

Club dues

The St. Lawrence Laurentians, provincial champs again, rely on friends and fans for hefty fundraising duties

By Bob White
For *The Independent*

When one thinks of the St. Lawrence Laurentians, provincial soccer supremacy immediately comes to mind.

Again this year, the tiny town from the Burin Peninsula is home to Newfoundland and Labrador's best senior men's team. The Laurentians are competing in the national Challenge Cup tournament in Surrey, British Columbia Oct. 4-9, an event they have attended as provincial champs 22 of the past 39 years.

It's no secret the townspeople take tremendous pride in their soccer team, a major reason the Laurentians are successful season after season, even when faced with a declining population and other rural challenges.

One testament to the town's ability to overcome is the enormous amount of money raised each season. Operation costs go up considerably when the team leaves the island. Adding to the intensity, the club doesn't know until the provincial Challenge Cup is decided on Labour Day weekend whether they'll be competing in the nationals. When they win, the club has three or four weeks to fundraise. On average, a trip to the mainland to represent the province costs the Laurentians between \$40,000 and \$45,000.

How does this tight-knit community, which has earned the right to proudly call itself the "Soccer Capital of Canada,"



Paul Slaney, Blair Aylward & Clinton Edwards

come up with the money?

The funds come from hundreds of die-hard Laurentians supporters — ex-players, hometown fans, and expatriates living all over the country and beyond. People like Lyle Drake, who admittedly takes more of a lead role in fundraising than most.

"Everyone gets behind it, it's a lot of work, but we do just about everything in order to raise funds," said Drake, 56, who also runs the club's website. "And for the most part, the money is raised in small increments, a dollar at a time."

Toll gates, bingos, cold plates, relays, Texas Hold 'em tournaments, car washes, telethons, yard sales, bake sales — you name it, the club has staged just about every type of fundraising event you can think of.

This year, Drake, who has his own music label, Avondale Music, helped organize a benefit concert at Club One in St. John's. It was a successful event and raised a nice chunk of change for the club.

Drake grew up in St. Lawrence, left for the mainland in 1969, and returned home for good in 1992. Since settling in St. John's, he's been an avid supporter of the team and lets his volunteer activities take over his "real life" in times when the players need a substantial amount of money in a short period of time.

Drake has travelled with the club, mostly on his own dime, to almost all Challenge Cup tournaments since 1992. This year, he won't be making the cross-country trip, but plans instead to go to Charlottetown, PEI for the Canadian masters championships. (The Laurentians won that provincial title too.)

Nonetheless, Drake expects the Laurentians to have a fair amount of support from fans in Surrey. No matter where the tournament is held, Drake says a couple hundred or more fans travel from all parts of the country to cheer on their favourite team.

"Really, when you consider our fans and how dedicated and supportive they are, you have to look at fans of English soccer, or Brazilian soccer or Italian to find the same kind of passion. That's how much it means to a Laurentians fan," he says.

Drake cites the 2002 Challenge Cup tournament, hosted in St. John's. The Laurentians were provincial champs and had a Cinderella trip to the national final that year against Manitoba. They didn't win, but the 8,000 fans that showed up to cheer on the club are still talked about in Canadian soccer circles.

There aren't too many places that can attract that number of fans to a senior club game — perhaps nowhere else in the country.

These days, many of the Laurentians players live outside the community. But still, a large portion of the fundraising is done in St. Lawrence and on the Burin Peninsula. Simply put, the heart of the team resides in St. Lawrence and that's where it will stay.