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Cincy Magazine Summer 2020

## Cincy Sports: Empty Stadiums, Zoom Calls and Breakfast Photos – 7/22/2020

FC Cincinnati supporters are getting creative to cheer on their favorite team

Noah Tong



Jared Handra's gameday experience as president of Die Innenstadt, an independent supporters' group for FC Cincinnati fans, is unmistakably different than this time last year.

In a normal season, Die Innenstadt members would spend their weekends on the front lines (literally) as one of numerous supporter groups. Those groups of hardcore FC Cincinnati fans would usually march to Nippert Stadium, drumming, chanting and singing in unison. They'd arrive from Mecklenburg Gardens to The Bailey, the seating section reserved for the most faithful fanatics, and would overlook the stadium they helped decorate during the week alongside other supporter groups.

This ritual evaporated when Major League Soccer suspended the season.

"When things got suspended in March it really started to put the pandemic into perspective," says Handra. "That week leading up to our first game we were due to start tracing and painting our first tifo [a banner unfurled from fans at the beginning of a match] of the year and we had to cancel it."

FC Cincinnati soccer is back now, sort of. MLS returned to competition July 8 in the MLS is Back Tournament. This World

Cup-styled tournament placed 24 of 26 MLS teams in Orlando, Florida, at the ESPN Wide World of Sports Complex. All players, coaches and staff live under a "bubble" designed to keep athletes safe from getting sick. Every one inside the bubble is tested for COVID-19 routinely.

Of course, a month-long tournament 900 miles away means there are no home games for Handra to attend anytime soon. He also can't accompany the travelling contingent that goes to each MLS city to support FCC on the road ("That's half the fun honestly.") because no fans are allowed inside the bubble.

The separation has forced the Die Innenstadt community to keep in touch virtually. Its Slack group is active during matches, and it also started a Zoom call for each game to create a "watch party" effect, says Handra.

"We've also thrown out some themes for each match, which have helped bring some fun into it," he explains. "For example, this morning we had a 9 a.m. game so every one was posting their breakfast and their work from home setups."

Maybe those good vibes from back home worked in FCC's favor or when they upset Atlanta United 1-0 last Thursday. A win against New York Red Bulls clinches a spot in the knockout rounds.

While other soccer leagues in the states are starting to allow fans again, Handra isn't sure he's ready to chance exposure to cheer on his team.

"I'm not sure it's worth the risk right now to be honest," he says. "I'm sure we'll have plenty of people go but I would bet a good majority of members probably wouldn't go right now."

Until then, Handra will continue rooting for the Orange and Blue on TV while practicing a rediscovered hobby:

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the guitar.

"Let's see if I can play something all the way through before the end of quarantine!"



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