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Local Sports

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International soccer hits Tuscaloosa

By Aaron Suttles
Special to The Tuscaloosa News

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TUSCALOOSA | International soccer makes its way to Tuscaloosa tonight as the China under-21 women's national team squares off with Trinidad and Tobago as part of the 2007 Futbol Internacional Soccer Festival.

The match is scheduled for 7:30 p.m. at the University of Alabama Soccer Complex.

Six countries will play a nine-match tournament in six Alabama cities -- Birmingham, Decatur, Huntsville, Mobile, Montgomery and Tuscaloosa. The United States, China and Trinidad and Tobago are in Bracket A. Argentina, Canada and Mexico are in Bracket B.

The tournament is hosted by the Alabama Youth Soccer Association with hopes of exposing soccer to a new legion of fans while providing tournament experience to international teams.

Trinidad and Tobago head coach Marlon Charles said the tournament presented his team with an opportunity that small countries rarely get.

"Here was an opportunity for our team to get tournament experience without the pressure of having to qualify," Charles said. "It gives us an opportunity to play three more games this year, and gives our players exposure to tournament play."

Charles said that without more opportunities like the 2007 Futbol Internacional tournament, the usual suspects of the U.S., Germany and China will continue their dominance of women's soccer unchallenged.

"The U.S. women's team plays about 35 games a year," he said. "We usually play six. They are always playing and it gives them more time to practice and more experience -- it makes it tough for us to compete.

"That's what makes this tournament so valuable and why we were glad to be invited."

The idea for the tournament came from Scott Spencer, who brought the women's Mexican national team to Birmingham's Legion Field last year. That event brought out 5,000 people and Spencer, the director of programs and coaching for AYSA, began to plan an international tournament soon after.

Graeme Orr, the assistant director for AYSA, said Spencer has worked tirelessly to market soccer in a state that loves its football.

"Scott has worked really hard to promote soccer within the state," Orr said. "He's done a great job of developing youth soccer and had tried different marketing techniques to get the game out there.

"This area is very hard to market soccer in, but for these teams to come back next year we need people to come out and support this event or the sponsorship money will dry up."

Orr said Tuscaloosa was chosen as one of the host sites because UA had everything in place to host the event.

"The facilities here are spectacular and both countries have been blown away by them," he said. "We came to UA for the facilities and because [UA women's soccer coach] Don Staley and the people here at the university work with us and care about growing the game."

Charles said he expects a close game, but that his team will be aggressive.

"China likes to play from the back and keep the game close with defense," he said. "But we're all about transition.

"When we get possession of the ball, we want to get the ball on the ground and get out in transition. We will be aggressive."

But regardless of the outcome, Charles said, there will be a clear winner on Thursday night.

"The women's game is getting better and people are realizing that women can play," he said. "The women's game is growing all over."

Tickets are \$16 and can be purchased at the gate. For more information, visit www.2007futbolinternacional.com

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