



Sep. 19, 2005. 05:10 PM

Spurs fans maintain love for London soccer team across Atlantic

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TORONTO (CP) — While others enjoy the lunchtime sun on a glorious Saturday in Toronto, members of Spurs Canada are planted like mushrooms in a dark bar.

A dozen TVs, 18 beers on tap and Tottenham Hotspur playing Aston Villa is must-see TV for Canadian fans of the London soccer team.

Sallywags, a three-level uptown bar equipped with satellite TV, is home to the official Canadian arm of Spurs supporters, as well as several other English Premier League teams.

Manchester United fans used to call the bar home, but they've moved further north. So now Sallywags is Spurs country, with Liverpool, West Ham and Sunderland fans also regular visitors.

But Spurs have seniority, so they get first crack at the dish. Conflicts are rare, however, and when rival teams play, everyone gets along in the bar.

Spurs Canada (<http://www.spurscanada.ca>) is officially the Tottenham Hotspur Football Club Official Supporters Club of Canada. It's not the biggest supporters' club in Canada — Manchester United, Celtic and Rangers probably are the heavyweights — but it may be the nicest.

A visiting journalist — a longtime Chelsea fan — is warmly greeted on the microphone during club announcements at halftime at Sallywags. A club T-shirt is handed his way before the final whistle blows.

Spurs fans are happy to share the love for their team.

They take their soccer seriously but in a pleasant way. A club member pops out to move his car during the second half and misses the Robbie Keane goal that makes it 1-1 for Tottenham. As the clock winds down, a fellow member desperate for another Spurs score suggests his colleague go move the vehicle again.

Sadly, there is no match-winner and the game ends 1-1. Club members pay their bills, exchange farewells and head out into the bright sunshine.

The camaraderie is plain to see, which explains why they make the trip to a bar rather than watch from home.

With the explosion of soccer on TV, fans often no longer need a satellite dish to see their team. Still it helps to have one. And thanks to the ones on top of Scallywags, Spurs fans expect to see some 30 games this season.

Tottenham has a proud history. The team has won the league twice, the FA Cup eight times and the League Cup (now the Carling Cup) three times. The trophy cabinet also includes the UEFA Cup and the European Cup-Winners' Cup.

Spurs alumni include Danny Blanchflower, Jimmy Greaves, Alan Mullery, Pat Jennings and Gary Lineker. Paul Gascoigne played for Spurs, as did Jurgen Klinsmann, Ossie Ardiles, Glenn Hoddle and Chris Waddle.

According to the unofficial fan site website <http://www.topspurs.com>, celebrity Spurs fans include Canadian NBA star Steve Nash (his father also follows Tottenham), Olympic champion swimmer Ian Thorpe, actors Jude Law and Patsy Kensit, authors Ian Rankin and Salman Rushdie and musicians Baby Spice, Rachel Stevens, Dave Clark (of Dave Clark Five fame), and Andrew Ridgley (the other half of Wham).

The late Bob Marley even followed Spurs, according to the website.

But it's been a while since Tottenham fans have had much to cheer about. Take away the 1991 FA Cup and the 1999 League Cup and the last 20 years have been lean times.

``The quote about Spurs fans is that Spurs are always good enough just to break your heart," said 53-year-old Patrick Dunleavy Sr., who grew up in north London. ``They always get you up and then they always drop you down."

Dunleavy, who's a project manager in IT, and his son, 27-year-old Patrick Jr., watch the Villa game side by side perched on barstools.

Dunleavy Sr. has been a Spurs fan since the 1960s. Cable TV, the Internet and satellites have made following his team a lot easier. He remembers a Spurs void when he came to Canada in 1974.

``In those days there was nothing," he recalled. ``In that period, Spurs got relegated and it was the last game of the season. The only way we could get a result was by phoning up the Edmonton Journal and getting it off the wire from them. Otherwise you wouldn't know anything about. And then going around being all miserable and no one else around cared. It's a really weird feeling."

Duncan Rowe, president of Spurs Canada, has Tottenham in his blood. His grandfather was Arthur Rowe, who played for the team from 1931 to 1938 and managed the team from 1949 to 1955. It was under Rowe, that Spurs won their first league title, in 1950-51.

Duncan Rowe was born in Canada and didn't really follow soccer at first. His granddad changed that.

``It's one of those things, maybe when boys turn to men when you start to look into and be interested in your heritage. I started really respecting and understanding some of the accomplishments of my grandfather."

Now 40, he is a lifelong Spurs fan.

Sadly he never really got to know his England international grandfather. Arthur Rowe didn't like travel much and it was a long way to Canada. He passed away in 1993 and Duncan Rowe only met him a handful of occasions.

“That's the one big regret,” he said.

A manager for the Regional Municipality of York in Newmarket north of Toronto, Rowe has already passed his loyalty to Tottenham to his nine- and 11-year-old daughters, one of whom is already showing a talent for soccer.

Both have lots of Spurs gear.

“Daddy went nuts with his credit card a couple of times with online orders,” he said.

Chris Peace, 33, grew up in London, some 10 kilometres from Spurs' home of White Hart Lane. He was a season ticket-holder for 11 years, even going to away games, before he moved to Canada six years ago.

“Before I can even remember, it's just always there,” he said of his Tottenham roots.

Soccer loyalties can be split, however. There are four Peace brothers — two follow Spurs and two West Ham.

Now working in advertising, he lists two things he misses about England.

“My family and Spurs,” he says.

“Not necessarily in that order,” he adds with a chuckle when pressed.

Criminal lawyer Christopher Biscoe's Spurs ties come via his father and grandfather.

“Before I even know anything about football, my granddad would send me Spurs kit every year for Christmas. ... I've always been a Spurs fan even though I didn't really know what that meant until very recently,” the 32-year-old said.

Ian McMahon, 32, followed Ipswich Town before he switched to Spurs.

“I made a conscious decision at age five to support Spurs,” said McMahon, who works in insurance.

His father, a Dubliner who supports Spurs, took his family to Bedfordshire in England when Ian was young. He started following the local club Ipswich until Spurs thrashed them one day. So he joined his Dad as a Tottenham fan.

“It's been good for the last 25 years or so,” he said

This season Spurs Canada has about 40 paid members but the number is growing.

Membership costs \$35 a year for Toronto-area adults and \$20 for students or non-Toronto-area supporters. That gets you a T-shirt, cheaper food at the bar on game day, and the ability to buy tickets

for Spurs games through the team itself.

Adding spice to this season is the fact that a Canadian, Toronto fullback Paul Stalteri, now plays for Spurs (Canadian goalie Lars Hirschfeld used to be part of the club but never saw action). Stalteri has recently agreed to become honorary chairman of the Canadian supporters' club.

Plus Tottenham has made some good off-season signings and is looking good on the field with a 2-1-3 record early in the season.

"I haven't felt this excited about a season since probably the year after we won the Carling Cup (in 1998-99)," said Biscoe. "I just think we're really looking good this year."

16:52ET 19-09-05

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