

## **The Other Football: FC Buffalo opens season tonight**

By MICHAEL MROZIAK Niagara Gazette 5/10/13

Niagara Gazette — BUFFALO — Tonight, local soccer fans will gather at All-High Stadium in Buffalo to cheer on FC Buffalo, the semi-pro team that opens its fourth season this year in the National Premier Soccer League.

Though based in Buffalo and featuring an official slogan "For Our City," FC Buffalo — that's Football Club of Buffalo — features a roster including players from all over Western New York.

Among them is 21-year-old goalkeeper Jeremy Figler of Grand Island, who also plays for the University at Buffalo.

"It's a good program," said Figler. "It's got good facilities. The guys and the people who came out this year are quality players, so it was definitely a big lure to come here."

Also luring Figler to FC Buffalo was the chance to work with Brendan Murphy, FC Buffalo's head coach and someone who worked with Figler for three years while as an assistant coach at U.B.

"I've followed the club for years and have been very interested in the progress they made," said Murphy, whose previous coaching experience also includes assistant roles at Niagara University and Buffalo State College. "I see the owners doing a great job marketing the club and building the interest.

"It's been something I've always wanted to be a part of, to coach players at this level, to be able to put a roster together of players of this caliber. It's a coach's dream, really."

The players Murphy will work with at FC Buffalo include current or former NCAA college players. Some former FC Buffalo players have gone on to brief professional careers domestically and internationally. One alumnus, Kendell McFayden, now plays for the Rochester Rhinos of the United Soccer Leagues Professional Division.

The team will open its season hosting Zanesville Athletic and then the following week welcomes Sparta Michigan to All-High Stadium. The NPSL has 59 member clubs broken down into ten regional divisions. Buffalo plays in the Midwest-Great Lakes division. Their biggest rivals are the Erie Admirals, the Buffalo soccer fan's version of the Miami Dolphins or Boston Bruins in terms of hate level.

By simply having a fourth season, FC Buffalo has outlived its two soccer predecessors combined, Buffalo City FC and before that Queen City FC, which collectively played for only three seasons until FC Buffalo came along.

So how has FC Buffalo been able to survive when the previous teams did not? For one thing, the ownership team is made up a half-dozen local natives, with Nick Mendola serving as its president. They're all passionate soccer fans who were simply willing to make it work, one way or another.

They've certainly not made a fortune on this venture.

"When you look at what we've been able to do, we had some really trying times," said Mendola. "Even last year, we were awful (the team finished in last place with just one win) but our fans showed

up and they sang and they were loud. They've even made, I believe, a 15-foot by 12-foot flag that they wave at our games."

The players are most appreciative.

"I really like what this organization is trying to do," said defender and Grand Island native Kolby Banker. "The professionalism of them all. We're all a tight-knit group. A lot of us know each other from high school. We just wanted to get together and do something really serious. This organization has done a great job of it."

For being a small local club, they've had a couple of moments in the national and even international spotlight. When they first began operations, FC Buffalo hosted a contest to come up with a team mascot name. The winning entry was "Blitzers", a salute to Buffalo-area native and CNN journalist Wolf Blitzer. The name helped the team earn some air time, with Mendola and chief operating officer Scott Fraunhofer appearing on CNN to enjoy the moment.

In 2011, they came into contact with local businessman Bob Rich, Jr., who sponsored not only FC Buffalo's uniforms but also began sponsoring a small club in his ancestral part of England, Bedlington. Rich helped arrange for the Bedlington Terriers to travel to Buffalo to face FC Buffalo in an exhibition match, a game the hosts won.

John Grabowski, a Middleport native now in his fourth year with FC Buffalo, remembers that special day when the world's most popular game became Buffalo's biggest game for one day.

"That was really cool to have a team of professionals who come from overseas, to come over and play us, just the attention that it brought to our club," said Grabowski. "There were so many people at that game... I don't even know how many, a couple thousand people watching. It seemed like the city really tried to recognize what we're trying to do."

What the players and management are trying to do is give local fans a local team to support, and slowly cement the "beautiful game" as part of the fabric in Buffalo and Western New York. It's slowly catching on. Even the team's official "pub" is a soccer-themed bar in North Buffalo known as Mes Que, adopted from soccer club Barcelona's motto "more than a club."

"It's a big deal for a lot of us," said Figler. "A lot of guys have played at high levels and now they've finally got a chance to play at a high level in our own city and represent our own towns, so it's an exciting thing here."