

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

By Jim Stewart Part 2 of 2

Halifax is no stranger to stirring events.

In July, the resilient and charming city 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.

Day 3'Touchdown Atlantic at SMU, The Old Triangle, and The Split Crow

We are slow-moving carbon life forms today after the Museum-Lower Deck-Barrington Steakhouse'Riderville adventure. Home-cooked brunch in our flat featuring Earl Grey Tea, 3 fried eggs in a toasted cheddar-herb bagel, banana, and Greek yogurt provided a nice base for our trek to Huskies Stadium at St. Mary's University, site of the Saskatchewan Roughriders-Toronto Argonauts regular season game marketed by the CFL as 'Touchdown Atlantic 2023.'

As lifelong Riders fans, we are clad in green jerseys, caps, pins, scarves, socks'verdant accessories from head to toe. A wee warm up at the Tailgate Party with Church Brewery Lagers for Garn and Paul and an IPA for me sets the tone for the Big Game. We have waited for this game since 2020 when our tickets were 'invalidated' by the Pandemic. We have end zone seats in the temporary stands erected for the encounter between the third-place Riders (3-3) and the first place CFL 2022 Grey Cup champion Argonauts.

The Argonauts'it must be admitted'are a juggernaut this season. The ancient club from Toronto carries a pristine 5-0 record into SMU where 10,555 fans fill the sold-out university stadium. I bonded with a number of Atlantic Schooner-jerseyed Haligonians at the game and the jury seems to be out on whether financial backing for a tenth CFL franchise is feasible in the Nova Scotia capital.

The Schooners almost came into being in 1983 before financing fell through thus scuttling the Halifax franchise before it took the field. Prospects of fielding a CFL team in the great sports city of Halifax re-emerged five years ago and the League seems hot to trot to balance the CFL with two five-team conferences with the Schooners joining the Argos, Redblacks, Ticats, and Alouettes in the Eastern Conference.

The game is a thrill for the tourists and locals in attendance. Riders fans travel well and in large numbers across the country and a very healthy contingent is seated at SMU. Green-jerseyed fans far outnumber those in Double-Blue by a 5:1 ratio in the grandstands and 2:1 ratio in the temporary end zone bleachers. The overabundance of Green Gear at SMU is eerily similar to Roughriders-Argos games at BMO Field on the shores of Lake Ontario where Riders fans always outnumber the local supporters, much to the chagrin of ardent Argos fans who must wonder what it takes to fill their home field with Double Blue-clad supporters.

Today's game is a showcase for the venerable 65-year-old league, but the median age of the audience is likely 50+. The league needs to attract a younger generation of fans and a tenth franchise'notably in Nova Scotia'for the CFL to remain viable.

The old guys like me'a Rider fan dipped in Green since 1966 when Ron Lancaster and George Reed led Saskatchewan to its first league championship and established their legendary careers in Regina'are the dominant demographic in Halifax for the Big Game and most Haligonian millennials have eyed our nomadic bar-hopping and restaurant patronage as a barren source of amusement.

They have no idea how much fun the CFL is and'to paraphrase the slogan of Ontario license plates'it is 'Theirs to Discover.' Hopefully.

There is hope the league will grow the game and the emergent superstar at quarterback for the Toronto Argonauts puts on a show in Halifax. Chad Kelly is a superstar in the making?the nephew of Buffalo Bills Hall of Famer QB Jim Kelly?and he demonstrates his uncle's acumen on the field at SMU in this showcase game.

Although the Riders contain Kelly and limit his aerial yardage to 157 yards, the two tanks with whom he shares the Argos backfield run roughshod over the Riders. AJ Ouellette and Andrew Harris chew up yardage and clock all afternoon en-route to an easy 31-13 win over the Riders. They are 6-0 for the first time since 1935.

In 29-degree, overcast kick-off conditions at SMU and with almost 12,000 fans jammed into every crevice of Huskies Stadium, the Argonauts score on four of their first seven possessions?Boris Bede kicks a 35-yard field goal in the first two minutes of the game and Jevon Leake returns a punt 71 yards for a touchdown. Bede converts the big specialty teams' TD and adds a field goal to give the Argos a 13-0 lead after the first quarter. The rout of the Riders is on and looks like the Argos will cover the 10.5 points by which they were favored.

The charming Mascots bond with the fans between quarters as Jason the Argonaut works our end zone as does Gainer the Gopher much to the delight of the kids and adults assembled. Kelly works his passing magic in the second quarter with a toss to Dejon Brissett for a touchdown and the Argos add a gutsy two-point conversion to take a 21-0 lead with ten minutes left before half-time.

The Riders fumble the ball on the Argos' one-yard line with thirty seconds left in the quarter and Regina's thirty minutes of futility at SMU comes to an end. They trail the juggernaut Argonauts by three converted touchdowns at half time.

Brett Lauther?the Riders' talented placekicker from Truro, NS, and a former SMU Huskies player?kicks a field goal in the third quarter and another with eleven minutes to go in the fourth to narrow the Argos' lead to 21-6.

However, the Argos have scored in many different ways this season and this game is no exception as the Double-Blue squad shows its scoring versatility in the fourth quarter. Bede kicks a 24-yard field goal to make it 24-6 with 4:37 to go and a Pick-6 by defensive back DaShaun Amos on Mason Fine's errant pass attempt is the knock-out punch as the Argos quick defender glides into the end zone in front of us to put Toronto up 30-6. The ever-reliable Bede kicks the extra point with 3:13 remaining to put the Argos up by 25 points.

Saskatchewan Head Coach Craig Dickinson throws caution to the wind and inserts his backup QB Jake Dolegala into the game with three minutes left. Dolegala almost throws a Pick 6 from his own two yard-line, but the Argos miss the interception attempt. Mason Fine's understudy engineers a skillful late-game drive featuring a series of impressive completions of 39, 31, 7, and 38 yards to revive a stagnant offence. Dolegala's 108-yard drive culminates in a TD reception by Shawn Bane Jr who was the only bright light on a dismal day for the Riders' offence. Bane's touchdown narrowed Toronto's lead to 31-12 and, fittingly, former SMU Huskie Brett Lauther scores the final point of Touchdown Atlantic 2023 when his kicked football travels through the uprights with 1:57 left on the clock. No miraculous rally occurs on the venerable 221-year-old St. Mary's University campus and Toronto leaves Huskies Stadium with an impressive 31-13 victory over Regina.

Crestfallen but not broken, we resume the last leg of the Pub Crawl by Uber to downtown Halifax to enjoy the hospitable offerings and patio setting of The Old Triangle Irish Alehouse on Prince Street.

The excellent musical sounds of the three-man band inside The Old Triangle Irish Alehouse spill out to the patio and raise our Quintet's spirits after a drubbing at the hands of the Argos. One more Galaxy IPA provides the ?shot of courage? we need to climb the hill to our final Pub Crawl stop: the Split Crow.

This old British Pub on Granville Street is a student bar full of life on a Saturday night. It reminds my brother and I of the Ceeps in London, Ontario that we frequented as undergrads at Western. We mingle with all kinds of university students and Argos fans at this classic Halifax pub. It's all in good fun and we close the evening with shots. I enjoy a Glen Morangie Scotch on the Rocks to close off a great trip and our Green-Clad Quintet walks in a midnight mist to our respective accommodations to rest after a busy day.

Garn, Paul, and I enjoy a glass of Cabernet Sauvignon and our flat's big screen tv presentation of ?Jays in 30? featuring a nice win over the Angels at The Dome. It's been a very good day for Toronto sports teams on the gridiron and diamond.

Day 4?A Relaxing Afternoon in our Flat and Porter Flight 210 Takes Us Home to Pearson

Our host is gracious and gives us much leeway on our previously-posted 11:00 AM departure. Our flight from Halifax Stanfield doesn't take off until 5:10 ADT and we enjoy a leisurely pace of brunching in the Creighton Street flat and packing for the trip home.

Our Uber trip north of Dartmouth is \$46. The spacious airport lounge outside Gate 12 is a really comfortable place to work so my brother rolls through financial spreadsheets on his brand-new computer purchased in Halifax and I power my way through this travelogue prior to our flight which is?mercifully ? on-time.

The cheerful attendants serve us a complimentary Canadian combo of Three Farmers Zesty Cheddar Fava Beans and a splash of Jackson Triggs Cabernet Sauvignon in a Porter Glass to make the flight home civilized and relaxing.

The jet that takes us home?no turboprop for this longer haul-- purrs through Canadian Airspace. Some of the Argos fans we were bonding with at The Split Crow look a little worse for wear-- and their team won at SMU! A smooth flight back to Toronto ends a fabulous four-day working vacation in one of the great Canadian cities.

Halifax?can't wait to be back in August 2024 for my nephew's destination wedding in Nova Scotia. I have this three-day Pub Crawl Plan I'd like to deploy?