

## Hundreds of fans at local World Cup Watch Parties witness Canada's dramatic 1-0 win over South Africa



After Team Canada's 2-1 loss to Switzerland in mid-week, it looked like the fun ride for soccer fans from coast to coast could be over.

A pair of unprecedented World Cup performances created sky-high expectations, but the undefeated Canadian Men's Soccer Team crashed back to Earth on Wednesday afternoon.

The narrow 2-1 loss to Switzerland was, indeed, a costly one for the national side.

Not only did Les Rouges fail to capture first place in Group B by at least tying the Swiss, but the one-goal defeat in front of 52,497 fans at BC Place cost the squad its home field advantage for the rest of the World Cup.

The first-place Swiss (2-0-1) stayed in Vancouver to play in the comfy confines of BC Place. Sadly, the Canadians (1-1-1) were exiled to Los Angeles to play South Africa in the sudden-death Knockout Stage of 32.

Then, something magnificent occurred at So-Fi Stadium on Sunday afternoon.

Those assembled at the Royal Canadian Legion Branch 385 Watch Party leapt out of their chairs in celebration when Stephen Eustaquio kicked the ball decisively and accurately into the lower corner of the South African cage one minute into extra time to give Les Rouges a narrow 1-0 lead.

Elation swept the Legion as Eustaquio's kick settled into the back of the net. When Canadian goaltender Maxime Crepeau snared a high shot fired as a last gasp by South Africa in the waning seconds of injury time, the netminder atoned for allowing an easy first goal by the Swiss on Wednesday, preserved his clean slate, and allowed millions of Canadians to exhale.

One of those active viewers savoring the moment at the Royal Canadian Legion was Eddie McNally who was inducted into the Aurora Sports Hall of Fame in 2014 to commemorate his brilliant career as a member of the national men's soccer team in the 1980s, as a professional player with the Toronto Blizzard, and as the inspirational coach of the Aurora Hearts. It wasn't a stretch to describe McNally as the happiest of the crew.

The Canadian soccer star expressed some relief as he described the significance of Eustaquio's goal and praised the national team's

efforts in Los Angeles.

?The best part was just seeing the ball go in the net. I admired the team's resilience and how they fought to get the ball today. We played through the calls we didn't get. The South Africans play a different game than we play. They're rougher and our team had to battle through it.?

McNally was clearly moved by the historically-significant goal by Eustaquio and he offered succinct, heartfelt praise amid the joyful vibe of the Legion Watch Party.

?I'm very proud of our boys.?

Sunday's significant victory?catapulting Canada into a sudden-death match with either the Netherlands or Morocco on Saturday, July 4, in Houston?bordered on miraculous, given the disappointing loss to Switzerland in Group Play on Wednesday.

The first 45 minutes of the Switzerland-Canada match created hope for Les Rouges as TSN showed footage of fans assembled at Watch Parties across the country. At Aurora Town Square, a hometown hero's play caught the fancy of over 150 red-clad fans inside the Davide De Simone Performance Hall.

The locals cheered every play that Aurora's Alistair Johnston made defensively and offensively.

Much to the delight of the young fans assembled who admire Johnston as role model, TSN commentators described the Glasgow Celtic star ?as made of solid stuff.?

The graduate of Aurora High School was front and centre in the first half as he was involved in a nasty midfield collision. Later, he made a key defensive play to prevent a Swiss go-ahead goal with two minutes remaining. The Maple Leaf flag-waving soccer aficionados were treated to Johnston's heroics as well as free popcorn?courtesy of the dedicated Town Staff? and an excellent viewing experience in comfy red theatre seats.

The scoreless first half wound down between the evenly-matched competitors with Canada carrying the play after the hydration break and the Swiss dominating the opening twenty minutes of play.

Half-time raffles of soccer jerseys and soccer balls revved up the all-ages crowd. MPP Sandra Cobena called the winning raffle tickets from the main stage and exhorted the standing crowd with a ?Go Canada Go? cheer to move the white-jerseyed lads to victory.

Alas, the second half opened as badly as possible for the Canadian side.

As I departed Aurora Town Square for rest-of-game viewing at Filly and Company on Yonge Street, the Swiss knifed their way on to the scoreboard when Ruben Vargas kicked the ball through Canadian keeper Crepeau just forty ticks into the second frame.

However, the patrons at Filly and Company were undaunted and cheered on the Canadian squad.

Bar Manager Nem Vasiljevic, who with running partner Taylor Wright raises thousands of dollars annually for the Aurora Food Pantry, described the upbeat vibe in the south-end, neighbourhood pub.

?It's fun to work these games. I get paid to watch soccer. The World Cup's great?we've been really busy for England and Canada games. As an English style pub, we've been filled with English soccer fans. With their presence, the environment has been great and the outcomes have been great, too. Seeing the first Canadian men's team goals and wins at the World Cup has been a blast.?

Fragmenting the fun at the Filly was Johan Manzambi's goal for Team Switzerland in the 57th minute of play, but the Canadian side

showed some fortitude and pressed onward.

The hydration break was perfectly-timed for both the Canadian team to recalibrate as they did in the first half and for the event hopper to savor his complimentary Creemore and chat with the friendly patrons at the bar.

The misted, hydrated Canadian crew got on the scoreboard in the 75th minute when Promise David hoofed one into the yawning Swiss cage to make it 2-1 much to the delight of the dozens of vociferous fans at the Filly.

Prayerful patrons could be heard invoking divine intervention-- "Please, just one more?" and the intensity ramped up as Team Canada pressed for the valuable equalizer.

In six minutes of added time, the Canadians made three more spirited pushes and I added one more Creemore to my tab in hopes that it would be a celebratory pint rather than a desultory one.

With 3:38 on the clock, a header from outside the box by local hero Johnston just missed the mark and elicited groans from the assembly.

The roof would've blown off the pub if Johnston's header would have found mesh.

Consequently, patrons clapped in defeat and the atmosphere at the Filly was upbeat because Team C had advanced to the next stage of the World Cup for the first time in tournament history by finishing second in Group B.

It was 20 ounces of consolation for all assembled and deepened our appreciation for the bigger and better developments on Sunday afternoon.

To paraphrase Mark Twain, "Reports of the death of the Canadian team's World Cup chances were greatly exaggerated."

By Jim Stewart Local Journalism Initiative Reporter