

Afram Island

(Forward Iceland)

“Afram Island” - Sometimes It's More than a Game

When the wheels hit the tarmac at Keyflavik Airport, our month-long adventure in Iceland began. For us, Iceland held the promise of undiscovered territory, waterfalls, glaciers and even elves and gnomes. We had read that there is an undercurrent of mystical belief on the island and we were ready to see for ourselves. I had heard that the EuroCup 2016 tournament was due to begin on the 10th but hadn't given it much more thought than it being a possible diversion from the hiking and exploring we had planned.

The promotions for Euro2016 were plastered everywhere in town as we made our preparations to depart. Along the way we learned that Iceland had qualified for their first international competition in world football and the entire country was behind their boys. The women's team has had much more success, making the last few Women's World Cup's, so it was finally time for the men to catch up.

Jim and I spent ten days going counter-clockwise around the country and by the night of Iceland's debut in the tournament, we found ourselves out on the tip of the Snaeffellsness peninsula. One of our hot-pot buddies had recommended stopping in at a hostel in the town of Rif (Reef). Jim and I had set up camp down at the very tip of the peninsula and were working our way back thru the tiny enclaves, trying to find the match. Eventually we learned that the local gas station in town would carry the match, which would solve the problem, but we were really looking for a sports bar, something in short supply outside of Reykjavik.

As we were leaving the gas station, a guy walked up, mentioned he worked at the hostel in Rif and they'd be carrying the game. So now we had a place. Iceland played Portugal, on the surface, a one-sided mismatch. FIFA at one point had ranked Iceland 133 out of 150 nations with a soccer program; Portugal was in the top 25. For Icelanders, just making the tournament was a huge step. Along the way they defeated Holland twice, essentially taking their place in the tournament, but just getting in wouldn't be enough for Iceland. They were "in" but wanted to "win" as well.

The game began with Jim and I sprawled out on couches at the hostel, with about ten other fans. The first half saw Iceland mainly on defense from a Portuguese attack featuring World player of the year Renaldo and another familiar name to fans of English Soccer; Nani. About mid-way thru the half, the Icelandic defense opened up and Nani forced home a shot, and the small hostel deflated.

Optimism still existed at the start of the second half and fans of the hometown were eventually rewarded with an equalizing goal by.....sson. Tensions remained high and the continual pressure by Portugal eventually led to a late-game penalty kick. These are usually scored in over 95% of attempts, and Portugal sent their main star, Renaldo, to apply the finishing touch to Icelandic hopes....but an odd thing happened....he missed wide to the left. The roars in that hostel were echoed throughout the lava fields and fjords of craggy isle....Iceland hung on and earned a draw in their first tournament match. The

fans in France and the players on the field were obviously overjoyed since it seemed like they had clung to the 5% chance before that penalty was taken.

In a post-game interview, Renaldo chided the Icelanders joyous end-of-match celebration, saying they would never win anything bigger by celebrating such non-events as ties....but for Iceland, this was the start.

Jim and I continued our tour, but put a circle around the following Saturday in Reykjavik, when Iceland's second match would be played against Hungary. We didn't have a plan for where, but figured one of the "townies" could fill us in.

Turns out there was a city-wide viewing party set up for the 4pm match down town. There is this small pseudo astroturf "pitch" where they set up an enormous projection-screen TV for the masses. I figured that there might be some local interest, so Jim and I got there about an hour before kickoff and were lucky enough to score seats on a picnic table at the far end of the pitch. The crowd didn't seem all that big, but by gametime there was a pulsing throng pushing their way towards the screen. Jim and I were leaning up against some concrete pillars, so at least we had that to keep us upright.

The game was another tense affair, but Iceland actually took the lead through a penalty kick in the first half. After the break, Iceland went into this protective shell trying to hold the lead instead of grow it. Hungary kept pressing and within the last ten minutes, Iceland wore down and conceded the tying goal. Another tie, but Iceland had SO wanted the win. To progress in the EuroCup usually takes a win and at least a tie to have a chance. The two ties were nice, but a win surely would have taken some of the pressure off. But the walk home was joyous. Iceland was performing brilliantly for a first-time tournament entrant and confidence was running high on Bank Street in Reykjavik.

Jim and I kept traveling. We had completed a 3,700 mile circuit of the island and were running out of places to drive. With the importance of the third match for Iceland, against Austria, and the insanity witnessed at this last match, we made sure we would be back in town for the pivotal third match the following Wednesday. We took a second trip out to the icefields and waterfalls, but were thwarted by bad weather. We returned along the southern coast, killing off just enough time to return to the city center for the pivotal match.

I was sure that it would be a mob-scene down there, so Jim and I left about two-hours before game time. I was determined to get a seat "on the pitch", not only to better sense (OK "Feel") the love for Iceland, but there was also the improved chances for swag. The city fathers, promoters and marketers did a great job of getting us all in the spirit. There were "capes" with the Icelandic flag and prominent sponsorship by CocaCola for that second match, and damn it, I wanted mine. Jim stopped off for yogurt on the way, so I went ahead and secured seats on the turf for us both, but I didn't see Jim until after the game. The few thousand we had at the second game had doubled. I was in the Icelandic version of a football "mosh-pit" but couldn't see more than 20 feet in any direction. Jim was outside the "pit" and likewise reported not being able to see more than 20 feet into the pit....I scored this sweet Stetson hat in the colors of the Icelandic Flag and we all settled down for football and beers...the one known constant between American and European Football.

Yet again, the Iceland “ssons” played a tight match. Technically they only needed a draw to advance, so though they scored in the first half, Austria applied the correct pressure and tied up the score. We in the “pit” were freaking out because our “ssons” were retreating, trying to play keep away and Austria was gaining control and confidence as the game wore on.

The game reached its “official” allotted time of 90 minutes, but the referee adds time to the end of the match to compensate for any injury time taken....there would be four minutes more. Austria had all the momentum and seemed to be surging towards the winning goal which would doom Iceland, but then, with literally thirty seconds in the match, it all changed. The right defensive back sent a long clearing pass as he had done about thirty times previously, but instead of going out of bounds, the pass found the right winger. Austria had pushed so far forward to win, they left the back-door open. The winger found nothing but green grass between the ball and the goalie. The “pit” had been a pulsing throng of hope and encouragement the whole game, but they suddenly went silent. The television broadcaster, himself a former player was screaming in Icelandic (later deciphered for us travelers) “go, go to the goal, to the goal!” And he did. At the very last second, he slid the ball across to his team-mate, who, with the very last kick, in the very last second, scored the winning goal. Iceland2-Austria1.

In my fifty-one years on this planet, I’ve had my eardrums popped on planes, and more than a few concerts when we sat too close, but let me tell you. The roar that went up when that ball rippled the old onion bag was right up there with the best of them...Folks who had been sitting and drinking for hours suddenly were standing, and falling, cheering and crying....it was an experience. There were an estimated five-thousand people there to witness Icelandic sports history and it was as if the cloudy skies seemed a little lighter as we followed the throng away from the game.

Jim and I were already hooked by the first game, but now there would be a fourth; an elimination match against England. Jim and I enjoyed a few days along the western shore, hiking and driving off to find the other elimination matches, but by Monday, we had returned to Reykjavik for the game.

I wanted a return to the mosh-pit with Jim, so to ensure we would have a chance to sit up close we headed down almost five hours early. There was an early game, an epic struggle between Spain and Italy as an appetizer, but we were amped up for the main course.

As we approached the pit, we were surprised to see picnic tables set up on the astroturf. We theorized it was some attempt at civility; Iceland was nothing but courteous to its citizens and visitors, after all. The first game airs, and we’re among about five-hundred people milling about. Just about the time we’re beginning to realize something is up, an announcement was made to remove all doubt. The viewing had been moved to “the hill”; about five blocks away. A mad dash ensues as we early birds sought to maintain our early advantage. Jim and I rounded the final corner to find that only about five-hundred people had beaten us to the spot; but instead of a confined “mosh-pit”, this new space was open and accommodating. The screen was larger as was the hill. Jim and I secured decent spots off to the left of center and settled in. Over the next hour, almost ten thousand of our new best “ssons” and “dottirs” joined us in a huge family reunion to cheer on the lads.

I had watched enough of England football to know the national side was fragile. Just four days prior, the UK had voted to leave the European Union, a massive decision with immediate massive financial implications to the England side taking to the pit. My thought on how to beat them would be to hit them hard in the first twenty minutes and perhaps the English psyche would crumble as the game wore on. Only time would tell.

The pre-game festivities in Iceland were mostly give-aways. There were countless cheers of “Afram Island” (I’m for Iceland) and even a pop-tune retrofitted with the announcers call of the final goal from the previous match...the crowd was amping up.

Thoughts of sitting throughout the game ended about ten minutes beforehand. They played the Iceland National Anthem to a roaring crowd, who were even composed during Englands “God Save the Queen”...but then the whistle blew and we were off.

Almost before many had cracked open their first beer, Iceland’s goalie had fouled an English forward. Penalty kick. Despite the rather loud prayers for a Renaldo-esque repeat, England scored and the crowd was in a panic. Was this the end of the most modern of Icelandic sagas? Thankfully not. Almost from the moment the game resumed, Iceland went on the offensive and within only about two minutes, had netted the equalizer. Fear seemed to blow offshore, replaced by a new-found optimism and believe in “our ssons”The belief was rewarded about fifteen minutes later when one of the defensemen took shot mostly blocked by the goalie for England. He got most, but not all, and it would take an agonizing second for the ball to finally cross the goal line. Iceland2; England 1....with only 18 minutes gone.

The “ssons” had done my bidding. Hit them with the go-ahead goal early, and hope to hold on. The rest of the match was mostly held at the Icelanding half, with multi-millionaire Englishmen doing their best to penetrate a line held by lower-level professionals, who’s assistant coach is a part-time dentist. But they held.

There were even a few chances for Iceland to score, but in the end, the important part was that England never did equalize. When the final whistle blew coastal Iceland erupted and hands were raised in disbelief. As Jim and I prepared to leave, there was a short prayer service held on the podium. Ten thousand fans taking a knee giving thanks to the soccer gods for this glorious result.

Improbable? Yes....but every so often when the wind is blowing right, Iceland is a magical place. Who knows, maybe it was the gnomes and elves....

Afram Island, “ssons” and “dottirs” always Afram

GK	Hannes Þór Halldórsson
GK	Ögmundur Kristinsson
GK	Ingvar Jónsson
DF	Birkir Már Sævarsson
DF	Haukur Heiðar Hauksson
DF	Hjörtur Hermannsson
DF	Sverrir Ingi Ingason
DF	Ragnar Sigurðsson
DF	Kári Árnason
DF	Hörður Björgvin Magnússon
DF	Ari Freyr Skúlason
MF	Jóhann Berg Guðmundsson
MF	Birkir Bjarnason
MF	Gylfi Þór Sigurðsson
MF	Rúnar Már Sigurjónsson
MF	Aron Gunnarsson
MF	Theódór Elmar Bjarnason
MF	Emil Hallfreðsson
MF	Arnór Ingvi Traustason