

# Croatians end NCSSL drought

Prince George Croatia waited five years to sip from the Cariboo Cup, but they more than made up for lost time on Saturday afternoon.

The celebratory beverages were flowing freely in the Croatia locker room after their 1-0 shootout win over Quesnel's Begbies Pub in the North Cariboo Senior Soccer League's Cariboo Division championship game.

In between sips, the players sang songs from the old country.

The locker room was hot and steamy. It was like a valve had been turned and the tension that boiled up inside the heavily-favoured locals was allowed to escape with a sweaty hiss.

"The game wasn't so beautiful to watch because we had everything to lose and we were uptight," says Croatia coach Nick Vukovic. "That tightness took away our freedom to play soccer."

But it didn't take away their ability to finish from the penalty spot.

All five Croatia shooters found the back of the net. Tom Brkich, Dennis Rukavina, Frank Kovasevic, Tien Mueller and Jon Lafontaine, the team's youngest player, beat Quesnel keeper Peter Kozic.

Kevin Sangha, Jim Nichols, Kewal Bagri and Rod Terry scored for Quesnel in the shootout while Paulo Serefini was the only player to miss from the spot as a diving Ivan Brkich turned the Quesnel striker's shot outside the left post.



**Tien Mueller, right, and his P.G. Croatia teammates celebrate Jon LaFontaine's winning goal in the shootout.** CHRIS SIMNETT/FREE PRESS

"I always knew we were going to win, even if it went into sudden death," says Vukovic. "We have a good core of players, I had the confidence to go with anyone and I knew they would score."

Vukovic's confidence should have been shaken by his team's inability to score during the 90 minutes of regulation time soccer and the 20-minutes of extra time.

Croatia dominated the game for most of the 110 minutes, but looked like they wasted their offence against

Honda North/Citizen the week before when they scored seven times.

"Last Sunday we couldn't miss and this weekend we couldn't score," says Vukovic.

But despite his team's lack of punch up front, Vukovic couldn't stop smiling.

"We are satisfied, we are happy," he says. "We expected to win. We knew from the beginning we were the team to beat."

"This feels great. We have such cohesion on the

team. Nationality, colour, race, it doesn't matter what it is. When you put on a Croatian uniform you are with us. It's a beautiful thing. I am proud to call myself Croatian."

Quesnel skipper and sweeper Kevin Sangha says the best team won on Saturday afternoon.

Two years ago it was Sangha's team that hoisted the Cup after dispatching Croatia in a penalty kick shootout so he wasn't too

upset when the tables were turned.

"They've got a great team," he says. "They proved it all around this year. Our guys put up a good fight for what we had to offer."

Gilbert Forestry had no problem scoring goals in the Rec Division final, thanks to Leo O'Connell. O'Connell had all three of Gilbert's goals as they won their first ever playoff title with a 3-1 victory over Croatia II.

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Please call the Minor Hockey office at 563-0303, to let us know that you are interested so we have some idea as to the number of people to expect. There is no charge for anyone coaching with G.P.G.M.I.I.A.

**INTERMEDIATE LEVEL:**  
There will also be an Intermediate Level Coaches Clinic to be held in Quesnel September 12 from 7 am - 10:30 pm, 13 and 14 from 8 am - 4 pm You must contact the Minor Hockey office to preregister for this clinic.

Any clinic fees will be reimbursed for those individuals who coach for the Greater Prince George Minor Hockey Association.

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