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Springfield's soccer community unites to watch World Cup

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THE STATE JOURNAL-REGISTER

Posted Jun 19, 2010 @ 11:30 PM

As Anthony Dickenson sat slumped in his seat Saturday, waiting to see if England could pull out a victory in the final minutes of its opening World Cup soccer match against the United States, the TV screen went red.

Dickenson, a native of England, was one of more than 50 people packed into Cafe Andiamo's basement to watch U.S. vs. England in the first round of the 2010 FIFA World Cup — until the threatening weather outside interrupted the last five minutes.

"For a moment I thought I was going to get murdered," Adrian Rojas, manager of Andiamo, said minutes after he realized it was a severe weather announcement that had turned off the game, not a problem with the expensive TV setup that had been purchased just for this year's World Cup. "My heart was (beating) 100 miles an hour."

Rojas had been planning for this day since January, or maybe his whole life.

Rojas, who was born in Venezuela, grew up playing soccer — football, as he and rest of the world call it — and at age 29, he hasn't lost any enthusiasm for the World Cup.

"There's nothing bigger than this," Rojas said.

This year, instead of going to a friend's house to watch the games, or a sports bar willing to turn off Cardinals or Cubs baseball, Rojas and soccer buddy Barnabas Helmy decided to convert Andiamo into a safehouse for the city's soccer community, which is as diverse as the crowds in South Africa.

Wedding can't wait

It's June 11, the first day of the World.

Downstairs from Andiamo's main cafe area, two televisions and a projector are broadcasting the initial match: South Africa and Mexico. For the next four weeks, Andiamo will be showing each World Cup match in its basement bar complete with food and drink specials.

Only a few men are in the dimly lit room, and one of them, Josh Evans, doesn't look happy.

Evans, 30, is getting married the next day — just when England and the Americans are to battle it out on the pitch.

"It's too bad I'm going to miss the game," Evans said.

To compensate, he decided to change his wedding-morning itinerary with his groomsmen to include a stop at Andiamo to catch the Argentina vs. Nigeria match.

Evans' photographer isn't too happy about the timing of Evans' nuptials, either.

Helmy, who is the audio-visual engineer for Andiamo's parent company, FIRM Inc., helped organize the monthlong event with Rojas. But he's also in charge of photos for Evans' wedding, so Helmy won't be around for the biggest turnout the cafe expects to see during the first couple of weeks of the World Cup.

"I asked that the wedding be moved back, but they wouldn't," Helmy said just before the England-U.S. match began.

Helmy was born in Sheffield, England, but grew up in southern Illinois and later Athens. He has dual citizenship — United Kingdom and the United States.

But he decided to root for England — for his dad.

No face painting

At least two other men and a baby were wearing England jerseys that afternoon.

One, the 38-year-old Dickenson, stood up alone and yelled as England scored only four minutes into the game, just as Helmy threw on his backpack and ran out of the basement.

"Oh, my god, I don't want to leave," Helmy said.

The mood shifted later. Dickenson sat almost solemn while the others in Andiamo's basement erupted in cheers when the tournament's first big gaffe, by England goalkeeper Robert Green, allowed the U.S. goal that tied the match.

"I'm glad I didn't paint my face today," Dickenson said.

Insults were traded throughout the match, but Dickenson knew he was in good company. Like him, most in the audience were soccer players — most play together in the Springfield Men's Soccer League, although many compete in more than one league.

"They are all amazing guys — everybody is so friendly," said Dickenson, who plays for the Argentina team in SMSL. "There's amazing commitment since the league came together."

Popularity on rise

Ten years ago, riding on the successes of the men's team at the University of Illinois Springfield (and previously the former Sangamon State University), soccer became one of the most popular sports to play in town.

Local high schools were winning state titles, and the YMCA soccer fields adjacent to UIS were full of shin guard-wearing kids and their parents.

The Springfield Men's Soccer League was born about the same time, drawing players who hailed from all over the world.

Jose Carlos Jimenez, 28, moved to Springfield from Cochabamba, Bolivia, with his family in 1999. He finished his senior year of high school at Sacred Heart-Griffin High School and playing soccer with SMSL. He received two full-ride soccer scholarships to Lincoln Land Community College and Robert Morris College, so Jimenez stayed in town and in the league.

Now a team captain for the fourth year, Jimenez says the league's approach of drafting players for each of its 10 teams helps foster the camaraderie that exists within the Springfield soccer community— and creates a level playing field among teams.

"Everybody puts aside all their differences, and it's a healthy competition," Jimenez said. "Nobody cares about the BP Gulf spill or what the president said about the BP president ... it's strictly soccer, and that's the beauty of it."

Cultural melting pot

Attend a men's league weekend game on fields near UIS, and you'll hear banter in at least two — maybe three — different languages.

"The good thing, since we have draft system, is that you get a mixture — you got Turkish, African, South Africans, Americans and Europeans," Jimenez said. "It's a good thing everyone speaks the soccer language, because it's pretty interesting when everyone is giving instructions."

Successful programs at area colleges have created enough local interest over the past decade or so for the creation of a traveling competitive team, popular indoor soccer leagues and lots and lots of youth leagues. Players from all over the world move to Springfield just to play soccer.

But the players are friends on the sidelines — one reason Helmy and Rojas decided to create a place for local soccer fans to watch the pinnacle event of their favorite sport together.

"I still cannot believe that this sport is not the No. 1 (sport) in the country," said Rojas, who plays on the USA team in the men's league. "This is love for some people. Soccer is my first love, and that will never die no matter what happens."

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U.S. plays today

Buoyed by an opening draw with the English, the Americans face Slovenia at 9 a.m. today (CDT) in Johannesburg.

Anything short of a victory would damage U.S. hopes of moving ahead in World Cup competition, because Slovenia already beat Algeria, 1-0. If the Slovenes pull the upset — they are ranked 25th compared to the U.S. ranking of 14 — Slovenia will be guaranteed a place in the next round. Even a draw would mean the Americans must beat Algeria in their next match or else they could need help to stay alive.

-- The Associated Press

Want to watch?

To watch World Cup soccer with a group, Cafe Andiamo, 204 S. Sixth St., and The Office Sports Bar and Grill, 1919 W. Iles Ave., are carrying broadcasts of each World Cup match in South Africa.

For home viewing, the ESPN and ESPN2 networks provide live broadcasts of every match.

For a full schedule of World Cup matches, plus a feature that converts South African time to Central Daylight Time, go to: <http://www.fifa.com/worldcup/matches/index.html>

Today's matches (times CDT)

Germany vs. Serbia, 6:30 a.m., televised on ESPN (Comcast channel 27)

Slovenia vs. United States, 9 a.m., ESPN (Comcast channel 27)

England vs. Algeria, 1:30pm., ESPN2 (Comcast channel 28)

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