



Local youth soccer leagues, like the Cranbrook High School game shown above, were going on a long time before the Detroit Express existed. (Staff photo)

Professional team cultivates suburban soccer fan support

By MARTY BUDNER

It's no secret the Detroit Express are counting on suburbia for sustenance. And, lately, the relationship has been growing stronger.

The Express, streaking through its first season in the North American Soccer League (NASL), played before its second largest crowd (15,018) last weekend against the Caribou of Colorado. That's the biggest crowd since opening day at the Silverdome when the team drew 28,523.

In 12 home games, the Express have drawn an average of 11,107. In its last three Silverdome matches—all victories—Detroit has played to at least 10,000 persons.

Gordon Preston, Director of Marketing Operations for the Express, cites three reasons for the attendance increase. They are:

- A number of game-day promotions (American flag day, flower day, for example).
- Express soccer clinics with metropolitan youth soccer leagues.
- An increasing interest in the sport.

"Soccer is definitely a suburban sport," said Preston. "You look around the stadium, and it seems to be predominantly a northern suburban crowd. We have a real good following from Troy and Birmingham, and we get a lot of people from Livonia. We are also stronger than any other club in the league with our involvement with youth. We dreamed up the Soccerfest in full

day of soccer at Oakland University between different area youth teams). I think we have a good rapport with the youth soccer leagues.

"They're out promoting us, and we're promoting them," he said. "Without them, we couldn't exist. We have to create our own fans, and unless we create those fans, we're not going to succeed."

THE EXPRESS have added a new dimension to the sport, according to representatives from the youth soccer league.

For the most part, in places like Troy, Birmingham and Livonia, youth soccer was well under way before the Express moved into town. Most of those leagues have expanded dramatically in the past few years.

However, in places like Southfield, West Bloomfield and Rochester, professional soccer has helped stimulate interest in the sport.

Mrs. Rose Vodka, vice-president of the Lakes Area Youth Soccer League (LAYSL), says that the Express have definitely helped soccer in her area.

"People didn't know what a soccer ball was, and there seems to be a heightened interest in soccer now that the Express are here," said Mrs. Vodka, whose children play in both the LAYSL and the Farmington Soccer Club.

"The kids on my team have gone to a couple games with their parents," she said. "It seems to have a rippling effect on them. And, the clinics they (Express) sponsor just help increase the awareness."

John Sala, coach of the Birmingham Groves girls' soccer team, uses the new soccer professionalism. He believes it gives the young players a unique opportunity to watch and learn from the pros.

However, there is one area where he thinks the NASL could improve on.

"I would like to see more Americans getting a chance to play," said Sala, who has attended all the Express games thus far.

"But, I can't fault coach (Ken) Furphy because he's got a winning team. I wouldn't argue with home over not putting people in at certain situations. But, there was an opportunity to put some of the reserve players in the other night (a 5-0 win over Colorado)."

TROY'S YOUTH Soccer League was formed in 1973 with seven teams and 125 players. The TYSL spring season ended two weeks ago with 75 teams and more than 1,200 players participating.

League president George Poppa anticipates the league expanding to at least 2,000 players next year.

"Our program would have gone on without the Express," said Poppa. "I tend to go back to the days when Pele (who retired last year from the NASL champion Cosmos) came to this country as the breaking point of soccer in America. Or, maybe it's just a sport whose time has come."

"But, the Express have definitely helped. The kids are starting to relate to the players. The Express players introduced themselves to everybody in a relaxed atmosphere at Soccerfest."

"We have taken the kids to watch the pros, and it's an opportunity for them to attach themselves to soccer heroes. The Express have been making efforts to be part of the community. They feel the youth leagues are very important to them."

"I'd like to see the franchise make it," he continued. "They've made a good impression on the community, and the players have conducted themselves well among all the youngsters. They are a welcome addition to the community."

It's a love affair that is just getting started. It will be interesting to see if the parties can continue harmoniously.

He's a psychological genius

Scorer ends struggle

By MARTY BUDNER

Trevor Francis is not only a goal-scoring whiz for the Detroit Express, but also somewhat of a psychological magician.

The Express, which had been struggling offensively until Francis' arrival from Birmingham City (England) in late May, has recently been one of the hottest scoring teams in the North American Soccer League (NASL).

In the past four games—including the two most recent matches against Vancouver and Minnesota—the Express has scored 15 goals for a four-goal-per-game average. Its most lopsided victory in that span—and for the season—was a 5-0 pasting of the Caribou of Colorado last weekend.

Francis was the biggest threat in those four games with four goals and one assist. In 10 games played, the English superstar has scored seven goals and assisted on five others.

However, as far as his teammates are concerned, his value extends beyond shooting and passing. Francis has given the team a needed offensive confidence it so desperately lacked at the start of the season.

"He's helped me a lot because he's had so much more experience than I've had," said Keith Furphy, who is Detroit's leading goal scorer with 10.

"And, he's given everyone on the team confidence. We've been playing consistently lately, and I think Trevor has a lot to do with that. It's a combination of confidence and us getting to know each other as a team."

FURPHY, who is fourth in the American Conference in scoring (10 goals, six assists for 24 points), has played well despite more linemates than the Rockettes' dance troupe. Early-season mates included, at one time or another, anyone from team captain Graham Gates to the now departed Steve David.

In the past few weeks, however, Furphy has been teamed with Francis and 18-year-old Alan Brazil. The trio has accounted for 13 of Detroit's last 17 goals.

"The three of us are playing very well right now, and if we stay uninjured the rest of the way we'll be alright," said Furphy, whose father Ken is the Express coach.

Detroit is currently on top of the NASL's central division with 15 points—some 30 points ahead of second-place Houston. If it maintains that position, the Express will have the home advantage in the playoffs, which the team should make easily barring a complete collapse.



Leaping high into the air, Trevor Francis battles with Philadelphia's Bill Staub. (Staff photo by Doug Bauman)

Sixteen teams will qualify for the playoffs, which start on Aug. 8. The top two teams in each division will automatically qualify, plus two wild card teams from each conference.

A champion from each of the American and National conferences will eventually emerge, with the winner meeting for the Soccer Bowl. This year's Soccer Bowl will be conducted Aug. 27 at Giants Stadium in East Rutherford, N.J.

And, what about Detroit's chances of going all the way in its premier NASL season?

"We've got some good players, and I must admit we've been playing quite well lately, so who knows," said Furphy. "We've been doing well on the road, and I'm looking forward to the rest of the season."

With the talented foot of Francis leading the path for players like Furphy and Brazil, the season's conclusion should be exciting.



Detroit Express leading scorer Keith Furphy (son of Express coach Ken Furphy) dribbles the ball beneath the Silverdome lights. (Staff photo by Doug Bauman)

Trevor who? sparks Express

By DAVID SAUNDERS

By now most people know who Trevor Francis is.

A short two months ago, everyone would've said "Trevor who?" But not now.

Francis, the 24-year-old Detroit Express forward from Birmingham, England, has caught the eyes of all soccer fans around.

For the thousands of young amateur players in the area, he is an inspiration, someone to marvel at. In his last two home games at the Silverdome, the British sensation has scored four goals, three of them on headers.

Francis is the type of player every American youth interested in soccer should keep careful watch of. His seven goals and five assists has already moved him into the ranks of North American Soccer League scoring leaders. Hopefully, in years to come, the youth of the area won't have to emulate him, but play like him.

Besides, for Francis' scoring abilities, he is an unselfish player. He is ready to pass the ball to a teammate with an opportunity to score. His skills rank him with the other world class players.

"I'm pleased with the way I'm scoring," said Francis, "but that's not what concerns me. I just want to play well every game and entertain the people who come out and see me."

FRANCIS HAS NOT had too many bad games since coming to Detroit. He played his first game for the Express May 28 against the Memphis Rogues. In that game he scored the winning goal in overtime and assisted on another.

Although he's probably the most popular athlete in Birmingham, England, he's gaining popularity here fast. In Birmingham youth flock around him.

"Obviously I get more publicity than anyone," said Francis, "and they follow everything I do. I still get loads of fan mail."

"But if I go home and they remember me here, I'd be delighted."

Trevor Francis' advice to the next generation of soccer players in America is to "keep watching, learning and practicing."

"If you never do enough practicing and watching, you won't learn."

Francis noted that there are some bad side effects of being the team's star player.

"The main problem is the player that marks (guards) me," said Francis. "They usually ask for my shirt after the game."

FRANCIS IS perhaps one of the most carefully guarded players in the NASL. And rightly so. He came into the league widely known, and opposing teams will always have their best defender guard him.

"I just wish the defenders would quit kicking me," said Francis of his being closely marked.

"Soccer is a game of skill, the fans come to see skills, not players kicking each other."

Hopefully, Detroit will have Francis back for another season of soccer. He like playing with his teammates and his social life here so far.

"Things are going well," he said. "And everyone has been so kind to me."



Trevor Francis has made the Detroit Express click. (Express photo)