



Galaxy gives two a magical ride

French forward Merlin and Portuguese midfielder Fortes are selected from 800 hopefuls for one-week trial with the team.

By Grahame L. Jones, Times Staff Writer

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Photo Gallery

Galaxy open tryouts

"C'est magnifique!"

Those were the words Sunday evening of Laurent Merlin, a 22-year-old French forward with a magical surname, on hearing that he had earned himself a one-week trial with Major League Soccer's Galaxy.

Merlin, who has spent several seasons in the French league and has represented France at the under-18 and under-19 levels, was one of two players chosen by the Galaxy from 800 hopefuls who each paid \$130 to take part in an open tryout over the weekend.

The other is Rui Fortes, a 24-year-old midfielder from Portugal who has kept in shape for just such a chance by running the two miles between his home and his work as a machine operator in Pawtucket, R.I.

Fortes' reaction to the news was as ecstatic as Merlin's.

"I had nothing to lose and everything to gain, and that's what happened," he said. "This is my dream. It was my dream all my life to play professional soccer, and now it's like one step away and I've just got to stay focused and keep working hard until I get to my goal."

Fortes, originally from Lisbon, came to the U.S. at age 13 after having played for the youth team of the Portuguese club Estrella Amadora. He played here in high school and junior college and for four years as an amateur with the Rhode Island Stingrays of the Premier Development League.

Today, Fortes and Merlin will undergo some medical and fitness tests before starting a week's training with the Galaxy on Tuesday.

A friend who landed a position on a Portuguese club after attending a similar tryout inspired Fortes to take the plunge.

"Back home that's all I heard: 'You guys don't do nothing with your lives. All you guys want to do is stay around here. You guys don't go anywhere to try out or anything like that,' " he said. "Nobody in this world is going to give you nothing for free.

"I just said to myself, 'Let me just go and have fun, even if they don't pick me.' "

Alexi Lalas, the Galaxy's president and general manager, has run into some flak for accurately pointing out that some of the tryout participants came in overweight and out of shape. The same could not be said of Fortes.

"I don't drive back home," he said. "From my house to my job is probably like two miles, so that's what I do, I run every day."

Merlin, meanwhile, made an even longer trek to try out.

The son of a retired Air France pilot, he was at the Stade de France in Paris on Wednesday evening watching Argentina upset 2006 World Cup runner-up France, 1-0, on a Javier Saviola goal. Later that night, father and son flew to Los Angeles.

"I've been trying to convince him for more than a year to come to the United States," said Michael Wiesenfeld, Merlin's New York-based agent. "We found this opportunity on Yahoo.com, and we said, 'Let's go and live the American dream.' "

Merlin has spent time with two French first division clubs, first Marseille and later AC Ajaccio on the island of Corsica, and most recently was with Chateauroux of the second division, but he has seen limited playing time.

That made the Los Angeles opportunity more appealing.

"It's wonderful. It's like a dream come true," he said of being selected. He also praised the Home Depot Center.

"Even with professional clubs in France it is rare to find such a sports complex," he said. "I feel very comfortable here. I really feel there is a new

life here for me, hopefully."

Said Lalas: "Merlin and Fortes are raw, but they showed some potential and therefore their adventure will continue."

grahame.jones@latimes.com

