

Middlebury man gets a kick out of ownership

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MIDDLEBURY - Much of Eric Voide's life revolves around soccer.

His soccer career started as a player. Now he is the northwest district coordinator of the Connecticut Junior Soccer Association.

This summer, he ventured into ownership.

Voide became part owner of 32-Panel Sports, the parent corporation of the London Gryphons, who played their inaugural season in the semi-professional W-League this summer.

"It was a natural progression for me to get involved," said Voide, a Middlebury resident. "But it happened sort of by accident."

Voide got involved with the Ontario, Canada-based women's team through the franchise's general manager, Aldo Carcani. The two had a previous working relationship, as both men were youth sector coordinators - Voide for the United States and Carcani for Canada - for the Italian-based soccer club AC Perugia.

Carcani already was involved with two other London-based businessmen in starting the team, but he was looking for additional ownership. That's when he turned to his friend, Voide.

"He had approached me with this opportunity to buy a W-League franchise up in London," Voide said. "The city of London came through with offers in terms of lands and support and things like that."

The W-League, which was started in 1986, features 34 teams located in the United States and Canada. Since teams consist of collegians, as well as former WUSA players, none of the players get paid during the three-monthlong season so amateur players don't lose their college eligibility.

While player salary is not an issue, Voide still needed to invest money into the team since it rents playing and practice fields from the city for \$5,000 a year.

Voide invested about \$20,000 during the Gryphons' inaugural season, which turned out to be quite successful.

London, which draws close to 1,500 fans for its home matches, concluded its first season in third place in the league's Midwest Division. With 26 points, the Gryphons (8-4-2) were just one point shy of placing second in the division and earning a playoff berth in the Central Conference.

Voide, however, almost missed out on the Gryphons' success because he had some initial hesitation about the deal since he was not going to relocate for the team.

"I was kind of skeptical at first about getting involved, but (American ownership) surprising brought a lot of credibility to the table," said Voide, who traveled to watch his team about once a month. "And we have a very good front office staff taking care of business."

His part ownership also aided him in maintaining the team's existence.

Voide's main responsibility is securing sponsors for the team, and he said he is not having problems meeting his goals even though he is operating out of Middlebury. And he plans on showcasing some of his players to the state in August.

Several of the London players will help run a camp for youth soccer players next month - the camp runs Aug. 8-12 at Meadowview Park in Middlebury - and Voide is hoping to operate such activities next year as well.

Voide said he wants to own a soccer team in Connecticut, but starting a franchise in the state may be tough task.

"Unfortunately we don't have the space," Voide. "We are in a protected territory with teams in New York, New Jersey and Massachusetts. ... Unfortunately the support from the municipalities simply isn't there."

Until the opportunity for owning a local team comes, Voide says he is happy to continue his connections with the Gryphons.

"To come from the ground up and make a bid for the playoffs is more than I can ask for," Voide said. "It was a crapshoot when we held our tryouts. We knew the girls coming in would play hard but we didn't know what the outcome would be."