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Direct From Winnipeg, ‘Fox Soccer Report’

By [JOHN DOYLE](#)



Fox Soccer From left, Michelle Lissel, Bobby McMahon and Asa Rehman of “Fox Soccer Report.”

It was cold when I landed in Winnipeg to visit the “Fox Soccer Report.” Ten below zero. But the welcome was warm — Bobby McMahon picked me up at the airport.

It’s not usual for the star of a TV show to greet a visiting journalist at the airport. In my day job I’m a TV Critic and I’ve visited many TV shows. Usually a harried publicist with an agenda meets me. “Fox Soccer Report” doesn’t have a designated publicist. It doesn’t even have a Web site. Photos of the hosts are not available, if you ask, as I did. “Fox Soccer Report” is a different kind of TV show. For a start, it’s located in Winnipeg, Manitoba. Think Winnipeg, if any sports fan in the U.S. thinks about it all, and you think hockey. The Winnipeg Jets, newly revived N.H.L. team. But soccer?

And yet it is Winnipeg, specifically a corner of the 30th floor of the CanWest Plaza, that houses the nightly show on Fox Soccer that’s a daily fix for soccer fans across the U.S. Goals,

highlights, league tables from around the world, cheeky remarks and analysis. The hosts — currently Derek Taylor, Michelle Lissel, Eoin O’Callaghan and Asa Rehman — plus the bonus of Bobby McMahon offering cogent analysis and stats, Scottish accent gratis, on Mondays and Fridays. Everybody who follows soccer in North America probably knows the show. Fox Soccer goes into 32 million homes. Yet hardly anybody realizes it comes from a tiny studio at the top of what is one of the tallest buildings in Canada. The tallest between Toronto and Calgary, Alberta, that is.

Yes, Winnipeg. Early December. This is definitely not America. In November, online discussion of the report and countless Twitter remarks expressed puzzlement at the mustaches being worn by the male anchors. That, for the information of American viewers, was for “Movember,” the movement to have November a month when men grow mustaches to raise money and awareness for men’s health, specifically prostate cancer. [Movember](#) is huge in Canada. Celebrities and politicians sprout mustaches and this year Canadians raised more than \$36 million, by far the largest sum raised by any country in the world. So there.

Why Winnipeg? The answer isn’t an easy one for Americans to grasp. It’s a [Canadian Content](#) thing. In 2000 Canadian broadcaster CanWest Global applied to Canadian regulators to launch 36 specialty, digital channel licences, including channels for baseball, extreme sports, classic sports and a world sports channel. It got six, including FoxSportsWorld Canada, a channel to carry soccer, cricket and rugby, with Fox Television as a junior partner. Canadian regulations require every channel to contain Canadian-produced content, in the case of a specialty digital channel, 15 per cent Canadian content. CanWest was then owned by the Asper family (it is now owned by Shaw Media) whose empire was rooted in Winnipeg, the first TV channel it owned being Winnipeg station CKND-TV. It was decided to base FoxSportsWorld Canada right in the CKND-TV studios. The Canadian content — a weeknight sports round-up called “Global Sports Link,” would be produced there.

Long story short, “Global Sports Link” became “Fox Sports World Report,” soccer came to dominate the show and it went to seven days a week in the fall of 2003 in Canada, and on Fox Sports World in the U.S., which morphed into Fox Soccer. The little show from Winnipeg found a big, hungry audience.

I went to Winnipeg to write about “Fox Soccer Report,” its peculiar status as a Canadian show that is carried in the U.S. to viewers oblivious to its Winnipeg base, and to contribute to the show about the draw for [Euro 2012](#), because my other job is writing about soccer. After Bobby picked me up at the airport, there unfolded an eye-opening behind-the-scenes look at the report. First, we picked up Eoin O’Callaghan at the dentist. Eoin was simultaneously cursing the cold, the dentist and laughing at the North American obsession with teeth. As Irish people do. Then we drove on to what Bobby called “the secret location” where his Soccer Report Extra podcast is recorded. This turned out to be home of Luke Crofford, the report’s producer. After mugs of tea in the living room and hello’s to Crofford’s wife and daughters, who were going about their business, we descended on a makeshift studio in the basement. For an hour, Bobby, Eoin and yours truly sat at a microphone, and argued about the Euro draw, while Luke monitored it all on his laptop.

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The chemistry between McMahon and O’Callaghan is obvious, whether on the TV show or the [podcast](#), and it’s one of the TV show’s great strengths. The Irishman and the Scotsman, needling each other about this and that. Joshing. O’Callaghan is a young Irishman who arrived in Canada two years ago. His freelance reporting from the Winter Olympics in Vancouver got him noticed and the report hired him, big ears, cheeky grin and all. McMahon, who played soccer at every amateur level in Scotland, immigrated to Canada in 1979. When I wrote about “Fox Soccer Report” for my TV column in Canada I described him as an accountant, which he is, but he hasn’t done an accountant’s work for years. He was the chief operating officer of the 1999 Pan American Games, held in Winnipeg, and since then has consulted for various sports tournaments all over Canada.

Bobby had been writing a weekly column about soccer for the Winnipeg Sun when he came joined the “Global Sports Link” 10 years ago. “When we found Bobby, the show had authority, an integrity about soccer,” Joe Pascucci, sports director at Global Winnipeg, said. (Joe was the guy who got the call from a CanWest Global boss in 2001 saying, “Can you do an international sports-news show out of Winnipeg for this channel?”) He’s correct. McMahon is a soccer analyst of some genius and a captivatingly droll TV presence. He is that rare combination of a stats man and a storyteller. The precision of his statistical analysis is matched by the dry wit. He has a natural authority, one that undermines the current sports TV fad for having only ex-professionals analyze games. He also drives carefully in icy conditions, I can report.



Fox Soccer Bobby McMahon is an accountant/soccer analyst.

After recording the podcast, Bobby dropped me at my hotel. An hour later I was to report to the show’s office. A short walk in the terrifying cold took me there. The “office” is a tiny corner of the CKND-TV newsroom. Local TV news celebs — the news anchor, the sports and weather people — move around, ignoring the presence of an internationally renowned soccer show. Taylor, Lissel, Eoin O’Callaghan and Rehman share a space about the size of an average kitchen table. They do all have their own computers, though. Taylor was keeping an eye on the Fulham-Liverpool game and filling in the gang on events. (Lissel was on vacation the day I visited.) Taylor is a wit, an easy-going TV presence. He told me he was a general sports guy, not a soccer specialist before he joined the show. “I compare and link soccer issues with other sports I follow personally, like the N.B.A.,” he said. “Some soccer followers don’t like that. But, what the hell, hardly anyone follows only one sport.” He added: “Working with Bobby is a gift. There’s nobody like him for analysis.”

Rehman is the newbie and the serious young man of the gang. He’s only been with “Fox Soccer Report” since April, still growing into the role but he has a long history with soccer. Born and raised in Vancouver, he has played soccer at every level since he was 5 years old. It was his Fijian father who instilled adoration of the game, and bequeathed a devotion to Dutch players

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and coaches. “When I was a kid, I asked my dad, ‘Who’s the best player in the world?’ ” Dad said, “ ‘Ruud Gullit!’ So I looked up everything I could about Guulit and developed this fascination with the Dutch. You know, they’ll win the Euro, right?”

The show is on 364 days a year. If my day there was any indication, the content evolves easily and organically from the day’s events in the soccer world and the instincts of the hosts for the night. Luke Crofford is the “producer” but, as he emphasized twice: “I’m not the executive producer. I help put the show together.”

The show’s odd status — Canadian-produced in Winnipeg but the flagship program of Fox Soccer in the U.S., with distant bosses in Los Angeles — is both a bonus and a drawback. Nobody is quite sure why there isn’t a Web site (and the show is not carried in high definition). Is that a Winnipeg or L.A. thing? A Fox representative in L.A. told me the show will get a makeover in January and the situation might change then.

For now it’s the hosts who hustle the show together with Crofford. That’s where the magic is — these are reporters and anchors who are genuine enthusiasts, unencumbered by a network agenda. They like the freedom, they like what they do, and that’s obvious. They experience international soccer like most followers, from TV and the internet, and that connects them intuitively to the soccer viewer watching at home. In a way, it helps to be in remote Winnipeg. Most Fox Soccer viewers are remote from major soccer centers.

The studio from which the show emanates nightly is a small room with white walls. Before “Fox Soccer Report” uses it, CKND-TV has aired the local Winnipeg news program from the same room. And used the same news desk. When “F.S.R.” viewers see the Fox Soccer logo on the desk in front of the hosts, what they see is a tiny railing on wheels that has been positioned in front of the CKND logo. The giant stock photo of a crowded soccer stadium that appears behind the hosts is a green-screened onto the wall. If you’re in the room, all you see are bare white walls.

What is even more bewildering is that the nightly production of “Fox Soccer Report,” though based in Winnipeg, isn’t actually directed from there. Or from L.A.. The show’s director is, who is in Calgary, at another Global TV station, about 800 miles from Winnipeg. The cameras are remotely controlled from Calgary, with Joe calling the shots. The show is just another news show for Kunkel, slotted between local news shows he directs as suppertime news slots move from east to west across various Canadian cities according to the time zones.

I sat, astonished, beside Neil Devenny, one of the show’s two technical producers, as the night’s offering unfolded. On one screen I could see and hear what was happening inside the studio — Eoin and Bobby hashing out the E.P.L. weekend games — with bare white walls, and on another I could see what Joe in Calgary saw from different camera angles, the image viewers saw on TV. Neil Devenny’s job was to time everything and continually tell Eoin that he had lost thirty seconds or gained ten seconds as the show’s planned content unfolded. Not an easy job if the two hosts decide to improvise a debate about a referee’s controversial call at some game.

The New York Times

Eventually I was ushered into the studio and appeared on-air for six minutes. My book about soccer was mentioned and the Euro 2012 draw discussed. It's a disconcerting experience to appear on a TV show you've watched for years. You've argued with the hosts in your head and then you're doing it for real. Disconcerting but easy once you know, as I did by then, that hosts and viewers are considered all part of the same soccer-fanatic gang.

Later Bobby dropped me at the hotel. It was even colder then when I arrived. But I knew as I dashed through a few seconds of fifteen-below zero cold, that I'd spent the day with the people who make the best, most-fun soccer show on TV. That warmed me, even in Winnipeg.

John Doyle is a columnist for The Globe and Mail in Toronto and the author of "The World is a Ball: The Joy, Madness & Meaning of Soccer."