth development soccer.

“There are ways that we can take the money we were losing on the senior team and build a youth organization that helps pay for kids’ travel or more,” Vaswani said. “The U.S. Soccer Development Academy is expensive, but that’s something I’d love to do.”

More than anything what the Heat wants is change. Laredo plays in the smallest division and Vaswani says it is almost an afterthought when it comes to scheduling. The familiar opponents and difficult travel was “no longer a viable business option.”

“We’ve been doing this for 11 years and we feel that in order to prove as a team and an organization we need to do some things differently,” Vaswani said. “Taking a stand is a harsh way to say it, but we’ve been promised that things are going to change. At this point, we’ll only believe it when we see it.”