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## World class soccer comes to Capital city

By **Erin Elaine Mosely**  
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Under the glare of stadium lights and with hundreds of dedicated fans, the other football was king in the Capital City on Tuesday night.

Or, at the least, a prince.

The South is still football country, where SEC football reigns supreme, but soccer is gaining its fair share of fans, too.

Residents from as far as Phenix City made their way to Montgomery to see two international soccer teams battle for top honors in a statewide tournament. About 550 people watched women's national teams from Argentina and Canada battle to a 1-1 tie. The game was a rare opportunity to see the world's most popular sport played at its highest level.

That fact wasn't lost on many soccer enthusiasts and novelists at Tuesday's game.

"I don't think anyone in the state really knows how hard it is to get these teams to play at this location," said Mike Carmeam, director of coaching for the River City Soccer Club in Phenix City. "Both teams are World Cup teams and are final four quality teams. Folks who play need to support it."

Carmeam brought 50 kids from his soccer club to the game. He said soccer is growing in this area -- something Katrina Wilson, director of soccer Montgomery YMCA and Michael Ritch, director of coaching for Montgomery YMCA Capital City Streaks, hoped to capture when they helped the city land one of the coveted international games being played in five Alabama cities between April 22-28.

"We had a lot of questions when people bought tickets," Ritch said. "They asked 'What is it, high school? I told them 'No. it's two countries. These two teams are playing in the World Cup.'"

After seeing the game, Wilson hopes those questions will turn into genuine interest for the sport.

"I hope we get more kids, boys or girls, who choose to play," Wilson said.

The choice was an easy one for Katie Bright, who watched the game with her teammates from St. James. Although soccer was not her father's sport, Mayor Bobby Bright's daughter said she stuck with it because "It was fun."

The elder Bright said he was delighted organizers chose Montgomery to host the game.

"We've always been baseball, football and basketball in this area," he said. "It's catching on here. For us to be able to host something like this is wonderful."

Seated behind one of the goals, a group of teenagers studied the players moves, joked around and, generally, enjoyed watching the game.

"It's good to watch good competition," said Clark Hankins, 17, who plays for St. James and the Streaks. "Any chance you get to see soccer in Montgomery, I want to come out and support it."

For Meredith Vigilant, the soccer game was an oddity. A relatively small group of

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Canada's Katie Thorlakson (16) works the ball against Clarisa Huber on Tuesday during Futbol Internacional at the YMCA Complex in Montgomery.

-- David Bundy

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dedicated fans filled temporary bleachers at a game of this magnitude. Back home in Troy, Mich. -- or soccer city as residents call it -- fan support would have spilled all over the park.

"I'm not used to soccer being a small sport like it is here," said Vigilant, who plays for St. James and the Streaks. "If you didn't play soccer (in Michigan) you weren't anybody."

Still, Vigilant has noticed the sport gaining fans in her new hometown. A good portion of that comes from exposing it to people who ordinarily would not get to see competition on this level said Dingani Nkuchwayo, a Zimbabwe native who lives in Tuskegee.

"I came here with the purpose of helping these children see something different," said Nkuchwayo founder and executive director of Tuskegee Futbol Youth Internationale.

He brought his players Dre Piner, Jautoria Fitzpatrick, both 10, Christopher Harrison, 9, and Dontavious Piner, 8, to see their first international soccer match. The group looked on enthusiastically and admired the players' skills.

"They're good kickers," Dre Piner said. "The goalie's good at blocking. She's good at catching. She's good at throwing."

Harrison agreed.

"It's a great game," he said.

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