Tiny Guadeloupe to play in the Gold Cup in the U.S.

by Mark Zeigler

Many historians consider the Seven Years' War the first truly global conflict, and when it ended in 1763 representatives of the world's most powerful nations gathered in Paris to carve up the planet. France essentially gave most of modern-day Canada to the British in exchange for control of Guadeloupe, a group of five tiny islands and a 4,800-foot volcano on the eastern edge of the Caribbean.

Nearly 2 1/2 centuries later, it makes perfect sense.

The Brits got Canada's endless swaths of terrain rich in timber and minerals. The French got Guadeloupe's beaches and soccer players.

Guadeloupe makes its debut in a major senior-level tournament next week, when it plays in Group A of the CONCACAF Gold Cup in the United States. And before you start cracking jokes about island boys getting drilled 10-0 by unfancied Central American countries, consider this:

There is probably no place on Earth that, per capita, has produced more soccer stars.

Guadeloupe, with a population 452,000, is an official overseas department of France. Think of it as the French version of Hawaii. Pointe-a-Pitre to Paris is a domestic flight. The Euro is the chief currency. Guadeloupeans vote in French elections from 4,200 miles and six time zones away.

It also means that Guadeloupeans play for France's national soccer team. Legendary defender Lilian Thuram, who last year became France's all-time caps leader, grew up in Anse-Bertrand, a village on the northern tip of Grande-Terre island, and still returns there most summers to host a local music festival. Arsenal superstar Thierry Henry? He spent a few years of his childhood on the tiny island of La Desirade, where his father is from.

Louis Saha, Mikael Sylvestre, William Gallas, Sylvian Wiltord? All either were born in Guadeloupe or have parents from there. Their current clubs: Manchester United, Manchester United, Arsenal and Lyon.

Last May, when Pascal Chimbonda was an 87th-minute substitute in a World Cup tune-up against Denmark, the entire French back line was of Guadeloupean descent: Chimbonda, Thuram, Gallas and Silvestre. So, too, were both goals in the 2-0 victory, by Henry and Wiltord.

In all, seven members of the 23-man French roster that reached the 2006 World Cup final have roots in five islands and the 4,800-foot volcano in the eastern Caribbean. Former French great Marius Tresor, who played in the 1978 and '82 World Cups, was born in Sainte-Anne, Guadeloupe.

"We are very, very proud," says Alain Soreze, the treasurer of Guadeloupe's soccer federation. "When the French national team plays a match, it comes on the TV in the afternoon in Guadeloupe. People don't work. They go to watch the match instead. Businesses are closed."

Because Guadeloupe is part of France, it is not part of FIFA. But CONCACAF allows what it calls "associate members" that can participate in regional tournaments with the proviso that they can't advance to FIFA events. So Guadeloupe can participate in the qualifying rounds for the Gold Cup, the region's biennial championship for national teams, and even the Gold Cup itself. But if it wins, it can't represent CONCACAF at the FIFA Confederations Cup.

And players with caps for France in official FIFA matches can't play for Guadeloupe. That rules out everyone from the 2006 World Cup team except Chimbonda, a 28-year-old defender with English club Tottenham who only appeared in the friendly against Denmark and did not play in the World Cup.

Guadeloupe put him on its tentative roster for the Gold Cup, along with several other players from respected European clubs, but actually getting them is another issue.

FIFA requires professional clubs to release players for national-team duty in sanctioned competitions such as the Gold Cup. Except Guadeloupe is not an officially recognized national team by FIFA.

"It is difficult for Guadeloupe," Soreze says. "Some clubs refuse to release the players, and they are not obligated to."

That leaves coach Roger Salnot's roster filled with players from Guadeloupe's amateur league, nearly all of them with day jobs (including at least one fireman). The best players from the island are gone in their early teens, snapped up by European clubs that religiously scout the annual youth tournament in Paris over Easter weekend for teams from overseas departments.

The lone exception is 41-year-old Jocelyn Angloma, who earned 37 caps for France in the mid-1990s and has returned to live in his native Guadeloupe. Since he is no longer a professional (he plays for one of the island amateur teams) and since his international career is long over, he is allowed to play for Guadeloupe. His

87th-minute goal on a swerving free kick against Cuba in January gave Guadeloupe an upset 2-1 win and all but clinched a spot in the Gold Cup.

It is an allegiance that Thuram, who currently plays for Spain's Barcelona, understands.

After France won the 1998 World Cup thanks to a pair of Thuram goals in the semifinal, Thuram quietly left the frenzied celebrations in Paris and boarded a domestic French flight to Pointe-a-Pitre. Then he drove to the northern tip of Grande-Terre island, through the sugar cane fields where his mother worked to support her five children.

"The procession along the Champs-Elysees was fabulous," Thuram later explained, "but these were my people."

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