
If this is a Soccer nation, where is Edmonton?

With Canada on the brink of a World Cup berth
this city needs to support its team

Editor's notebook

By Brett Holden

THE FIRST piece of sports attire I was given as a child was a Canadian soccer jersey. But, as with most Canadian soccer fans in the '90s and 2000s, the shirt was put aside for those of our favourite football nations: Italy, Britain, Netherlands, Germany, Poland, Brazil, Argentina. Almost never a Canadian one.

The last time Canada made the World Cup was 1986, and the team didn't register a [single goal](#).

[Four](#) of the Canadians on the 1986 World Cup squad played overseas at the time: Ian Bridge, Colin Miller, Carl Valentine, and Igor Vrablic.

Now, the Canadian national team has [22](#) active players drawn from pro teams around the globe, including France's top scorer Jonathan David, fan-favourite Tajon Buchanan, and Edmontonian Alphonso Davies.

Yes, the leader of Canada's team making international waves is from Edmonton. Born in a refugee camp in Ghana, Davies emigrated with his family to Canada when he was five, arriving in Windsor before settling in Edmonton.

"I am proud to say I'm an Edmontonian," Davies said in a [video posted](#) by the Canadian National team when returning to Edmonton to face Costa Rica and Mexico at Commonwealth Stadium.

As the November snow fell to the ground, tens of thousands of soccer fans piled into the stadium to watch hometown hero Davies and the Canadian club take on their toughest test yet, Mexico.

Canada beat Mexico that night, 2-1, as they solidified their place atop the qualifying standings. Some 44,000 fans packed the frozen Commonwealth Stadium — newly nicknamed the Iceteca, parodying Mexico's home stadium, Estadio Azteca — to watch the boys from the north defeat El Tri.

After that match, it seemed like Canadian Soccer was on a high; gifs of Calgary native Sam Adekugbe diving [into a snowbank](#) littered Twitter feeds. Hundreds of Davies jerseys were heading for Canadian Christmas trees.

However, that was only the beginning.

"A lot of people comment on the energy it really brings, especially if they are winning," Canadian soccer fan and general manager of the downtown sports bar 1st RND, Franco Camminatore says. "And they've been winning for a while now,"

On Jan. 30, Canada faced its biggest rival, the United States, in Hamilton, Ont. As the Canadian National team arrived at Tim Horton's Stadium — which is as Canadian as it gets — the team bus was bombarded with red smoke, confetti, and chants by Canadians, who [lined the streets](#) to cheer their newest heroes. That afternoon, Canada took down the States in a victory that unofficially booked Canada's ticket to their first World Cup in nearly four decades.

Canada finally looks like a country that takes soccer seriously.

In Edmonton ... not so much.

In November, the [44,000](#) who filled Commonwealth Stadium doubled the Edmonton Elks [2021](#) season average, as fans travelled from across Canada and Mexico to watch a soccer match in the middle of November.

Only a day after the Costa Rica game and two days before the contest with Mexico, FC Edmonton played one of the best teams in Canada, Hamilton's Forge FC — and sold only [564 tickets](#).

FC Edmonton had the worst average attendance in the Canadian Premier League this season, averaging only [961](#) fans per match — the only club in the league averaging less than 1,000 fans.

Before matches, FC Edmonton supporters, who call themselves the [River Valley Vanguard](#), usually meet at 1st RND — a hub for Edmonton Soccer fans — before making their way to Clarke Stadium. Camminatore says it's a nice show of support, but nowhere near enough.

"If we don't support that, we're not going to get anything better."

Tuesday, FC Edmonton announced the appointment of new club President [Jeff Harrop](#), potentially the first step in a new direction for the team and how its owners market it.

Camminatore compares the dismal attendance of FC Edmonton to that of the local basketball team.

"The Edmonton Stingers have done a fantastic job in creating an atmosphere and creating a culture."

This is something FC Edmonton has lacked over the years.

A few members of the River City Vanguard are also members of the National team supporters club, [the Voyageurs](#). When Canada played here, the Voyageurs and the national Soccer TV channel, OneSoccer, hosted a Q&A with Canadian fans at 1st RND.

Over the past 15 years or so, the women's national team has established itself internationally, and turned Christine Sinclair into a national hero. They won Olympic gold in Tokyo, and bronze in 2016.

Edmonton and Canada have always shown up for the women, posting record attendance numbers virtually every time they play in a major tournament.

The women's team blazed a trail for the men to be loved by Canadians, and this love story hasn't even reached its climax.

In March, Canada can officially punch its ticket to the 2022 FIFA World Cup, when it faces Costa Rica and Panama in Central America, followed by a rematch with Jamaica in Canada. Wherever the game is played – here in Edmonton or elsewhere – Canadians will let the world know that we are a soccer nation, and we're here to stay.

Now if FC Edmonton could just feel a bit of that love.

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