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# Ballard FC: A Team Supporting Community

Sean Campbell, Staff Reporter

With seven major league professional sports teams, Seattle is a sports metropolis. However, the city also has seven minor league sports teams including Ballard FC—the semi-professional men’s soccer team that started its second season off with a 4-1 win last week.

Ballard FC plays at Interbay Stadium, a dedicated soccer stadium that is shared with Seattle Pacific University and Ballard High School. For their May 18 game against the Vancouver BC Whitecaps, the stadium was packed with fans reveling in support of their community’s team.



Last year, the inaugural season saw success and according to co-founder and General Manager Sam Zisette, Ballard FC is growing much faster than originally anticipated. This success can be credited to the fans, with some games packing in over a thousand people to spectate.

The team gave fans plenty of reasons to keep coming back.

The first season saw Ballard FC make it to the final round of the United Soccer League Two’s (USL2) Western Conference playoff bracket, finishing in 8th place overall. This success in a 122-team league brought credibility to the new franchise, which contributed greatly to its popularity today.

“Ballard is a community that has a lot of pride, it has people that really care about Ballard,” S. Zisette said. “But it didn’t have a (sports) team that allows people to celebrate that and wear that with pride to show up on game day and root for their community.”

The team itself is comprised of local talent, pulling from Seattle’s college athletes, ex-professionals and promising youth soccer players. This is unlike most professional soccer leagues, where players come from all over the world to participate. In fact, three of this season’s players are current Seattle U men’s soccer players as well: Junior forward Jeremy Opong, Senior midfielder Taketo Onodera and Junior midfielder Hyoungjoon Lee.

Ballard FC is what is called a fourth-division club. At the top, there is Major League Soccer (MLS) and below that are two divisions of professional soccer. After that are the semi-professional soccer clubs, like the USL2—the group that Ballard FC falls into. Clubs like this are a stepping stone for college athletes to play for a team in the summer and give themselves a leg up in trying for the MLS or another professional soccer league.

Players aren’t paid, however. It is against USL2 rules and collegiate players would forfeit their NCAA eligibility if they accepted wages for their play.

Ballard FC being composed primarily of local talent truly makes it a team for the community. For Rob Zisette, a longtime soccer and Seattle Sounders fan and volunteer usher for the team, this community aspect is key.

“Today I am working as a beer garden safety monitor,” R. Zisette said. “Being in the beer garden, it’s obvious how much the community is interacting with each other and how all these different people were brought here together to enjoy a common interest.”

Even the sponsors of the team come from Ballard, with local businesses like Watson’s Counter or Reuben’s Brews being the financial backbone that makes the team viable. For James Lim, owner of Watson’s Counter, becoming a sponsor made perfect sense.

“I bought two season tickets for their inaugural season last year,” Lim said. “Then I thought I should get involved. So I asked and they said they were looking for sponsors... So far it’s been cool to just see our community get together and hang out.”

Both R. Zisette and Lim agree that soccer fans and community members bring energy and jovialness to the games. Fans of all ages, backgrounds and walks of life joined together at the team’s first game. From kids running around chasing each other to groups of friends enjoying a drink together while they watched the game standing beneath the fruit trees, everyone was there to have a good time.

The food offered at the game did not include the usual hot dogs and nachos. It was instead a collection of different styles of food, like curry and some vegan options, offered by local businesses as a way of further connecting the community.

“I can go on and on about what makes the community so special,” S. Zisette said. “I think it’s something that we all feel and we can’t necessarily put our finger on what it is but I know I feel it, especially on game day.”

In a sports landscape that’s constantly growing, Ballard FC provides something not often seen in the U.S.. From local establishments providing concessions, to small things like the Ballard Bridge being the team’s logo, Ballard FC is in the process of capturing a sports niche in the Emerald City.