

Community Policing

Building Bridges on and off the field



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Special thanks to Louis-Riel Dome

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When I first interviewed to join Ottawa Police Services over a decade ago, a staff sergeant was interested to learn that I played varsity before turning semi-pro - in the now defunct Canadian Soccer League. He was even more intrigued when I mentioned my involvement with a grass roots community organization that engaged youth through sport. At the time I enjoyed the conversation, but I didn't see the correlation to police work.

However, this quickly changed, as I sensed that I was part of a generation of police officers who wanted to bring about new traditions within police culture. You see, starting in the 1990's, the Ottawa Police began to recruit in non-traditional areas. We realized that if we were going to serve the community we needed to strengthen our ranks, not by increasing our numbers but by diversifying them. From the values, interests and experiences of these new officers, a cultural shift soon emerged. Officers were now less engaged in traditionally favored sports such as hockey and football, especially the new recruits. They preferred a sport that had a wider appeal and this sport was soccer.

In our line of work, it's very important to know that when you are involved in a life threatening situation, your fellow officers will bail you out. We must also be able to relate to the neighbourhoods we serve in order for us to do our jobs properly. I personally feel my involvement in soccer has given me the ability to relate to people from every

background and culture. I can honestly say that I have probably played with, or against players from almost every country on this planet. I can't imagine any other sport would have exposed me in this way. The positive reaction of people when they find out I am an avid soccer enthusiast is very rewarding. They are able to see past my uniform and realize we have a common interest.



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As soccer gained popularity within the ranks of the police service, we began to organize weekly co-ed scrimmages to build camaraderie and promote fitness. As attendance grew, so did the quality of play. Because the police service continued to hire from a wider demographic group, more recruits joined the ranks with more than just a passing interest in soccer. Before we knew it, competitive players began to join our

scrimmages, many coming from local clubs, while others had played soccer in university. We even managed to attract a recruit who played on the Canadian women's National Team and whose international experience is certainly an asset!

The infusion of soccer fostered more than just camaraderie, it also brought about a fundamental shift in the way we viewed community/police relations. We realized that soccer, thanks to its sheer popularity, was more than just a sport; it was an opportunity to engage youth and bring about a positive difference in their lives. We began forming teams and reaching out for matches with local schools, community groups and even club teams. The Ottawa Police soccer teams participate in the annual Community Cup at Brewer's Park and officers donate their time to coach and instruct youth from marginalized communities. We also maintain partnerships with agencies such as the Boys



and Girls Club. The Ottawa Police Diversity and Race Relations section annually runs the Soccer Youth Mentoring Program. Some of our graduates go on to play at the local club level, which would not have been possible without these programs.

Beyond scrimmages and community engagements, many of our players hone their skills by playing for local club teams. In fact, the women's team has been enrolled in the Ottawa Carleton Soccer League (OCSL) for many years. On the men's side, most players only play together at community games or police tournaments, as most have stayed loyal to their club teams. Chances are that most people have already come across a member of



Photo by Andrew Geddes Photography

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Ottawa Police Services on the pitch without even realizing it – we're usually the really competitive ones who hate to lose! We can also be found behind the bench coaching, or as parents, cheering on our kids from the sidelines.

On the competitive side, both the men's and women's teams have competed in numerous law enforcement tournaments. The proceeds raised are donated to charity and other good causes. Our travels have taken us across Canada, the United States, Central and South America, the Caribbean as well as

Europe and Asia. In 2007, the men's team won the Trinity Cup Championship and were runners-up at both the 2005 Stop the Violence Futsal Tournament in Washington, D.C. and the 2009 North American Police Soccer Tournament that took place right here in Ottawa. Our women's team has yet to win its first championship, but we expect great things in their future.

Long standing Carleton Raven's Men's Soccer Coach, Sandy Mackie, is a former Deputy Chief with Ottawa Police Services. I remember when as he handed me my badge,

he whispered in my ear that had he known a Laurentian soccer alum was applying, he would have immediately "lost" my application. To this day, I'm still not sure if he was kidding!

This brings me back to the wise Sergeant I mentioned earlier; I now realize what he saw in me during our seemingly random conversation. He knew that anyone who is passionate about sport probably has the qualities required to be a good police officer. Sport not only brings people together, but reminds us that we all share a common bond. Soccer transcends the barriers of race, class, gender, age, religion and culture. As police officers, these are critical issues we address every day which impact the lives of everyone we serve.

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"Together we achieve more."



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