

Cornelius (Con) Cole

October 13, 1923 –

For years it seemed like Con Cole was fighting a losing battle in trying to get the game of soccer established in Cambridge.

Today minor soccer in Cambridge has never been bigger, and Cole is regarded as the father of minor soccer in the city.

He had help. People like Jack Major were devoted to helping get the sport off the ground locally, and through their steady efforts, the sport finally gained a foothold here.

Ironically, soccer had been a hugely popular sport in town in the late 1800s and early 1900s.

Born in London, Cole came to Canada in 1957 with the promise of a good job, but when he got here, he found that there was no job.

Others had been similarly duped and had returned home, but not Cole. He managed to get a job in Galt in his trade, as a machinist, and with the help of several individuals, he was able to make a go of things. Soon his family joined him here.

"If it wasn't for the generosity of the Canadian people, he would have gone back," said his son Tom.

One of those people was Fred Sage, who owned the farm where Cole lived, out near Dickie Settlement west of Galt.

"Fred Sage allowed my father to use his bush to get wood, let him use his tractor, and gave us second-hand clothes."

Coincidentally, Fred's brother Earl, longtime executive member of the Ontario Rural Softball Association, entered the Hall in the same year as Cole.

Cole brought to Canada a love for soccer, and though it was a tremendous struggle in the early years to get minor soccer established here, he persisted, along with Jack Major and a few others.

"Jack and his wife drove the kids all over and never let up," said Cole. "They did an absolute marvelous job."

Another supporter in the community was sportsman Nels Findlay, who owned the Sulphur Springs in Preston.

"Preston gave us the best support," he said. "Nels was the greatest. He would set aside a room after every game at Riverside Park for the soccer people – players, wives and kids – to have fish and chips. It was a great family atmosphere."

Cole had nothing but praise for the town of Preston and its recreation department, and to people like Findlay, who helped the fledgling soccer association gain acceptance.

"It was a struggle like you wouldn't believe," recalled Tom.

Once, when a game was cancelled at Galt's Dickson Park due to the wet condition of the field, ball players were then allowed to take to the field to practice.

Eventually Cole landed a job at Joy Manufacturing, and it was Joy who fabricated local soccer's first steel goal posts. Prior to that, the goalposts had been wooden.

Through the years others have tried to take credit for starting minor soccer in town, but, said Major, Con Cole is the real father of minor soccer.

It all began in Preston. Sign-up day in 1963 drew 67 youngsters. "It was a number I'll never forget," said Cole, who was worried they might not find enough bodies for a single team, let alone a league.

Cole left the game in 1968 but was succeeded as president by his son Philip.

"It couldn't have happened," said Cole, "without the help of the Preston recreation commission. Harry Halberstadt was mayor and chairman of the commission. He and commissioners Dave Norwood and Bob Whittaker and park staff helped out."

Other Preston residents, in addition to Findlay, who were instrumental in helping the sport gain a foothold included Allan Reuter and Bill Shayler.

Initially, there were two senior teams – Queens and Preston City – then eight minor teams, which often played in Hamilton, Burlington and St. Catharines.

The Galt recreation commission showed little interest, so Galt boys who wanted to play soccer had to play in Preston.

Preston gave the fledgling league Riverside Park to use and everyone seemed to



Top: Con Cole, back right, with sons Philip, back left, Tom, lower left, Christopher and Con.

Left: Con Cole, middle, with soccer supporter Nels Findlay, left, and fellow soccer builder Jack Major, right.

be behind the effort.

Then came the Can-Am Games in 1972. Finally, there was some money and support to get a soccer program started in Galt.

"It was a blessing in disguise," said Cole. Suddenly money was no object. "Saginaw asked

us to bring down five soccer teams from our minor league."

With John Quinn as president, coaches Pat Duggan and Jack Major, the first Galt Minor soccer Association was formed. Years earlier, in 1951, Hughie Shields tried to get soccer started in Galt, but it was an uphill climb for years.

The next year the minor soccer systems from both Preston and Galt amalgamated, with about 300 registrants, all boys, in 1973. By 1977 registration had reached about 650, including a four-team girls division.

Today, some 32 years later, soccer is one of the biggest elements of Can-Am on both sides of the border.

Cole retired to Victoria, B.C., in the 1990s.

Inducted 2002