

A TIMBER AT FEVER PITCH

Eugene's Echo Squadron goes rabid as Portland Timbers earn a trip to their second ever MLS Cup Final

With a 0-0 draw in the first leg of the Major League Soccer (MLS) Western Conference finals in Portland, the second leg in Kansas City was expected to be intense for both sides but particularly challenging for the Portland Timbers.

Sure enough, the first half was very challenging for the Timbers, and most fans probably felt their team was lucky to be down just 1-0 at halftime after several close opportunities squandered by Sporting Kansas City.

Despite the disappointing first half, the local Timbers fans, known as the Echo Squadron, at Level Up Arcade, located at 1290 Oak Street, weren't overwhelmed with despair.

When halftime came around, longtime Squadron member and co-leader Preston Orr drew raffle tickets for various prizes before an impressively animated crowd. The crowd's positivity would have had you thinking the Timbers were winning or — at least — playing well if you hadn't seen the first half.

The arcade bar was packed. By the range of numbers called, it was clear that more than 130 raffle tickets had been given out. But the crowd seemed even bigger by the time the match ended — perhaps inquisitive onlookers couldn't resist the raucous roaring from the arcade on a Thursday night?

The fans' commitment and hope were rewarded — and their raucousness likely reached its climax — just seven minutes into the second half, when midfielder Sebastián Blanco netted a spectacular shot from at least 25 yards away.

Diego Valeri's face as he pressed his hands to his head in disbelief, described the outrageousness of Blanco's goal far better than words.

As a veteran attacker, last year's MLS MVP, and former teammate of Blanco when they won an Argentine league title in 2007 with their hometown team Club Atlético Lanús in the southern outskirts of Buenos Aires, Valeri probably had the least reason of anyone in the stadium to be awestruck by what his longtime comrade had just executed. It was simply that amazing.

With a newfound confidence after the most sensational goal of the playoffs, Timbers controlled most of the remainder of the match and finished 3-2, winning the Western Conference and earning a place in the MLS Cup Final to be played against Atlanta United in Atlanta on Saturday, Dec. 8.

Winning an MLS Cup Final on the road won't be easy, especially in front of a 70,000-plus home crowd at the Mercedes-Benz Stadium in Atlanta — where the average attendance for Atlanta United matches this year, according to *The Guardian*, "ranks among the top 15 for any club in the world."

Nevertheless, the Timbers are one of two teams to ever win an MLS Cup Final away from home (the other being Seattle Sounders). Saturday's final will offer an opportunity for the Timbers to become the only team to ever do so twice.

Although Level Up has warmly welcomed the Echo Squadron and other soccer fans for the last two years, it was booked months ago for a private party this Saturday. Managing partner Josh Docherty, though, assured me Level Up would be back in action welcoming soccer fans next season. Echo Squadron members will watch the MLS Final match at The Duck Bar & Grill at 1795 W. 6th Avenue.

The Webfoot Bar & Grill on E. 13th Avenue will also be showing the final at 5 pm on Saturday, Dec. 8 on several of their big-screen TVs. Find the Echo Squadron on Facebook at facebook.com/groups/echosquadronTA. ■



ACTIVIST ALERT

- On Dec. 10, Citizens concerned about the recent dire climate change reports plan a creative display to demonstrate the rapid rise of carbon dioxide in the atmosphere. The **350 Eugene Creative Climate Action** event takes place at Harris Hall, 125 E. 8th Avenue, preceding the Eugene City Council Meeting at 6:30 pm, and "is designed to bring attention to the worsening climate emergency and the need for local governments — including Eugene — to take bold action" according to event organizers.

- **St. Vincent de Paul's Holiday Joy Gift Giving Program** recruits community members and business offices to "adopt" more than 1,400 individuals and families for the holidays to support residents living in affordable housing or participating in a housing program. To adopt, contact Ashley Hensley, 541-743-7147 or ashely.hensley@svdp.us. "SVdP will provide application(s) including: first names, gender, age, clothing sizes, things they would like or need and possibly a little information about themselves and their background." Financial contributions can be sent to: Holiday Joy Department, P.O. Box 24608, Eugene, OR 97402.

- **SMART (Start Making A Reader Today) needs volunteers.** "SMART is an Oregon unique program that encourages the love of books and reading in young children by having the SMART Kids read every week for 1/2 hour sessions with the same volunteer SMART Reader," Barbara George, the site coordinator at Cesar E. Chavez says. "In most cases, the reader would volunteer for an hour, reading one-on-one with two SMART Kids, for 1/2 hour each." Readers are welcome to volunteer more. Twice each month the SMART Kids get to pick a book to keep, which George says, "is so awesome for the children." To volunteer go to getsmartoregon.org, go to how to get involved and register to be a reader or call 541-600-8035 to request a paper form.

- The Camp Fire, California's deadliest and most destructive recorded wildfire in Butte County, has claimed 88 lives with nearly 200 people still missing. **Also heartbreaking is the toll on wild and domestic animals in the area.** PetSmart in Eugene, with locations at 2847 Chad Drive and 2858 Willamette Street, has stepped up through the holiday season, at least, with donation barrels so that Lane County residents can contribute blankets, food, litter and other badly needed supplies. Lane County residents also can contribute through North Valley Animal Disaster (nvadg.org).

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