

World Cup could bring soccer buzz to friendly match in Baltimore

A huge hit last year, international soccer will return to M&T Bank Stadium July 31

By Glenn Graham, The Baltimore Sun

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The World Cup, set to begin June 11 in South Africa, is expected to have Baltimore buzzing about soccer early this summer.

The city will get a second dose of the sport — up close and personal — shortly after.

A huge hit last year, international soccer will return to M&T Bank Stadium when Italy power Inter Milan takes on England's up-and-coming Manchester City in an exhibition match set for 8 p.m. July 31.

Last July 25, a sellout crowd of 71,000 fans packed the stadium to watch Chelsea play AC Milan as part of the Inaugural World Football Challenge, which showcased two of the most storied franchises as well as Baltimore's passion for soccer.

With this year's World Cup already bringing soccer to the forefront, another sellout crowd for the friendly is expected to follow in Baltimore. Tickets, which go on sale Wednesday and may be purchased by calling 410-261-7283 or visiting <http://www.BaltimoreRavens.com>. Prices will range from \$25 to \$115.

The strong support from last year's exhibition drew the attention of the U.S. Soccer Federation, which named Baltimore one of 18 finalists to hold future World Cup matches. The U.S. is expected to be awarded the World Cup in 2018 or 2022 by FIFA, the sports governing body.

This summer's exhibition is another chance for Baltimore to state its case, along with providing exciting soccer at its highest level and stimulating the local economy. Last year's game generated \$20 million of economic activity and \$1.5 million more in state and local taxes. The same is expected for this summer's event.

"We are extremely excited to have soccer coming back to M&T Stadium," said Baltimore Ravens' President Dick Cass at a press conference on Friday morning. "I think as we demonstrate that Baltimore and M&T Bank Stadium is a good venue for soccer, we hope to bring more soccer events to the stadium. We also hope this will help our World Cup bid for the U.S. If we can demonstrate that this is a great place for soccer, we're hopeful that when they U.S. does get the World Cup awarded to it, that Baltimore will be one of the cities that has matches."

Chelsea's 2-1 win over AC Milan last summer was highly competitive with both rosters stacked with their top players. The same is likely this summer when Inter Milan takes on Manchester City.

The July 31 date is enough distance from the World Cup finals — allowing top players to be rested — and both clubs respective seasons start two weeks later.

"Three weeks from the World Cup final — it gives them enough rest time to come with their team and it's a critical date because it's only two weeks prior to their seasons starting," said Baltimore Blast President and general manager Kevin Healey, who equated it with the third preseason game in football when coaches like to get their starters plenty of time.

Inter Milan, which competes in Italy's top league, Italian Serie A, won both the league title and the Coppa Italia in 2010, and will compete against FC Bayern Munich on Saturday in the Union of European Football Associations (UEFA) Champions League final.

Manchester City, which competes in Barclays Premier League, is considered one of the fastest rising club teams in England.

"We want Baltimore to be known as an international soccer destination, and I think we're getting that reputation, so this is a win for everybody," said Maryland Stadium Authority executive director Mike Frenz.