

## Bill Rea ? World Cup means much to many

I realize I'm going to make a lot of people mad with this statement, but it is a statement of fact.

I'm really not interested in the on-going World Cup. I guess there are some who would accuse me of sacrilege. Go ahead!

That's not to say that I haven't been exposed to some of the games. My wife and I had lunch last Saturday (June 21) in a sporting establishment, and the TVs were showing soccer (Germany playing Ghana to a 2-2 draw). We watched the action while we waited for the food to arrive.

And last Thursday saw my regular appointment with my dentist, allowing her the opportunity to bawl me out for my bad flossing practices. The lady runs quite an operation, complete with TVs in all the examining rooms. The hygienist asked me if I wanted the TV turned on while she worked, and I said it was okay. She asked what I wanted to see, and I suggested soccer, willing to do just about anything to be spared to usual daytime TV garbage. Germany and the United States were going into the second half of their match in a scoreless tie. I missed Germany's one goal because the hygienist was poking around my mouth in search of cavities and gingivitis. She found neither, but I still got bawled out.

And Beth and I stopped for some supper Tuesday night, after a day filled with taking in Canada Day celebrations. Not surprisingly, the TVs in the establishment were showing soccer, and I personally thought the team from Belgium was handily outplaying the U.S. I kept my yap shut, however, because it seemed like I was in the middle of a very pro-American crowd.

But I will admit I was a little interested, but just a little.

While this major international tournament is not holding my interest the way it is for other people, I'm empathetic enough to realize I'm in something of a minority. There are people out there who virtually live for this every-four-year spectacle, and who am I to poke fun at their fun?

Indeed, there was a time when I expressed puzzlement that soccer wasn't more popular in these parts. In the days following a World Cup many years ago (either 28 or 24), I raised that very question in print. I reasoned at the time the game was easy to understand to the point where a willing person can take to the pitch and maybe make a contribution. It's not like polo, in which one also has to worry about managing a horse.

And there doesn't have to be a major outlay for specific equipment. I played a fair amount of soccer when I was kid. In a bit of a departure from most of my ventures into organized sports, I learned that a serviceable pair of running shoes and a knack for getting in the way of opposition shots could earn a lot of respect from teammates.

Although I'm no expert in the game, I suppose as one progresses through various levels of the sport, more sophisticated gear is in order. I learned that when I played house-league hockey as a kid. Those who had higher aspirations had pretty fancy-looking equipment, while I competed mainly in hand-me-downs (older brothers enjoy certain advantages).

And when it comes to soccer, there's also a cultural connection, because the sport has always been very popular in many foreign lands. When I was in Grade 4, I was old enough to get involved in intermural soccer at school, played at lunch time. That first year, the captain of the team to which I was assigned had a very thick English accent, along with the ability to dominate any soccer pitch he chose to step onto. I was impressed at the time, and still am at the memory (I don't think he was ever impressed with me and my soccer skills, or lack thereof). Remember this kid was dominating a sport at school probably before his voice had changed. He ended up marrying the older sister of a girl I was rather sweet on in high school. I bumped into the three of them at a function a couple of years ago, and he didn't have even a trace of an accent.

As I got older, I picked up a number of hints as to how important the World Cup is to some people.

A very positive memory came during the time I was editing newspapers in Toronto. Part of my coverage area took in the Danforth, which includes Greek Town. There was one year in which Greece did quite well in of the big tournament. Hearing on the radio that the Greek team had won a crucial match, allowing them to advance to an unprecedented level, I wondered if there might be any celebrating taking place on Danforth Avenue. Since things were a little quiet in the office, I decided to see for myself.

I was very glad I did.

I headed in that direction, parked my car and walked into a mad house.

I can't remember if the police had closed off the street, but they probably should have. It seemed every car heading in either direction was filled with revelers hanging out the windows, waving those blue and white Greek flags. Some of them were actually riding on the tops of the cars. By rights, the cops should run out of tickets to issue for all the infractions that were taking place. If they had any common sense, they wouldn't have bothered.

What they were dealing with, and what I was witnessing, was a couple of thousand people having a lot of fun, enjoying one of those moments that come only a couple of times in a lifetime, if at all. Think back 22 years to the first time the Blue Jays won the World

Series. Think of what might go on around here if the Leafs ever win the Stanley Cup again.

So while I'm not too interested in what's going on in Brazil right now, I can easily appreciate that it's very important to many, many people. I'm fully prepared to let them have their moment and enjoy it.

The problem is not everyone takes that position.

It was while I was driving to the bawling out from my dentist last Thursday that I heard a radio commentator complain about the flags of various lands being attached to so many cars in the area. He had a problem, too, with flags being laid on the hoods of cars, like a tablecloth. I will agree that can be a problem. If the flag should come loose and flap up against the windshield of a car coming at me, then I would have an objection. But this guy also raised an issue with flags being mounted on the sides of cars. He said he was okay with two flags being displayed, provided one of them was Canada's.

I would have a real problem with imposing a requirement like that.

Probably the most wonderful part of the World Cup in this part of the world is it gives people an occasion to celebrate their roots. Both my father's parents were born in Ireland, and there's a certain amount of Irish in my mother's family tree too. I don't regard myself as an Irish-Canadian. I'm a Canadian who happens to have Irish ancestry of which I'm quite proud. I have been to Ireland. I have relatives there with whom I correspond.

When the occasion warrants it, I celebrate my Irish heritage.

Thus I have no problem with people using the World Cup as an excuse to celebrate their heritage

