



The “Beautiful Game” Is Toronto’s Game!

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On July 11, 1982, Italy defeated West Germany 3-1 to win the World Cup in Spain. St. Clair Avenue erupted into a sea of celebration. For twelve city blocks all you could see was a mass of people celebrating, dancing in the street, wearing the blue colours of Italy. Every Torontonian became an Italian that day.

Fast forward to 2002. Korea advanced to the quarter finals, and Little Korea, the strip between Palmerston Avenue and Christie on Bloor Street saw another throng of people, celebrating, dancing, and then very civilly picking up the garbage on the street. And Toronto again took pride and celebrated with Korea in its accomplishment.

Toronto has danced with Brazil, cheered for the Portuguese, filled the streets for the French, doffed its hat to the Dutch, and madly celebrated when the Iranians beat the US in its group match in 1998.

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In Toronto, you find supporters for every team that qualifies. Because Toronto is home to the world’s largest multicultural population, every qualifying team has a home field advantage. John Doyle, Globe and Mail TV critic, and author of *The World Is a Ball: The Joy, Madness and Meaning of Soccer*, writes that Toronto is probably the best place to experience the World Cup if you cannot be in the host country.

Soccer is a defining feature of Toronto’s landscape in other ways too. Soccer helps many immigrants integrate. Recent immigrants search out soccer fields to meet new people. It’s a place where their struggle in a new land can be forgotten for a while, where it does not matter whether they have Canadian work experience, or whether their English is heavily accented. The soccer field becomes the place for new beginnings.

Soccer is an easy game to play. You only need one ball, a couple of shirts for goal posts, and a few players willing to run up and down a field. Watch some people playing a game of pick-up soccer and you’re sure to be invited to join in. It doesn’t matter what country you’re from, what language you speak, what job you have (if you have a job at all, or if you’re a doctor driving a taxi). All you need is love for the beautiful game.

Every four years Toronto turns into a one-month carnival. People dress up, wear funny hats, put little flags on their cars, paint their faces, high five perfect strangers, feel their hearts pound, scream at TV screens, laugh, and cry.

And if your country hasn't qualified, you just adopt another. Or you are adopted by another – just visit its headquarters, be it Chez La Belle Africaine for Cameroon, the Prague Deli for Slovakia or Teranga for Ivory Coast. If your team fails to make it to the next round, you just adopt another. And so, only in Toronto, Germans get together with the Dutch at the Madison to marvel at Klose's extraordinary header (you would never see that in Europe), the Swiss Consulate invites representatives from Chile to join the Swiss at the Foxes Den when they play each other and turn the game into a fundraiser for the earthquake victims, and everyone dances with the Brazilians long after the final whistle has blown.

While we may not share the same mother tongue and cheer for different countries during the World Cup, we all come together to share this moment and to celebrate the first World Cup on African soil. And almost 30 years after I arrived, I won't be surprised anymore by the passion, noise and celebrations. Soccer is very much part of the Canadian identity. It brings us together every four years in a wonderful one-month celebration – and in the end, where you came from really doesn't matter all that much anymore.

Imagine, the 2018 World Cup hosted in Toronto. That would be worth cheering for.