

Kick-starting soccer in OKC

Taft Stadium considered for big league play

BY BRIAN BRUS
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OKLAHOMA CITY – Major renovations to a landmark high school football stadium in Oklahoma City are being planned with professional soccer in mind as well, sources confirmed Thursday.

And there may be competition to secure a pro team for the city. Sold Out Strategies this spring announced that it is now managing a new Premier Developmental League amateur team, Oklahoma City FC, which is preparing for its inaugural game Saturday against the Austin Aztex. Sold Out Strategies partner Brad Lund said OFC's home games will be played at Stars Field at Oklahoma City University about a mile away from Taft Stadium on NW 23rd Street.

"We're very aware of the proposed renovations for Taft Stadium and we are in the due-diligence stage of not only reviewing the possibility of playing home games at Taft but bringing pro soccer to Oklahoma City as well," Lund said Thursday. "We currently own a PDL franchise, which is the highest level of amateur soccer in North America. ... We feel like we will eventually outgrow the capacity at OCU, which is around 1,800."

When asked whether OFC would complement a rumored second sports group in the metro area trying to develop a team, Lund said, "There's only room for one pro soccer franchise in this market; we'll see how it all plays out."

Taft Stadium, 2609 N. May Ave., will soon be closed, as will Speegle Stadium, 500 SW Grand Blvd., for a yearlong upgrade worth a total of \$18 million. Taft is the home field



Gary Armbruster, principal architect at MA+Architecture, at the Taft Stadium. PHOTO BY BRENT FUCHS

of John Marshall and Northwest Classen high schools; Speegle holds games for Capitol Hill, U.S. Grant and Southeast high schools.

Gary Armbruster, principal with Oklahoma City-based MA+ Architecture, said he's excited about the challenge of bringing historic sites up to modern standards without losing their signature charms. The stadiums were built in the 1930s under the federal Works Progress Administration, or WPA.

Armbruster said large portions of the stadiums need to be replaced, but his plans include keeping the WPA rock walls facing the streets because they're symbolic to so many students over the decades. At Taft, other upgrades include new grandstands to seat about 7,500 people, locker rooms, concessions buildings and artificial turf.

That last item is important, Armbruster said, because high school athletics programs now expect a higher standard of turf to play on. The new field at Taft also will

support other sports.

"It is designed for soccer use as well," Armbruster said. "I know that one of the original goals was to get the professional soccer team coming to Oklahoma to possibly play there."

"Because of the time and scheduling of stadium renovations it wasn't going to happen this year," he said. "But when they look at it again next year, it will be a perfect venue for that with all the new concessions and seating and artificial turf."

Jim Burkey, chief operations officer for the Oklahoma City Public Schools district, said other uses are being considered for Taft beyond high school games, but it's too early to discuss specific details. If attendance is strong enough, Taft seating could be increased at the south end zone, he said.

The stadium renovations are being funded through a school bond issue passed by public vote several years ago. They are being administered by the Oklahoma City Metropolitan Area Public Schools office at City Hall, which oversees projects in the

temporary tax program. Administrator David Todd said the ultimate use of the stadium will be determined by the district.

Lund has been interested in developing a soccer team in Oklahoma City for at least a decade. As chief executive officer of Express Sports, in 2002 he briefly entered negotiations with the University of Central Oklahoma to use a renovated Wantland Stadium as the home field of a Major League Soccer franchise.

Major League Soccer continues to grow in popularity with 19 teams throughout North America, as well as increasing attendance and viewership. The average attendance at an MLS game last year was 18,800 and total attendance for the season was 6.1 million, according to league statistics.

By comparison, the NBA has 30 basketball teams with a full league attendance last year of 17.1 million. An average Oklahoma City Thunder game last year drew about 18,000 fans.