

If they build it, will Philly soccer fans come?

By JOHN KOPP
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BRYAN JAMES traveled to Washington 11 years ago to watch DC United's inaugural game.

James, who had never before seen a soccer game, quickly fell in love with the sport.

"When you get out and see the game and the atmosphere, if you're a real sports fan, you can't help but like it," he said.

James is returning to Washington Sunday for the MLS Cup. He's taking 100 members of the Sons of Ben, a local fan group dedicated to supporting an MLS team in Philadelphia.

While Sunday's championship game should be eventful for the Sons of Ben, today's state of the league address, to be delivered by commissioner Don Garber, offers more impact on their ultimate goal. Garber will outline the status of each city vying for an expansion team. The league hopes to expand to 16 teams by 2009, with Philadelphia among the possibilities.

There was speculation that Garber would announce at least one - if not two - expansion teams during the speech, but that talk died when MLS officially named Seattle its 15th franchise Tuesday. The league has maintained it would add teams only when it makes strategic sense, but told the *Associated Press* that a 16th team would have to be announced by the end of the year if it is to begin play in 2009.

"Philadelphia is still a market MLS wants to be in," MLS director of communications Will Kuhns said. "It's a process. That hasn't changed as a result of [Tuesday's] Seattle announcement."

Of the cities bidding for an MLS team, Philadelphia and St. Louis appear to be the favorites, the latter perhaps in better shape based on what Garber told the *Associated Press* on Tuesday in Seattle. "With us, things are never perfectly aligned, but it would be positive to have an Eastern team for our 16th team," he said. "St. Louis has been very active and it could be that St. Louis comes into play. We're not going to make the decision necessarily on a regional basis. We're going to do it the way we always do - owner, market and then facility."

Garber told the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* that whichever team loses out would likely be a strong candidate for expansion in 2010 or 2011.

The St. Louis investment group has secured funding for a \$400 million development project featuring an 18,500-seat stadium, 240 hotel rooms, 1,600 homes and 500,000 feet of office and retail space. The group only awaits league approval.

The Philadelphia investment group has proposed a \$115 million stadium along the Chester riverfront. Delaware County has pledged \$30 million for the project. Now the investors await state aid that would make or break the project, group attorney Charles Kopp said.

Despite losing the 15th team to Seattle, Kopp said the group remains optimistic.

"It was really no surprise to us that Seattle got one," Kopp said. "We expected it. We're hoping to get the 16th team.

"They're anxious to have a team in Philly because they have one in New York, Boston and Washington. Philly would round out the East Coast."

While being awarded a franchise would be an accomplishment for the investment group, that's only half the battle. Whether the team could be built into a success is a different story.

Philadelphia already has a cluttered sports landscape. Finding its niche among the four major sports and several smaller franchises might be difficult for an expansion team. That's not even mentioning the Big 5 or the fact that two previous outdoor soccer franchises - the Atoms and the Fury - disbanded after only a few years. Those teams, however, played in the 1970s.

"One thing you can say about Philadelphia is they're very passionate about their sports," said David Deal, vice president of internal operations for the Kixx. "You would hope they would always have room in their hearts for one more team."

Deal said the Kixx, which won its second Major Indoor Soccer League title last spring, have had a 10 percent rise in attendance in each of the last three seasons. Last year, the team drew an average of 6,551 fans, second only to the Baltimore Blast.

"It's a very crowded market," Deal said. "So they have to present themselves appropriately and accordingly so they're seen as a major player in the area."

Marketing to youth and club soccer teams is the obvious strategy, Deal said, but embracing Philadelphia's diversity also could prove effective.

"Soccer is the world's game so you do have the love of the game out there," Deal said. "It's growing. It's the No. 1 sport in the world and the No. 1 participative sport in the U.S."

That high numbers of youths are playing soccer bodes well for MLS, Smith College sports economist Andrew Zimbalist said. That projects better for an expansion team's long-term

success, because a soccer culture needs to be created by one generation passing its love of the game to the next.

Although Zimbalist predicted an MLS team could eventually overtake hockey in popularity, it would struggle in the short term, he said.

"It's very difficult for any of the teams in Major League Soccer to make money, because they haven't gotten to a threshold where they can generate media revenue," Zimbalist said. "The league isn't as profitable at this point, so it would be unrealistic to think a new franchise in Philly could be profitable right out of the gate.

"I don't think it will happen in the next year or 2, but I think if the investors are patient, they'll be successful."

Instilling a soccer culture among the youth is an aspect in which coaches must do a better job, Temple men's soccer coach David MacWilliams said.

MacWilliams has built a career around soccer, much of it spent in Philadelphia. He has coached Temple for 8 years. Before that, he coached the Kixx for four seasons. He was captain of Philadelphia University's 1978 Final Four squad and played professionally for the Fury.

"In some other sports, it's always that there's a tradition and a history," MacWilliams said. "We, as soccer coaches and people involved in the game, have to pass it along to the kids. I think if each coach took their kids to one or two games a year, that would be awesome. We have to make sure that happens as coaches. We really need to go out and support it and watch the games."

Adding a player like David Beckham helps, too, MacWilliams said, because the international superstar sparked attendance and generated interest among casual observers.

Regular-season attendance rose 8.9 percent. The league drew an average of 16,767 per game, the first time it has eclipsed the 16,000 mark since 1996, its inaugural season. Beckham's Los Angeles Galaxy had a 16.5 percent hike and drew the largest road attendance.

An expansion team in Toronto also helped attendance figures, but Scott Rosner, associate director of the Wharton Business Sport Initiative, said the effect of expansion teams is better viewed after a few seasons.

"They'll come out and experiment with it and sample it at the beginning, but the honeymoon is very short," Rosner said. "Fans want to see results, particularly in Philly.

"If an MLS team in Philly could be the soccer equivalent of the Wings or the Soul, it would be a success. When they have weekend dates, their gates are tremendous. It's just about playing on the right night and getting the right landscape.

"It's really more, 'Have they had fun or been entertained for the 2 hours they're at the park?' That will be the long-term determination in whether they come back."

James, a founder of the Sons of Ben, came back and he thinks others will, too.

Since January, the Sons of Ben has grown to 1,567 members, including 890 who have said they will purchase season tickets.

"I think the game has wanted Philadelphia since '96," James said. "For the first time it looks like we've got investors and legislators who have made it work on the county level. Hopefully, it's just a matter of time . . . It all comes down to Harrisburg now." *

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