



# Welcome to the Blue Heaven: Don't Bet Against the Goal Keeper

*Jimmy Nielsen*

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Major League Soccer's Goalkeeper of the year for 2012, Jimmy Nielsen, has established himself as one of the best players in the League and a fan favorite while playing for Sporting Kansas City. Yet, while supporters are familiar with his achievements on the field and larger-than-life personality off it, few are aware of the remarkable story that led him to the Midwest.

Compared at an early age to Denmark's greatest goalkeeper ever, Peter Schmeichel, Nielsen was scouted by Manchester United and a host of other leading European clubs, but at the point when he should have been building a great career he was instead developing a ferocious gambling habit. In 1999, he dropped from Denmark's Under-21 team after missing several because of a lost night at the roulette table.

Nicknamed "Casino Jimmy" by rival supporters, Nielsen continued to gamble—the stakes getting so high that he was able to win \$5000,000 on a single night at one casino and then throw more than half of that away at the same venue a day later. His losses finally caught up with him in 2004, when his inability to pay off a gambling debt helped put a major bookie out of business.

Avoiding bankruptcy only with financial assistance from his soccer club and with the support of a family he feared would desert him, Nielsen gradually pieced his life back together. But in his soccer career he remained unfulfilled. He had spent almost his entire career with Aalborg, the team he supported as a boy, starting a record 398 games and winning the Danish championship in 1999, but he dreamed of a fresh challenge.

Were it not for a phone call, from Kansas City in January 2010, that might have been the end of the story. Despite still performing at a high level, Nielsen was contemplating retirement when he was offered a contract by an American club he didn't even know existed. He said yes.

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