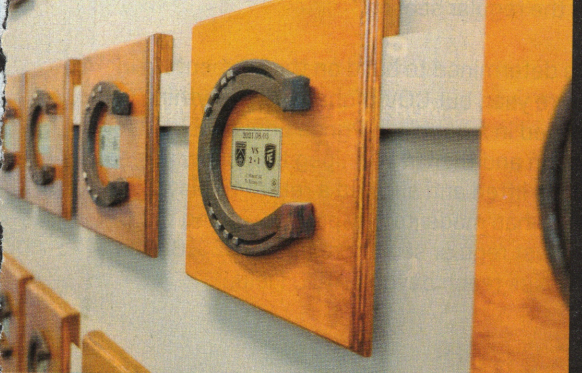




Photo by Riverwood photography



Photo by Riverwood photography



SENDING IN THE CAVALRY

Inside the dynamite pairing of Spruce Meadows and Cavalry FC

Written by Rennay Craats | Published by Melissa Mitchell

Calgary's professional soccer club started with a casual compliment about grass. At the Spruce Meadows Masters event in 2016, Tommy Wheeldon Jr. was introduced to Linda Southern-Heathcott, Spruce Meadows' CEO and president, and Ian Allison, Spruce Meadows' senior vice president, sport & media services and Cavalry FC president, and he mentioned being impressed with the grass in the International Ring. And as a soccer coach, technical director and former professional footballer, Wheeldon knew of what he spoke.

"For me, that's where the game of football is best played, on natural grass. I said, 'Have you ever considered having an exhibition or charity game here?' Because to me, it looked like an international arena with all the manicured grass and sponsorship around it," says Tommy Wheeldon Jr., Cavalry FC head coach and GM. "The conversation just developed from there."

The Southern family is no stranger to hosting world-class athletic competitions at Spruce Meadows, so bringing a professional soccer team to the facility didn't land far outside their wheelhouse. But it couldn't be just any team. It had to align with the family's values surrounding community, inclusion, education and excellence in order to work. Whether the athletes were showjumping equestrians or footballers, the goal would remain the same: to provide an opportunity to access a pathway for Canadian athletes to excel on an international stage.

"The football team aligned well with our mandate and what we had done in the equestrian sport, so it seemed quite seamless to put Cavalry in place," says Linda Southern-Heathcott, owner, chairman and CEO at Spruce Meadows Sports & Entertainment Group. "We already had the infrastructure so to expand our sporting offering at the venue seemed like the right fit, and it has been an excellent decision for us."



Ian Allison, Mason Trafford, Linda Southern-Heathcott and Tommy Wheeldon Jr. Photo by Riverwood Photography.

Things happened quickly from there. In May 2018, the Canadian Soccer Association accepted Cavalry FC for professional club membership, joining York9 FC in Toronto, HFX Wanderers in Halifax, Valour FC in Winnipeg, Forge FC in Hamilton, Pacific FC in Langford and FC Edmonton in the inaugural 2019 CPL season.

With the league in place, Cavalry set out to build the best possible team and fan experience. Spruce Meadows supplemented its existing infrastructure with a grandstand accommodating up to 6,000 visitors, players' locker rooms and lights for night games. Tommy Wheeldon Jr. left his position with Calgary Foothills to lead Cavalry FC, and now all he needed to do was fill the roster.

THE CAVALRY IS COMING

The first players signed were Nik Ledgerwood and Sergio Camargo, both from Wheeldon Jr.'s Foothills program. In fact, a dozen players on that Cavalry squad were hometown boys from Foothills who joined established Canadian players like Mason Trafford as well as skilled international players like Brazilian forward Oliver Minatel and German midfielder Julian Buscher.

When the 2019 CPL season opened, Cavalry was ready. The team won both the spring and fall seasons and pulled off an upset win against Vancouver Whitecaps FC in the Canadian Championship before losing to Montreal Impact in the semi-finals. Regardless, it was an incredible first season for the talented Cavalry squad; Wheeldon Jr. was

named coach of the year, keeper Marco Carducci was awarded the Golden Glove and Dominique Malonga was nominated as League Player of the Year.

"It was a very good season, and that points total has yet to be matched in the five seasons since," says Wheeldon Jr. "Right out of the gate we were the strongest team over the course of the regular season."

The team was determined to build on the momentum in their sophomore year, but COVID changed everything. The league played in a bubble in Prince Edward Island for the 2020 season and then in Winnipeg the following year until restrictions lifted and allowed a return to play. Since then, Cavalry FC has made its city proud, winning the CPL Shield for the best regular season team in 2023. But its biggest successes reach beyond ATCO Field.

BUILDING STARS

Cavalry FC supports its athletes' journeys and over the years has cheered on alumni as they conquer bigger markets. Two-time goaltender-of-the-year Marco Carducci was the first CPL player to be called to the national team in 2019, and defender Dominick Zator, now playing for Korona Kielce in Poland, was named to Canada's team for a CONCACAF Nations League match in 2019 and again in 2023.

Calgary was the first CPL team to sell a player to MLS when Joel Waterman left to don a CF Montreal jersey in

QUICK FACTS*

*AT TIME OF PRINTING

TOTAL LEAGUE GOALS SCORED SINCE 2019:

196

LEAGUE TITLES:

2

APPEARANCES IN MAJOR INTER-CONTINENTAL TOURNAMENTS (CONCACAF):

1

THE BEST HOME RECORD IN LEAGUE HISTORY:

43 wins

NUMBER OF INTERNATIONAL PLAYERS (2024):

7

NUMBER OF INTERNATIONAL PLAYERS (ALL TIME):

20

PLAYERS CALLED UP TO CANADA:
[ZATOR, WATERMAN, LOTURI, CARDUCCI]

4

ALUMNI APPEARING IN THE 2022 FIFA WORLD CUP:
[WATERMAN]

1

PLAYERS TRANSFERRED ABROAD:

5

NUMBER OF PLAYERS FROM CALGARY IN 2024:

10

NUMBER OF PLAYERS FROM CALGARY SINCE 2019:

27

2023. He represented Canada at the World Cup in Qatar in 2022 and also played at the 2024 Copa America. Mo Farsi moved on to the MLS champion Columbus Crew, and Goteh Ntignee was sold for a league-high fee to FC Annecy last year. Calgarians Victor Loturi and Aribim Pepple also traded their hometown for Scotland and England, respectively. Despite losing these players, Cavalry's amazing core led the team to victory, with Daan Klomp named both the League Player of the Year and Defender of the Year, Ali Musse named the Players Player of the Year and Tommy Wheeldon Jr. receiving his second



Canada Day at Spruce Meadows.

Coach of the Year award while also being shortlisted to lead Team Canada.

"Many of our players have used Cavalry FC as their stepping stone onto larger international stages, whether it be over to Europe or the MLS or into careers off the pitch," says Ian Allison, president of Cavalry FC. "We have a few others that have sunsetted their careers as athletes and then have a sunrise, whether it be administrative, coaching or football operations. So I think opportunity, community and inclusion are key elements of that."

The front office has benefitted immensely from that sunrise; after retiring from play, former Cavalry captain Mason Trafford became the club's commercial director, Oliver Minatel heads up recruiting, Tofa Fakunle is the assistant general manager, and Nik Ledgerwood and Jay Wheeldon are assistant coaches. These passionate players are now organizational leaders creating a foundation on which Cavalry's legacy can be fortified.

STRONG FOUNDATION

That foundation is rock-solid so that the next generation of Canadian soccer phenoms can use it to launch their careers. Of the 23 players on the CPL roster, at least 16 must be Canadian and three must be under-21 players who play at least 2,000 minutes during the regular season. This creates amazing opportunities for young players and inspires Calgary kids who see the starting lineup packed with products of the Calgary Minor Soccer Association; it makes their dreams seem possible.

Cavalry facilitates those dreams with a U21 squad and a U18 ID program to capture the best players coming out of Calgary first before coaches widen the net to recruit Canadian athletes in other leagues and finally reaching out to international players to fill out the roster.

The club's goal is to put the best product on the field today while encouraging and developing talent for tomorrow. In conjunction with Spruce Meadows' Leg Up Foundation, Cavalry proudly supports the Lucy Tries

Soccer school program that encourages kids to play sports and lead active, healthy lives using Lisa Bowes' illustrated book of the same name.

"The players go out, mostly to underserved communities or First Nations schools, and introduce kids to lifelong literacy and activity, and of course, try to build the brand and carry the alignment of what is possible," says Allison.

With 30,000 minor soccer players in Calgary, there is clearly significant interest in the sport, and Cavalry runs grassroots camps for youngsters just learning the game, outreach and street camps, skills centre programs for developing athletes and technical development for U18 and U21 athletes working toward becoming professionals. The club can't do it alone, and it is grateful for the community and business partners that have helped grow the game and club in Calgary.

BEYOND THE PITCH

Spruce Meadows has corporate and community relationships dating back 50 years, so it's a great model to emulate when trying to attract and retain sponsorship partners. Southern-Heathcott is happy to offer her insights to help grow the club, and Mason Trafford has taken the mentoring and done a fantastic job securing corporate support that aligns with the core values and path Cavalry FC is charting, from local businesses like Marmot Construction, Cascallen LLP and South Centre Volkswagen to national powerhouses like WestJet; from provincial corporations with global reach like ATCO to international brands like Carlsberg. These aren't cookie-cutter relationships either. Trafford tailors the experience to bring true value and ROI for partners, and support from these sponsors and others like them drives Cavalry's outreach, special events and operations.

Cavalry's growing popularity is a driver, too. The team continues to increase season's ticket sales, which sit at around 2,700, and draw more fans on game day. There are routinely nearly 5,000 Cavalry fans cheering them on at ATCO Field, with many wearing their hearts on their sleeves via the Cavalry logos on their chests. In a short time, an entire economy has been built around this sport, largely thanks to the dedication of the Spruce Meadows Sports & Entertainment Group ownership and the infrastructure the CPL has installed across the country.

Cavalry FC has had success on and off the pitch, and the forward-thinking club continues to seek out innovative ways to increase club awareness and grow the brand across Calgary and around the world. While all eyes are on North America as it prepares to host a shared 2026 FIFA World Cup tournament, Cavalry plans to keep their eyes



Photo by Riverwood Photography



Photo by Riverwood Photography

focused on building their audience in the Calgary market, continuing to produce amazing results on the pitch and collaborating with its partners to deliver a memorable experience for fans.

"What we want to do is build something for the future, something that will last long after we've hung up our cleats and passed on the keys so that somebody can inherit the groundwork that's been done for them and leave the community in a better place. This mission is a core value of Spruce Meadows and the legacy that the Southern family has invested in," says Tommy Wheeldon Jr.

Mission accomplished. Just ask any soccer fan - there's now no better place in the Calgary community than ATCO Field on Cavalry FC game day.

Connect with Cavalry FC

For ticket and hosting information, visit cavalryfc.ca/corporate-hosting. For any additional information or to speak with a member of the Cavalry FC staff, email info@cavalryfc.ca or call us at [403] 974-4567.



RID
WIT
US.