

Iceland's soccer team has eyes on world championship

By Roger Newman

Icelandic soccer fever is heating up again in Gimli.

It reached a peak last summer when Gimli pubs were filled with large screen TV viewers following Iceland's unexpected long run in the 2016 European Cup tournament. Iceland, one of the smallest countries in the competition, eliminated soccer superpower England and was undefeated in four games before bowing out to host France in the "Euro" quarter-finals.

Now Gimli soccer fans — including about 20 native Icelanders, hundreds of Icelandic-Canadians and just plain sports junkies — are glued to their TV sets and computers to see if players on Iceland's national soccer team can repeat their performance as giant killers. The challenge is even bigger this time as Iceland is currently attempting to emerge victorious from a group of six nations and qualify for the 2018 World Cup of Soccer in Russia.

"Iceland still has five games left in the qualifying round which is being held this year," says Gunnvor Asmundsson, a native of Iceland and long-time Gimli resident. "Our team is competing in a group of nations that includes



Tammy Axelsson and Gunnvor Asmundsson display the Icelandic national soccer team uniform that could soon be worn by a Gimli fan.

Croatia, Ukraine, Turkey, Finland and Kosovo."

With the crunch still to come, Iceland remains in contention after four qualifying games to-date. Croatia leads the group with 10 points but Ukraine and Iceland are close runners-up with eight and seven points, respectively. The remaining contests will be crucial in a qualifying round where only 32 teams out of more than 50 in nine groups will make it to the big showdown in Russia.

Asmundsson has a particular interest in the world cup because she wants a Gimli fan to watch the TV games clad in the official uniform of the spectacular Icelandic 2016 Euro team. The uniform — including a jersey, shorts and socks — has been autographed by all of Iceland's Euro players. It is currently being raffled to raise funds for Logberg Heimskringla, the Manitoba Icelandic newspaper which has survived for more than 90 years despite intermittent financial difficulties.

Asmundsson also hopes to re-live last fall's Euro Cup when Gimli's soccer fans congregated at the Ship and Plough pub, the Lakeview Resort bar and the 'Oldie' hotel to root for Iceland's team. "Because of the time difference, Ship and Plough owner Scott Carman opened his bar at 11 a.m. to let us watch Iceland's games," Asmundsson recalled. "It was a time when the community came together and I was happy to be part of it."

She is proud of Iceland's sports prowess, saying that the Icelandic women's soccer team is also doing well for a small country whose principal sports are soccer and handball.

"It was a group of Icelandic-Canadian — the Winnipeg Falcons — who won Canada's first Olympic hockey championship in 1929," she added. "Gimli's Dan Johnson led a campaign to seek official recognition for the Falcons and there is now a plaque honouring them at Winnipeg's MTS Centre."

The winner of the complete soccer uniform — a gift from Manitoba's Icelandic Consul Thordur Gudjonsson — will be drawn Wed., May 10. Tickets are available at the New Iceland Heritage Museum and the Ship and Plough.