

WORLD CUP

# The World Cup is an obsession in North Jersey cradle of American soccer

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Every four years, around the time the World Cup kicks off, attendance at Harrison High School takes a dive.

"Tremendous absenteeism," said Mike Dolaghan, a town councilman, maintenance supervisor for the Harrison school district and soccer aficionado. "I know from past World Cups."

Next come the country flags — propped up in windows, fluttering from cars, draped across shoulders. The streets empty once a game begins.

"This town shuts down," said Kevin Manjarrez, president of the Harrison Futbol Club, a youth soccer organization. "You don't see nobody here. Everyone's home watching the games."

In neighboring Kearny, where a street sign once welcomed visitors to "Soccer Town, U.S.A.," the main drag, Kearny Avenue, comes alive after games — particularly when Peru or Colombia wins.

"You just drive around town and everyone's got their flags up," said Michael Mara, coach and treasurer of the Thistle youth soccer club. "I know other towns don't have people riding up and down their main street beeping horns and waving flags."

Other towns don't have the history of Kearny, Harrison or their fellow West Hudson community of East Newark, where these familiar scenes have been playing out since the 2018 World Cup opened in Russia on June 14.

American soccer was born on the banks of the Passaic River in Hudson County, flourished in immigrant enclaves stretching from West Hudson to Newark's Ironbound district, and reigns as the dominant local sport and, some would argue, obsession.

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"The people have fallen in love with soccer over and over and over again," said Tom McCabe, a history professor at Rutgers University-Newark who is working on a documentary and book about Kearny's soccer heritage. "It's a generational story now."

## 'Intersection of industry, immigration and sport'

The story began some 150 years ago with the arrival of Scottish and English companies like Clark Thread, Nairn Linoleum, Mile End Thread and Linen Thread. The mills and factories they built became draws for thousands of Scottish and Irish immigrants and, with them, the game of soccer.

Soccer fields appeared amid the smokestacks and towering brick buildings. Companies formed teams, workers formed clubs and communities formed a tradition.

At the Clark Thread Co. complex on Passaic Avenue in Kearny, workers would walk across the street to what is now the parking lot of the Tops Diner in East Newark and play pickup games at lunchtime, McCabe said. The United States and Canada played the first unofficial international soccer match on American soil on that field in 1885.

"You had this intersection of industry, immigration and sport," McCabe said. "They could just roll out of the mill onto the soccer field, and that was the mecca of American soccer for many years."

Harrison's soccer tradition can be traced to five German-owned breweries and their respective soccer teams, Dolaghan said. The breweries faced off against one another at riverfront picnics in Newark until the outbreak of World War I.

The town's Holy Cross Roman Catholic Church got in the game, too, establishing a league for the men of the parish, most of whom were poor Irish immigrants.

"Little did the clergy know that they were weaving the first threads of a way of life into the fabric of a community," Dolaghan said.

## **A tradition grows on 'the Courts'**

Dolaghan grew up playing soccer on "the Courts," a playground area across the street from the now-shuttered Holy Cross School. Built in the 1960s as a fenced-in tennis court, the space was quickly refashioned by local children into an asphalt soccer field.

It became a gathering place for soccer enthusiasts — nuns from the school included — and a training ground for the area's most famous soccer exports: John Harkes, Tony Meola and Tab Ramos. In 1990, the three were part of the first U.S. team to play in a World Cup in 40 years. They reunited four years later for the next World Cup, which was played in the United States.

James Harkes, John's father, watched his son play in both World Cups in person and still has trouble articulating what it was like nearly 30 years later.

"How can you describe it?" he said between sips of beer at the Scots American Club in Kearny on a recent afternoon. "Wow. It was bloody fantastic."

The elder Harkes came to the United States from Scotland in 1961, settling first in Detroit and then in New York City. Soccer and the Scots American Club, a social and soccer hub for the Scottish community, brought him across the Hudson River.

"The Scots are soccer-crazy, and the whole thing here was the soccer," he said. "This was the place to be."

James Harkes played for the club's soccer team for 15 years before turning to coaching. At its height, the club had hundreds of members, all of Scottish heritage. Today, Harkes considers himself an anomaly.

"There are maybe two Scottish people in here," Harkes said. "And I'm one of them."

As waves of immigrants from Portugal, Italy, Poland and, more recently, Latin America have changed the demographics in West Hudson, soccer has remained a constant.

"We've always been an immigrant town, and we've always been an immigrant area," Dolaghan said. "We all have a love for the sport. It's what we all rally behind."

The 2010 opening of Red Bull Arena, home of the New York Red Bulls professional soccer team, in Harrison strengthened that bond, said Manjarrez, the Harrison Futbol Club president, who is a coach and lifelong resident. The stadium stands just a half-mile south of the Courts off Frank E. Rodgers Boulevard.

"All the kids go to the games. I see whole families go to watch a game," Manjarrez said. "I used to never see that."

The team has forged a partnership with the area's soccer institutions, helping to pay for renovations to the Scots American Club several years ago, said Bob Anderson, a club board member.

High school games, particularly between Harrison and Kearny, are not as popular as they once were but still attract thousands, Dolaghan said. The Harrison boys' soccer team has won 25 state championships, a U.S. high school record. Kearny has had an edge as of late, beating Harrison in three of the last four match-ups.

"Every year is a battle," Dolaghan said. "It's something to look forward to."

Smaller clashes play out daily on the street soccer scene, which remains as vibrant as ever. Three years ago, Harrison was forced to raise the fencing around the Courts from about 14 feet to 30 feet because children were scaling it so they could play after the park closed for the night.

"We'd turn the lights off at 9 o'clock and the cops would leave, and then all of a sudden, the cops come back 10 minutes later and they're hopping over the fence," Dolaghan said.

"Everyone says it was to keep the balls in," Dolaghan said of the new fencing. "No, it wasn't; it was to keep the kids out."

## **Continued growth**

Children are still hopping fences in Kearny, said Mara, the Thistle youth soccer coach. With the recent closure of Gunnell Oval, a recreational complex that was long the centerpiece of Kearny soccer, space is limited, and players will do anything to get on a pitch.

"Anytime you drive by, morning to night, you'll see someone around training, whether it's on their own or kicking around, taking shots with friends," Mara said. "It's something I did when I was 14. You see kids doing it in the exact same pattern, like nothing's ever changed."

What has changed is the growing number of players. The sport has become highly organized over the past decade, Mara said, with some 35 youth soccer clubs in Kearny alone.

The increasing competition has driven the 45-year-old Thistle club, named after the Scottish national flower, to begin recruiting players from the age of 4 rather than 6 or 7, Mara said. It

has more than 20 teams of various age groups. The vast majority of them are Kearny residents.

"We're lucky that we have this pipeline and this proud tradition, where we have great players and a very strong interest in the game," Mara said. "I foresee that continuing and possibly getting bigger."

Many players never stop once they start. Mara continues to play recreational soccer with some of the same people he shared the field with more than 30 years ago as a 5-year-old. He picked up the sport from his father — one of the original coaches at Thistle — his two brothers and sister and has passed it down to his two sons.

"Being from Kearny, it was just what you did," Mara said. "I always knew we had something special that other towns didn't have."

Kearny's influence has extended beyond West Hudson over the years. The head coach of the Rutgers women's soccer team is a native of Kearny. So is the head coach of the Monmouth University men's soccer team. The associate director of athletics at Montclair State University is a Thistle alum.

The list goes on, in Harrison, too.

Tab Ramos, born in Uruguay and raised in Harrison, now coaches the U.S. under-20 men's national soccer team.

Dolaghan hopes to commemorate their achievements with an 8-foot bronze sculpture, for which the town began raising money last fall. The statue, of a soccer player, would tell the history of soccer in West Hudson. It would stand feet from the Courts.

"It's long overdue," Dolaghan said. "This is where it started in America. This is the cradle of soccer."

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