

Kicking it up a notch

Ravens say they are looking to bring more high-level soccer to M&T Bank Stadium

By Kevin Van Valkenburg, The Baltimore Sun

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Now that the Ravens and the Maryland Stadium Authority have inked a deal to host a friendly between Manchester City and Inter Milan in July at M&T Bank Stadium, officials are hoping that top flight European soccer matches will become an annual Charm City summer event.

Roy Sommerhof, vice president of stadium operations for the Ravens, said Monday that the team and the stadium authority are in talks with several European soccer clubs about future dates, and the goal is to bring the highest level club soccer to M&T Bank Stadium for at least the next three summers.

In 2009, M&T Bank Stadium hosted a sold-out match between AC Milan and Chelsea as part of the World Football Challenge. This year, the Ravens are acting as the promoter for the match between City and Inter, and plan to continue that role in the future.

"What we've heard from those in the soccer world is that the first match put Baltimore on the soccer map internationally," Sommerhof said. "Now there are teams, like Manchester City, that heard about that game and really want to play in Baltimore. We're actually getting calls from people that are interested in coming to play here. Getting calls out of the blue like that is a pretty good thing for us."

The friendly between AC Milan and Chelsea, according to official estimates, augmented local business revenues by approximately \$20 million and generated over \$1.5 million in combined state and local taxes. That made it a virtual lock that the Ravens and the stadium authority would look to make it happen again.

"We have a big, big soccer community in this region," Sommerhof said. "I think what happened was you saw there was a lot of pent up demand for something like this."

One of the long-term goals on everyone's wish list is for M&T Bank Stadium to be selected as one of the sites for World Cup matches if the United States is the host country in either 2018 or 2022. That could bring an additional \$100 million of revenue to the region, according to some estimates by the stadium authority.

"This is a tremendous opportunity for the State of Maryland, the City of Baltimore and M&T Bank Stadium to showcase its commitment to the soccer community regionally, nationally and internationally," said Terry Hasseltine, director of the Maryland Office of Sports Marketing. "Games of this nature enhance our presence in the global sports marketplace and add instant credibility for being a premier destination for sports."

The Ravens have been gradually branching out in recent years attempting to find new ways to generate additional revenue for

the franchise, especially in a down economy. M&T Bank Stadium has hosted the **NCAA** men's lacrosse championship three times and will host the championship for a fourth time this week. (It's also the site of the **final four** in 2011.) It has been the host for college football games involving Navy and Maryland, and for a handful of musical acts.

Sommerhof said the Ravens would like to have more musical acts play M&T Bank Stadium, but the limited number of touring artists who can fill a stadium these days has made it difficult. Ravens president Dick Cass told The Sun last year that he considered scheduling a U2 concert at M&T Bank Stadium, but that it would have required the Ravens play too many games on the road early in the season, so he passed on the opportunity.

"In order for a stadium show to be successful, it has to be a blockbuster show," Sommerhof said. "There just aren't many acts out there capable of that. I don't see it happening in 2010, but we'll continue to work on something for 2011."

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