

Opening of World Cup has local fans at fever pitch

U.S.-England opener will set tone for month-long tournament

*By Don Markus, The Baltimore Sun
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After watching World Cup games with thousands of fans in France and Germany, Pete Medd will view Saturday's contest between the United States and England much closer to home — on a big-screen in what he hopes to be a packed Towson Town Center.

Medd, a former player and assistant coach at Towson University who is now president and part owner of Crystal Palace Baltimore, the city's second-tier professional league team, said this year's World Cup, which begins today in South Africa, has more buzz locally going in than any in memory.

"I think the interest level for the game has always been here," Medd said earlier this week. "Anytime soccer has been offered to Baltimore it's been well-received. But now, with ESPN's involvement, the World Cup is bigger nationally than it's ever been. The U.S. is just becoming aware of what has been an international phenomenon for a long time."

Interest in soccer has exploded in Baltimore in recent years. It has grown from the grass roots of the suburban rec leagues to the influx of high-level club teams to the point where a sellout crowd of more than 71,000 came last July to watch two of the world's elite teams, Chelsea and A.C. Milan, play a riveting "friendly" at M&T Bank Stadium.

"There were 30,000 to watch them practice," recalled Keith Van Eron, who came to Baltimore to play for the Blast in 1980, stayed in the area after he retired in 1990 and opened an indoor facility in Hunt Valley last December. "It was chilling."

Going forward, there will be another international friendly this summer, when Manchester City meets UEFA Cup champion Inter Milan on July 31 at M&T Bank, teams that boast a total of 17 players in this year's World Cup. There is also a feasibility study being done on a 10,000-seat soccer-only stadium proposed for downtown as well as Baltimore still being considered as a site for preliminary matches if the United States is awarded the 2018 or 2022 World Cup.

The frenzy for the 2010 World Cup has been building since the draw for the 32-team tournament was announced last December in Johannesburg and it was revealed to a live international television audience that the United States and England were not only in the same four-team group, but would face each other in their opening game.

The teams will meet Saturday in Rustenburg, South Africa. The tournament concludes with the championship game on July 11 in Johannesburg.

"I've told all my English friends that they're going to be more upset after the game than they (their ancestors) were after the Boston Tea Party," Van Eron said..

Though his team will be in Rochester, N.Y., Saturday for a game, Medd will be watching the United States vs. England as part of the WNST-sponsored Baltimore County World Soccer Festival. Though it won't match the 10,000 or so he gathered with in Paris in 1998 or in Kaiserlautern, Germany, four years ago, Medd said he expects it to be the largest public viewing of the game in the Baltimore area.

Van Eron's facility will have the five televisions showing the game, but he will be at Hartwick College in upstate New York being inducted in his alma mater's Hall of Fame. "I'll have one eye on the game if there's a place to watch it," said Van Eron, who has threatened to paint his face red, white and blue.

If the international matches are good for the local economy, the World Cup is good for some local pubs and restaurants that will open their doors — not to mention their taps — as early as 7 a.m. Saturday and keep showing matches long after the United States, considered a long-shot to make it past the Round of 16, loses.

It will certainly be good for Slainte, an Irish pub in Fells Point (pronounced Slan-sha), and other bars and restaurants in the area showing the matches, including Hightopps Backstage Grille in Timonium and Amicci's in Little Italy, which will open early for the 10 a.m. U.S. matches against Algeria and Slovenia .

Four months ago, Slainte owner Patrick Russell trademarked the words "Where Soccer Is Religion" as part of the bar's name. It was Russell who recently told general manager Bill Irwin what to expect for this year's World Cup after what happened four years ago.

"He said it was like St. Patrick's Day for the whole month," Irwin said.

Irwin, who grew up playing the game in Baltimore County, is expecting the atmosphere to be even more frenzied this year based on what has happened when other matches have been televised. Irwin said he had to stop letting people in at \$20 a head for a World Cup qualifying match between the United States. and Honduras last spring..

"I don't think we've seen anything like this," Irwin said.

A few weeks ago, the bar took two busloads of its most hardcore fans — members of the Baltimore Brigade, the local chapter of the U.S. team's unofficial fan club, "The American Outlaws — to Philadelphia for the team's send-off game, a 2-1 win over Turkey at Lincoln Financial Field.

Brett Holmes, a Slainte regular and Brigade member whose father Rob was a soccer star at then-Towson State, said that the new-found popularity of the sport in the United States can be attributed to the technology of the Fox Soccer Channel, which shows England Premiership games the way other U.S. networks televise American football.

Recalling the first World Cup he watched as a 10-year-old, played in Italy in 1990, Holmes said, "We watched a Spanish television feed at a restaurant in Greektown," Holmes said.

Most have had time to plan where they were going to watch the U.S.-England game, but another member of the Brigade hopes that his wife doesn't go into early labor. Four years ago, Eric Wheatley's wife was due to deliver their first child on the same day as one of the World Cup semifinals.

"We went to Mercy Hospital that morning and the doctor said, 'You don't have any plans this afternoon?'," recalled Wheatley.. "I told him I wanted to watch Portugal-France that afternoon. He winked at me and said, 'So do I.' I was holding my little girl that afternoon watching the game."

Wheatley's wife is due with their second child, a son, on June 22, the day before the United States is scheduled to meet Algeria in the last of the opening round games.

"She's nixed the idea of naming him Oguchi or Josie," Wheatley said, alluding to starting central defender Oguchi Onyewu and starting striker Josie Altidore. "I think she's OK with Landon, as long as Landon Donovan shows up against England."