



A free ball attracts a crowd. Schoolcraft's Lisa Griffin (left) and Jennifer Belhart (middle) and Livonia Hawks' Marcie Hart close in on this one.

In contention

Indoor soccer carves out own niche

By C.J. Rissak
staff writer

When the drabness of winter, the blackened snow and barren trees is replaced by the sprouting green of spring, spirits naturally soar.

Why? Because baseball season has arrived. When the leaves are metamorphosed once again, this time into the brilliant reds and yellows and oranges of fall, Saturday afternoons become a week's focal point.

Football, with its entourage of tailgate parties and betting pools, has taken command.

And when that first soft, white blanket of snow carpets the landscape, it brings with it another message. Move indoors — it's time for hockey and basketball.

EACH SPORT, a season. There is overlap, of course. But for the most part, sports are identified with a certain time of year.

Soccer has thirsted for an audience like those commanded by baseball, football, hockey and basketball. But the king of sports worldwide remains secondary in the United States. One reason could be its lack of seasonal identity.

When is soccer played? In Michigan high schools, girls play in the spring and boys play in the fall. Then both join club teams for the summer.

Attempts to peg soccer with a single season have failed. Or maybe never really tried. And with the advent of a new variation of soccer — indoors, on a smaller field — perhaps it never will be.

Indoor soccer has blossomed into a sport with a stat-all its own in the last decade. To be sure, it is a direct descendant of the 11-man game so popular on every other continent.

BUT INDOOR soccer cannot be lumped together with other sports that attempt to stretch year round, like basketball or hockey or, indoors, football. Indoor soccer has accomplished something other major sports have not.

While variations of other sports act merely as a bridge between seasons, indoor soccer has evolved into something more. The indoor version of the game is indeed more popular than its outdoor ancestor. And noting Americans penchant for action, it will probably remain that way.

Professional outdoor soccer has long since died; the indoor pro circuit, however, is still alive and kicking. "The skills are the same," said Nick O'Shea, comparing the two. "But the strategy is totally different indoors. With less players, there's more room to operate."

O'Shea, a Livonia native who coaches girls outdoor teams at Schoolcraft College and Livonia Churchill, played outdoor soccer at Oakland University and, later, for pro indoor teams in Kalamazoo and Toledo. He currently plays indoor under the dome at the Canton Softball Center.

GAME TIME for O'Shea's team — which also features Marty Hagen, another OU grad (from Troy, Athens), Gary Meixotte, a Livonia Stevenson alum now at Bowling Green State; Wally Barrett, Southfield's boys coach; and Bobby Neumann from Schoolcraft College — is 10 p.m. Sunday nights.

Canton is one of five indoor facilities in the metropolitan Detroit area. Others are Total Soccer, which has two locations — one in Farmington Hills and another in Royal Oak; Square Lake in Bloomfield Hills; and Lakeshore in St. Clair Shores.

Two former Detroit Express players, Brian Tinnion and Gus Moffatt, and Redford Catholic Center coach Paul Scelluna are co-owners of Total Soccer. The Farmington Hills arena opened five years ago as Four Seasons Soccer. Before being restructured for indoor soccer, the facility was South Downs Tennis Club.

Tinnion was first exposed to indoor soccer when he played in England. Although similar, the English-style indoor game had waist-high fences and goals, instead of the hockey-style boards that surround fields here.

'Five years ago we had 250 teams playing in leagues. This year we have close to 400.'

— Brian Tinnion,
Total Soccer

THE AMERICAN-BRAND of indoor soccer was introduced after an exhibition featuring U.S. all-stars against a Russian team in Philadelphia in 1977. Earl Foreman was one of those in attendance, and it inspired him. He became one of the founding fathers of the Major Indoor Soccer League, and served as its first commissioner.

The sport has grown, slowly but steadily, in the last decade.

"Five years ago," said Tinnion, "we had 250 teams playing in leagues. This year, we have close to 400."

And five years ago there was just one facility, compared with five currently.

The indoor season starts in the fall and lasts until spring. Total Soccer operates about eight hours each weekday, on weekends, with kids out of school, doors open Saturday at 7 a.m. and don't close until 2 a.m. Sunday, then reopen again at 7 a.m. Games last one hour, by running clock.

There are as many contrasts as there are likenesses when comparing indoor with outdoor. Indoor resembles hockey with the ball: six on a side (including the goalie), played on artificial turf surrounded by hockey boards. Like hockey, in indoor players are shuffled in and out of the game in shifts, unlike outdoor, which is slower-paced but requires players to run further and for longer stretches.

THE INDOOR GAME also accentuates talented players.

"If you have skill, it shows," said Lisa Griffin, O'Shea's assistant coach at SC and a player on SC's women's indoor team. "Dribbling skills stand out here. And one thing playing indoor, if you make a mistake, you don't dwell on it. The play comes back to you too fast."

Jennifer Flowers, SC's most valuable forward at the NCAA outdoor tournament (a championship captured by the Lady Owls), is like many soccer zelos. "I like outdoor better," she said. "You get tired faster (indoor). And it's much faster-paced."

But Flowers did agree with Griffin. "Indoor takes more skill," she said. "You can tell an unskilled player here easier."

Which is why the "more well-rounded players" compete in indoor leagues, according to O'Shea. And that's what indoor soccer is aimed at, said Tinnion.

"THE ADVANTAGE of indoor soccer is, five years ago the national team consisted of players from places like California, Texas, Florida — where the weather was warm year round," he said. "In Michigan, a kid could play only in the spring or summer."

"If a kid is going to play on a national level, he has to play year round. Indoor soccer has grown tremendously in the last 10 years, and it will keep growing. It's the only way (for a player) to improve."

What both Tinnion and O'Shea are hoping for is a backlash. Indoor soccer was hatched from the outdoor game. Can the reverse be as successful?

"We need a professional outdoor league back, if the U.S. is ever going to compete internationally," claimed Tinnion.

O'Shea agreed, and saw hope on the horizon. "On June 30, they're going to announce if the U.S. gets to host the World Cup in 1994," he said. "If we do, people will go crazy."

That could lead to a popularity explosion for soccer — and a business boom for indoor arenas everywhere. Soccer could become the sport for all seasons.

Birds, tourist flock to mission

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The cliff swallows were certainly building their cone-shaped adobe nests out of twigs and river mud when Father Junipero Serra built Mission San Juan Capistrano out of twigs and adobe mud in 1776, but the colonists on the Atlantic coast were too busy with the American Revolution to notice.

Swallows like high eaves even better than high cliffs, so the birds were nesting beside mission roofs when the great events of the day were taking place — When the great stone church was completed in 1886, after nine years of hard labor, and when an earthquake knocked it down six years later. When Mexico gained its independence from Spain and the mission system began to crumble. When California became part of the United States and the California gold rush began.

THEY WERE there, but nobody really noticed until a priest called Father St. John O'Sullivan came along in 1910 and decided to dedicate the rest of his life to restoring Mission San Juan Capistrano.

It took a lot of money to rebuild the gardens, fountains and walkways, so the fund-raiser in him

responded when the newspapers noticed a curious fact — the swallows usually came back to Capistrano about March 19, St. Joseph's Day and Father Sullivan's birthday.

All of which set the stage for the morning in 1939 when songwriter Leon Rene heard a radio announcer say that the swallows were on their way back to Capistrano. A song was born and Mission San Juan Capistrano was on the tourist map for good.

As you say, the disc jockeys play the song every March. Sure, and it wouldn't surprise me, if Father St. John O'Sullivan celebrated St. Patrick's Day and the swallows every year during the same week!

The swallows hadn't returned to Capistrano when I visited the mission this winter, although there were clouds of pigeons sitting on the old roof tiles, making silhouettes beside the old church bells and flying over the remains of the old stone church, which still dominates the front courtyard.

Today, you enter the mission through a gate on a town street, but the old Spanish mission architecture is still there after 212 years, wrapped up in wonderful old trees, fountains and rose gardens.

Wander the pathways into a second large courtyard, where the adobe bricks were once made, and you see several old buildings set amid the fountains and flowers. The most important is the tiny Serra Chapel, where Mass has been said every day since 1776.

A GLORIOUS floor-to-ceiling altar covers one wall of the chapel in gold. It provides one of the many colorful stories that have been told and retold at the mission over the years. When the 300-year-old altar from Barcelona, originally destined for the Los Angeles Cathedral, was sent to Capistrano at Father O'Sullivan's request, it arrived in 395 pieces, packed in 10 crates, with no instructions!

The swallows will be at San Juan Capistrano until Oct. 23, St. John's Day, when, tradition says, they go south. Entrance fee is \$2 for adults and 50 cents for children. A tour of the mission can be rented on tape for 75 cents.

For more information, contact the Mission Visitor Center, 31882 Camino Capistrano, Suite 218, San Juan Capistrano, Calif. 92675. For the rest of Orange County, write the Anaheim Area Convention and Visitors Bureau, 800 W. Katella Ave., P.O. Box 4270, Anaheim, Calif. 92803.

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