

Chill coach, players make their pitch

By Emmanuel Moutsatsos
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Thunder Bay Chill head coach Tony Colistro announces his team at the Soccer Plex on Friday. (The Chronicle-Journal/Jamie Smith)

When I was younger, I bought my newly-born cousin an Olympiakos soccer scarf. This was in a northern village in Greece and when my uncle, a fanatical Panathinaikos supporter, saw the red-and-white in the crib of his second child, he lost it.

Grabbing the thing with a fist, his other hand holding an Amstel, he stormed outside the concrete dwelling and then furiously (yet comically to me) threw the scarf onto the street where a goat probably later ate it. He grabbed me hard on the arm. He said: "Don't ever, ever, do that again," he explained oh so slowly, his eyes piercing and me gulping.

So it's not a lie when Thunder Bay Chill Tony Colistro says how many treat soccer as a religion: "You know how it is back in the old country," Colistro, an Italian, explains, "doesn't matter if you're working or not working, it's always in your head."

Same goes for Gustavo Oliveira, Wilson Neto, Brandon Swartzendruber, Jose Coronado, Marcos Roberto Silva and the other 22 members of the Thunder Bay Chill who start their ninth season next Friday night at Chapples Park.

We're at the Soccer Plex and whether they meant to or not, the head table for the Chill's news conference Friday to announced the team looks like an altar with a soccer ball in the forefront.

Others are starting to trickle onto the field that's known as holy ground to many here, and considering the way they whisper and act with such politeness, they too probably feel like they're at church.

The event begins and after thanking all the people they're supposed to for helping them claim their first-ever Heartland Division title last summer, Colistro calls out his players who come from one end and go to the other as if walking down a runway.

Some strut to their position, smiles painted on their confident mugs, but the pitch is where they belong. It's where they want to be – where they're meant to be really. It's their home. Their sanctuary. Their church.

"It's their chapel," reaffirms Colistro. "That's what they keep saying and for these guys, that's what it is."

What it was last summer was a winning season and one filled with firsts for the Premier Development League. First time winning the division and first time making it to the playoffs. The Chill sputtered to a playoff loss in Detroit but they got a taste of what it's like to be one of the big boys on the block and now they're hoping to muscle their way into controlling the whole street.

"It was kind of like, business unfinished," Colistro says.

That's why most of last year's Cinderella team is back. Many of them could have went elsewhere but they

chose to return to a place most couldn't find with a map and directions. They came here last year not knowing what to expect and did things no other team had done before, so of course, they're hoping to do more.

"That's why I came back," says Anthony Putrus who was named a co-captain along with Chill veterans Tony Valente and Wilson Neto. "Personally, I want to win it. The whole team wants to win it. Obviously we want to go further than we did last year because that's the stepping stone, but I want to win it yeah."

Adds Valente, "A lot of people have heard that expression, success breeds success, and I think because of the success we had last year everyone's expecting more."

In past years, the tune that flowed through the Chill camp was Frank Sinatra's 'He's got high hopes' but this summer, due to what they did last summer, it's more like Queen's 'Under Pressure.' Bring it on Colistro says.

"I love the pressure," he says smiling and hands folded behind his head. "I love it.

"I loved playing under it and I love coaching under it because it's challenging."

A challenge is what they want and a challenge is what they'll get.

The Chill have an exhibition game today against the Winnipeg Sons of Italy at 6 p.m. at Chapples and again Sunday at 11 a.m.