

NYC FRANCE

(New York)

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THE GREEN SOCCER JOURNAL – THE FRANCE ISSUE
SUMMER 2011

Over three and half thousand miles away from their homeland, the French community in New York use football to escape from the chaos of the city. This year they hope to field a side worthy of competition in the Cosmos Copa and take the title away from their fellow European champions, Poland.

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Restaurateur FREDERICK LESORT, president of the NYC FRANCE team stands proud in front of the TRIBORO BRIDGE.

FRANCE NYC — The French national team continues to expose the beautiful game to some ugly truths. First, there was the Thierry Henry handball, where a simple slap pushed Les Blues into the 2010 World Cup whilst simultaneously making them reviled across the globe. The embattled group completely fractured in South Africa as the ageing striker and his cohorts revolted against coach Raymond Domenech in spectacular fashion.

The 2006 World Cup runners up finished at the bottom of their group four years later, netting a single goal alongside getting embroiled in a prostitution scandal and a training-field boycott. Their countrymen wondered if they should adopt another nation. The French Football Federation appeared to hit rock bottom, then it found a shovel when rumors started flying that the powers that be had instituted a limit on the number of “black” and “Arab” players allowed in the squad.

So, the state of French football... *oh vey*.

There is, however, hope for *Les Tricolores*. The optimism

those men (*cough, Thierry Henry, cough*) earning millions. Lesort’s intense eyes and instant charm explain why he has succeeded in the brutally difficult New York restaurant industry. His charisma hides a business savvy earned fighting his way up the service industry ladder. His occasional appearances in *Page Six*, the *New York Post*’s famous who’s who gossip column, attest to his successful man-about-town status. On the field, however, Lesort slides into the background, with a content smile, has fun, and lets his younger, more skilled teammates take the lead; he knows his talents are eroding and he is happy to let the beautiful game serve as a release from the powerful pressure of hiring and firing, contemplating Plein Sud’s menu, and P&L charts.

In his friend Zohair Ghenania, Lesort has a captain who can lead NYC France to the Copa cup. The pair met – where else? – on a soccer pitch half a decade ago and the ease of their friendship stems from the sport. They laugh frequently; mixing French with English and the unspoken understanding that playing together creates.

Ghenania, a Tunisian-born and French-bred 40-year-old,

“I met a lot of people who invited me everywhere. It was my way of integration into the city and the country. Soccer and New York go hand in hand.”

springs not from the country’s official representatives – for now, the squad simply needs to stay out of the press – but from a group of 22 footballers living half a world away in America’s best city. These talents make up the French roster for the Cosmos Copa, a yearly New York City-based tournament that pits 30 “national teams” against each other. The rules are simple: each man who dons a jersey must be a 1st or 2nd generation descendant from the country for which he is playing. And go.

Think about that amazing fact for a second: the tournament showcases more than 600 players from 30 different countries. Soccer may be the world’s game, but the Copa Cosmos is a uniquely NYC event; it wouldn’t and couldn’t happen in another city.

Which brings us to the 49-year-old Frederick Lesort. The restaurateur, who began his foray into the food world more than 20 years ago with an eponymous French joint, currently runs Plein Sud in the luxurious Smyth Hotel and doubles as the president of the squad. He’s charged with leading his nation’s return to glory. Or, at the very least, recruiting a crew that can compete with some of the best NYC has to offer.

“We try to showcase the sport and showcase our country. We want to show that we are well-educated. We play fair most of the time and we behave accordingly, unlike professional soccer players on TV,” he says with a disarming smile and cheerfulness that can’t quite hide the disdain he feels for some of

played for Le Mans and FC Lorient. He coached the latter club’s youth development program in addition to battling on their semi-pro side. Fifteen years ago, he crossed the pond and landed in Gotham to teach economics at the elite private school, Lycee Francais de New York.

Like Lesort, Ghenania knows the ever-changing network of his countrymen who inhabit Gotham. While the duo are lifers after falling in love with the opportunities New York presents, in general the city’s French community is more transient than some other ethnic groups. Many of their compatriots come for a few years to work in fashion, banking, or other high-end industries before returning to Paris or Europe’s capital cities. New York never quite feels like home for that group, but football ties them into a social network.

The heart of New York soccer is Pier 40, the converted car park between the West Side Highway and the Hudson River. Pick up games and leagues continue constantly on its massive turf fields. An observer quickly runs out of fingers when counting the number of languages he hears spoken. The space embodies the diverse, all-encompassing spirit the Copa Cosmos strives create. Ghenania understands this better than most; in the not-too-distant past, he was another immigrant trying to find his place in the overwhelming bustle of Manhattan.

“When I arrived from France, I knew nobody in New York. I heard about Pier 40, and I was here playing every day before

FRANCE NYC

PEOPLE



NYC FRANCE captain
ZOHAIK GHENANIA outside
the LYCEE FRANCAIS DE
NEW YORK in MANHATTAN.

The NYC FRANCE team prepare for a training session on RANDALL'S ISLAND.

GABRIEL BOGAT at pier 40, a breeding ground for soccer in NEW YORK.

At ease, PRESIDENT and CAPTAIN take time away from their day jobs.

Team talk. LESORT and GHENANIA offer words of wisdom to their fellow countrymen.



Work hard, play hard.
FREDERICK at his popular
French Brasserie PLEIN
SUD.

Ghenania has integrated into the rhythms of the city. He found a home on the French Cosmos roster and is now helping newer arrivals find their way. One man the teacher hopes will star in the tournament this summer is Gabriel Bogat, a 6-foot, 185-pound striker who grew up in the Nevers youth system and then at clubs around Italy. He relocated to US in August and was playing for the Brooklyn Knights in the Premier Development League, the third tier of American professional soccer, before deciding he wanted to attend university. The coach at St. Francis College, a small institution in Brooklyn Heights, offered the smooth, athletic Bogat a scholarship. He netted four goals -- including a tally in the season-ending loss to Long Island University -- in his first season as a member of the Terriers.

In person, Bogat speaks in the soft voice of a person who is not entirely confident with English, although his is excellent. He walks with the easy grace of an exceptional athlete, almost floating across the ground. The kid who lists Marek Hamsik and Ezequiel Ivan Lavezzi as favorite players on his Facebook page lives in Harlem, loves the diversity of his new city, and enjoys his schoolwork in international business. The college-level soccer he experiences in the States trades tactical acumen for athleticism, but Bogat says he's happy playing "a little of both." Overall, his attitude and dress -- skinny black jeans, oversized head phones, shiny black puffy coat, and black skate shoes with pink laces -- give the impression of just another kid making his way through New York. He fits in fine, no doubt helped because he's fluent in the international language of soccer.

Bogat and his teammates also understand the true importance of the Copa Cosmos. After all, no matter what anyone tells them, they know that a recreational football tournament is not life. Recruiting the correct chef is life. Teaching teenagers economics is life. Struggling to earn a degree and survive in America is life. Playing football while representing your nation in your adopted city is a break. It's fun. Lesort and the rest of NYC France keep their weekly training sessions light. Getting together on a field somewhere and kicking a ball in is a joy, not a job.

Is this a uniquely French attitude? Of course not, but the band of brothers tries to make their country proud and retain a sense of her romanticism in their play. The Frenchness of it all comes out in their individual flair and style on the field. They are 22 men, far from home, united by their love of country and their outsider status. "Being French in New York and liking soccer as much as I do has been very tough because we are always being teased," Lesort says. "We have this arrogance that people think of us and they are so happy about our misery of the last World Cup. But slowly people are forgetting. Thank god."