

In a southern Newfoundland town, every day is soccer day

'As soon as you were able to walk, you had some kind of ball at your feet'

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If you want to know just how important soccer is to St. Lawrence, a small town on the south coast of Newfoundland, you need only know what residents did when one of their own was killed in combat in Afghanistan.



A giant soccer ball serves as a monument in the heart of St. Lawrence, a small town on Newfoundland's south coast.(CBC)

In April, when residents learned that Pte. Kevin Kennedy had been killed by a roadside bomb, flowers spontaneously appeared at a memorial in the heart of the community.

The monument is not a war memorial, but rather a massive replica of a soccer ball — just one of many images of soccer balls to be seen in St. Lawrence, a town where most every facet of life somehow involves the sport.

"Soccer is everything, pretty much, to St. Lawrence," said Lyle Drake, who serves as the community's soccer historian.

"For us, soccer is the glue that holds our community together."

That's not an overstatement. With a population of just 1,350, the community boasts no less than nine organized soccer teams.

St. Lawrence has been a soccer powerhouse for decades, sending one team of elite players after another to tournaments. The pre-eminent team, the Laurentians, are legends not just in Newfoundland and Labrador, but also among Canadian soccer aficionados.

Each year over the last three decades, the teams have as often as not won the right to represent the province at the national senior men's championships.



'Soccer's pretty easy,' says Lyle Drake.

'There's a meadow, and all you do is cut the grass and go.'(CBC)

In the 1970s, a visiting executive from the Canadian Soccer Association was so impressed by the level of commitment to the sport in the coastal town, he dubbed St. Lawrence "the soccer capital of Canada." The nickname stuck, and is used to this day.

"As soon as you were able to walk, you had some kind of ball at your feet," said Gus Etchegary, a retired fisheries executive who grew up in the town.

"In small communities — and certainly St. Lawrence was a small community — the opportunities for recreation were not all that great. Soccer was the ideal game," he said.

How did soccer take hold in St. Lawrence in such a powerful way?

"There are many stories, but I think it came many ways," said Etchegary.

Game arrived with immigrants

Once a whaling station, St. Lawrence survived for years by what it could harvest from the sea, and later from a since-closed fluorspar mine. The town was populated by emigrants from Scotland, England and Ireland, some of whom obviously brought the game with them.

Inflated bladders were used for balls, meadows cleared for a field. Soccer was likely established as the game of choice by the late 19th century.

Drake credits town leaders, especially clergy, with encouraging a sport that could be played by all.



Gus Etchegary says soccer likely came to St. Lawrence in different ways, through different generations of newcomers.(CBC)

"Some of the priests that were here were very involved [and] loved the game of soccer, and consequently made sure that everybody was involved. There were all kinds of house leagues and church leagues."

At its peak, before a shuttered mine put its economy in a tailspin, St. Lawrence's population was about 2,700 — enough to fill a suburb in a major city. Even so, the town had more soccer activity than far larger towns, with multiple games on at once.

Herb Slaney, with more than 50 years' experience on the soccer pitch, remembers watching miners — many of whom were sickened by exposure to radiation at the fluorspar mine — leave their worksite, and head straight out to play.

"Some of those men really had a hard time of it ... but they stood up to it, and they kept playing, and kept playing," he said.

Main pitch honoured for historical significance

The town's history with soccer is indeed so storied that Centennial Field, the main pitch in town, is on the Canadian Register of Historic Places.



Soccer was likely established as the game of choice in St. Lawrence by the late 19th century. (CBC)

Drake credits the simplicity of soccer for its success. In a town that has known hard times all too well, soccer has flourished.

"For everything else, we didn't have the facilities. [But] everyone could wear a pair of sneakers and get out and kick a ball," he said. "Soccer's pretty easy. There's a meadow, and all you do is cut the grass and go."

Like other residents, Drake has more than just a casual relationship with soccer, and with Centennial Field in particular. In fact, his will instructs his survivors to scatter his ashes over the pitch.