



GETTING THEIR KICKS

During Regina's Labour Day Classic and Winnipeg's Banjo Bowl, it's the fans who really know how to get in the game

by John Campbell

The air is perfumed with the scent of booze, tobacco smoke and a more pungent leafy substance. Wayne's World, a private home and party central near Regina's Taylor Field at Mosaic Stadium, is rocking. Painted faces and beating drums greet a fleet of buses from Winnipeg that are disgorging foot soldiers into the fray. Dressed in blue and gold, these clansmen have arrived from their stronghold 570 kilometres to the east. It's Labour Day 2008 and the siege has begun. ▶

Sides have clearly been chosen as insults rain through the warm air. "Riders suck!" cries one out-of-towner. "Bombers suck!" echoes back a swift if not particularly inspired reply. The bravado is a necessary prelude to the fact that, in a few hours, titans in shoulder pads will be pushing, shoving and thunderclapping into one another on the turf of Mosaic Stadium. Blood will, in all likelihood, flow. Bones may break.

Great fun for the whole family, actually. Traditions usually are. And when it comes to prairie traditions, few dip back further than the annual Labour Day weekend tilt between the Canadian Football League's Winnipeg Blue Bombers and Saskatchewan Roughriders, staged nearly every year since 1950 in Regina.

The second-most anticipated game in the CFL schedule, for fans in Canada's western heartland at least, the Labour Day Classic has evolved into nothing less than a mini Grey Cup – particularly so in 2008 when the game was a rematch of the 2007 final won by the Riders. The electric atmosphere, throngs of visiting fans, pageantry and high drama suggest the afternoon's clash is more than a mere football game. Indeed, it's a battle for

(here and opposite) Saskatchewan Roughrider and Winnipeg Blue Bomber fans alike gather for the annual Labour Day tussle at Regina's Mosaic Stadium (shown, previous page).



guaranteed a 100 per cent occupancy level for that Friday, Saturday and Sunday," she says. With rates running to \$200 per night, the numbers pile up like beefy linebackers atop a quicksilver running back.

"The Labour Day game has taken on a life of its own," says Roughrider president and CEO Jim Hopson. He happily admits that the event's success is a fan-driven phenomenon that requires nothing in the way of promotion from the club. "Our biggest challenge is filling demand for tickets."

Local interest was particularly high last year as the defending cup champion Riders compiled a 6-2 win/loss record by the end of August despite an unbelievable rash of



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bragging rights between two very similar small-market franchises whose sometimes not-so-friendly feud is a metaphor for the determination and spirited work-hard/play-hard ethic of prairie people themselves.

The gridiron rivalry has breathed colour into the early fall, pride of place into the cities and considerable dollars into local economies for nearly 60 years. Sellouts are all but guaranteed now for the Regina contest as well as the return bout the following weekend in Winnipeg (a.k.a. the Banjo Bowl). Feuding, it seems, is good business as the faithful criss-cross the provinces to fill each other's stadiums, restaurants, bars and hotels.

"Is there a spike in business on Labour Day?" Kay Koot asks rhetorically. "Every hotel in the city will say 'yes.'" The general manager of the tony 235-room Regina Inn and Hotel Conference Centre has worked in high-end accommodations in New York and Toronto but has never encountered the hue and cry that accompanies this fierce matchup. "We're

misfortune and economic reality checks. Injuries had decimated the team's starting receiver corps. Former head coach Kent Austin had jumped ship in the off-season to take a job at his alma mater, Mississippi State. And all-star quarterback Kerry Joseph had been moved to the Toronto Argonauts to free up room in the operating budget. (The CFL mandates a \$4.2-million salary cap for its eight franchises, and retaining the services of the league's 2007 MVP would have eliminated the wriggle room the Riders needed to acquire other vital players.)

Despite these challenges, the Riders simply kept winning (and would win again this day by a 19-8 score, extending their Classic winning streak to four straight). Consistent sellouts, buoyed by a league-high 22,500 season ticket holders, has created a playing environment arguably unlike anything else in Canadian professional sports. "Team Green" T-shirts, hats and jackets are almost mandatory fashion statements in this

football-mad province (and never more so than at Classic time, when merchandise sales top a quarter million dollars in a single weekend, according to CEO Hopson).

The faithful work themselves up to a near-religious pitch prior to the Bombers' arrival in town. Indeed, one fan from deep inside the Grain Belt, identifying himself only as Prophet, called in to an AM radio show before last year's game to connect the dots. The Riders' recent spate of injuries was like the biblical trials of Job, he said. And, as Job was rewarded by God for his perseverance and faith in the face of adversity, so too would He redeem the Riders.

Before the 2008 kickoff, the atmosphere at Mosaic Stadium is part carnival, part Roman encampment. All due credit goes to a new generation of fans that is far "less inhibited" than their forebears, observes Hopson with some understatement. Capes, bangles and beads, full-body paint and outlandish costumes speak to the human need for

lavish display. Elvis is here along with aliens, the infamous Watermelon Heads and unique "fan-thing" creatures adorned in team colours. As DJs provide a booming backbeat of classic rock and hip hop, there's even an undeniable sexual tension in the air – definitely so in that part of the stands where an attractive young woman is wearing a T-shirt that boasts "Blue Girls Do It Better."

There is always the possibility that things might turn chaotic, of course. Over in a parking lot, where barbecues roast meat and tailgate parties are in full swing, a trio of young men from Winnipeg are doing their best to torch a T-shirt bearing a slogan offensive to Bomber ideals. Their failure to do so rouses equal measures of scorn and support from bystanders dressed in Rider Green and Bomber Blue. Then good-natured smiles break out all round as the trio give up their efforts and return to their cans of beer hidden in hand-held styrofoam coolers.

Alcohol is banned in the public places

surrounding Mosaic Stadium, of course, but putting the brakes on festivities attended by an intimate group of 30,985 is a tricky job – one that Winnipeg has struggled with too. "Tailgate parties themselves aren't illegal, as long as there is no consumption of alcohol," Winnipeg Police spokeswoman Constable Jacqueline Chaput told the CBC, when authorities in the Manitoba capital announced plans in 2007 to curb the pre-game alcohol-fuelled Banjo Bowl tailgate parties. "Anyone found to be consuming alcohol [in parking lot areas] may receive an offence notice under the Liquor Control Act." Those words do not deter serious revellers, and stadium security and law enforcement officers tread a fine line between tolerating the fun and keeping the environment safe for all fans, including the very young and very old – both of whom generally mingle quite peacefully among even the noisiest knots of juiced-up yahoos.

If it's true that the Dallas Cowboys are "America's Team," then it can be readily

argued that the Saskatchewan Roughriders are Canada's team. An exodus from the province during the economic downturns of the 1980s and '90s means that there are now Saskatchewanians in every CFL city from Vancouver to Montreal. The Rider diaspora turns stadiums across the country green when their team rolls into town – an estimated 10,000 Rider fans invaded Calgary's McMahon Stadium during a 2008 game, for instance.

Throwing a wet blanket on that kind of free-spending, ticket-buying demographic would be flatly anti-entrepreneurial. In any event, a total clampdown is likely not feasible, especially not in Regina. Winnipeg's Canad Inns Stadium, which is surrounded by light industry and controllable shopping centre parking lots, can be patrolled more readily. In Regina, on the other hand, residential homes in established neighbourhoods trim the apron of Mosaic Stadium. This brings a significant X-factor into play,

including Wayne's World, the most visible, possibly largest tailgater of them all.

Wayne's World is a modest bungalow on Mosaic Stadium's west side, at best a stone's throw from the entry gates. The home belongs to Wayne Kuntz, who for the past four years has entertained a large, free-flowing contingent of primarily Winnipeg

Western Senators, says these unscripted events in his backyard have humble origins. "It happened by accident one year," he explains. "I was sitting here with a friend when these guys came by and said they had nowhere to party and could they join us." The guys in question were Winnipeg residents Brett Sylvester and Ken Burns, who



(here and opposite) In early fall, hard-nosed baby boomers, the iconoclastic YouTube generation and even preschool squeakers meet on friendly turf where the common denominator is football.



fans with canned music, door prizes and a lively but relaxed conviviality that allows for the downing of pre-game beers and the venting of pro-Bomber sentiments. Telltale tendrils of reefer smoke thread their way through the youngish crowd at Wayne's. While Canadian social scientists and law courts have wrestled with this bugbear and its impact on society, there seems little point in denying that marijuana is an attendant component of outdoor cultural events, including the Labour Day Classic.

Kuntz, a bass player with Regina's Grammy-nominated polka band, the

had rolled into town with a small entourage of family and friends. "Wayne told us, 'Yeah, bring your friends. C'mon and have a drink,'" recalls Sylvester.

This introduction sparked a standing friendship and the debut of a new business. Burns and Sylvester now operate All-Star Tours, which specializes in shuttling busloads of 'Peggys to Regina for the big game. These fans off-load at what is now known as Wayne's World, and there they party until it's time to filter into the stadium. The bus ride across the prairies is itself a rolling bacchanal – though, again, the consumption

of alcohol is technically prohibited. (All-Star Tours' policy paper spells that out.)

Still, the Labour Day run is an unbridled hit that last year saw the company pack six Regina-bound buses, each bearing 52 passengers at a per-head cost of \$289 (includes transportation, two nights hotel lodging, a T-shirt and game ticket). The expeditions appear to have the full endorsement of the Bomber organization. "Jeff [Bannon] from the Bomber shop meets us in Brandon with lots of giveaways," says Sylvester. The only downside: Limited ticket availability. The unprecedented sale of season tickets in

Regina has curtailed seats open to operators such as All-Star Tours.

Kitty-corner to Wayne's World, a rockabilly trio has set up on the front lawn of another private home and is serenading the masses with a medley of cranked-up, Dick Dale-style instrumentals. The Regina band Let There Be Theremin describe their sound as "skapunksurfably," and their thumping bass lines, note-jumping lead guitar and effusive drumming create a downright surreal mood. The Mosaic-bound fans turn giddier still as they pause to soak up the music and ramp up their own internal

Elvis is here along with aliens, Watermelon Heads and "fan-thing" creatures.

voltage. Others actually hunker down as though this impromptu gig had been their original destination. LTBT's unexpected presence here deepens a well-founded conviction that the Labour Day Classic is not essentially about football, but rather about the fans themselves. "Marketing genius" cannot create this kind of atmosphere. It is organic to the core.

"The highlight of that gig was having some guy from Winnipeg with full Bomber regalia and an accordion jump over the picket fence and jam with us," says LTBT guitarist Dave Kapp. "Skapunksurfably knows no

boundaries." Stand-up bassist Darren Stovin agrees that the first Sunday of September is infused with a rare party atmosphere. "Taylor Field is always electric but never more so than on Labour Day," explains Stovin. It starts with the Bomber fans. "Thousands travel from Winnipeg for the weekend. Regina Inn is more like a zoo. Flags are hanging from the balconies and fans are blowing their horns out the windows and raising a ruckus all night."

True enough, confesses the Regina Inn's



Kay Koot. While the weekend is essentially fun and features its own obvious economic advantages, there are "necessary precautions"

Regina rockabilies, Let There Be Theremin, crank out the tunes for Mosaic-bound fans.

that need to be taken. "We have to make sure we don't book one group of fans next to fans from the other team," she says. "We don't want somebody climbing over the balcony to tear down the other guy's flag. That's happened!" ❏

and the fans twanged on

The Canadian Football League understands the value of regional rivalries and has scheduled four sets of them on the last weekend of the summer in recent years. Also butting helmets during Labour Day Classics: the Calgary Stampeders and the Edmonton Eskimos renew the fierce "Battle of Alberta"; the Toronto Argonauts travel to Hamilton to face the Tiger-Cats; and the BC Lions either host or visit the Montreal Alouettes (though this matchup, by CFL standards, is less a feud and more an ongoing snit). League slogans such as "watch the team you love play the team you love to hate" fuel passions. And a smart back-to-back, home-and-away game policy keeps them burning for at least a fortnight.

The Bomber/Rider game, held nearly every year since 1950 in Regina, sets the stage for a return engagement the following weekend in Winnipeg. The rivalry has always been intense, but in 2003 hostilities ramped up thanks to the Bombers' free-spirited kicker Troy Westwood. Rider fans are "a bunch of banjo-picking inbreds," opined Westwood, himself a Saskatchewan-born product.

The fallout was predictable, and the Winnipeg player showed contrition. "I was wrong to make such a statement and I'd like to apologize," he told the media. "The vast majority of people in Saskatchewan have no idea how to play the banjo." Meeting irony with irony, Rider fans brought banjo-like props to the next game in Winnipeg. Bomber brass, realizing money couldn't buy this kind of marketing, promptly billed the 2004 post-Labour Day engagement with the Riders as the "Banjo Bowl." The feud continues and the name has stuck. ❏ -J.C.

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