

Heart, desire, skill mean...

Strong national Challenge Cup performance results in silver medal

BY DON TURPIN, The Southern Gazette



St. Lawrence Laurentians goalie Pat Byrne and Chris Caines defending against Alberta during Sunday's Canadian National Challenge Cup game won by the Laurentians 3-1.
Lyle Drake Photos

The St. Lawrence Laurentians gave it their all but fell just short of the Canadian National Challenge Cup championship hosted in St. John's this past weekend.

Twenty-one minutes into overtime, the Laurentians surrendered the only goal of the game in a 1-0 defeat to Manitoba. Goalie Pat Byrne and the rest of the side played through regulation time, one 15-minute overtime and had just moved into the second overtime when the game ended abruptly.

The match was watched by some 8,000 fans at King George V pitch from St. John's to Stephenville, from Labrador to St. Lawrence and listened to by 5,000 more on the Internet around the world, on a site provided by Chris Slaney.

The first 30 minutes of the game was dominated by Manitoba and then the Laurentians rebounded in the second half to battle the national champions with

strong goal tending and exciting attacks by all 10 players up front. The game was a thriller from start to finish but ended on a sudden note when Manitoba scored on what appeared to be an offside infraction which was not called. St. Lawrence outshot the champions 10-8. There were three yellow cards during the game.

It may have been the lash hurrah for a group of soccer players who have been together for a decade or more at the senior level. But they played with all the heart they could muster and nearly pulled off the senior men's soccer championship.

And Team Captain Bob Spearns could have been the one epitomizing that lash hurrah. Spearns had announced his retirement from the Senior Laurentians team at the beginning of the season but the lure of the Canadian National Challenge Cup championships to be hosted in St. John's saw him lace up his boots again half way through the season.

Spearns helped his squad to its eighth appearance at the top national amateur soccer event in Canada for men and then going into the 10 team tournament he predicted St. Lawrence was going to win it all 'for their loyal fans'.

All of Newfoundland were the Laurentians' fans over the weekend but especially the hundreds who made the trek from their home community to watch their revered blue and white.

The Laurentians have never been shy of heart but this year they went into the nationals rested, after not having to travel across Canada, and as striker Rudy Norman indicated in 'good physical shape'.

Half a dozen of the senior Laurentians, like Spearns, have said they plan to retire this year and they wanted a national championship for their last effort. The Laurentians managed a bronze in 1999 and two earlier silver medals - from previous teams.

Thursday night on King George V pitch, in their tournament opener, the Laurentians shocked a strong British Columbia team 1-0. In last year's championship, the same two teams met and were forced indoors because of poor weather. The result was a 1-0 decision for B.C.

However, this time six minutes into the game striker Richard Kelly, the Laurentians' star of the future, scored the game's only goal. Goalie Pat Byrne and his teammates made sure that would stand up for the remaining 84 minutes.

The next night St. Lawrence again opened an early 1-0 lead against Quebec but failed to hold on this time as their opponents booted the tying goal at 87 minutes.

But the win and the tie were enough to advance to the medal round after B.C. rallied in the second half, from a 2-0 deficit, to tie Quebec 2-2 Saturday afternoon.

In the semi-final Sunday, the Laurentians upset a strong Alberta team, featuring former Laurentians' player Michael Howlett, 3-1. Again Kelly scored along with Alec Turpin and Chris Caines.

That win set up the gold medal game Monday afternoon.