# Home Advantage in the MLS and the Impact of Road Trips

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**Strategy Summary:**

We look at how big an impact home advantage has in the MLS and specifically how away teams perform when on different lengths of road trips. This article was published on 23rd April 2020.

**Home Bias**

The MLS has a significant home bias, with home teams winning 50.3% of the 5441 matches between the start of 2000 (the year that draws were allowed in the MLS) and the end of the 2019 season, whilst losing just 24.0% (this range will be used throughout this piece unless stated otherwise). Moreover, since the start of 2012 and the end of 2019 the home side has won 52.3% and lost just 23.3% of 2948 matches. In contrast, the English Premier League saw home teams win 45.6% of matches and lose 30.3% since the 2012/13 campaign.

Given the spread of MLS teams across North America, teams will often play multiple away matches in a row, with Kansas City and Toronto playing 10 consecutives away matches in 2011 and 2016 respectively, while Portland played each of their first 12 games of the 2019 campaign on the road. The large travelling distances and fatigue from long road trips partly explains the home bias we see. Similarly, if a team just has one away match between two home games, they may prioritise the home matches and rest a couple of players for the road trip.

**Long Road Trips**

Ignoring the first three games of the season after teams have had a break to recharge the batteries and then pre-season, there have been 149 matches since 2000 where a side has played at least a fourth consecutive away match with a W34-D38-L77 record. This would have resulted in a 8.7% profit if you'd backed the home team on every occasion, although this is based on average odds so a profit of about 12 or 13% would have been possible with best prices.

However, while backing the home team in these situations during the first half of this 20-year span would have produced a tidy 14.5% profit from 63 games, this drops down to 4.3% across 86 matches over the past decade alone. This trend has continued to grow with the last five seasons swinging completely the other way, as there was an 8.5% loss to sustain over 60 matches, compared to a whopping 24.6% profit to be had on the away side – who won just shy of a third of their games.

| Period | Matches | Home Win | Draw | Away Win | HW ROI | Draw ROI | AW ROI |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2000 - 2019 | 149 | 51.68% | 25.50% | 22.82% | 8.74% | -14.57% | -19.35% |
| 2000 - 2009 | 63 | 50.79% | 26.98% | 22.22% | 14.48% | -17.76% | -30.05% |
| 2010 - 2019 | 86 | 52.33% | 24.42% | 23.26% | 4.29% | -12.10% | -11.05% |
| 2015 - 2019 | 60 | 46.67% | 21.67% | 31.67% | -8.54% | -17.11% | 24.57% |

** How MLS teams fare when the away side is playing at least their fourth consecutive away game, excluding runs where there is overlap between seasons.*

Alternatively, we can consider the extra stress of making multiple trips to different time zones. Ignoring encounters on the opening day of the season, teams playing their second consecutive away match, but with both that and the previous game having been played in a different time zone to their home stadium, have a poor record. In this particular situation there have been 837 matches between 2000 and 2019, with the away sides losing 51.4% of the time and with a 3.3% profit from backing the home teams.

**Single Away Games**

For the 20 seasons spanning 2000 until 2019, teams have played 5441 away matches and if you'd backed the home side every time, you'd have made a small loss of 1.01%. Considering this is with average odds it highlights just what good value home teams have represented in this time. In comparison, backing the away side would have resulted in an 16.9% loss while the draw would have given a 11.7% loss.

Excluding the first game of the season, if we look at just those away matches that were sandwiched between two home games then we get 2018 games and we see that backing the away side in this scenario would have resulted in a slightly larger loss of 21.8%.

However, where this gets more interesting is if the away side has a quick turnaround. If the away game is no more than five days since their last home match, or is less than six days till their next home game, then we get a significant increase in our return for backing their hosts. This leaves us 804 matches, with a profit of 6.1% backing the home team compared to a loss of 26.0% for the away side. Furthermore, these profits are relatively consistent over time, with the last five years even delivering a slightly greater edge:

| Period | Matches | Home Win | Draw | Away Win | HW ROI | Draw ROI | AW ROI |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|---|
| 2000 - 2019 | 804 | 53.86% | 23.38% | 22.76% | 6.08% | -19.67% | -25.99% |
| 2015 - 2019 | 279 | 57.35% | 21.51% | 21.15% | 7.35% | -17.21% | -26.09% |

** Results where away team is between two home games, of which at least 1 is within 5 days of game*

**Travelling Distances**

One of the biggest advantages home sides have in the MLS is some of the distances that their opponents face when travelling to them. However, if we look at teams that are hosting sides that have crossed from the Pacific to the Eastern time zones, or vice-versa, we actually see that the results aren't any stronger. Between 2000 and 2019 there have been 706 such matches and the home side has won just 47.6%, with an 9.3% loss backing the home win. This could simply be an anomaly but it could also be that these trans-continental journeys are already being factored into the price – though the fall in win percentage suggests there's more at work.

In comparison, where teams have crossed two rather than three time zones (i.e. from Mountain to Eastern or Central to Pacific) the results are far more dramatic in favour of the home team. There are 1014 matches in this sample and the home win rate is 52.5% with a 3.7% profit.

Of course, if the home side was playing away on the opposite coast in their previous match then their advantage should be significantly reduced when back at home. And so it proves, as ignoring the first game of the season again, backing the 428 home teams that had played on the road three time zones away in their previous game, would have resulted in a 13.1% loss as they won just 44.6%. Given how strong home teams have been in most of our queries that is a significant loss and you'd have been far better backing either the draw (a 3.4% profit), while even the away win (10.3% loss) was less disastrous in this situation.

**Conclusions**

- Avoid backing home teams that were playing three time zones away in their previous match
- Back home sides where their opponents have crossed two times zones to play them
- Back home sides where their opponents have home matches either side of their away trip, when at least one of those games (before or next) is fewer than six days from this match
- Be careful backing home sides when the away team is playing at least their fourth consecutive away games – this has become increasingly unprofitable.