

# In Good Hands

**From Sun Valley victories to benders with Beckham, two-time MLS goalkeeper of the year Joe Cannon has built a life between the sticks** BY BRYCE HUBNER

**In the mid-1980s,** Joe Cannon and his twin brother, Jon, were known as the next Phil and Steve Mahre: tiny twins bombing around the slopes of Sun Valley, Idaho, and collecting ski racing trophies by carving up USSA's Intermountain J5 competition.

Now, Joe Cannon is better known as one of the best goalkeepers in Major League Soccer (MLS) history. After more than 300 career starts, he sits second on the overall career goalkeeping stat sheet, second in career saves, and fourth in career shutouts (particularly impressive since he's spent the past four seasons on expansion teams). In his 12-plus-year career as a professional — which included a year at RC Lens in France's top division, League 1 — Cannon has also garnered two MLS Goalkeeper of the Year honors and an MLS Cup Championship.

Not bad for a kid who started playing footy for the sole purpose of getting his ski legs in shape.

“My mom only got us playing soccer -- when we were about 6 or 7, I think — so that we could build up our legs and our strength for ski racing,” says Cannon, now the starting goalkeeper for the Vancouver Whitecaps, which is averaging almost 21,000 fans per game in its inaugural season.

Cannon's family spent winters in Sun Valley because his father, Joe Cannon Sr., was a popular musician who livened up the up the area's après ski scene in Ketchum and Hailey. They were magical winters for the future soccer star.

“For me, skiing is kind of spiritual, like surfing in the mountains,” Cannon says. “Some of my fondest memories as a kid are from when we were 11 or 12 and so excited to ski that we'd be throwing our thermals on at 6 a.m. and at the mountain by 7 — there before anyone else was awake, skiing the fresh tracks, and following the ski patrol around. And the racing was awesome, too. We raced for both Sun Valley and the Hailey ski club with people like Picabo Street.”



**Cannon makes a diving save against Houston for Vancouver's 21,000 strong.**

# Role Model

## Picking a passion

Despite that early success on the slopes in Sun Valley, Cannon and his family spent the rest of the year far from snow in California's Los Altos Hills near San Jose, where the high-level competition in other sports proved a compelling draw for all the Cannon boys. Jon was a star baseball player who went on to play minor league ball; younger brother, Colt became a famous professional skateboarder; and Joe immersed himself in soccer.

"When I was about 14," Cannon says, "I had a great club coach named Alberto Montoya, who believed I was good enough to get a college scholarship, and from that point on I really focused on nothing but soccer."

Cannon spent time at two of the nation's very best soccer colleges, first matriculating at the University of California at Santa Barbara before moving on to Santa Clara University, where he overlapped with future NBA star Steve Nash, who is, coincidentally, among the owners of Cannon's current Vancouver Whitecaps team.

"I credit coaches like Mitch Murray at Santa Clara University for getting me to think about being a professional and trying to give me the discipline to do that," Cannon says of his time at Santa Clara, adding that there wasn't necessarily an obvious path for Americans who wanted to play professionally at the time. "When I first got to college, Major League Soccer didn't exist but it was in the works, so I just made it a goal: 'I want to be a pro soccer player.'"

Cannon has an uncanny ability to remember the details of even the minutia from each of his hundreds of pro starts: the exact move a player used to beat him in a league game in 2004 when he played for the Colorado Rapids; the weather, time of day, and angle of the sun when he made a brilliant stop in his return to San Jose in 2008; etc. And because of that exceptional memory, Ski Racing had to ask Cannon what it was like to be the L.A. Galaxy goalkeeper in 2007, when new teammate David Beckham arrived and forever changed the face of the league.

"Honestly, it was a little crazy and a tremendous learning experience," Cannon says. "David is a good teammate and a true pro, but he's also more than just a soccer player and his arrival put a tremendous amount of pressure on our team — not to mention [media scrutiny]. There were some surreal moments that year."

One day, the team entered the locker room to find that each locker was adorned with an ornate envelope.



**Cannon (right) catches his breath with Whitecaps teammate and American 2010 World Cup star Jay DeMerit.**



**Little Joe and Jon Cannon pose with Phil and Steve Mahre as Joe Sr. and mom, Barbara, look on.**

# Role Model



**Thanking Vancouver supporters.**

**Joe Sr. plays at Ketchum's Roosevelt Grille.**



“It was a couple months after it was announced that David was coming but he hadn’t actually arrived yet,” Cannon says. “We all got back to our lockers and there were these beautiful envelopes that said, ‘Tom Cruise, Katie Holmes, Will Smith, and Jada Pinkett Smith would like to invite you to a star-studded event welcoming the Beckhams to Los Angeles.’”

## **More goals ahead**

At age 36, Cannon knows he’s got only a handful of playing years left in his body, and he’s already commenced laying the foundation for a future in soccer management.

“I definitely want to stay in the game,” Cannon says. “I have a passion for the sport and I want to keep it going — I’m probably looking at doing something on the business side rather than coaching, and I think there’s some room for me to continue to grow with the game.”

As for the impact his ski racing youth played on his soccer present and future?

“I think, even more than other sports, there’s so much preparation that goes into ski racing at a very young age, and I think the lessons stay with you forever,” Cannon says. “As a young kid, you might not really think about those kinds of things, but you’re up on the mountain very early, you’re inspecting the course and trying to memorize every turn and gate. I think there was a discipline I started to learn then that I’ve carried with me throughout my career. And the goal-setting that you learn in any sport is such an important tool for life.” [SR](#)



**Cannon shreds the Intermountain Mighty Mite circuit.**