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Bordeaux Wins French Champions Trophy in Montreal

By JACK BELL



Nicolas Tucet/Associated Press Bordeaux's Yohann Gourcuff held up the French league trophy during a parade in Bordeaux, France, in May.

On Saturday afternoon in Montreal's Olympic Stadium, F.C. Girondins de Bordeaux, the champion of France's Ligue 1, defeated En Avant Guingamp, the first team from the second division to win the French Cup in several decades, by 2-0 in their face-off (figuratively in the capital of Canadian ice hockey) in a meaningful match far from home — the French Champions Trophy.

Bordeaux's Argentine striker Fernando Cavenaghi scored 38 minutes into the match and Fernando, a midfielder from Brazil, slotted home a free kick by Yoann Gourcuff near the end.

It is the first time in the history of the French League (LFP) that one of its official competitions was held outside France. The match was being hosted by the Montreal Impact of the United Soccer Leagues First Division. The club, which one day hopes to join Major League Soccer, will play a friendly against Bordeaux at the adjacent Stade Saputo on Tuesday night.

“We are curious to see how the fans react,” Joey Saputo, the president of the Impact, said during a telephone interview from Montreal on Friday morning. “It’s an international game that actually means something — the teams are playing for a trophy. The winner of Ligue 1 against the Cup winner from the second division, a Cinderella team. It is not just a friendly. The game means something.”

Although the match, first played in 1995, is the curtain raiser for the French season, which begins the second weekend of August, the Champions Trophy game is a bit unlike the other friendlies and preseason tournaments now under way in the United States. That roster includes the World Football Challenge and the coming tours of Real Madrid and Barcelona of Spain. But certainly not the Concacaf Gold Cup, which will bring together the regional archrivals Mexico and the United States in its final at Giants Stadium in East Rutherford, N.J., on Sunday afternoon.

Saputo was hoping to surpass the top attendance (30,500) for all previous Champions Trophy games, and succeeded with 34,000 turned up to watch the teams play on the unfamiliar artificial surface.

“Would we have loved to have a top team like Paris-St. Germain, Lyon or Marseille?” Saputo said. “Sure. But I think we’ve shown, after we drew 55,000 to a Concacaf Champions League match last February, that there’s an appetite for international soccer in Montreal. It’s important for us to promote the game of soccer in the province of Quebec.”

Although the French League has produced and exported some quality players over the past decade — stars like Didier Drogba, Franck Ribery, Thierry Henry, Nicolas Anelka, Karim Benzema and others — most club officials have been reluctant to follow their counterparts in England, Spain, Germany and Italy in attempting to spread their brands outside France. French teams simply have not ventured to North America for preseason friendlies or training camps. Ligue 1 games, which were available for a few years on Fox Soccer Channel, are now only shown on the subscription channel Setanta. In effect they are out of sight and out of mind of the North American soccer fans.

In April 2008, French officials approached an expatriate, Michael Wiesenfeld, the founder of the European Football Group, a New York-based sports marketing agency that specializes in soccer. With little lead time, the project was pushed back to this year, with Montreal, with its large French-speaking population, landing the match. And although Saturday’s game was beamed back to France on TV, Wiesenfeld said his efforts to get FSC to carry the game, at no cost, were rebuffed.

Speaking about the first French foray to North American, Saputo said: “The Italians do it. The English do it. If the French want to be known outside France they have to do this. Now it is coming to fruition and is a good start. I think there’s been this perception that the French League was a lower quality. But France does well in international competitions and I guess it leaves you scratching your head.”