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U.S. ARMY MANEUVER SUPPORT CENTER OF EXCELLENCE FT. LEONARD WOOD, MISSOURI



PUBLIC AFFAIRS OFFICE
FORT LEONARD WOOD, MISSOURI 65473
VOICE: 573-563-4145
FAX: 573.563-4012
BY: Matt Decker, Guidon Leisure & Sports editor
EMAIL: shatara.r.seymour.civ@mail.mil

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Release No. 15-152

Sept. 4, 2015

Post soccer team hits the road – FLW United to represent post at Defender’s Cup

FORT LEONARD WOOD, Mo. – Members of the Fort Leonard Wood United Soccer Club are on the road, bound for San Antonio, Texas, where they’ll spend the Labor Day weekend representing Fort Leonard Wood in the Defender’s Cup, the largest military open soccer tournament in the nation.

“The team is comprised of members from the Air Force, the Army and the Marine Corps,” said Treavor Bellandi, Fort Leonard Wood United’s head coach. “It truly is a Fort Leonard Wood community team. It’s great to have all the services — although we’re still looking for some Navy players — working together toward one goal, and that is to represent Fort Leonard Wood in the best way possible.”

The club’s players have been practicing since early July, shortly after its first tryouts were held.

“We started the process when the intramural season ended. We’ve been playing nearly all summer long,” said Jeff Cornuet, the club’s assistant coach and back-up goalkeeper.

Originally an Air-Force-only tournament, the Defender’s Cup is entering its 14th year, with this year’s tournament being held at the San Antonio Aztecs indoor soccer facility, one of the largest in Texas.

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Last year was the first year a non-Air Force team won the event, when Fort Irwin, California, took home the tournament title, Cornuet said.

“They opened it up to all services (a few years ago), but it’s limited to post-level teams,” Cornuet said. “Seventy-five percent of each team has to be active-duty military. This year, they capped it at 40 teams.”

Fort Leonard Wood United will start the tournament today in pool play to determine their seeding. After a day off, play in the single-elimination bracket begins Sunday.

From that point on, “it’s win or go home,” Cornuet said.

The tournament championship and consolation game are scheduled for Monday.

Fans can follow the club’s progress on Facebook on the “FLW United Soccer Club” page. Zachary Weigelt, who plays defense, acts as the club’s point of contact and assistant coach, said club members plan to post updates as games are completed.

“It’s the first time this post has sent a team down (to the tournament), so it’s kind of a big thing. Just kind of knowing how big the tournament is, and us being able to participate, is a good thing,” Weigelt said.

Challenges ahead

Although they are looking forward to the tournament, Fort Leonard Wood United coaches aren’t under any illusions about the first-year team’s chances at a Defender’s Cup championship. Bellandi said a recent, four-team tournament at Whiteman Air Force Base helped the club determine its strengths and weaknesses.

“(At Whiteman) we weren’t sure how we stacked up against the competition. They quickly let us know that we had some work to do,” Bellandi said.

“Right now our strengths are really on the defensive side of the ball,” Bellandi said. “We have a strong defense. I think we also have a strong attacking side, but one of the things we’ve been working on the most is our midfield and control. The ability to control the ball has been a challenge for us.”

The club has also suffered from some attrition due to service members changing duty stations and injuries, including two cases of broken ankles. Weigelt said that since July, the team has gone from about 24 players to a core group of 18.

“There have been some injuries. We know going into this, that we won’t have the numbers that some of the other teams have,” Weigelt said. “This is definitely a building year. We know our abilities, and we’re going to be fine. We want this to be a thing that the post does every year. Hopefully, this goes on year after year.”

Player proposed post-wide club

Fort Leonard Wood United’s road to the tournament has been a long one. The idea for the team began in March shortly after the post’s annual USA vs. The World Tournament, in which U.S. service members play against the post’s foreign national students. A member of the USA team, Air Force Master Sgt. Andrew Hackett, proposed forming a post-wide team to take to the Defender’s Cup.

“I just wanted to play soccer,” Hackett said. “This is my last year in the military — I’m retiring next year — so I figured, ‘Hey, let’s get the Army guys involved.’ With it being an Air Force tournament, I knew the director, so I got the information from him and just passed it up (the chain). The colonel (Lt. Col. Bellandi) took it from there, and away we go.”

Seeing his idea come to fruition — and seeing his fellow Airmen, along with Soldiers and Marines coalesce around the sport of soccer — has been “fantastic,” said Hackett, who plays midfielder for the Fort Leonard Wood United club.

“You know, in the end we’re all buddies out here. We call them Wingmen; they call them Battle Buddies, but it’s all the same thing. It’s great because we have a pretty diverse group. I think we’ll be a force to reckon with,” Hackett said.

Soccer, year-round

For Cornuet, who also helps coordinate the USA vs. The World event, the formation of a post team is a dream come true. “I’ve been here 12 years, and we haven’t had a post soccer team until now,” Cornuet said.

It’s also a dream that coaches and players say they plan to continue after the Defender’s Cup. Bellandi said plans are in place to hold another set of tryouts after the tournament, and he, Cornuet and Weigelt are searching for future matches and tournaments to be played throughout the year.

“I think one of the keys for a military team is to be able to incorporate and assimilate new members,” Bellandi said, noting that military teams often have to face the challenge of turnover, especially with players representing multiple units.

“Whether folks aren’t available due to schedules, or they PCS, you have a continual ebb and flow of players,” he added.

One of the goals in forming the club was to have opportunities to play soccer outside of Fort Leonard Wood's annual intramural season and Commander's Cup Tournament.

"We want to play in events from now through the winter," Cornuet said. "Our plan is to have our season lead up to the USA vs. The World (tournament), take a break through intramurals, and then start back up."

The club currently holds practices at 5:30 p.m. on Mondays and Thursdays at Fort Leonard Wood's Field 2.

Players interested in trying out or seeking more information about the club can visit its Facebook page or call Cornuet at 573.337.8671.

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For more information, contact the Fort Leonard Wood Public Affairs Office at 573.563.4145.

Encl. (1): Photo

Photo cutline: Fort Leonard Wood United Soccer Club midfielder Josh Bardell and defender/assistant coach Zachary Weigelt compete for control of the ball during practice Aug. 27. The team will play this weekend in the Defender's Cup tournament in San Antonio, Texas.

About Fort Leonard Wood

Fort Leonard Wood is a thriving and prosperous installation that has evolved from a small basic training post 70 years ago to a premier Army Center of Excellence that trains about 80,000 military and civilians each year.

Home to the Maneuver Support Center of Excellence, Fort Leonard Wood now trains and educates service members and develops doctrine and capabilities for the Training and Doctrine Command's U.S. Army Chemical, Biological, Radiological, and Nuclear School, U.S. Army Engineer School, and U.S. Army Military Police School, three gender integrated Initial Military Training brigades, and the Army's largest Noncommissioned Officers Academy.

Over the past several years, Fort Leonard Wood has received numerous additional responsibilities to include supporting a colonel-commanded Marine Corps Detachment and an Air Force Detachment, which are both the largest on any Army installation, are located on Fort Leonard Wood; a large Navy Seabee Detachment and elements of the Coast Guard train here as well.
