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St. Lawrence back on top

By JOHN BROWNE, The Telegram



St. Lawrence Laurentians striker Richard Kelly knocks Marystown United full-back Vinnie MacDougall on his duff as they fight for the ball during second-half action of their provincial Challenge Cup soccer final at King George V soccer pitch Monday morning. Kelly and his teammates regained the provincial soccer crown after defeating Marystown 3-1 and will now represent the province in the nationals in Calgary Thanksgiving Day weekend.
Joe Gibbons/The Telegram

All is well with the universe, the Molson Challenge Cup is back in St. Lawrence.

The Laurentians regained the provincial senior soccer trophy they lost two years ago with a 3-1 win over Marystown United Monday morning before a crowd of more than 2,500 at King George V field.

"I think St. Lawrence has been in mourning the past two years," said Laurentians Dr. Paul Slaney, who was named the game's most valuable player.

"It's great to get it back to St. Lawrence. We've got great fans and we get lots of support, but second best is not acceptable," Slaney said.

Slaney said limiting Marystown's scoring chances and relying on its team's talented strikers to produce was basically the game plan.

"We knew they (United) were going to play a defensive game and probably look for their chances on the deep ball. We knew that if we eliminated their chances, we'd eventually get ours with Rudy (Norman) and Richard (Kelly) up front," Slaney noted.

Kelly, the most dangerous player on the field all weekend, opened the scoring at the 38-minute mark when he broke into the clear and drilled the ball past United goalkeeper Scott Edwards from the top of the penalty box.

Marystown evened the score 18 minutes into the second half.

Craig Edwards beat Laurentian keeper John Douglas from a close-range scramble after Douglas made a great save on Vinnie McDougall, who played very well at the back for Marystown. Chris Caines restored the lead for the Laurentians 10 minutes later and Norman, with help from Kelly, completed the scoring with seven minutes to play.

"We knew they were going to come at us hard," said Slaney. "They are a veteran a team with a lot of heart. They tied the game up and we knew at that point that we had to settle down, compose ourselves and play our game and we did."

Slaney felt the players grew as a team from the experience of having lost the past two seasons.

"We worked a little harder this time around," he said.

Laurentians captain Blair Aylward, who along with Slaney, now has 10 provincial championships to his credit, said this year's win was "a very special one."

"We did this with a lot of younger players," noted Aylward. "We were without guys like Harry Kelly and Bob Spearns and we still won, so maybe we can start another dynasty."

Aylward said there's pressure for the Laurentians to win all the time and "It gets worse when you don't win. St. Lawrence expects the Challenge Cup every year and we like it that way. But when we lose we let the fans down and the pressure builds to get it back."

Both keepers played well and had big saves over the 90 minutes, but the Laurentians just had too much scoring punch and, in the end, that was the difference.

Marystown, the defending champions who won the title by beating the Laurentians in St. Lawrence last year, had to play three games in three days as they did last season, but it was a much tougher task this time around.

"It was a big time factor," United's captain Darrell Stewart said after the match. "The two games we had to play to get to the final this weekend were way harder than the ones we had to play last year. It took a lot out of us and we didn't have the (scoring) power up front like we did last year, so that's what basically killed us."

Marystown made it to the final by beating Holy Cross/The Keg 1-0 Saturday and shutting out Mount Pearl/That Pro Look/Molson 1-0 on a goal by Nick Hurley in Sunday's semifinal. St. Lawrence earned a bye to the final by defeating Mount Pearl 3-1 Saturday.

Laurentians coach Derek Strang got the loudest applause when his name was announced to accept his championship medal. Strang, a former Laurentian assistant coach was named co-coach with Jack Simms this season, but had to handle the full job when Simms resigned late in the season.

Strang said he knew the pressure was on him and his players but he felt he had a good enough team to win it all.

"In a game of soccer anything can happen, but I felt we were prepared and I felt confident we could win and that I could help my team win."

Strang said the team had a weekend off just after Simms quit which, he says, was probably good for the club.

"We had a camp in St. John's and we sat down and we talked about the situation and cleared everything up.

"There was no problem. I never had a problem with Jack and I felt I had the support of the players from the beginning," said Strang who had been an assistant coach with the team for the past two years.

However, the classy young mentor admitted "It was a bit of an awkward situation" to have co-coaches.

“Still, things were going fine, but Jack decided there should be only one coach. In fact, that decision made it a little easier on us instead of causing any controversy,” Strang said.

Strang said losing the past two seasons gave the team “a different perspective on the game.”

He felt the team played well enough to win last year, but missed Kelly who couldn't play because of card trouble. The Laurentians lost in a close match to first-time winners Mount Pearl two years ago.

Referee Mike Edmunds handed out five yellow cards, including three to the winners.

St. Lawrence will now represent the province at the nationals next month in Calgary.