

Hospitable Halifax hosts Green Rider revelers and ardent Argo Fans at CFL's Touchdown Atlantic 2023

Halifax is no stranger to stirring events. It endured 200 years of war between England and France. It was a significant rescue and salvage port following the tragic sinking of the Titanic in 1912. It was decimated in the terrifying Explosion in 1917 when the Mont Blanc collided with the Imo in The Narrows and ignited a 1.5 kiloton explosion. Parts of the destroyed ships in a lethal blast zone were jettisoned as far as four kilometers into the center of the city. Halifax was terrorized by Hurricane Juan in 2003 when the tropical cyclone devastated the Nova Scotia coastline. Juan's sustained 158 km/h winds blew the beautiful Halifax boardwalk into the Harbour.

More recently, in July, the resilient and charming city endured a 'Biblical' amount of rainfall as the besieged Nova Scotian capital and nearby municipalities like Bedford received three months of rain in 24 hours.

Despite this meteorological mayhem and the cleanup that ensued, Halifax hosted with tremendous efficacy the Canadian Football League's biggest pre-Grey Cup event of its season, 'Touchdown Atlantic 2023'. Halifax welcomed both the friendly 'invasion' of nomadic Green Rider fans who routinely fill CFL stadiums and the arrival of a smaller number of ardent Argonaut fans whose distinctive double-blue gear separated them from the Regina revelers.

For the second year in a row, the regular season game pitted Canada's most popular CFL franchise, the Saskatchewan Roughriders, against the CFL's winningest franchise, the Toronto Argonauts.

Last year's event was hosted at Acadia University in Wolfville, NS, but this weekend's game was held at Huskies Stadium on the 221-year-old campus of St. Mary's University in the heart of Halifax.

Over 10,000 CFL fans—the vast majority supporters of the visitors from Regina —swept into the city for three days of revelry, culminating in the Big Game on Saturday afternoon which was broadcast nationally on TSN.

'Touchdown Atlantic', a celebration of CFL culture and played by two of the league's most storied franchises, is also played in Halifax to drum up support for a prospective CFL expansion franchise aptly named the Atlantic Schooners. Halifax is a great sports town that already boasts the CHL Halifax Mooseheads, the CPL HFX Wanderers FC, the NLL Halifax Thunderbirds, and the ARU Halifax Tars Rugby Football Club. Halifax and Moncton co-hosted the 2023 IIHF World Junior Championships so the city knows how to throw a sports party in any season.

Fortunately, I was among those invaders clad in green that descended on Halifax on Thursday and my assignment this week morphed into a travelogue that extols the virtues of Porter Airlines, the great pubs, restaurants, and museums of downtown Halifax, the hospitality of Haligonians, my own love of the Saskatchewan Roughriders since 1966, and my lifelong admiration of the venerable Toronto Argonauts—an ancient sports franchise by Canadian standards—that is rolling right along this season with a perfect 5-0 record heading into Touchdown Atlantic 2023.

Here's how the Three-Day Party unfolded in one of the greatest Canadian cities.

Day 1: Flying Into Halifax to Bond with Rider Fans and Enjoying East Coast Hospitality

If you haven't visited Halifax in the summer, consider this an invitation to enjoy the charming capital of Nova Scotia during its peak tourist season.

If you've never seen a CFL game live, consider this an invitation to travel to nearby Hamilton or Toronto or even Ottawa to experience the unique version of football that Canadians have enjoyed since the league was formed in 1956 and renamed in 1958 when the Interprovincial Football Union (1907) and the Western Interprovincial Football Union (1936) merged into the CFL as we

have known it for 65 years. The Grey Cup, the oldest trophy in professional sport in North America, has been competed for by rugby teams and, as the sport evolved, football teams in Canada since 1909.

When these two invitations were merged, the working vacation was irresistible. Covering a Riders-Argos game in July in Halifax was a ?dream? sports and travel assignment.

?Touchdown Atlantic 2023? was promoted by the CFL as ?The East Coast's biggest celebration of football? so your intrepid reporter jumped on a plane to document a ?love-in? set in picturesque Nova Scotia.

After an effortless digital check-in with our Porter boarding passes, my brother Paul and I, both lifelong Riders fans, sampled some smoky delights at Caplansky's Delicatessen at Pearson Terminal 3.

As our Porter Flight 207 banked its way to the tarmac of Halifax Stanfield International Airport, we saw aerial evidence of flood-ravaged Nova Scotia. Roiled, cloudy, waterways were still swollen from the incredible amount of rain and the muskeg looked soggier than usual north of the airport, but Halifax looked like it had weathered the storm better than its neighboring municipalities as we Ubered our way from the Alt Hotel for \$50 through Dartmouth and into the city to our three-bedroom flat.

Halifax is so walkable?as long as you can climb hills. It's as hilly as San Francisco and as steep in places. We arrive at our flat west of the Citadel. Its location affords us walking distance to the famous bars and the hospitable Haligonians who look after tourists so well. We have a Pub Crawl Map to follow for three days, courtesy of my son-in-law's friend who, like so many young Ontarians, has moved to Nova Scotia for employment and housing opportunities. His hand-drawn overview of downtown Halifax, featuring its best bars and restaurants, is penned on an envelope and perfect for non-digital natives. Essentially, it functions as a treasure map for 72 hours.

We start our Touchdown Atlantic Adventure at Durty Nelly's?an authentic Irish Pub. Garnet (from Sutton and originally from Saskatchewan), Paul, and I?all loyal Riders fans since the 1960s?meet Ardys and Ed, Garnet's sister and brother-in-law from Saskatchewan, to enjoy some Argyll Street fare.

Our quintet is looked after expertly by Victoria who delivers local beer for us? Black Angus IPA and Halifax Haze?to complement a big bowl of the best seafood chowder I have consumed since I visited San Francisco.

The big meaty scallops have come fresh from Digby and today's medley of items in this creamy goodness includes shrimp, haddock, potatoes, and carrots served with Durty Nelly's warm ?house-made Guinness Brown Bread.?

Buoyed by our first meal of the trip, our Quintet strolled down to the harbor to take in its lively night life. We enjoy the reggae rhythms of Andru Branch and Halfway Tree on our way to other more bacchanalian pursuits. We settle on The Stubborn Goat Beer Garden on the boardwalk with its enchanting view of the harbor and decide on whisky for a nightcap?doubles of Bushmill's Highball for Paul and Red Bank on the Rocks with a sprig of mint for me. Both are served perfectly by Owen?a quick-witted, friendly, and articulate server who is an Argos fans and we forgive him for this minor transgression.

Owen looks after us skillfully, goes the extra mile to serve us like yacht captains, and we reward him royally. A very sobering, brisk walk up Duke Street and a nice night photo of the misty Citadel that overlooks this great Canadian city close off an enjoyable Day 1 in Halifax.

Day 2?Preparing for the Big Game subtitled ?Gather ye Rider Fans while ye may?

We are a slow-moving trio today after last night's ?liquid-induced lethargy?, but bless my brother?he's already attended his business meeting and comes back to the flat to inspire the troops to get a move on. Our flat has Earl Grey tea and a number of essential niceties?a lovely treat to have my plasma in a mug. We set off for vibrant Halifax which is teeming with millennials?such great levels of energy in the cafes and sidewalks as we descend Citadel Hill in search of brunch. We settle on Cora's on Dresden Road

where Paul orders a 10-Star Omelette, Ramekin Fruits, and a Coffee, Garn opts for The Gargantuan Breakfast and a Coffee, and I select the French Toast and Fruit Medley with a side of sausages and Earl Grey Tea. All the essential absorbent ingredients are in our respective meals.

After power-shopping for victuals and power-walking back up the hill to fill the flat's fridge, we conduct a costume change and emerge in Rider Green gear. The Terrific Trio assumed a nice downhill gait?great for the calves?to take in the Maritime Museum of the Atlantic for only \$8.50 each. The Titanic and The Halifax Explosion are poignant exhibits among so many compelling artefacts that show the fury and cruelty of the Atlantic.

The models of the great ships, especially the Cunard ocean liners that transported European immigrants to Pier 21, are intricately-detailed. The most notable of the ships for us was the Aquitania that was built in 1913 after the Titanic tragedy and carried our dad from Scotland to Canada in 1949 when he was 17. What a meaningful trip down family memory lane.

After the reflective moments in the museum and the obligatory trip to the Gift Shop for a black \$24 Titanic Nightfall t-shirt, we developed a thirst for harbour patio life, took out our Treasure Map, and it was off to The Lower Deck?one of best waterfront pubs where Ardys and Ed had a table ready for our Green-Garbed Quintet. It was evident that thousands of Rider fans had flown in on Friday with Saskatchewan fans outnumbering Argos fans on the harbor front at least 5 to 1.

At our Lower Deck table overlooking the big ships in the harbor and seated with a bunch of vocal Rider fans, we ?clapped in? all those clad in Green. A ?Love In?, indeed. Even a young lady sporting a Green purse and no Riders gear was applauded vociferously. A couple pints of beer for the Quintet enhanced our view of the sailboats dotting the brilliant blue harbor.

The Lower Deck's local offerings prepped us for our walk up the hill to the Barrington Steakhouse and Oyster Bar where we splurged on a decadent meal. I chose the six-ounce tenderloin and seared scallops, seasonal veggies, and mashed potatoes preceded by a colorful and tasty garden salad complemented by a shared bottle of Joel Gott 815 Cabernet Sauvignon California 2019.

Equally perfect were the dulcet vocal stylings of pianist Apryll Aileen who voice suggested notes of both Sarah McLachlan and Amanda Marshall. Our quintet?clad in Rider gear in one of the finer restaurants in Halifax?submitted an Amanda Marshall request to the charming songstress and the sweet tones of ?Let it Rain? rolled from the microphone and piano, much to the delight of her ?fans all the way from Saskatchewan? that she noted to her audience.

After a nice visit with the engaging paddler-pianist-vocalist-songwriter, we set up for the next stage of the uphill climb to ?Riderville??a big party for Saskatchewan fans complete with music, dancing, a spirited watermelon-eating contest, and pics with Roughrider players at the greenlit Marquee Ballroom on Gottingen Street.

We conversed with legendary Rider running back Wes Cates and enjoyed the company of affable Canadian wide receiver Kian Schaffer-Baker who posed with us for a number of photographs. His patience with photo-seekers and inebriated fans was saint-like.

As another night of Rider Revelry drew to a close in the great city of Halifax, Riderville was on our way home from downtown so it was a wee walk uphill to our Creighton Street flat.

To be continued next week.

By Jim Stewart