

Men's hockey team wins the Friendship Four, but tournament is about more than just hockey

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I. The Troubles

18 years after The Good Friday Agreement ended over 30 years of violence in Northern Ireland, the UVM Men's Hockey team won the Friendship Four tournament in Belfast Nov. 26.

In what is now known as "The Troubles," Protestants and Catholics violently clashed in Northern Ireland for over three decades.

The city of Belfast in Northern Ireland was the site of much of this violence and division, and during "The Troubles," it would have been almost unthinkable for the city to host a peaceful hockey tournament.

However in the second annual Friendship Four, hockey fans and youth groups of all religious affiliations packed the SSE Arena in Belfast to watch four division one hockey programs compete in the "Belpot."

The UVM men's hockey team traveled to Belfast for the entire week, using the time to engage with the community and visit many of the sites they had learned about during their semester-long class on the conflict.

II. Homecoming

The trip was also a sort of homecoming for several people involved with UVM athletics. Senior forward Brendan Bradley was born in Belfast, and his dad is from the city.

"My dad doesn't really say much about it, but obviously we had to get out of there. When you're younger you have no idea," Bradley said.

With familial ties to the area, Bradley has experienced firsthand some of the division and animosity between Protestants and Catholics that still exists to this day.

"I remember one time we were talking about something and one of my uncles who is from Derry, he was like what's his last name and my dad said the last name and they were like we don't like him."

Derry is the town in Northern Ireland where "Bloody Sunday" took place, a massacre that left thirteen civilians dead at the hands of the British Army, according to BBC.

In Jan. of 1972, several thousand people gathered in Derry for an Irish civil rights protest against what they felt to be discriminatory practices against their mostly Catholic nationalist community.

As the British peacekeeping forces in the area began to arrest protesters, violence erupted and thirteen civilians were shot dead by the British Army.

Former UVM athletic director Bob Corran was the Athletic Director when the trip was being arranged last year and like Bradley, he also has ties to Northern Ireland.

Corran was born in Cumber, a town right outside of Belfast.

Although Corran's family moved out of Cumber, to Canada, when he was nine years old, much of his family still lives in the area.

For Corran, who attended the tournament, it was the first time that he had been back to Belfast since he was a child.

"This was pretty neat to go back and see because I had not been back since we left," Corran said.

UVM senior forward and Burlington native Tom Forgione also has family in the area.

"My mom's side of the family is all Irish and she still has family living in Donegal," Forgione said. "Irish heritage is a big part of my life, my sisters Irish step dance and stuff like that."

Because of this, Forgione said that he already had a general idea about much of the conflict going on in the region.

However Forgione said that taking the class on the conflict this semester "really opened [his] eyes to how serious it really was."

Forgione said that his perspective on the significance of the Friendship Four tournament began to change after learning more about The Troubles.

III. A different kind of tournament

Similarly, first-year forward Ross Colton described the tournament as different than any of the other international tournaments he had played in before.

Colton is UVM's highest draft pick since Mike Paliotta went in the fourth round in 2011, and is no stranger to the international stage.

"When I was younger I went to Iceland, Sweden and Canada a bunch of times," Colton said. "I mean those tournaments were more hockey based where as this one it seems that there is more meaning behind it."

First-year goalie and Friendship Four MVP Stefanos Lekkas said that he had never been a part of a tournament that holds this much value to the public outside the game of hockey.

In addition, where many of the team's hockey trips leave little room for non-hockey activities, because the trip lasted the entire week, there was more room to do other things, Colton said.

Leaving time for the players in the tournament to get a full experience was one of the goals that Friendship Four Project Manager Shane Johnson hoped the tournament would accomplish, along with bringing together clashing groups for a unifying event.

Johnson, who played hockey at the collegiate and professional level, hoped to use the Friendship Four to bring people together, and add to much of the positive community development that has taken place since the end of The Troubles.

"Why don't we get kids to the game, and bring communities together. There has always been a history in Northern Ireland of divided communities and that's changed significantly over the years," Johnson said. "We wanted to do just something else to keep with that integration of communities."

One of the ways in which Johnson hoped to achieve this was by having the college athletes visit different schools in the area, which the Catamounts did on their second morning in the city.

Johnson hoped that these school visits would not only allow the teams to get engaged with the community, but that they would inspire the kids that they visited.

"One of the best things we've done with the tournament is to get the players to go out to the schools, because that gets the players to know the people of Belfast," Johnson said. "It's a way for the kids in Northern Ireland to hopefully get inspired, that these guys aren't just athletes, their student-athletes."

Forgione said that during the school visit, the team demonstrated some of their hockey skills to kids who had not really seen the sport before.

"[Hockey] is a sport we have played all our lives that they haven't been exposed to," Forgione said.

Both Forgione and Colton said the kids were extremely engaged throughout the visit, making it more valuable for both parties involved.

"The kids were eager to learn which made it a lot more enjoyable because if they were goofing off and stuff it wouldn't have made it very exciting," Colton said.

Max Daigle, a UVM first-year from Montreal, also found the school visit to be an extremely rewarding part of the trip.

"That was a pretty amazing experience," Daigle said. "It was cool to just drive through the town, and just see how rough of a life it really is, and then to see the kids be so happy."

In choosing the schools to visit, Johnson was sure to arrange visits with schools of all religious affiliations.

"We wanted to make sure that we got a wide range of schools, we showed no favoritism whatsoever so we basically went Northeast, South, West Belfast," Johnson said. "We wanted to make sure that we weren't just going to a Catholic or Protestant school so we went to both."

Through things such as the school visits, Johnson said he hopes that the sport of hockey can continue to grow and gain popularity in Ireland.

Over 300 youth groups were in attendance at the Friendship Four tournament, with groups ranging from a dozen to one hundred, according to Johnson.

"We want to continue to grow it," Johnson said. "Hockey is still a relatively new sport for the people of Northern Ireland, it's still seen as a fringe sport to a lot of people."

IV. The Belfast experience

Upon arrival in Belfast, for one UVM player, it felt right at home.

"I thought parts were very similar to Montreal," Daigle, who is from Montreal, said. "More like the old port, I kind of felt at home."

Once in Belfast, the team took a tour around some of the parts of the city that had seen major violence and conflict in years past.

The tour was extensive, and the players were able to experience firsthand much of what they had learned about during the semester.

For Lekkass, the differences between the city centre and the parts just outside of the city were extremely noticeable.

"Getting into the neighborhoods today where you see the peace walls and you talk about obviously all the troubles that have happened there it kind of gives you that real view of the events that took place here," Lekkass said. "Where we are staying here in the city is very upbeat but then you drive up two miles and you see the other side of the story."

Despite learning about the divisions, for Daigle and Forgione, it was also shocking to see the extent to which they still exist.

"We knew while taking the class that it was divided," Daigle said. "But to really be able to see it in person and to kind of see the animosity that still exists was pretty crazy."

"What really surprised me is just how militaristic the city is, Forgione said. "There is barbed wire, and especially with the tour we just went on, there's still a lot of remnants of The Troubles and how it really affected the society."

According to Lekkass, because the players came in with background knowledge on the significance of the area, they were able to get much more out of the trip than people who came in without this knowledge.

"Taking the class has actually been a big advantage to us where we can go into this situation and get more out of it," Lekkass said. "I have friends on the other team that are going and they still don't really quite know the magnitude of what happened there."

For the Friendship Four Tournament, the team practiced and played all of their games at the SSE Arena in Belfast, the home of the Belfast Giants.

The Belfast Giants are a hockey team that was created in the year 2000, two years after The Good Friday Agreement.

Unlike some other soccer teams in the region, the Giants are not associated with any single religion or community, and instead aim to be non-sectarian and a safe space for all, according to The Irish Times.

One of the biggest rivalries in soccer, the rivalry between the two Glasgow clubs Celtic Rangers, have deep religious ties, according to BBC.

The Rangers have always been perceived to be a Protestant club and Celtic an Irish club.

Matches between the two teams have been marred by violence, and chants at each team's games have often been openly sectarian, according to BBC.

"I think the whole idea of the Belfast Giants, trying to make hockey a neutral sport is a very good idea," Daigle said.

Daigle said he found value in being a part of a tournament that was aimed at bringing people together in a similarly peaceful manner.

"To bring four Division I teams to go there just to bring everyone together is a very rewarding experience," Daigle said.

Bradley cited the unifying effect that the recent Chicago Cubs championship parade had as a way in which sport can really bring people together, and hoped that the Friendship Four could serve a similar purpose.

"What were there, 5 million people there? It didn't matter what religion everyone was," Bradley said.

V. The road to the Friendship Four

According to Shane Johnson, the seeds for the Friendship Four tournament were planted in the year 2010, when the Boston Bruins visited Belfast for an exhibition game.

"It goes back a long way, it goes back to when the Boston Bruins were here in 2010," Johnson said. "They ended up playing a select team from the Elite League that plays over here."

Johnson said that it was the first time that an NHL team had played in the city of Belfast.

The exhibition game attracted a large crowd and several college hockey teams took notice of the event. Relationships began to form that would ultimately set the stage for the creation of the Friendship Four.

One of the people that came to the initial Boston Bruins scrimmage in Belfast was current Mayor of Boston, Marty Walsh.

"So relationships were forged then," Johnson said. "And then in the background these conversations happened. It was like what else can we do?"

When Walsh became the Mayor of Boston in 2014, according to Johnson, one of the first things Walsh did was to enact a symbolic sister city agreement between Boston and Belfast.

Following this, wheels began to churn on creating something between the two cities that was tangible.

"The idea of hey maybe we can get a college hockey tournament here was just a fantastic idea," Johnson said.

Ultimately, through the cooperation and coordination between several different groups, the first Friendship Four tournament took place on Thanksgiving weekend of 2015.

"There was a lot of hard work involved in getting a number of different community and government and city initiative groups together to make it happen," Johnson said.

At UVM in 2015, Athletic Director Bob Corran saw the tournament as a unique opportunity for the men's hockey team.

"When it first came up we thought it would be a really great opportunity for our student-athletes," Corran said. "These don't come along very often, they really don't."

Because the tournament took place during UVM's week long Thanksgiving Break, Corran said he saw an opportunity where the student-athletes could travel to Belfast for the week and have a true cultural experience without missing class time.

Corran proceeded to lobby the Hockey East commissioner's office for UVM to be a part of the 2016 Friendship Four.

"This was a great opportunity for them so we lobbied pretty hard to get Vermont as one of the teams to go this year," Corran said. "The fact that there was a connection between UVM and Belfast, I'd certainly hope that was helpful."

VI. A chance to look forward

Although three current Catamounts have already been drafted by NHL teams, several players on the team have professional aspirations and used the Belfast experience to see what professional hockey was like in another part of the world.

For Tom Forgione, who is a history and political science major, the tournament was an opportunity to explore a possible professional hockey career in Europe.

"I'd love to play somewhere in Europe," Forgione said. "I think that would be pretty sweet. Even in Ireland or in the English League I think that would be pretty cool."

Although Forgione said that he would be "fine" with not going pro, he did say that he would like to play a couple seasons at the professional level.

If not, Forgione said he may be interested in going into the field of law.

Similarly, Daigle said that he is interested in playing hockey professionally and used the trip to gauge the popularity of the sport overseas.

Lekkas said that the opportunity to get an inside look into how the Belfast Giants work was a valuable experience.

"It kind of gives you a little bit of an inside look on how that gets operated," Lekkas said. "Coming from a college hockey player, you don't really get to see how European professional hockey works."