

# A local community for the global game: How Alberta's only professional soccer franchise was built from the ground up, after three decades of failed experiments

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# A local community for the global game

**How Alberta's only professional soccer franchise was  
built from the ground up, after three decades of failed  
experiments**

*By Mike Arcuri and Jamie Umbach*



*FC Edmonton captain Albert Watson (foreground) came from Northern Ireland in 2013 and has seen the team through many of its growing pains. (Photo by Dennis Schneider/Delaney B. James Sports Photography)*

It's a brisk morning in October, and FC Edmonton is at Clarke Stadium practising for the final match of the season against the Atlanta Silverbacks.

The thermometer barely reads zero as head coach Colin Miller shouts instructions to his players. Most are foreign to this environment. The coach's commands barely register to the players through their toques and headbands. A bag of orange balls sits on the sidelines, a reminder of the ever-looming threat of snow.

The concept of trading ice for grass is where you usually lose the attention of Edmontonians if you're trying to explain the concept of FC Edmonton, a second-division franchise that competes in the North American Soccer League.

That may be why, since 1978, many have tried to bring pro soccer to Alberta's capital, but all have failed.

The ground is rock hard and covered with ice and snow for eight months of the year, so a grass surface isn't even a viable option in this part of Canada. Here, they play on artificial turf made from fibre and rubber.

Playoffs are in November, and a post-season matchup in Edmonton this year would have been played in ankle-deep snow if the Eddies hadn't missed out. The NASL provides its member organizations with bright orange balls for such occasions. Playing in wintery conditions is a foreign concept for some teams in the NASL – five out of the 11 teams who will compete in the 2015 season reside in subtropical climates, and only two are north of the U.S. border.

Through a dedicated and passionate owner and a newfound professionalism not seen in previous Edmonton soccer incarnations, the club is taking root in the harshest of climates. FC Edmonton is an anomaly in a sport that opposes the idea of playing in a boreal climate. But such is the nature of Canadian soccer. A game sprung from international roots, it is just starting to gain a foothold north of the 49th parallel.

## **International roots, local support**

As fans take to their seats for the kickoff at Clarke Stadium, a select few in the southeast corner FC Edmonton's home venue remain standing with their flags, drums, smoke bombs and voices. An opposing player hits the ground, writhing in pain, and "Amazing Grace" on the bagpipes rings through section 107 of the stadium. A banner quoting Iron Maiden's "Run to the Hills" hangs from Clarke's sky-blue stands.

Seen as a disturbance by some, this vocal minority is representative of a soccer culture that spans the globe. Many people fail to grasp why someone would approach fandom in this extreme way, but it's a philosophy that has been developed in soccer-crazed nations over more than a century. Soccer clubs are deeply entrenched in their respective communities. Developing this connection takes time, and the members of the Edmonton Supporters' Group are happy to lead the way.

In 2011, a group of voyageurs – Canadian National Soccer Team supporters – took the reigns in bringing the supporter culture to Edmonton. Back then, FC Edmonton played at the University of Alberta's Foote Field, and the ESG, approximately 12 members in size, found themselves stationed at the general admission side's grassy knoll. Many members have come and gone since then, but the name and motives of the ESG remain.

For Tobias Oliva, who goes by the Twitter name Field Turf of Dreams – a knock on Edmonton's artificial turf – the group thrives on a casual membership and the common goal of spreading the culture within Eddies Nation.

"The nature of the group is that, if you have something to contribute, then you do it," Oliva says. "If you want to stand with those guys, it's as simple as that."

Soccer is a global sport, and with it comes the differing perspectives of what is and isn't proper supporter-culture etiquette. For FC Edmonton, the global has become the local through the diversity of the fans who occupy Clarke Stadium's seats. That local culture has benefitted from the experiences of those who have brought their perceptions of the

game to Edmonton. Members from strong soccer nations such as Portugal, Germany, and Argentina bring their individual brand of support to the community and strengthen its ties.

“We know that’s the culture of soccer everywhere around the world,” Oliva says. “It’s one of those things that binds us together.

“These things take time. FC Edmonton has only been around for five years. You look at other clubs and cultures where this is prevalent, and it’s because they’ve been established for so long, so there’s that tradition of supporting your club. What drives most of us is that it’s got to start somewhere.”

With the growth of the supporters’ culture comes public acceptance, but there’s a difficulty in translating that culture to people. Members of the ESG have been asked if they’re paid by the team to be there, but they’re just fans who pay the ticket price just like everyone else. They just go about the game-day experience in a whole different way.

“I think a lot of us haven’t got our heads around why are people are so reserved in their passion for their club,” Oliva says. “We accept that people have different tolerances for it, but we’re just surprised that there’s only the odd dozen of us that do it every game.”

A significant rift has been created among the generations of Edmonton soccer fans since professional soccer first came to Commonwealth Stadium in 1979. With the Edmonton Drillers beginning operations in 1979 before folding in 1982, and the Edmonton Aviators operating between the years of 1996 and 2000, there is a significant generation gap in Edmonton soccer fans. Some fans who flock to Clarke Stadium on the weekends were in the stands when the likes of Dwight Ledeweges and Brian Hornsby took to the pitch in Edmonton. FC Edmonton is creating a new generation of Canadian soccer fans that are influenced by a new generation of soccer players, such as Hanson Boakai, Ritchie Jones, and Tomi Ameobi.

Despite being a city with a history of professional soccer, FC Edmonton is fostering a local support for the global game from the ground up through the fans who occupy Clarke Stadium's seats every week, each of which hold a shared value for soccer in the community. Take the Jones family, for example – a father and son who arrived in Edmonton from Huddersfield, England – who support FC Edmonton. They didn't grow up cheering for the Eddies, but it's their home club now, and the local aspect is something to be cherished. It's these cultural values that make soccer so valuable, and having people who understand what that culture is about is indispensable to a club that's trying to find its place within the Edmonton community.

— *JU*



*FC Edmonton players huddle in advance of their match against the Tampa Bay Rowdies on Sep. 21, 2014. (Photo by Tony Lewis)*

### **Unlikely owner, unlikely franchise**

Before the second leg of last season's 2013 Amway Canadian Championship semi-final between Major League Soccer's Vancouver Whitecaps and the NASL's FC Edmonton at BC Place, supporters of the clubs met to play a match.

Many had travelled to Edmonton and Vancouver for both matches, including FC Edmonton owner Tom Fath and his son Eric. Players were in short supply, so Eric gladly took up the side of the Edmonton supporters. During the match, Tom Fath stood with the FC Edmonton supporters instead of in the press box. At home games, you'll notice the short, silver-haired owner packing up equipment after a match. Eric spends his game day producing broadcasts for FC Edmonton's video production provider, M31 Design Group.

Tom Fath is one in the crowd, and that's just the way he wants it. He's in it for the growth of the community, not his wallet. That's a perk that will come after his club is firmly cemented in the ground.

His climb to success started in road construction for O'Hanlon Paving in 1968. He invested in the company in 1985, and took over the business in 1990. Now, Fath owns a number of businesses, including Hi Signs, Fath Industries, and Aubro Services, all of which deal in the business of roads. He invested in the FC Edmonton franchise in 2009 after attending a presentation in New York by the NASL.

At the beginning of his ownership, his expertise was limited to the business end of the operation. The logistics of operating a professional franchise, and the intricacies of the sport were new territory.

"I wasn't even aware of what an offside was in soccer at that point," Fath says. "It didn't really matter at that point."

It's not commonplace to see the owner of a professional sports franchise in North America walking among the spectators, but that's the atmosphere at Clarke Stadium.

"FC Edmonton might not be at the level where it's part of the community publically in Edmonton yet," Oliva says. "But, on a personal level, it is more of a community club than anywhere I know."

The club's operating philosophy hinges on cohesiveness and family, from the upper management to the players and coaches in the dressing room. It was an attitude that was infectious



*Tom Fath with Colin Miller hold the future of FC Edmonton in their hands (Photo by Tony Lewis)*

within the club from the early parts of the NASL Fall Season.

Fath knows when and where his expertise is needed. Bolstering the image of FC Edmonton to attract fans is always on the agenda, and nothing speaks louder than infrastructure: If you build it, they *will* come.

On Feb. 4, 2013, FC Edmonton presented to the Edmonton City Council a proposal for a mid-size (10,000-seat) soccer stadium. Fath had increased the seating capacity of Clarke Stadium from 1,250 to 5,000 with the installation of temporary stands and had installed a brand-new \$1.25 million artificial surface, removing the North American football lines and replacing them with proper soccer lines to give it a stronger sense of professionalism.

“We have a league that consists of individuals at every club who show up every day to improve the standard of soccer,” NASL Commissioner Bill Peterson said during his yearly trip up north to visit Edmonton to us in a press conference. “We’re focused on every aspect of every piece of this business.

“Whether you’re here or watching the broadcast on television, just seeing the soccer lines raises the whole thought process about what people think of Edmonton.”

Raising the standard of the stadium is one thing, but filling it with the right players and coaches is another.

The club has been able to bring in strong European players such as former Manchester United youth academy member Ritchie Jones, Northern Ireland’s Albert Watson and Daryl Fordyce, and Tomi Ameobi, an English product whose brother recently competed for Nigeria in the 2014 World Cup in Brazil.

“I think they’re very good signs to be making all of these moves,” Oliva says. “I’m seeing signs that this is something that people at all levels (of the club) are beginning to take seriously.”

That's a sentiment echoed on the inside of the organization by FC Edmonton captain Albert Watson, who experienced the growing pains of FC Edmonton first-hand during the early years of its development.

"The whole professionalism of the people coming in, like Ritchie and Tomi, changes the whole mentality of the club. That's a testament to the staff that's here to take on everyone in an all-aboard kind of way."

Fath and FC Edmonton's work at the local level can pay off in big dividends at the national level. Being one of five professional soccer teams in Canada, and one of two in the second division next to the Ottawa Fury FC, it's a positive avenue for Canadian players to gain valuable experience at the professional level.

"I think the fact that they even exist is a big gain for Canada," Oliva says. "That's a sign of the commitment to the long-term development of soccer here. There needs to be that opportunity for Canadians to advance to the professional levels."

Fath has provided FC Edmonton the stability needed to grow. Owners can only do so much, and it's in the people that only true stability can be found. Some may see the experimental phase as over, and that the next few years will be crucial if FC Edmonton's attendance and legitimacy keep rising.

— *JU*



*Colin Miller demands professionalism and athleticism from the clubs he coaches. on Aug. 24, 2014.(Photo by Tony Lewis)*

### **Legitimacy and stability through consistency**

To be a professional team, you must hire professionals. Fath kept those words in mind when he recently signed head coach, and former Canadian Men's National Team defender Colin Miller to a three-year contract extension in October.

Miller has an interesting presence about him, which begins with his thick Scottish accent. He's is a man with strong features that have softened over years of football. He patrols the FC Edmonton sideline with a stern demeanour masked behind a pair of wire-rim dark sunglasses.

A Canadian soccer legend who has been capped more than 60 times for the men's national team, Miller took the reigns of FC Edmonton in 2012 and hasn't looked back. A fiery leader with a wise tactical mind, Miller has been FC Edmonton's most important acquisition during its short existence. His demand for fitness, intensity, and professionalism has carried over from his playing days.

Miller, 50, had long been grooming himself to be a coach.

"Even at that early age, I wanted to be a manager," he says. "At every club I was at, I was a player-coach. I took the first team training sessions at 23 years of age, which is incredible. Even at 23, I knew I would be a better coach than a player.

"It just seemed like a natural progression. Being a leader that was strong willed, and hopefully a positive influence on other people, it has carried over in my management style."

Miller is a shining example of international influence on Canadian soccer. He came to Vancouver from Scotland when he was 10, having never played organized football before touching Canadian soil. He had never had a coach, and had learned the game playing street football back in Scotland. It was through his adopted home in Canada that he developed into the man he is today.

He rose up through the Canadian youth levels, culminating in a provincial championship for the U-16s in British Columbia. When the time came for Miller to begin his professional career, it was Canada that first came calling.

Several teams were interested in his services, including the now defunct Edmonton Drillers. But it was the Toronto Blizzard that first gave Miller his chance in the NASL in 1982. The promise of playing on the first-team drew him to the club. It was there that he would meet the man who had the biggest impact on his career – manager Bob Houghton.

“He set the standards that I do in coaching and set the standards that you need in professionalism if you want to play at the next level,” Miller says.

Miller played under Houghton for two year, until the franchise folded. The young footballer, in need of a place to hone his craft, returned home to his childhood team – the Glasgow Rangers. It was during his time with the Rangers that Miller captained his team in a friendly against England’s Tottenham Hotspur, a powerhouse in Premier League football.

Miller plied his trade in Europe for 16 years, with stops in Doncaster, Dunfermline, and his hometown of Hamilton, Scotland. When it was finally time for him to hang up his cleats and pick up a clipboard. He did so, then worked his way through the semi-professional ranks until he became an assistant coach with the Vancouver Whitecaps of the MLS in 2010.

Two years later, he had made his way to Edmonton.

Canada had adopted Miller and renewed his career in the game he has always loved. Now, he says he hopes to return the favour in the only way he can – by coaching the Canadian national team. He held the position on an interim basis in the early 2000s, but a taste is not the same as a meal.

“It’s one of my dreams, if you like, to one day be our national team head coach,” he says. “I love my job here, but if you can get to that national-team level, it’s as high as you can get.”

The job is held by Spaniard Benito Floro, the former director of football for the Spanish soccer giant Real Madrid. Hiring a foreign coach for a national team is common in soccer, as evidenced by the hiring of former German international player Jurgen Klinsmann by the United States national team last year. Miller has thrown his complete support behind Floro, but he’d like to see the job filled by a Canadian.

“I feel we have Canadian coaches who can do the job – for sure they could. But, at this time, the CSA went the foreign route, so let’s support them.”

Time will tell if Miller will be able to go full-circle, living his dream as a Canada’s national team head man. He learned his tactics internationally and developed them in the Canadian game, and in that way he may represent the future of Canadian soccer.

— MA



*FC Edmonton midfielder Hanson Boakai demonstrates his athleticism against the New York Cosmos at Clarke Stadium on Sep. 28, 2014. (Photo by Tony Lewis)*

### **Improbable Journey of a soccer star**

When you look at the FC Edmonton squad, it’s hard to miss Hanson Boakai – unless he’s off the pitch.

The native of Guinea is blessed with a tantalizing combination of speed, impeccable ball control, and dynamic playmaking and striking ability. The recently turned 18-year-old

prodigy is a tiny ball of energy on the pitch – with added emphasis on the tiny. Listed as just 5-3, but probably standing a few inches taller now, the attacking midfielder is not what you would call an imposing presence.

It isn't until you see Boakai dribble past a defender and uncork a sidwinding shot into the corner of the net that you realize his impact on the field is so much greater than the shadow he casts on it.

People are beginning to take notice. More important, the Canadian Soccer Association is beginning to take notice. Boakai represented Canada at the U15, U17, and U20 levels, and at 17, was the youngest member of the Canadian Men's National team that played a friendly last October against Columbia, FIFA's third-rated soccer nation.

The diminutive midfielder shared the pitch with South American soccer giants Radamel Falcao of Manchester United and James Rodriguez of Real Madrid, both of whom were sold during the summer transfer window for a combined €135 million.

"It was crazy," Boakai says. "During warm-up, we'd watch the screen and any time Falcao or Rodriguez came on, the crowd would go wild. It's great to see a top-class player that you watch on TV and you like, but you have to focus, too."

That need for focus becomes more evident when Boakai tells the story of a Canadian teammate who was struck by a ball in practice while transfixed on the duo working their magic on the pitch.

"I talked to Falcao at half, Boakai says. "He seemed like a good guy. I wanted to follow in his footsteps. After I met him, I went home and watched videos because I wanted to know how good of player he is."

Boakai journey to his present level was as long as it was improbable. He left the civil war in Guinea with his father at the age of seven, travelling more than 10,000 kilometres looking for a more stable life.

“It was a big change because of the war,” he says. “I’m really grateful to be here. If I were still in Guinea, no one would know who I am and I wouldn’t be playing for a national team. I wouldn’t be doing anything.”

Boakai is a complete product of the Edmonton soccer scene. He has worked his way through the youth ranks and onto the senior circuit.

He was cut in his first year trying out for the Alberta Soccer Association, typically a death sentence for a young player looking to play professionally. He almost quit that same year. It took the convincing of his mentor, Hussein Shabdi, whom he considers a second father, for him to overcome his insecurities and continue playing. Shabdi has been a mentor to many of Edmonton’s soccer players, including other FC Edmonton players like Mallan Roberts.

“I wouldn’t go to practice, and Hussein would go out looking for me,” Boakai says. “He told me, ‘You’re a soccer player; you just have to keep believing. He kept pushing me, and next year the ASA came calling.

“After that, I never looked back.”

The teenager now holds the record as the youngest player to ever appear in an NASL game – a title he usurped from his FC Edmonton coach Colin Miller.

“He did, the little bugger,” Miller says in mock outrage. It was Miller who put Boakai in the game that broke his old record.

“He’s a special talent and we love him at the club. We just want to see maturity from Hanson going forward.”

That is the criticism laid on the constantly sheltered Boakai. Despite his talent, instances of showing up late to practice and questions about his fitness have held him back from seeing regular first-team minutes. Part of that is due to predictable immaturity from someone who played most of last season as a 17-year-old.

Yet, Miller is a slave to fitness and detail. It is a staple of his squads, and he sees promise in Boakai.

“If a young player shows consistency then there’s development there, but if it’s up-and-down and up-and-down, there’s a problem. The wee man took a dip but he’s on the upswing.”

The city in which Boakai grew up is just a stop in his football journey. FC Edmonton, although professional, is not yet a competitive enough club to house national stars, a fact that Miller acknowledges. The intent is to mature Boakai into a professional soccer player so he can take his talents to the next level. Such is the nature of soccer. Aside from the top teams, such as Rodriguez’s Real Madrid’s and Falcao’s Manchester United, most clubs act as training grounds for bigger markets.

“We’ll keep him as long as we possibly can,” Miller says. “But that may be taken out of our control if he forces the issue,”

And that is what it is all about for Boakai, who has been dubbed the “Canadian Messi” by the Edmonton media, due to his exceptional ball skills and short stature. FC Edmonton is just the first stop on Boakai’s journey.

“To be put in the same category as Messi is crazy,” he says. “Nobody should ever be put in the same category as him.

“It makes me feel good though. It makes me want to work harder.”

— MA



*FC Edmonton captain Albert Watson is an imposing presence against the San Antonio Scorpions at Clarke Stadium on Aug. 3, 2014. (Photo by Tony Lewis)*

## **Turning a hotel into a home**

The idea that soccer is only a sport is a short-sighted view of its importance to those who play it. For many talented young people in impoverished nations, it can be an escape to a better life, and a refuge from the poverty, war, and oppression that afflict so many who play it. A quick glance at FC Edmonton's roster shows soccer's international reach; birth certificates from Jamaica, Guinea, Sierra Leone, England, and, in Daryl Fordyce's and Albert Watson's case, Northern Ireland.

Watson and Fordyce grew up playing soccer together in Belfast, a city known mainly for civil strife, sectarian violence and economic disparity. The country is infamous for the terrorist group the Real Irish Republican Army, which has remained active to this day. The country has been mired by recession following the 2008 Irish economic crisis. In the bluntest terms, Northern Ireland is a mess for the citizens who remain. The

negativity and economic downturn drove Fordyce and Watson to seek greener pastures in a new country. When the duo heard about open try-outs for a burgeoning NASL club in Edmonton, they jumped at the chance to get out.

“We had some great times playing in Ireland,” Watson says. “But we both wanted to go to a new country and experience new things and change our lifestyle.

“When the opportunity arose, we took the plunge and said let’s go over.”

The two had known each other since their pre-teen years, engrossed in Northern Ireland’s tight-knit soccer circle.



*FC Edmonton teammates and Northern Irish internationals Daryl Fordyce and Albert Watson embrace after a Fordyce goal at Clarke Stadium in 2013. (Photo by Tony Lewis)*

Professionally, they joined the Irish club Linfield FC in 2011, played there for two years and won back-to-back Irish championships. In 2013, they made the move to Edmonton, accompanied by their wives.

“The whole attitude is negative back in Ireland,” Watson says. “It’s not everybody but it’s there. People try to put you down and it just wasn’t working for us. We came here for a whole life change. Our wives work here, and it’s not a place where we go to play for nine months and go back to Ireland.

Fordyce adds: “It’s so refreshing out here that people are trying to help you, and we’re not used to that. When people want to help you back in Ireland you think of their ulterior motives or what do they want from you,

“This is our home,” Watson says.

Fordyce and Watson are two of only three foreign players who brave the frigid Edmonton winters in the off-season.

The transition wasn't easy though. When the pair got here, FC Edmonton was just finding its feet. As Fordyce says, the Eddies were a team, but not yet a club.

"I'll be honest with you, it was in shambles," Watson says. "The club wasn't sorted out and the staff that's in place now wasn't in place.

"We literally had four days to get out of the hotel to find our own place."

The pair soldiered on through a difficult first year. With the support of their wives and each other, the footballers focused their efforts on the pitch instead of the chaos off it. Watson was named the team's captain in his first year and Fordyce led the in goals, but it was their work behind the scenes that has brought stability to the club.

FC Edmonton is now a club in and out, and duo can focus their talents on their real goal, the NASL cup.

"I always grew up to be a winner," Watson says. "I was a winner before I came here. I'm not a 'nearly' person. It's all or nothing for me and it hurt that we didn't make it this season."

— MA

### **Big leaps and little steps**

The final whistle blows on the 2-1 victory over the Atlanta Silverbacks that concludes the 2014 season for the Eddies. FC Edmonton finished just shy of the NASL post-season, but achieved its highest points total in franchise history. Most of the players have gone back to their home countries – minus the three who have made Edmonton home.

FC Edmonton has seen its reputation rise, and attendance has followed suit. The win against the Silverbacks reinforced the club's reputation for strength at home; they are undefeated in their last seven matches at Clarke.

It's these little things that bring the rise to respectability.

On May 7, 2014, FC Edmonton defeated MLS side Montreal Impact in the first round of the Amway Canadian Championship semi-finals. A late 90th minute goal from West Vancouver native Michael Nonni sealed the deal against the first division side in what was the club's biggest win in franchise history. Despite the eventual loss in the round, FC Edmonton was the winner of that series – at least through the ensuing nation-wide discussion of the Eddies' clash with superior opposition. It proved professional soccer could exist here, first division or not.

It was a culmination of the club's commitment to the long-term goal of bringing professional soccer to Edmonton in defiance of the naysayers. The minds of few have begun to foster a soccer identity in a city that had been written off by past failures. It isn't a hypothesis any more; it's a full-fledged experiment.



*Clear skies over Clarke Stadium. (Photo by Tony Lewis)*