

All bets are off for local soccer

You could make a case for each of the four teams in the provincial Molson Challenge Cup championship round which begins Friday at King George V Field in St. John's.

All four remaining teams — St. Lawrence Laurentians, Mount Pearl/That Pro Look/Molson, Marystown United and Holy Cross/The Keg are capable of beating one another under the exciting playoff format.

The final should come down to St. Lawrence and Mount Pearl, the team with the longest name in Challenge Cup history. But don't bet the house.

It is anyone's guess as to how much of a negative influence the coaching controversy will factor into the Laurentians on-field performance this weekend.

Many provincial soccer followers were skeptical co-coaches would work when it was announced that Jack Simms and Derek Strang would share the Laurentian mentor duties this season.

The duo replaced Junior Edwards, who was pressured to give up the job after losing in back-to-back finals.

People are not surprised the combo coaching scheme didn't work, but more than a few eyebrows were raised in the local soccer community when Simms resigned only a few weeks ago. If it wasn't working, why didn't Simms or Strang quit at the half-way mark of the campaign? Why wait until the end of the season?

If fact, if these two well-respected individuals had such big philosophical differences concerning how the team should operate, why wasn't it settled before the season began?

PRESS BOX

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Simms says the team is better off with just one person calling the shots this weekend and on that we agree. But is it the right one?

Mount Pearl is well coached by Walt Mavin and will be prepared to regain the title they won for the first time two years ago. The team has a balanced scoring attack and now needs to prove again that it can score when it counts the most. And while you can't win without scoring, if Mount Pearl raises the Cup, goalkeeper Gerald Connolly will probably be the game's MVP.

St. Lawrence could fall apart, but more than likely, the players will circle the wagons for the good of the club. Still, the Laurentians have lost in the final the past two seasons and the team's reputation for winning the big one has been tarnished. Richard Kelly has regained his scoring touch and who can equal Rudy Norman and Clinton Edwards? Questions remain about the team's mid-field, once the strength of the club.

St. Lawrence is no longer invincible and all the teams in the championship round—including the Laurentians — know it. Big Blue may have lost its psychological edge, but not its raw talent.

Defending champs Marystown, out to prove last season wasn't a fluke, should get past Holy Cross, but no further. This team gave up too many goals (33 in the first round) to be considered serious challengers this time around.

United did play its best soccer in the second round, with three wins and one tie, while giving up only two goals, so maybe they are peaking at just the right time. But you have to consider the tier 2 opposition. I don't think Marystown is capable of winning three straight games against this weekend's competition.

However, there is certainly enough experience on United to give any opposition problems if Marystown plays to its potential and the opposition makes too many mistakes.

Holy Cross/The Keg was the surprise team in the league this season, but the young squad is a few years away from making it back to a final. The coaching staff did a tremendous job in getting the Crusaders this far.

Young striker John Hawco has emerged as a scoring sensation, challenging veteran Richard Kelly for the scoring crown, but lack of experience will keep Holy Cross from advancing. However, the team is quite capable of an upset, so Marystown would be wise not to look past the red and gold.

Bottom line when all is said and done? The glory will return to St. Lawrence.

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