



Calgary District Soccer Referees Association

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Origins of the CDSRA

Written by Steve Papp, April 2022

The Calgary soccer community has a long history of FIFA referees. Since the 1980s some of those names include: Ann Blackwood (FIFA AR and National Referee), Mike Seifert (FIFA referee), Drew Fisher (current FIFA referee), Mike Barwegen (current FIFA AR) and numerous other nationally ranked officials (Referees, Assistant Referees, Assessors and Instructors). Each one of these people made it to the pinnacle of their soccer referee career because they were members of the CDSRA. This organization has had an impact on the development of soccer referees that has reached far beyond the city of Calgary.

Local soccer referee associations started to pop up across the country in the 1970s and 1980s to provide a social environment for referees to meet and discuss how they may have responded to various different scenarios on the field, to support one another emotionally, and to build a community of officials who were looking to improve the game through the growth and development of strong, competent officials. In many cases, the local soccer referee associations were also responsible for assigning referees to all of the games in their district.

In 1980-81 the game of soccer was really starting to grow in Calgary. Businessman and millionaire Nelson Skalbania had just purchased the Memphis Rogues, that were part of the North American Soccer League (NASL), and brought them to Calgary. This was the highest level of professional soccer that was played in North America at the time. Spectators, fans, players and local referees were treated to great football at McMahon Stadium during the outdoor season, and then at the Corral during the indoor soccer season.

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Calgary_Boomers

Bringing the top footballers in North America to Calgary helped grow the game at the grassroots level. Getting to see the best players and the best referees allowed Calgarians to see the potential for the growth of football in Calgary. Player registration numbers started to grow and with an increase in the number of players, there was also a need for more officials.

In the early 1980s there already existed two separate and unique soccer referee associations in Calgary. One of the associations was specifically for youth referees who worked exclusively with the youth leagues and minor soccer players. The second soccer referee association worked specifically with referees who worked only on senior or adult leagues. The 'minor' association had refs that they scheduled to referee their games, and the 'senior' association had refs that they used to schedule for the senior games.

In the early years of the 1980s, there were discussions between these two associations about whether it was important to continue to have two, or if they could amalgamate and become more efficient as one association. (Ann Blackwood)

Throughout the discussions there were concerns among the minor soccer referee association. The youth association was concerned that they would lose some of their better referees who would want to go and work in the senior leagues that were perceived to be more challenging and competitive than the minor leagues. The senior organization was concerned that their best referees could be spread too thinly as they would be asked to referee both youth and senior games.

Ultimately in 1983, it was decided that both of these associations would merge into one larger soccer referee association and thus formed the Calgary and District Soccer Referee Association, the CDSRA (Ann Blackwood).

With the formation of the CDSRA, the association now had the ability to draw from a larger group of referees to cover the growing number of games in the city of Calgary that were being scheduled. The CDSRA was responsible for scheduling the officials for all of the games in the city's leagues (minor and senior, men's and women's), which worked well for all parties (the local leagues and the CDSRA). The CDSRA consisted of a strong group of referees who knew one another well, who worked together often, and who were starting to build an educational portfolio that was being recognized across the country as a revolutionary way to train and prepare referees.

In the early years of the CDSRA, if a person wanted to become a referee in Alberta, all they needed to do was to prepare and then write an ASA entry level exam. There was little to no education used in preparation for this test. Once the test was completed by a potential referee, and a passing grade was achieved, these new 'referees' would soon get their Alberta Soccer Association referee badge in the mail, along with their schedule of games to officiate from the CDSRA.

There was no formal referee education in Alberta (or Canada for that matter) before the existence of the CDSRA. One of the first things that the CDSRA started was a multi week optional course that was offered to referees once they completed (and passed) their entry exam. This course that was offered by the CDSRA and was optional for referees to take. The course was not for free. Referees who were interested in developing themselves to become better referees were strongly encouraged to take the course.

The course ran one night per week in a classroom at SAIT for 2-3 hours a night. Referees signed up for the six-week course that was designed to help them learn how to better understand the laws of the game and how to apply the laws effectively as they learned more about the game. (Kim Chalmers)

At first these six-week courses were only offered to adults. There was not much of a need at this time for training and developing referees. Most community clubs in the city were still responsible for training and developing their own youth referees.

Over the first few years of the CDSRA's existence, FIFA referees like Ann Blackwood and Mike Seifert, discovered that there was more that they could bring to the soccer community in Calgary from their experiences and their education that they had been a part of in National and FIFA events.

In the early 1980s, indoor (boarded soccer) was the new game in town. The games were played at the Atco Facility which was stationed near the intersection of Crowchild Trail and 50th Ave SW. The fields looked similar to what they do now, but were housed in a 'temporary' facility where the current Atco buildings are now.

Indoor soccer was new, and there were some rules to the game, but they hadn't been standardized yet or published anywhere. Mike Seifert and Kieran McGarrigle of the CDSRA, created the first written version of the Rules of Indoor Soccer in Alberta in the mid 1980s. As members of the CDSRA, they were changing the way that this game was played. Their Rules of Indoor Soccer were soon published for referees across Alberta, so that the game could be standardized and the Rules would allow for Provincial competitions following these newly written Rules. These two referees took the ideas of the fluid indoor game that was being played, and built it into a nationally recognized game with a book of rules that didn't exist before that all leagues in provinces could follow.

Mike and Kieran also discovered a need for referee training and development to become more regular and consistently available. Once a referee had passed the entry level exam, there was little other training and development. Kieran and Mike questioned why there wasn't any additional training available for referees. Over the years they saw many referees who were very forgetful of simple laws of the game, mostly because they didn't go through any education about Laws of the Game. Mike and Kieran started to offer refresher courses at the beginning of each new season. The purpose of the course was to get referees together so that they could look through the Laws of the Game (or the Rules of Indoor Soccer) and engage referees in conversations about how to best understand the Laws (Rules), how to apply them effectively, and what the spirit of those Laws (Rules) were when they were written.

Today, the refresher courses that we attend twice each year, is the standard for all referees across Canada. This concept was begun by the CDSRA in the vision that Mike and Kieran had for the betterment and the development of the game.

As Mike and Kieran were travelling across Canada (and the world) for games and tournaments, they shared with others the work that they were doing with the local soccer referee associations. People around the world were amazed by how much these two referees were doing locally, and the impact that their work was having on the development of referees and the game of soccer in Calgary. The game was able to develop at such a rapid rate in part because the officiating became so much more consistent and of a higher standard that could be relied upon due to the training and education by the CDSRA.

Since 1983, the CDSRA has been the envy of many soccer referee associations across Canada. We typically have one of the largest membership bases, and through our exceptional instructors and education programs, we know that our association has had an immense effect on the growth and development of the game of soccer in Calgary, specifically through the growth and education of referees.

This article would not have been possible without the wonderfully enlightening telephone conversations that I had with Ann Blackwood (April 18, 2021) and Kim Chalmers (Feb 25, 2022). I want to thank them both for sharing their memories and stories about the CDSRA that have helped to create this article.