sports

Bend Over Beckham

Queer soccer team catches World Cup fever

by Karen Kudej

MONICA BURKE

Brian Carhart (second from left) formed the NetRippers after participating in Seattle's Rain City Soccer Club.

About 8,000 Portlanders turned out July 9 in Pioneer Square to watch the final game of the 2006 men's soccer World Cup, the most-watched sporting event on the planet. Countless others spent the weeks prior gathering around screens in cafes, pubs, community centers and living rooms to watch world-renowned players such as England's David Beckham, Brazil's Ronaldo and France's Zinedine Zidane put their experience to work on the field.

With Italy's victory over France, the World Cup came to an end for another four years. Promising young players such as Germany's Lukas Podolski, Portugal's Cristiano Ronaldo and England's Wayne Rooney will return to their club teams to wait for another chance at the cup. The U.S. men's team, which failed to advance beyond the first round of play, will have to wait to prove that it can compete on the world stage.

But the end of the World Cup doesn't mean soccer enthusiasts have to wait another four years to get a soccer fix. The British Premiership league, featuring many of the World Cup stars, resumes play in August. Play for Major League Soccer can sometime be caught on ESPN. Locally, the Portland Timbers play all of their August games at home at PGE Park.

For those more interested in playing the game than watching it, Portland has its own fledgling gay and gay-friendly team. The NetRippers formed in February under the initiative of Brian Carhart, who started playing soccer when he was in third grade and has been playing and coaching ever since.

He lived in Seattle for a while and was active with the Rain City Soccer Club. With eight teams and about 300 members, Rain City boasts that it is the largest queer soccer club in the world. Its mission is to provide play at all skill levels and "to provide members with a safe environment to meet like-minded people to socialize and play soccer."

When Carhart moved to Portland, he wanted to start something like that here. Although Portland has a large soccer community—the Oregon Adult Soccer Association covers close to 250 teams, not including indoor leagues—there has been no club specifically for queer players and their friends.

For Carhart, it's not that he's had issues being out on other teams. "I pick things up quickly and am a pretty good player, so I've been able to reel them in to accept me," he explains. "I play on two other indoor teams, but the social part isn't there."

Carhart hoped to put together a group of queer people who wanted to be out doing things and playing soccer. He advertised for the team on Craig's List, and word started to spread. Carhart will be leaving town before the fall soccer season starts, but the NetRippers will continue under new leadership.

One player who will be sticking around is Carlos Petry-Freeman. He's a defender and goalkeeper who, like Carhart, has been playing since childhood. He heard about the NetRippers through Team Oregon, which promotes athletic opportunities for the queer community in a variety of sports.

"It's about creating community within community," Petry-Freeman says. "But you've got to take those first steps."

At press time Petry-Freeman was in Chicago tending goal for the Dublin Devils at the 2006 Gay Games. There weren't enough players organized from Oregon to field a full team. Petry-Freeman found the Dublin Devils through a posting on the Gay Games Web site. Like the World Cup, the Gay Games happen every four years. After this year's cup, Germany will not host the tournament for a long while. But the 2010 Gay Games will be held in Cologne, Germany, and Petry-Freeman is hoping the NetRippers will have at least 18 players ready to travel by then.

In the meantime, the team continues to practice through the summer. It will participate in an indoor league this fall. All skill levels are welcome, and anyone gay or gay-friendly is invited to join the team.

For more information about NETRIPPERS *e-mail bendoverbeckham@gmail.com.*

KAREN KUDEJ *is a Portland freelance writer.*

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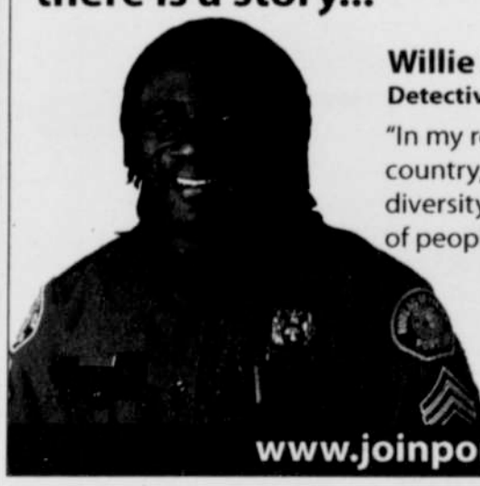

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