

Silver lining

Despite Monday's championship game loss, St. Lawrence players can see their soccer stronghold continuing for many years to come

By Don Power, Express Sports Editor

Depleted is a word rarely associated with St. Lawrence soccer.

Yet that's exactly how Bob Spearns felt following his team's heartbreaking loss in Monday's national Challenge Cup championship game.

Spearns, the captain and emotional leader of the vaunted St. Lawrence Laurentians senior soccer team, may have had nothing left in the tank after the 1-0 overtime loss to Manitoba, but there's plenty remaining in the small town of 1,400.

Despite a dwindling, aging population that suffers through a poor economy and massive out-migration, tiny St. Lawrence proved Monday it can still hold its own with the soccer powers from across the country.

In an emotion-filled national championship tournament played on home turf — virtually the entire population of St. Lawrence was at King George V all weekend — this year's version of the Laurentians vainly attempted to do the impossible: take a small band of extremely dedicated and talented players and upset the soccer world by claiming the Canadian title.

It would have been an upset of historic proportions.

St. Lawrence's opening match during the event showcased the disparity between the Laurentians and their opponents.

British Columbia's Victoria Gorge Football Club was the first opponent. The city's soccer association boasts approximately 1,000 members.

St. Lawrence has 1,400 residents. Assuming half the population is female, and subtracting kids and elderly men, the senior soccer team is, in all likelihood, selected from a pool of less than 100 bodies.

St. Lawrence's opponent in the championship game was the Sons of Italy out of Winnipeg, a metropolis of 1,142,500 (according to the 1999 census numbers).

So how do they do it?

How does St. Lawrence continue to dominate — eight consecutive senior men's championships constitutes domination — the provincial soccer scene ?

"It's just pride," veteran Harry Kelly says.

"Passion," explains stalwart defender Blair Aylward. "It's right there in your chest. It's passion; passion for the game. It's pretty simple.

"Everyone is playing from the time you're five years old. It's in your blood as soon as you're old enough to realize it."

All well and good, but passion doesn't always translate into talent, and St. Lawrence teams are always talented.

The list of outstanding soccer players is tremendous. The timeline of players from the 1940s and 1950s through the teams of the decades in the 1970s and 1990s continued with nary a blip.

From Norm Kelly to Joe Turpin to Frank Pittman to Wils Molloy to current coach — and Hall of Fame player — Junior Edwards to Harry Kelly to Bob Spears to youngsters like Rudy Norman and Richard Kelly, St. Lawrence has always managed to produce talent.

"Every boy wants to play for the Laurentians," says Kelly, who officially retired from senior ball following Monday's loss.

"Yes, you always want to play for your Challenge Cup team, or your first division team. We saw Joe Turpin and Junior Edwards and all them play, so we want to take their spots.

"I'm playing now and there are fellas out there who want to take my spot. They're fighting for it. You know you're not handed it. You've got to work for it. You earn a spot on that team.

"That's our passion. That's in bred. It's just there."

Spearns says when families discover they're about to have a baby, everyone wishes for a boy; a boy who would eventually grow up to wear the Laurentian blue.

For a kid from St. Lawrence, there is no greater honour.

"You grow up somewhere where you dream about this day for your whole life," Aylward says of wearing Laurentian blue at a national championship.

It's the dream of every kid with a soccer ball in St. Lawrence.

Perhaps that's why the Burin Peninsula is known affectionately as The Boot.

"It comes from St. Lawrence," Spearns says, adding it's all about community spirit. "St. Lawrence is a soccer town. That's what we do best.

"The community is the key to our success. The family thing we have going. There is zero animosity among our players. We're not just friends. We're all best friends. We're all family and that's the way it's going to stay. That's been our success forever."

Ah, but can forever last much longer?

As the players continue to leave home — 13 of the 21 players on this year's team live in St. John's — can the Laurentians continue to field superior soccer teams?

A quick look at their bench during the championship game would lead one to believe 'yes' is the answer.

"We've got a young bench that's going to be competing for this for years to come," says Aylward.

"Hopefully if our population doesn't dwindle, we'll keep on this tradition for years to come, and for everybody to come behind us."

Many of the players who spent the weekend in blue track suits are barely old enough to shave. But, according to coach Junior Edwards, that's part of the secret.

"I think when they're born, they just want to play soccer," said Edwards, disappointed in Monday's result, but optimistic about the future.

"I think it's bred into them for kicking soccer balls around. The goal of every kid is to play with the senior Laurentians.

"These kids are going to keep this going for the next 10 or 20 years."

Maybe longer, Spearns says.

He and his wife just had a baby boy on Sept. 11. One day, perhaps he'll carry on his father's tradition.

"I'm 36 years old and I'm twice the age of many players on our team, but I'll tell you, they're men in my eyes. Every one of them.

"Players like young Richie Kelly there, the entire group. I'm one of the happiest men on earth to be part of it.

"It seems to be everybody hopes for a boy. I just had a boy myself and I hope he's going to play some ball for St. Lawrence.

"The tradition must continue."