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Young U.S. faces experienced China

Saturday, April 21, 2007

SOLOMON CRENSHAW JR.
News staff writer

A soccer tournament begins Sunday at Legion Field but participating teams will be playing for more than just a berth in the championship game in Mobile.

The 2007 Futbol Internacional Soccer Festival pits teams from six countries against one another in a nine-game series across Alabama. Birmingham hosts the first two games with Mexico taking on Canada at 2:30 p.m. and the national team of China facing the United States.

Play Tuesday moves to Huntsville and Montgomery and Thursday to Tuscaloosa and Decatur. The tournament concludes with a tripleheader next Saturday at Baker High School in Mobile.

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Three teams are set to compete in the Women's World Cup later this year - the host team from China and the national teams of Argentina and Canada. Every country in this event sent its senior national team except the U.S., which entered its under-21 team.

"We're playing against a group that will be more experienced players but the group I have is a talented group," U.S. coach Bill Irwin said.

Irwin's team includes Danesha Adams and Kelly O'Hara, a pair of forwards who have logged time with the U.S. Women's National Team. They'll provide some experience.

"But there's a lot of talent there. There's a lot of talent in this country," he said. "It's just a matter now of getting that talent to play together. It's a tremendous challenge for us."

Tournament organizer Scott Spencer said each team has its own goals as it competes this week. He said China, for instance, is trying to foster a younger crop of players because its core group is getting old.

"Most of their better players are in their 30s," he said. "In 1999, they almost won the World Cup. Now they're dropping off a little bit."

Team Canada coach Bob Birarda said international "friendlies" provide a much more intense training environment for players.

"It's about trying to integrate some of the U20 players into the World Cup group," Birarda said. "Of course results matter but certainly the experience together is the biggest stress for us."

While some teams are preparing for the World Cup, Irwin is preparing his squad for its next international event, the Nordic Cup in Iceland in July.

"I'm still looking at players," he said. "I want to play attacking soccer. I want to entertain the people who are coming out. I want them to be excited by what they see. I know I want to be excited watching them play."

Irwin acknowledged that he knows little about the China team he faces Sunday, except that China is "one of the top teams in the world." But, he added, China knows little about his squad.

A number of UAB players trained with some of the national teams. Freshmen Danya Barsalona and Danielle Blair trained with Team Canada and juniors Jill Porto and Sally Palmer worked out with the under-21 U.S. team. Nadine Liverpool, a Blazer sophomore, is living and training with the national team of Trinidad & Tobago.

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