

A large crowd of football fans celebrating, many with green and white face paint and holding flags. The scene is filled with energy and patriotism, with fans of various ages and backgrounds. Some are holding up flags, while others have their faces painted with the colors of the national flag. The overall atmosphere is one of joy and unity.

FORGOTTEN NATIONS

The Incredible Stories of
**Football in
the Shadows**

CHRIS DEELEY

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Cascadia – America, But Not

HE Hive, Barnet FC's ground and training complex, is a sparkling example of the things that lower league clubs can do with the right investment and smart planning. Arriving there the day before the 2018 World Football Cup kicks off, there are some LA Galaxy II gazebos set up beside the 3G pitches, with watchful coaches and scouts looking for the next big thing at their trial session.

In another timeline, one or two of the Cascadia team might be strutting their stuff on those artificial pitches, looking to earn a move to a club in the States. In this one though, Cascadia find themselves shunted to the very edge of Barnet's complex – a few hundred yards from the slick stadium and high-tech pitches, on a pitch that wouldn't have looked out of place in an amateur Sunday League ground. Whose groundsman had died.

Jack Thorpe is the only man there – a Wolves scout who, in his spare time, has helped Cascadia coaches James Nichols, Shaun Gardner and Stuart Dixon put together a band of 20ish players to compete in London.

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He isn't happy.

'I think there have been some foxes on the pitch or something,' he says by way of greeting. 'There are holes just fucking ... everywhere.'

There are. There's a minor crater inside the centre circle – at least the pitch has been marked out (small mercies) – and a few smaller troughs scattered around, but the showstopper is about five yards outside one of the penalty boxes: a hole almost perfectly the size of a grown man's foot, which would swallow him to mid-shin.

It's an inauspicious start to Cascadia's first ever training session as a football team; a couple of coaches and 23 (actually 22 – one got lost in transit) strangers traipsing over to the outskirts of Barnet's training ground.

With the second-rate pitch and mismatched kits, it's hard not to feel a sense that these are the players the US has already rejected, just a few hundred yards away from trials for one of Major League Soccer's biggest teams.

That sense dissipates quickly upon talking to the players – partly because most of them seem too young to have been rejected by anyone but a school classmate yet, but primarily because the majority of them speak with London accents.

Not solely because of CONIFA's *sliiiiightly* loose criteria for player qualification, either.

Allow me ...

* * * *

The region referred to as Cascadia is pretty massive, consisting of (deep breath now) all of the state of Washington, most of Oregon, Idaho and British Columbia, some of northern California, and little bits of Montana, Wyoming, Nevada, Alaska and Yukon.

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It's not just a region, you see, it's a bioregion. Now, a glimpse behind the curtain: my original notes on this chapter read, at this point, 'Explain where Cascadia is. It's a "bioregion" full of hippies in North America. Now explain what a bioregion is, dummy'.

So now I, the dummy, will explain what a bioregion is in fairly short words – not because I don't trust your intelligence but because I don't trust my own.

One way to look at the idea of a bioregion is to consider a map as if the boundaries were drawn by nature, rather than being man-made and relatively arbitrary. It's an ecological, environmental region rather than one defined by population or political lines. It's a recognised concept – the World Wildlife Fund classifies it as 'larger than an ecoregion but smaller than an ecozone', which I'll grant is a spectacularly useless definition if you don't know what those are either, but the point is that ... it's a thing, okay? It's a thing. Of course, people don't usually adopt them as pseudo-states.

The defining feature of Cascadia specifically is (surprise!) the Cascade mountain range, which runs as a spine down what is generally considered Cascadian 'territory'. Full of coniferous tree forests, bears (some), coyotes (more), deer, elk, moose (more again), cougars (thousands) and wolves (fewer), Cascadia is a diverse ecological region. Apparently. I'm not an expert, but people who seem to agree on that point, so who am I to argue?

There are some volcanos there too, it being a mountain range and all that, although all but one are dormant. That one is Mount St Helens, which erupted in 1980. That eruption was the deadliest in United States history – if you're going, go big – and some more minor activity has been observed there in the decades since. I sat through a lot of geography lessons

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about Mount St Helens in a comp in south Wales maybe 15 years ago. Did not expect it to ever come up again in my life. A surprise around every corner in adult life, eh?

Anyway, that's Cascadia's boundaries and the briefest primer on bioregions, but what about the people who live there? More to the point, what about the people who live there *and* identify as Cascadian?

Given the traditionally left-wing political leanings of the north-west of the United States and British Columbia, it's not a surprise that a lot of self-identifying Cascadians are both politically active and left-leaning, usually uniting under the unofficial flag of the region: the Doug.

Named for the tree which features in its centre, the Douglas fir, the Doug flag's background is three horizontal stripes, blue over white over green. Designed by student Alexander Baretich in the 90s, the flag quickly earned near-ubiquitous status at protests and political rallies across Cascadia, particularly in Seattle and Portland.

Explaining his vision for the flag some years later – and indeed his vision for the region itself – Baretich said, 'The flag conveys something far more tangible than an abstract concept of demarcation of space; the flag captures that love of living communities in our bioregion. Unlike many flags, this is not a flag of blood, nor of the glory of a nation, but a love of the bioregion, our ecological family and its natural boundaries, the place in which we live and love.'

Like I said. Full of hippies.

But hippies with a point. In a continent doing its level best to ignore the encroaching threat of climate change, environmental awareness is *important as hell*. It's no coincidence that the flag also shows up at a number of the region's gay pride parades and Occupy demonstrations; it's

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become a symbol for people in the area who want to bring through important issues on the back of ... well, caring about the place they live, and the people who live there.

There are some looming threats to those ideals though. A number of white nationalists have piggybacked on the idea of a separatist, nationalist Cascadia. The region is already overwhelmingly white in its population, and the idea of a separated, ecologically classical 'utopia' has resonated with some people who many Cascadians would rather stay a long, long way away from.

One student arrested in Oregon for hate crimes in recent years had both a Confederate flag and a Cascadian one hanging in his room. White nationalist Jeremy Christian, who killed two people on a train in Portland in 2017 after shouting racist slurs at a pair of teenage girls, had called for 'Cascadia as a white homeland' on his Facebook page before the killings. It's clear that these people don't represent Cascadia or Cascadian ideology as a whole, but to ignore the existence of the movement would appear to be dangerously ignorant. What'll happen? Who knows? Predicting American political developments is like trying to guess which precious vase a drunk toddler might smash if you put them in a room full of them.

On to less delicate matters. Cascadia has three Major League Soccer teams: the Portland Timbers (whose fan group have adopted the Doug flag), the Seattle Sounders and the Vancouver Whitecaps. The trio played together in the United Soccer League at the start of this century, leading to fans creating the Cascadia Cup, a trophy awarded to the team with the best results in a mini-league between the trio in their league fixtures against each other at the end of each season.

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Seattle's entry to MLS in 2009 meant that they couldn't play for the cup for a couple of seasons, before Portland and Vancouver joined them at the top table in 2011. The competition has been remarkably evenly split since then, with three wins apiece for Vancouver and Seattle and two for Portland, and the matches are some of the most fiercely competitive in the competition. The rivalry is real, and if there's an area which has a claim to be the real homeland for fan culture in North America, it's Cascadia.

* * * *

Wolves scout Jack Thorpe has been the man on the ground in the months leading up to the tournament, scouring the lower leagues for promising players with Cascadian roots who would be willing to give up two weeks of their summer to play for nothing, for a team they've never heard of, with people they've never met.

Jack ended up bringing in more than half of the team, finding players who could be both eligible for the team and good enough to complement the handful of players who were coming over from the US.

'I heard from Paul Watson [Tournament Director of the 2018 competition] that Cascadia were struggling to get a team together,' he told me, 'so I thought it might be fun to help out. I started going through lists of non-league players off the top of my head who I was aware were vaguely American or Canadian and finding contact details for them to make the sales pitch.

'I did my best to make sure there were scouts from professional clubs at their games so that the players had a chance to put themselves in the shop window, which was a big part of the pitch to them.

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‘Patrick Wilson: I wasn’t aware of him as a player but his Football Manager profile said he was Canadian. He thought it was a bit weird that I’d found him “on a game”, but he joined up and then asked “hey, do you mind if my brother plays?” Turned out his brother is a pro in Denmark, which was a massive bonus. His brother (Jordan) vice-captained the team!’

For some players, the tournament does the job. Some summer fitness, a chance to get in front of some scouts. Not for all of them though.

‘One player, Anthony Wright, I know he’d been a pro at Forest so I knew he must’ve been half decent but I couldn’t find any contract information for him anywhere. I went to one of Banbury’s last games of the season to see him play, and I waited outside the ground for him to leave.

‘He was really down on football because he’d been taken off in that game, said he was going to go back to America and give up football but I convinced him to play ... I don’t think he’s played a single game of football since. He’s gone to uni, and I don’t even think he’s playing for his uni team. This was his last hurrah.’

The squad is augmented by a handful of actual Americans, led by former MLS star James Riley. The ex-Seattle Sounder had a storied career in the top tier of American domestic football, winning the US Open Cup five times, the MLS Cup once and, earlier in his career, helping New England Revolution to three Eastern Conference titles in as many years.

At the age of 35 and two years into his retirement, his announcement as Cascadia’s captain came as something of a surprise – dragged into the setup late on by a journalist who knew him from his playing days.

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Riley himself is a native of Seattle now, in many ways the heartland of Cascadia. Diminutive and softly spoken, he represents the opposite of what you might expect an American captain to look like, but he's as fiercely competitive as any American hero of years gone by.

Looking back at Riley's influence in the tournament, one member of the squad explained, 'He had a lot of respect, he's been there and done it, and he commanded that respect really well. Everybody was there to win, but he was *there* to *win*. It was surprising, he'd been retired for two years, but his competitive nature and the way he conducted himself was amazing.

'After our first game he brought everyone into the lobby and was like "right, now we're all going to go to the shops and get two bottles of Lucozade, two bottles of water, protein bars and all that", and it set a real example to the team that if you want to be a footballer, this is the way you need to be.'

There's only so much a captain can do though, no matter how respected they are, and the Cascadia team have known each other for a full 22 hours by the time the first match of the tournament rolls around. It isn't enough for some, with at least one audible whisper of 'sorry, what's your name again?' in the tunnel as the Americans come out to face Ellan Vannin – the team from the Isle of Man.

It takes just 15 minutes for Stephen Whitley to put the Manxmen in the lead, a rasping shot from the edge of the area flying into the roof of the net of teenage goalkeeper Will Marment. Nerves start to jangle among the Cascadia fans in the stands, knowing that this could easily become a drubbing, especially if that barely set glue holding the team together comes unstuck.

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If the opener came quickly, the equaliser is like lightning. A long ball over the top releases Calum Ferguson down the left, and the Scottish-born Canada Under-20 international holds off a defender to square the ball to Josh Doughty, who makes no mistake. It's 1-1, and the celebrations are as joyous as they are slightly confused.

Cascadia dominate the rest of the first half, but a blown marking assignment lets Ellan Vannin go into the changing room one goal up at the break. In the second half, the collapse finally materialises and the Americans finish on the end of a 4-1 beating, with captain Riley coming off with a combination of a muscle niggle and a lack of match fitness early in the second period.

On the pitch at full time, Riley tells me, 'They've been together for a while and they're the favourites here, but I thought we did well and had a chance to get a result. To lead out the first Cascadian team here is immense, it brings back memories of being in Seattle with the Sounders's inaugural game – how special it was for the Pacific Northwest, and for American soccer as a whole.

'I thought we were the better team in the first half, but the Isle of Man punished us for some mistakes in the first half. Disappointed to not get the result, but there are a lot of positives to take from our first game given that we met yesterday. For me the calf and the hamstring, plus old age – I told the coach to be aware of it. I pushed through in the first half, but I wanted to be able to push through for the double-header at the weekend.

'We have the players to make it into the winners' bracket; we're just trying to figure out who our best team is. It's almost a trial at the moment, and by the end of the weekend we should have our best team taking shape.'

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It takes just two days for him to be proved absolutely right, and heads are turned when goals from Hector Morales and, again, Doughty turn a 1-0 deficit against hosts Barawa into a 2-1 win, a match holding a significance to the tournament which wouldn't become publicly obvious until after the next round of games, leading to Ellan Vannin's eventual banishment from CONIFA.

With scouts from clubs around the UK keeping a close watch on proceedings at the World Football Cup, Doughty's good performances in back-to-back games have caught the eye, not for the first time.

As a 17-year-old, the Canadian moved from Real Salt Lake to Manchester United, drawing comparisons to Dimitar Berbatov from his Canada Under-20 manager. Delays with international clearance followed though, and the move dragged on. He arrived highly rated, despite the delay, and was clearly confident in his chances of breaking through at the highest level.

After his medical in 2014, he told an American website, 'I will be playing mainly with the United Under-21s; however, I might play with the Under-18s to get back up to speed. I can play for Canada, England and hopefully will be eligible for the US soon [but] I am still undecided on which team I will play for at the moment.'

United are a club famous for bringing through youth players into their first team but, unlike players like Timothy Fosu-Mensah, Andreas Pereira and Axel Tuanzebe, who are roughly the same age as the young Canadian, Doughty didn't break into the first team.

In fact, he barely featured for the Under-21s, where he had previously been so confident of making a mark. While Marcus Rashford, his United youth team-mate, broke into

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the first team to score four goals in his first two senior games, Doughty floundered. Quietly, over the winter of 2016, he left the club and returned to the US. Homesickness was given as a reason for his failure to adapt to life at United's Carrington training complex, and he more or less fell out of the game on a recognisable level until he popped up in Cascadia's squad.

In a Cascadia squad who bonded together almost instantly under James Riley's captaincy, Doughty stuck out like a sore thumb, clearly on the outside of the group, seemingly reluctant to engage with his team-mates. Whether it was a symptom of being burned by his time at United or a possible reason for his apparent failure to integrate away from home, it was obvious – and hard to determine the root cause of, because he wasn't keen on talking to me, either.

It didn't go unnoticed, one team-mate admitting after the tournament that he would never have guessed Doughty had been a highly touted prospect at one of the world's biggest clubs, and another questioning whether he took his time with Cascadia seriously.

He started the tournament well, though, scoring in each of the first two games and being offered a trial at Middlesbrough, playing in the second tier of English football. That trial might not have come if the scout hadn't left before full time, when Doughty was sent off for sparking off a melee by, as they might say in Wales, 'starting on' one of the Barawa players.

It didn't really matter though; he didn't take the trial, and went back to North America. The takeaway was pretty clear. He was a talented player – you don't stay at Manchester United for as long as he did without that – but there was something else going on under the surface.

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Sunday dawns and, just 24 hours after breathing life into their World Football Cup campaign, Cascadia face a do or die scenario. Again. Tamil Eelam have been the group's whipping boys so far, but Nichols and co come into the match knowing that just a win won't necessarily be enough, with their goal difference sitting at -2 after their opening game drubbing.

Sure enough, Barawa lead Ellan Vannin at half-time thanks to a strike from controversial striker Mohamed Bettamer, leaving the Americans with a mountain to climb. Goals from Tayshan Hayden-Smith and Jon Nouble – brother of former Chelsea and West Ham product Frank – mean that each of the three competing teams are sat on a provisional six points, but Cascadia are four goals off a qualification spot.

Barawa score one just after half-time to make the task a shade more manageable, but a stubborn Tamil team have kept the North Americans to just two more goals in the second half. With less than five minutes to go, Cascadia are set to be the only team to go out with two wins – until target man Nouble, an absolute unit, a 6ft 4in Gulliver towering above his team of Lilliputians, cuts in from the left flank and bends a brilliant, dipping shot around the Tamil goalkeeper from the edge of the area. It's like a mountain growing an arm and painting the Mona Lisa, like a volcano retraining as a nail technician. A force of nature can be beautiful, sure, but on an epic scale. This is precision, finesse, and detail. Cascadia, though they don't know it yet, are through.

All teams are granted a rest day between the group stage and the start of the knockout rounds. A good thing too, because three games in four days, especially when you have to push right to the finish line of your final match, is an absolutely knackered proposition. When your captain hasn't

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played in two years and is starting to creak a little, it becomes even more important.

There seems to be something about Sutton's Gander Green Lane though, the scene of that humbling opening day loss to Ellan Vannin. It's a warm Tuesday evening when Cascadia return to the scene of their first ever match to face Karpatalja, and the first half of the match ... well, the first half of the match isn't really worth spending much time on. Karpatalja probe and prod at the Cascadian side, who defend stoutly and break with pace. Nobody scores. Half-time arrives.

When the second half starts, Karpatalja get a massive slice of luck – a speculative shot from 25 yards out hit straight at goalkeeper Will Marment, who completely fails to gather it, parrying it straight back out into the middle of the box. Gergő Gyürki pounces, putting away the simplest finish in the world, and Cascadia are behind.

The second goal is a shambles of defending, one which Nichols is still fuming about at full time. Karpataljan defender Robert Molnar picks up the ball right out on the wing, just inside the Cascadia half. A quick shimmy takes him around Cascadia vice-captain Jordan Wilson, before two more men in blue, white and green shirts completely whiff on attempted tackles.

Patrick Wilson, Jordan's brother, is turned absolutely inside out in the penalty area before Molnar's eventual shot is *finally* blocked.

The rebound falls to Ronald Takács. He taps past a stranded Marment in goal to double the lead. Sometimes football isn't fair.

It's the second goal that finally wakes Cascadia up as dusk begins to set across south London, the pitch bathed

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in an orangey late-evening glow as North America's only representatives finally perk up and start to attack with vigour. Winger Max Oldham, later named player of the tournament by at least one publication, is at the heart of a number of the attacks. Driving forward powerfully, he creates a couple of half (really, quarter) chances before going through the middle of two Karpatalja defenders to set up Hamza Haddadi. He scores. With just ten minutes remaining, Cascadia are back in the game ... somehow.

It isn't enough. An absolutely monstrous kick from Karpatalja goalkeeper Béla Fejér takes out the whole Cascadia team, bouncing once on the edge of the penalty area and hanging high in the air as Zsolt Gajdos and Cascadia's Joey Censoni battle to win the header when it comes down again. Censoni pushes Gajdos in the back, the referee gives a penalty, and Gajdos (**FOOTBALL CLICHÉ ALERT**) dusts himself off to take the penalty and seal Karpatalja's progress to the semi-finals.

The dream is over. Exactly a week after the squad met for the first time, they've been knocked out of the competition they were assembled to win. It was, ultimately, a step too far.

* * * *

When I spoke to Oldham a little after the competition was wrapped up, he admitted, 'I think the idea of the tournament was really good, but it was a really hard job for the manager to pick a team because he didn't know everything about everybody. The scheduling though ... it was impossible. We played three games in four days, then we had the quarter-final after that. I think I played 90 minutes in every game and I was just knackered by the time the quarter-final came.'

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‘The guys from Karpatalja, they’d all played together multiple times beforehand, and had a much deeper bench. Their continuity and the fact that they could rely on people off the bench was a big part of the reason they were fresher and that they won that match. Add that into the fact that we’d just played three games in four days and that was that. They had some good players on their team though.’

It became clear just how good those Karpatalja players were a few days later when they eased through their semi-final against Székely Land, then beat Northern Cyprus on penalties to become CONIFA world champions.

As for Cascadia, their final two games – in the placement round, much to the chagrin of the coaches and players – provided a chance to hit back and prove themselves against the other beaten quarter-finalists. They took that opportunity with both hands against Western Armenia in the first of their two placement games, absolutely racing out of the blocks to shut down the Armenians and secure a 4-0 win, Calum Ferguson striking twice while Oldham finally got the goal his consistent performances had deserved.

The Corinthian-Casuals winger was one of a number of British-based players in the Cascadia team in London, fresh off an excellent season for Britain’s highest ranked fully amateur team. Now living in the capital, Oldham was born in northern California and grew up there, although he admits that he always considered himself an England fan through his father.

Oldham was one of a number of players in the Cascadia side playing while being acutely aware of the scouts from lower league clubs who came to London for a week to find some rough diamonds who could be cut and shined into full-time professionals. For him, 24 at the time of the tournament,

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it came at the perfect time of his career – nearing his prime, and standing out in a team who appealed to British clubs thanks to the number of players who already live in the country.

His performances earned him a three-week trial with Swindon Town, who were preparing for a season in England's League Two (the fourth tier of the English football pyramid, in that obvious and intuitive way that English football functions). That trial ended without a contract being offered and, despite some interest from clubs in the National League (fifth tier – again, yes, intuitive), Oldham ended up back at Corinthian-Casuals for the following season.

'It feels weird to say it,' he hedged, 'but I was aware that there was some buzz around my name coming into the tournament. The coaches and James actually came up to me before a few games to say "oh, such and such was here to see you play, or this person was here to watch you". Unfortunately none of it worked out, but the tournament certainly benefitted me in that way and I had some great experiences nonetheless.'

Oldham was one of six Cascadia players who featured in every one of the team's matches over the course of the ten-day tournament, but the fatigue implicit in that schedule didn't seem to manifest. Slow out of the blocks, they allowed a skilful Panjab team to race into a 3-0 lead before nicking one goal back as the managers' minds turned to their half-time team talks.

Calum Ferguson scored another brace within 15 minutes of the restart and Cascadia looked for all the world as though they would roar back to win the game inside 90 minutes and complete an incredible turnaround to secure fifth place in the tournament. Panjab stuck to their task, however, forcing a penalty shoot-out in which the first four penalties were

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missed. The next seven all hit the back of the net, though, before Keaton Leveck faltered to blacken Cascadian moods.

Ferguson ended the tournament as Cascadia's highest scorer by some distance, hitting the back of the net five times while none of the other Americans did so more than twice, but was forced to take a break from football after the summer when an ongoing back problem worsened, forcing him to crowdfund surgery in order to give himself a chance of returning to the pitch.

Injury would be a cruel way to cut short a promising career, the Scottish-Canadian forward starting his career at Inverness Caledonian Thistle (of 'Super Caley Go Ballistic, Celtic Are Atrocious' headline fame) and impressing enough to pick up a number of caps for Canada's Under-18 and Under-20 sides.

He bounced around the Scottish leagues for a couple of seasons before the injury which was inhibiting him became too much at the start of the 2018/19 season but, having only turned 24 in early 2019, he has time to bounce back and forge a career in professional football, if his body allows it.

Most teams across the tournament piled into their buses and made their way to Enfield to watch the final and pick up their medals, but the Cascadian delegation who climbed the steps to the roof of the Queen Elizabeth II Stadium for their trophy (oh yeah, every team got a trophy) consisted of just the coach and FA president.

Their reaction summed up the Cascadian approach to the tournament, and laid out exactly why they'll be such a threat at Somaliland 2020, if they go. A muttered 'I don't want a trophy if I haven't won', a brief lift of the pot for the crowd below, and on to the planning stage for the next tournament, and for the future of the team.

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Reflecting on the experience a few months later, Oldham agreed with the mindset. ‘If you looked on paper,’ he said, ‘talent-wise we should’ve gone a lot further. Some people were just there for the experience, but people like myself and a lot of the others, we really wanted to win. James was right, if we’re going to pick something up that isn’t for winning, what’s the point?’