



CHOICES: Critics may scoff, but Donovan says leaving Europe was more about peace of mind than about soccer

# Lone Star

LANDON DONOVAN, THE GALAXY'S NEW GREAT HOPE, HAS COME HOME WITH A LOT TO PROVE **BY JOE RHODES**

**H**E FIGURED IT OUT EARLY, when he was only five years old, in the first organized soccer game of his life. He was in a youth league in the high-desert suburbs of Ontario, going up against boys who were at least a year or two older but didn't yet have an idea of how the sport should be played. All of them—except for the ones who hadn't drifted off to chase butterflies—converged on the ball as soon as the whistle was blown, a kicking, screaming cluster of hyped-up little kids, aimless as a tumbleweed, a tangled, directionless swarm.

It was obvious to Landon Donovan, who'd been playing soccer in his backyard since he was three, that the middle of that mob scene was not where he should be. So he moved off to the side until, inevitably, the ball squirted loose from the crowd. Already faster than the other boys, already able to make the ball go where he wanted it to go, he ran down the field, alone, toward the terrified goalkeeper, who had no time to protect himself or his suddenly vulnerable net.

Donovan shot and he scored. Over and over again. By the end of the game he had scored seven times, enough for other players' parents to complain that maybe he shouldn't be allowed in the league. He remembers the joy that came with every goal, the feeling that he could fly. If it's possible for a five-year-old to find his purpose in life, then that's what he had done.

"There's this incredible liberating feeling that you get right after you score a goal," he says now, 18 years later. "I decided that I loved that feeling. It still gives me goose bumps every time."

**I**F IT HAD BEEN ANY OTHER U.S. soccer player, going to any other team, the April announcement that Donovan would be joining the Los Angeles Galaxy wouldn't have made it above the sports-section fold. Major League Soccer, nearing the end of its tenth season, is still trying to establish itself as something more than a second-tier professional league, still struggling to capture the imagination of the millions of soccer-loving American kids and their parents—what keeps getting touted as a fan base waiting to happen. The size of the potential audience hasn't translated into the ticket sales or television ratings that would





allow the league to compete with the NBA, the NFL, or even the hapless NHL. Other than last year's signing of unproved teen prodigy Freddy Adu by D.C. United, the MLS seldom gets noticed by anyone other than its die-hard fans.

Donovan's presence in Los Angeles could change all that. He is considered to be the best soccer player America has produced and is well on his way to becoming the leading scorer in U.S. national team history. His multi-goal performance at the 2002 World Cup, when he was only 19, made him a media darling. He was on the cover of *Sports Illustrated* and appeared on *Letterman* and MTV's *Total Request Live*. In four seasons with the San Jose Earthquakes, he led the team to two MLS championships, and he was the U.S. national team's Honda Player of the Year three years running.

Donovan is a marketer's dream: He is soft-spoken, self-effacing, and thoughtful, with none of the camera-shoving swagger Americans have come to expect from celebrity athletes. He is also pop-star cute

and infinitely patient both with reporters and with the hordes of autograph seekers who press in on him. After a recent World Cup qualifier in Salt Lake City, it took him nearly an hour to make his way through hundreds of admirers, most of them squealing preteen girls. He posed for every cell phone picture and signed every jersey and ball. Donovan has become "like a little David Beckham," says fellow U.S. team member DeMarcus Beasley. "He deserves all the attention he gets."

Listed as five feet eight and 147 pounds, Donovan is smaller than most of his teammates, not shorter necessarily, but less obviously athletic. He is narrow through the shoulders and hips and has a rapidly receding hairline that belies his baby face. He is 23 but seems much younger. No bouncer in the world would let him pass without demanding two forms of ID.

During a game, Donovan can seem fidgety when he doesn't have the ball, like a child who's had his favorite toy taken away. He runs with his mouth open and his arms held close

to his sides, his wrists hanging down, elbows bent, as if he's carrying an invisible purse. The cumulative effect is to make him appear vulnerable, more delicate than he really is.

Until he sees an opportunity to make a play, an opening that he exploits before other players realize it is there. His gift, even more than his quickness, is his ability to sense the split-second gaps in the defense, to find teammates with a clear path to the goal or, if an opponent is foolish enough to give him room, to shoot and score. In those flash-point moments, when his right foot finds the perfect spot and the ball whizzes into a corner of the net, when the confetti cannons fire and bits of paper descend on the crowds at Home Depot Center like millions of fluttering multicolored moths, you start to see what all the fuss is about.

"He doesn't just make us a better team, he makes us more attractive to fans and to sponsors," says Galaxy president Doug Hamilton, who expects Donovan to help his franchise mount a run at its second MLS championship, reach the play-offs for the



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tenth straight year, and consistently sell out its 27,000-seat stadium by the time the season ends in October.

Before Donovan could become the highest-paid player in the league (at a reported \$4.8 million for four seasons), the Galaxy had to purchase his rights from Bayer Leverkusen, the German team that signed him as a 16-year-old wunderkind when he was at Redlands East High School. Donovan, who is both a forward and a midfielder, went to San Jose under a loan arrangement with Leverkusen. He had been back in Germany for only a few months when the Galaxy deal was announced, one day before the MLS season began.

Immediately there were accusations that Major League Soccer and the Anschutz Entertainment Group, which owns four franchises, including the Galaxy and the Earthquakes, had manipulated the transaction to get Donovan out of San Jose and into L.A.'s fertile media market. It's a charge all parties have denied. Not that it mattered to Earthquake fans, who felt so betrayed by their former hero that when Donovan returned with the Galaxy for the first time in June, they booed whenever he touched the ball, hung his bobblehead doll in effigy, and hammered at a life-size Landon Donovan piñata until they tore off its head.

There were critics who wondered whether Donovan had come back to America because he couldn't handle the top-level European competition. His brief return to Germany had been marked by uninspired play and more time on the bench than in the starting lineup. The truth, he says, is considerably more complicated and has less to do with soccer than it does with peace of mind.

"Ninety-nine percent of the players in the world would have been better off staying in Europe," Donovan says as he lounges in a Salt Lake City coffee shop the day before the U.S. team's victory over Costa Rica. "But for me, that's not what soccer's about. For me, soccer is a direct result of the rest of my life being good or bad. If my outside world is going well, you'll see that on the field. So over there, even though it was a higher level of soccer, my game was deteriorating because I wasn't enjoying my life.

"Every day in Germany it seemed like I was always thinking about the next time

I would go home, or the next time there would be a U.S. national team camp. You're almost wasting your life away, thinking about being somewhere else. And that sucks. That's a horrible way to live."

For all the attention and money Donovan is likely to get (he has endorsement deals with Nike and Gatorade, with others sure to come as the 2006 World Cup approaches), agent Richard Motzkin says his client could have earned millions more if he had stayed in Europe. "But he wants to show that you can be a world-class player without having to leave the United States," Motzkin says. "He wants to be a pioneer for the game."

Donovan knows there are those who think that he took the easy way out, that for all his talk about wanting to be in Southern California to be close to his family and to move in with his girlfriend, actress Bianca Kajlich, the real reason he came back was that he wasn't tough enough to cut it over there, that he'd rather be a big fish in a second-rate pond.

"From some people's perspective, maybe they're right, that I'm not tough enough," says Donovan, who admits he played poorly while with Leverkusen. He accepts criticism in a way that is rare among pro athletes. He is willing to concede that maybe he's not always as focused as he needs to be, that he sometimes overthinks the game or gives shots to teammates that he ought to take himself.

"I'm not Michael Jordan. I'm not the guy who can take the ball, dribble through everyone, and score. That's not me. But I think I do other things that benefit the team, and I think that's why I've always been a winner. If a team tries to shut me down, then other guys are open and I'll find them."

He bristles at any suggestion that he shies away from pressure. If a penalty kick will win the game, he says, he wants to be the one who takes it. He points out that he's played best in the biggest games—MLS championships, the World Cup. In his first five games with the Galaxy, Donovan scored five goals. In the U.S. team's last 14 World Cup qualifying matches, Donovan racked up an unprecedented eight goals and ten assists.

"It's a team game," he says. "Sometimes I can get through, sometimes I can't. But if





anyone wants to play against me one-on-one, everybody else move off to the side, that's fine with me. Because I'll destroy them."

**D**ONOVAN'S MOTHER IS NOT shy about saying that her son was a bright, intense, and often difficult child. "He had a big temper problem for a while," says Donna Kenney-Cash. Sometimes soccer was the only thing that could keep him under control. The threat of holding Landon out of a game was her fail-safe disciplinary tool.

"I was so competitive," Donovan says, "even more competitive than I am now. I loved playing soccer more than anything in the world. The reason I had good grades wasn't because I cared that much about school. It was because I wanted to get my homework out of the way and have more time for playing soccer."

Donovan seized every opportunity that came his way, playing in all-star leagues and Olympic development programs, taking up residence at the elite IMG Soccer Academy in Bradenton, Florida, and joining Leverkusen as the youngest American player ever signed by a European pro team.

It wasn't until after the 2002 World Cup that Donovan considered the notion that maybe he should slow down. The pressures of being a star were starting to take a toll. "He couldn't stop talking about when he could retire," says Kajlich, who began dating Donovan that year. "I don't think he expected to become a household name. He's this 20-year-old boy who suddenly has people all over him in a way that he never anticipated. And I think it really was a little debilitating for him."

Donovan would fly down from San Jose after games to spend time with Kajlich. He was already having misgivings about his imminent return to Leverkusen, about spending so much time away from home. His mother, a special-education teacher, and magician Paul Cash, whom she married in 1995, live in the two-story house where the family moved when Donovan was in sixth grade. Landon's twin sister, Tristan, and his brother, Josh, who first taught him to play soccer, live nearby. (Donovan's parents were divorced when he was two. His father, Tim, a semipro hockey player, moved out of state but often attends his son's matches.)

Donovan's doubts intensified in December 2003 when Kajlich's brother, Andre, lost both legs in a subway accident in Prague. As he and Kajlich flew between L.A. and the Czech Republic to get Andre to America, Donovan says, he realized that "I don't want to be 6,000 miles from the people I love, worried that something might happen to them and I couldn't get there in time."

Donovan and his girlfriend now have a house in Manhattan Beach, three dogs, and a cat, with marriage and children a foregone conclusion. They visit his family regularly.

That doesn't mean Donovan has lost any of his passion for the sport. His match-day rituals border on obsession. On the road he eats a pregame meal of three poached eggs and spends time by himself. Before the start of every match, and before every penalty kick, he grabs a bit of the stadium grass. He kisses, three times each, spots on his wrists and hands to represent gifts from his sister, his brother, his mother, and his girlfriend. Then he makes the sign of the cross, not because he is religious but because he saw the other players, most of whom were Latino, do it when he was a kid. (He also taught himself Spanish so he would know what was happening on the field.)

"I guess I'm a little obsessive-compulsive," he says. "It just makes me feel comfortable. It's weird."

Galaxy head coach Steve Sampson thinks the move to Los Angeles has improved Donovan's game. Bruce Arena, the coach of the U.S. national team, for which Donovan interrupts his Galaxy schedule during World Cup season, agrees. Both men say he seems more relaxed and more focused than when he was playing for Leverkusen and San Jose. But the pressure of high expectations—such as Motzkin's prediction that within five years Donovan will be as recognizable as any athlete in L.A., including Kobe Bryant—is unavoidable. The question, still unanswered, is whether he's up to the test.

"This is the first time that I feel I have something to prove," Donovan says. "I want to be here for a long time. And I know they want me, because they want to market the sport and because they want to win. Now, whether that pans out, that's up to me."

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