

Chelsea cruise past LAFC

Chelsea secures 2-0 victory over LAFC in Club World Cup opener despite sparse attendance

● **Pedro Neto, Enzo Fernandez score for Chelsea**

● **Nearly 50,000 seats remain empty**

AFP | London

Chelsea kicked off their Club World Cup campaign with a solid 2-0 victory over Los Angeles FC on Monday in Group D, although there were nearly 50,000 empty seats in the stadium in Atlanta.

Pedro Neto and Enzo Fernandez's goals got the Blues off to a good start in a competitive clash against one of the three qualified MLS teams.

New signing Liam Delap made his debut as a substitute and helped set up Fernandez's strike, with Chelsea hoping to reestablish themselves among the elite after their UEFA Conference League triumph and Champions League qualification.

Chelsea coach Enzo Maresca said it was a "very good result" and was happy with Delap's display.

"The good thing about Liam is he knows the way we want to play, so the process is quite quick," said the Italian.

After a solid start to the tournament regarding attendance numbers over the opening weekend, a sparse crowd of just over 22,000 settled in at the stylish 71,000 capacity Mercedes-Benz Stadium.

Behind former Tottenham Hotspur stopper Hugo Lloris' goal in the first half, a couple of hundred LAFC 'ultras' helped provide an atmosphere with a drum beat and constant song.

The closed stadium roof offered refuge from the Georgia humidity and mid-afternoon summer sun which Paris Saint-Germain and Atletico Madrid stars roasted under on Sunday at the Rose Bowl in Pasadena.

However, the attendance suffered badly because of the 3:00 pm local time kick-off.

Despite regular strong crowds



Chelsea's Portuguese midfielder #07 Pedro Neto (L) fights for the ball with LAFC's French forward #99 Denis Bouanga

for MLS side Atlanta United, the best supported US team, few locals decided to take a Monday off work for the tournament's first weekday afternoon game, seemingly chosen to suit a British television audience.

After beating Club America in a play-off to qualify for the competition as late as May, LAFC took the place of the banned Mexican side Club Leon, and play none of their three group games at home in California.

The top ring of the stadium was entirely shut and other levels were only partly filled, despite ticket prices dropping in the days ahead of the game.

It was the first real blow for organisers FIFA's expanded competition, which is also being viewed as a trial run ahead of the 2026 World Cup, hosted by the US, Canada and Mexico.

Chelsea took control from the start, with Lloris saving from

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CHELSEA COACH ENZO MARESCA

Nicolas Jackson and Noni Madueke, while Cole Palmer whistled a strike narrowly over.

With new signing Delap looking on from the bench, Jackson played like a man determined to keep his starting spot.

The striker was instrumental in Neto's opener, releasing the Portuguese winger with an excellent through ball.

Neto chopped in the box to leave LA defender Ryan Hollingshead stumbling helplessly out of sight and then buried a powerful strike past Lloris low at the near post.



LAFC's US forward #27 Nathan Ordaz (L) fights for the ball with Chelsea's English defender #24 Reece James

Delap debut

Former Chelsea striker Olivier Giroud came on at half-time for the Americans and Steve Cherundolo's team improved in

the second half.

Jackson came close with a header and LA almost levelled but Sanchez made a fine save with his outstretched leg to thwart 2023 MLS golden boot

'Strange' to play in front of 50,000 empty seats: Chelsea's Maresca

Chelsea coach Enzo Maresca labelled the atmosphere in his team's opening Club World Cup game on Monday "strange" after the Blues triumphed in front of nearly 50,000 empty seats.

Only 22,000 fans present at the 71,000-capacity Mercedes-Benz Stadium.

"The environment was a bit strange, the stadium was almost empty, not full," Maresca told reporters.

"We are professional, we have to adapt to the situation, to the environment..."

"It's important the behaviour of the players, the attitude, and once again they showed how professional they are."

The Chelsea coach said his team had expected a larger crowd, but were hopeful they would get that in their second game against Flamengo of Brazil in Philadelphia.

"We prepared this game also thinking that the environment was a bit different, but no doubt that the next one will be a nice one, because we know that the Brazilian teams, they always bring many, many fans," he added.

Over 60,000 spectators attended the opening match between Lionel Messi's Inter Miami and Al Ahly on Saturday, while 80,000 were present at the Rose Bowl in Pasadena on Sunday for the clash between UEFA Champions League winners Paris-Saint Germain and



General view inside the stadium with empty seats in the stands

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ENZO MARESCA

Atletico Madrid.

Plenty of Boca Juniors fans created a raucous atmosphere later on Monday for their match against Benfica at the Hard Rock Stadium in Miami.

With Chelsea playing at 3:00 pm local time on a working Monday, the Mercedes-Benz Stadium was under a third full.

MLS side Atlanta United average nearly 45,000 fans at their matches and are the best sup-

ported US team.

"PSG against Atletico, in front of a big crowd at the Rose Bowl...so I don't know if there's just more fans in Los Angeles who are into this tournament than here, or if it's the pairing tonight," said LA coach Steve Cherundolo.

However the American said it was too early to judge FIFA's new expanded competition on the basis of just one match.

"Regarding crowds I think it's kind of different each game you look at, so I don't think we should be talking about this right now," he added.

"I think we should wait until the end of the tournament... (to make) an opinion about it as a whole, as opposed to one game."



Despite the stadium's 71,000 capacity, only 22,000 fans attended—leaving the top ring closed and large sections empty, a stark contrast to Atlanta United's usual packed MLS games

winner Denis Bouanga after he shook off Neto.

Maresca brought on 22-year-old striker Delap for his Chelsea debut after the hour mark, having begun the game with all of the club's new faces on the bench.

The forward drove into space and tried to tee up Fernandez with a promising first move in a Chelsea shirt since his arrival from relegated Ipswich Town.

Chelsea star Palmer, who had shown occasional flashes of brilliance, hammered over before Fernandez grabbed Chelsea's second.

Running into the six-yard box, the Argentine midfielder controlled Delap's cross from the right and beat Lloris to put the game to bed.