

The Virgin Islands Consortium

History Is Made On St. Croix As First 'FIFA Quality Pro' Stadium In Caribbean Gets Official Ribbon Cutting

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ST. CROIX - Sunday afternoon marked a defining moment in the U.S. Virgin Islands as it relates to the sport of Soccer: A ribbon-cutting ceremony for a FIFA regulated and funded soccer stadium, which is located on St. Croix, was finally realized.

According to Hilleran Frederick, U.S. Virgin Islands Soccer Association president, the playing field is rated FIFA quality pro, the highest rating that FIFA has for soccer fields. Mr. Frederick said St. Croix is the only island in the Caribbean that currently has this type of field. Other Caribbean islands have FIFA-quality fields, a step below the FIFA quality pro facilities. "In our region, North America and Central America have FIFA quality pro fields, but St. Croix is the only one in the Caribbean," Mr. Frederick said.

This is also the first time the FIFA president has ever visited the VI. This is definitely a historic moment.

The excitement in the air was palpable. On hand for the ribbon-cutting was Gianni Infantino, president of FIFA and his delegation; Victor Montagliani, president of the Confederation of North, Central American and Caribbean Association of Football (C.O.N.C.A.C.A.F.); Mr. Frederick of U.S.V.I.S.A.; Governor Albert Bryan; Senator Javan James; soccer officials across the territory and residents of the St. Croix community.

The long-awaited soccer field was originally slated for completion April 2019. According to USVI Soccer Association member Darryl Rogers, who spoke to the Consortium earlier this year, the facility is owned by the association but is being fully funded by FIFA and will facilitate both pro local and international FIFA matches. The stadium comes complete with seating for 600 people, changing rooms, showers, along with media and medical areas, Mr. Rogers said.



Tiffany James, the association's communications specialist, spoke of the current and upcoming plans for completion in more detail. "The women's locker room is now being constructed, along with a two-level VIP media area. There will be an official concession stand that includes a bar, and a separate bathroom facility away from the locker room facility and the main offices. A plan is also in the works to redo the parking lot and the landscaping," said Ms. James. She said the bleachers will eventually be covered as well.

"This is a monumental moment. The FIFA president is here and this is historic," Ms. James stated.

Mr. Bryan said when his presence was requested for the ribbon-cutting ceremony, there was no question that he would participate. "Just looking at the stadium is inspirational. Even me at 51 years old, I want to get out there and kick a ball or two."

He added, "I do not think that we could ever appreciate the magnitude of the FIFA president being here in St. Croix. This is something positive for the territory."

Mr. Bryan said he has been visiting stadiums and frequenting the softball, soccer, and baseball fields, and realizes that families want safe places where they can go and be entertained with their kids, and activities they can afford.

The Consortium asked the FIFA President, Gianni Infantino, why after so many years of discussion it was important to him to ensure that the project was successfully completed.

"I want to see results. Until three and a half years ago, I did not dream that I would be FIFA president. I want to show the world that change is possible and it is real." Mr. Infantino explained that as he traveled the world, he realized that Europe had developed the idea that soccer and its success was unique to their region, and he wanted to change that notion from day one.

"When I was campaigning for the FIFA presidency, I traveled to over 70 different countries and I saw the passion for the sport that exists everywhere in the world, but the infrastructure and the structure for competition was missing in the Virgin Islands," he explained. Mr. Infantino's goal, he revealed, is to see the U.S.V.I. national team not just playing one or two games in four years, but on a regular basis. "Children cannot identify with sports if they do not have the opportunity to play," he said.

The FIFA president was pleased with the state-of-the-art stadium on St. Croix and said it is not just for the Virgin Islands, but something that can be showcased to the world because it was built from the ground up. "If the governor, FIFA, and the U.S.V.I.S.A. work together, we can achieve a lot not only for soccer but for the community, giving the children not only an opportunity to play sports but opportunities for the future -- to include travel for tournaments and scholarships," Mr. Infantino said.

Mr. Bryan spoke of a number of projects across the territory that would result in an investment of more than \$100 million in stadiums and sports complexes over the next five years. This investment stands to make sports tourism a viable option for the territory with the propensity to drastically boost the local economy, said the governor. He said his administration is already in preliminary discussions with major league soccer teams to come to the Virgin Islands to play at the new facility. Mr. Bryan believes the plan, once realized, will inspire neighboring islands to come to the Virgin Islands for soccer.

Even so, an increase in visitors to St. Croix requires an increase in available accommodations to house them. With this in mind, the Consortium asked the governor if plans were being made to increase the territory's hotel room capacity. His response was that it is necessary to encourage new businesses to invest in the U.S.V.I. with new hotels on St. Croix, and getting St. Thomas and St. John back up and running. However, the current priority, Mr. Bryan said, is ensuring that the territory's hospitals are up to par and

schools are in solid standing.

"Change takes time. We have to stabilize the government and restore trust," Mr. Bryan said. "Having this facility and maintaining it is a commitment to our children,"

The governor and FIFA are in discussion about the possibility of providing a stadium for the St. Thomas community as well.

Correction: August 12, 2019

A previous version of this story needed clarity. It said the St. Croix stadium was the only FIFA regulated and funded in the Caribbean. The stadium is the first FIFA funded and regulated stadium in the Caribbean to fall in the FIFA Pro Quality category, not first regulated in general. The story has been updated to reflect the correct information.