

Cardinal Stadium

BARNBURNERS FORCED TO THE SUBURBS

In 2002 and 2003, the Chicago Fire's motto should be "Make the Best Of It."

Shoved out of Soldier Field, barred from Comiskey Park and snubbed by Arlington International Racecourse, the Fire has set up shop 30 miles west in Naperville, Ill. (population 113,800) at North Central College.

Cardinal Stadium seats about 4,500, so the Fire will move in portable bleachers to increase the capacity to about 15,000, which is less than the 16,400 the team averaged last season at Soldier Field.

There are other drawbacks to the Fire's temporary home.

Flares, tailgating and alcohol — staples of the wonderfully boisterous Barnburners at Soldier Field — will be banned.

The playing surface will be artificial turf of a variety called SafePlay, which has been approved by U.S. Soccer. The federation's statutes for Division I soccer require natural-grass fields but an exception has been made.

General manager Pe-

ter Wilt said he's researching the feasibility of covering the surface's football lines with a water-soluble paint.

"It can't be any worse than what we've played on at Soldier Field a few times," said midfielder Chris Armas, half-jokingly.

One opposing player called the Soldier Field surface "the worst field in the league." Its bog-like conditions were blamed on its proximity to Lake Michigan and poor maintenance.

To minimize inconvenience to residents of the Cardinal Stadium neighborhood and the nearby downtown area, the Fire must pay for extra traffic police and buses to ferry fans to the stadium. It must also devise a traffic flow plan.

Chicago hosts Municipal of Guatemala in the FC Champions Cup March 20. Only 5,000 tickets will be sold for the CONCACAF game. The first few MLS games will be limited to 10,000-12,500 as everyone works out the kinks.

— Ridge Mahoney

Ecuadoran international Ariel Graziani will play higher up for the Quakes than he did in Dallas.



BILL BARRETT