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Sporting's half season recap: First bite at the CSL's top division
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Sporting SC players and manager Edgardo 'Ed' Romero. Sporting SC Images

2019 was a memorable year for Sporting

It seems like the whole world lamented about 2019 and couldn't wait for it to end but over in The Bronx in semi-pro club Sporting SC's own world, 2019 was a blast. It was the most exciting year of the team's 19 years of existence.

Sporting was promoted to the first division of the Cosmopolitan Soccer League in June, going undefeated. They also won their first ENYSSA Cup, taking the Jack Flamhaft Cup (2nd Division Category Knockout Competition) home that same month.

Later in 2019, the club added an Over 40 team, solidified their partnership with South Bronx United as well as their sponsorship with Fruit Street, a digital health and telemedicine company that delivers the Center for Disease Control & Prevention's National Diabetes Prevention Program). And of course, Sporting kicked off their first season in the CSL's elite division in 2019.

First half of the season recap

As overjoyed, club founder, Edgardo 'Ed' Romero, was when he heard the final whistle that indicated that his club was in the top-flight of the CSL, he couldn't help but think how grueling playing in the top division would be.

You can't move your way around in the CSL's highest level without a club that's well organized from inside out, without players with a never-say-die attitude, some who could've played pro or have played pro, without a tight-knight board and so on.

But of course, the CSL's top division isn't only overly demanding there's also some enjoyable facts about it, for example, you play games at historical venues as the Metropolitan Oval, you go against teams with a tons of history as New York Pancyprian Freedoms, and play matches with a professional-like intensity to die-for—if you can keep up.

The dream of playing in the first division came reality for Sporting on Sept. 8, 2019 in an away game against Doxa SC.

They were missing some key players going into the season. Their top scorer from last campaign Ibrahim 'Abbe' Abdoulaye suffered a knee injury that ruled him out for the whole season.

Keeper Laurence Girard, center back Michael Natsu and midfielder Maximilian Mansfield were all away during the first two months of the season. Marin Frasher-Gjoca, midfielder general, officially retired.

Nevertheless, Sporting almost had a dream start in the CSL's elite division. Winger Don 'Messi' Oba had a one-on-one opportunity with the keeper but he rushed his shot and sent the ball wide.

The promoted side paid for their missed chance. Sporting conceded a penalty in the second half, which Andras Breuer converted. The Greek-American club scored again to end the game 2-0.

Ed wanted to get things right, right away.

“I understood from the beginning that we are going to have a learning curve,” he said. “It’s a big jump from D2 to D1. Doxa was a wake-up call.”

The following week Sporting was off from league-play because they were participating in the Sal Rapaglia Cup, a one-day tournament.

Ed’s men defeated Eastern District Soccer League club CA Tumi, in a dramatic 5-3 come back win, in their first game to earn a trip to the final versus the reigning CSL champions - NY Pancyprians.

Sporting only had two subs, many players were nursing injuries from the first game and the field where the match was played, Verrazano Sports Complex, was barely playable.

The Freedoms, after securing a spot in the final with an easy win 5-1 win over LISFL Port Jefferson, scored twice in the first half. Knowing that it was nearly impossible to make a comeback from a list of obstacles that kept increasing, the final match was cut short by ENYSSA at the request of both teams.

But it was a great learning experience to go against the champions. Sporting put what they learned into practice in their next match, which was against NY Greek Americans. NYGA won the league in 2017 but Sporting wasn’t afraid to go toe-to-toe with them.

“We came to play,” Sporting very vocal keeper, Julio ‘Frankie’ Tsasse said.



Sporting SC keeper and assistant coach Julio 'Frankie' Tsasse.

Sporting won the encounter 3-2, thanks to Kendon Anderson's brace and Oba's free-kick. In just their second encounter in D1, Sporting downed a nine-time champion. The future was bright.

The club's next game was against another powerhouse, Cedar Stars Academy. Although Saul Corado-Ramirez opened the scoring for the Bronx based club, they lost the match, 3-1 allowing two goals in injury time.

Sporting's next outing was their home opener against Zum Schneider F.C. 03. Ed was hoping that his players would defeat Zum to boost up their confidence. Unfortunately, they didn't even play the game.

Zum reported to the referee that their opponents' nets were hanging on the turf. The referee granted ZSFC a forfeit victory.

The club appealed it to Eastern New York State Soccer Association and to the league but they didn't overrule the decision. At the amateur level, with no set field standards, how can a replay be prohibited?

Sporting piled up some more losses. They lost to Lansdowne Yonkers F.C. 4-1 and then to KidSuper Samba AC 4-0. It was time to make some major changes.

"I told Ed we're not going to stay in first division with this team," Frankie recalled.

Sporting signed numerous high caliber players as Sikele 'Kele' Sylvester, Karim Russell, Tavoy Morgan and so on. Girard, Mansfield and Natsu also returned to the team. Mansfield didn't only come back as a player but was also appointed as the team's head coach.

It was a tough task for Mansfield to lead a new roster during the season, especially with players who are not used to playing for a club that's at the bottom of the table.

"Max has a lot of challenges," Ed observed. "We're bringing top quality players into a last placed team. It's a tough situation. Not any type of player can come to a last place team. It's a constant fight to get out of relegation zone especially in the CSL."

The new Sporting team lost their first game to New York Athletic Club, 1-0. It was a "heartbreaking" one for Mansfield.

Sporting then edged NY Shamrock SC, 2-1, in their following encounter with an own goal followed by a Morgan strike.

"You could see it [the joy] on their faces when we came out of that game with three points," Mansfield reminisced.

The club then rallied back for a 3-3 draw versus Zum via a Morgan hat-trick—he equalized the game with a late free-kick.

Things were getting better but then they had two straight games versus the Pancyprians. First, they had to face the CSL giants in the Manning State Cup quarterfinals then in a round two make up.

“The state cup match was the game to win because Pancyprians weren’t fully loaded,” Ed said.

Sporting lost the encounter, 3-2. They netted an own goal and Damone Manning converted a penalty. Mansfield’s men bowed down to the CSL champions again in league play but by a much larger margin, 7-1.

Morgan netted Sporting’s lone goal to finish the first half of the season as the team’s top scorer with five goals. Sporting’s 7-1 and 3-2 loss to the Freedoms weren’t because of a lack of talent.

“In this league, talent isn’t enough,” Frankie, who’s been in the first division since 2012, said.

The players didn’t have enough fight in them. “Sometimes they [my teammates] don’t put the work ethic in, they don’t demonstrate they have the heart,” Girard admitted.



Sporting SC keeper and assistant coach Laurence Girard.

Sporting ended the first half of the season in ninth place, three points inside the relegation zone. With such a talented roster, the club doesn't fear relegation.

"We're not concerned about getting relegated at all. I think we can even go on a winning streak in the second half of the season," Girard said.

Frankie thinks the same but then again the players will have to show more eagerness in order to reflect their talent in the standings.

"We can only stay up in the first division only if we change our mentality and play more like warriors," the keeper said.

2020 will be an exciting year for Sporting. We have been greenlighted to announce that Sporting will be joining the UPSL in the Spring. This means that they will be competing in two competitive leagues in the Spring. When asked how prepared the organization is to take on this task, club founder and president Ed Romero made the following statement.

"We have a quality reserve team organization behind us. They currently sit 4th in the D1 Reserve standings and in the championship playoffs. We have a talented first team squad that will be ready to compete in the Spring to get us out of the relegation zone. We have the right people in the right positions in our organization. We are starting this decade very aggressive and very ambitious. We all feel it is our time."