

Something in the Air for D.C. United, as Burch Spurs Victory

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BOYDS, MD-It was, as D.C. United head coach Tom Soehn put over the weekend, a game he "expect[ed] to win." They did, blanking the USL-1 Rochester Rhinos 2-0 on a pair of Marc Burch free kick goals late in the second half to advance to the quarter final round of the Lamar Hunt U.S. Open Cup.

That was the story on the pitch. Truth be told, the real story was off it.

How strange was it to watch United and the Rhinos face off in a rural, albeit massive soccer complex in Boyds, MD rather than the spacious confines of RFK Stadium in the District? To be able to hear the thud of ball on foot and the shouts between players, rather than merely watch the game from afar and take such sounds for granted?

Two days prior D.C. played the Los Angeles Galaxy and David Beckham in front of 35,979 screaming fans and a nationwide audience on ABC in the sweltering midday heat. On Tuesday that dynamic setting was all but forgotten, as 2,752 mostly-quiet fans settled onto the bleachers and enjoyed the clear, humidity-less summer twilight.

Barra Brava still showed, as did the Screaming Eagles and La Norte, but their numbers measured less in the thousands with drums than in the dozens and a drum. A busload of diehard Rhinos fans made the 6 hour trip from Rochester to Boyds, arriving just after the start of the first half and never ceasing in their cheers, even as their team fell behind in the waning moments.

The press box consisted of two reserved bleacher rows at the half line; only one row was filled. A few players in street clothes, their families and various guests filled the remainder of the section labeled "V.I.P." By the middle of the second half several kids, having spied their heroes sitting feet away, discovered a path to the section unguarded by security. Somewhere in suburban Maryland a young boy has a Yankees hat signed by Santino Quaranta, and his best friend's new cell phone background is Ben Olsen making a funny face.

The game itself was at times interesting, at times deadly boring. Soehn mixed and matched his starting eleven, playing starters Luciano Emilio, Devon McTavish, Gonzalo Martinez and Zach Wells, plus frequent contributors Marc Burch and Rod Dyachenko. Also starting were Dan Stratford, Quavas Kirk, Pat Carroll, Ryan Cordeiro and Francis Doe, who have a combined 3 MLS starts between them.

Soehn explained the lineup as an attempt to maximize his team's ability while resting players who played in that scorching Sunday noon-time match: "We put a lot of energy into the game Sunday…we tried to limit how many guys we had out there from that game."

Indeed, McTavish was the only player who went 90 minutes both on Sunday and Tuesday. Emilio left the game at the half, appearing in the player section in shorts and a t-shirt in time to catch the end of the game. Martinez and Stratford also played only the first half (teams have four substitutions in U.S. Open Cup games, compared to three in MLS games). In their place were Clyde Simms, Fred and new signee Craig Thompson.

Thompson in particular is an enigma. Signed yesterday to a developmental contract, Thompson was drafted by the Houston Dynamo but never signed by that club, and gotten by D.C. in exchange for a 4th round supplemental draft pick in 2010.

How new is Thompson to United? His entry to start the half prompted Quaranta to turn to a press member and ask, "Who is that guy?" It certainly appeared as though Quaranta's question was serious.

As the game wore on a distinct atmosphere settled on the SoccerPlex, not of panic but perhaps unease. Rochester played D.C. tight through the first half, jamming up the middle and stifling Emilio. Dyachenko managed several quality scoring chances, including a header inside the first minute, but for the majority of the half United succeeded only in Rhinos goalkeeper Scott Vallow look good.

While the exits of Emilio and Martinez at the half were certainly preordained by United's coaching staff, that they were replaced by Fred and Simms rather than Dane Murphy or Mike Zaher spoke to Soehn's desire to win the game, not just get some young players some experience.

Last year D.C. lost to a USL-2 team, the Harrisonburg Islanders, a result most easily described as an embarrassment. To have lost to a non-MLS team again would effectively wipe away all the positives of Sunday's victory over the Galaxy and severely derailed D.C.'s SuperLiga preparation. Luckily that eventuality never came to pass.

Burch, as the scoresheet will show, was largely to thank for D.C.'s victory. As United began to knock Rochester on its heels the Rhinos' fatigue began to show, making ill-advised passes and sloppy tackles. One such play earned United a free kick from about 30 yards out, and with Gallardo in the stands free kick duty fell to Burch.

Faced with the Rochester wall, Burch chose to power the ball past the mass of players rather than curve it around them: "I tried to hit it as hard as I could." His low blast tricked Vallow, finding the bottom left corner in the 78th minute. Seven minutes later he pulled the same trick from slightly closer in, with a helpful ricochet off a Rhino fooling Vallow even more.

As D.C. secured the victory and a date with the Chicago Fire in a week, certainly some thoughts turned not to guarding Cuauhtemoc Blanco but to the pastoral soccer fields just outside Germantown.

Did the suburbanites living in the massive houses visible on the horizon above the east side bleachers even know an MLS team played in walking distance on Tuesday night? Will they care that two MLS teams will take the field on the 8th, a match that drew 18,605 to RFK two months ago and 19,256 in Chicago a month and a day prior?

Chances are most won't know, and they'll be missing out.

NOTES:

In other local U.S. Open Cup action, Crystal Palace Baltimore blanked the New York Red Bulls 2-0 in front of 1,564 fans

at Broadneck High School in Annapolis, MD. Crystal Palace advanced to the quarterfinals on goals by Andrew Marshall and Gary Brooks, despite playing nearly 55 minutes with a man disadvantage.