

Syracuse soccer kicks into gear

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SYRACUSE-The Syracuse Football Club will officially announce the name and debut the logo of the city's new A-League club during a March 1 press conference at the Oncenter. A Flock of Seagulls, a group formed in the 1980s, will perform that day.

Meanwhile, club officials have been raising capital from local investors, finalizing an agreement to play home games at P&C Stadium and selling season-ticket packages. According to Team President and Managing Partner Tim Kuhl, Syracuse will have an operational budget of more than \$1 million-which includes employee and player payroll, rent for the stadium, equipment, and uniforms.

"The key to being successful is the tremendous input of the soccer community," says Allen Laventure, the team's vice president of sales and marketing. "It's a tremendous opportunity. There are 36,000 families involved in youth soccer in Onondaga County."

To help attract those soccer-playing families to the game, the team has created a season-ticket package that will help raise money for local soccer organizations. The team is selling a membership family plan that includes four season tickets, a season-long parking pass, team newsletter and photographs, and several private functions with the players (including birthday parties). The packages cost \$500, one-fifth of which goes to a youth soccer organization chosen by the purchaser.

"Giving back to [the] community is part of every decision we make," Laventure says. "We want to be a community asset and want people to be happy we're involved. Part of the responsibility of being a community participant is that we give back to fans."

Other community programs will include soccer summer camps, coaching clinics, player visits to local schools and camps, and presentations by foreign players about their home country.

The club also is selling traditional season-ticket packages for the 14game home season. Tickets for the first tier cost \$135 and \$120 for the second tier; youth tickets cost \$105; and tickets on the ends cost \$90.

"[The team] gives an affordable family [entertainment] option. Our average ticket prices are under \$10," Laventure says. "We think the soccer fans are very driven from the tremendous success with the Rochester fan clubs, and other teams in four] division have strong booster clubs. We're [also] setting up bus trips for [those fans] to visit Carousel Center and watch our games."

Additionally, the team has arranged its schedule so it does not conflict with the Syracuse SkyChiefs, the main resident of P&C Stadium. The soccer team will only play when the SkyChiefs are on a road trip, which also gives stadium crew members time to convert the stadium's AstroTurf field from a baseball configuration to one that conforms to soccer. Portland is the only other A-League team that plays on an AstroTurf field.

Although a contract has not been finalized with Onondaga County, which owns P&C Stadium, the team expects to call it home.

"From day one, we always have felt that we are playing at P&C Stadium, and we have no reason to feel otherwise," Kuhl says.

"On the weeks that the SkyChiefs are away, we're a great family alternative," Laventure says. "When they're here, they provide great family entertainment. We're hoping to fill that void [during SkyChiefs' road trips]."

"[Home games] are going to be an event" he adds. "We're going to create a pre-game family-fun zone with inflatables, tailgating, and a concert series... We're going to have fireworks after every game."

The team's first home game is scheduled for May 17 against the Toronto Lynx, one of Syracuse's Eastern Conference foes. Joining Syracuse and Toronto in the conference are Atlanta, Charleston, Charlotte, Montreal, Pittsburgh, Richmond, Rochester, and Virginia Beach. Syracuse faces Rochester five times; Toronto, Pittsburgh, Montreal four times; Virginia Beach three times; Charlotte and Charleston (S.C.) twice; and Minnesota, Milwaukee, and Atlanta once. The playoffs are scheduled to begin Sept. 5.

The team is planning several other activities for home games, including youth soccer games. Kuhl says the bands-all of whom have

played at Turning Stone Casino Resort or the Cole Muffler Court on the New York State Fairgrounds-will be nationally known and play at several home games. The names of the acts will be announced once contracts are signed.

Additionally, the team will play two games at neutral sites. The first will be an exhibition game on July 12 against the Rochester Raging Rhinos at the Pro Soccer Hall of Fame in Oneonta. The team also will face the Pittsburgh Riverhounds on Aug. 1 in Binghamton.

Meanwhile, as a member of the A-League, the team will participate in the Lamar Hunt United States Open Cup, a tournament open to every American soccer team-including the A-League, the Premier Development League, D-3, and youth soccer teams. Syracuse faces Rochester on May 23-24, with the winner advancing in the 89-yearold tournament.

Hockey's impact

Kuhl formerly served as sales and marketing vice president for the Syracuse Crunch, and helped bring the American Hockey League franchise to the Salt City. During that time, he started to think about forming a soccer franchise in Syracuse and turned to his friends in Rochester for advice.

"We saw the success that Rochester had, and saw how the team has run and [placed] itself in the community and wanted to duplicate that here," Kuhl says. "The economic models from the standpoint of youth soccer players are the same [in both cities]."

"It's all how you market the team and the value you give to fans, customers, and sponsors vs. just playing a game," Kuhl continues. "We thought the time was right and talked to [Rochester] about purchasing the territorial rights, and we went from there."

Steve Donner, owner of the AHL's Rochester Americans, and Frank DuRoss, who owns the AHL's Providence Bruins, started the Rhinos seven years ago. DuRoss, the Rhino's majority owner, spoke to Kuhl and eventually granted him permission to start a soccer team in Syracuse. (Under A-League rules, Rochester owned territorial rights in Syracuse and Buffalo before the current expansion. The Rhinos still have those rights in Buffalo.)

The Rhinos, who visit Syracuse on May 23 and Aug. 29, average 11,000 fans for its home games at Frontier Field.

"We studied everything they have done and know intimately their first seven years of operation-some things they would change if they were starting [now], things that were a success," Kuhl says. "It's critical to business [to learn this information] and gives you a leg up."

Kuhl adds that the Rhinos told him everything "down to structuring player payroll and incentives."

And Kuhl hasn't forgotten the lessons he learned when the Crunch came to town.

"I learned an awful lot from [Crunch owner] Howard [Dolgon]," he says. "I learned the value from having local investors that are passionate about the team and the sport. The entertainment aspect [is key] and how important it is to the team and attendance. We knew entertainment was important to the sale of tickets and the game."