

Sports

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Irish gearing up for title defence

Open division champions preparing for 30th edition of Nations Cup

By MARK BOOTH
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An opportunity to lace up the boots for one weekend in the summer and have a few pints with teammates after the game.

Anyone who thinks that's what the Nations Cup is all about is in for a rude awakening.

Sure the fun atmosphere and the beer garden adds to the popularity of this 30th annual event,

but it's also about being well-prepared and playing at a high level with country bragging rights at stake.

Defending Open Division champion Ireland finalized its roster a few weeks ago and have been training since. An intersquad game is planned, along with a couple of friendlies to ensure the Irish will be ready when the three-day tournament kickoffs July 17.

Head coach Craig

Burnham suggests his biggest challenge is ensuring all his players are relatively on top of their games. Some are already playing at a high level in the Pacific Coast League while others have opted for a more casual approach in Lower Mainland spring leagues. The rest haven't played since the winter season concluded — usually to rest nagging injuries.

"It is a challenge

because you have to bring it all together for one weekend," said Burnham. "Guys are at different stages right now and its tough to get the (Pacific Coast) players out because their (training) schedule is already busy enough."

It's one of the reasons Burnham has made little changes to his roster since taking over the team in 2005. Typically, he is adding two or three new faces but the core has stayed



MARK BOOTH/RICHMOND NEWS

Ireland rallied for a dramatic 3-2 victory over Caribbean last year to capture its first Open Division title at the Nations Cup in a decade. The Irish will be looking to repeat with the 30th annual tournament kicks off July 17.

intact. The continuity paid off a year ago when Ireland rallied for a 3-2 win over Caribbean in the championship game for its first title in a decade.

"It's all about cohesion and it paid off for us last year," said Burnham. "You're usually a step better coming in with the guys being familiar with each other."

Being a champion or an also ran can also come down to the luck of the

draw. The format sees each of the 16 teams in the Open Division play three round robin games and the winner of the four different groupings advancing directly to the semi-finals.

A year ago, Ireland played India to a draw and both teams finished tied at the top of their group. The Irish advanced based on better goal differential then took care of Canada in the semi-finals before outlasting a highly-skilled

Caribbean team — thanks to the heroics of Golden Boot co-winner Tiaran King who netted a spectacular equalizer. That set the stage for John Collins' game winner with five minutes remaining.

This time, Ireland has been grouped with First Nations, Germany and Portugal.

"India, Caribbean and Fiji are typically very difficult to play against," added Burnham. "They are more

acclimatized to the (warm) weather and all three usually have their own leagues going right through the spring so their fitness is excellent. You especially don't want to face any of them on the turf as you're usually dealing with more heat (coming from the surface) and an even faster paced game."

The 2009 Nations Cup draw is available at the official tournament website www.thenationscup.com.

30th Nations Cup July 17-19

Participating teams:

Men's Open Division

Ireland	First Nations
Portugal	Germany
China	Korea
Italy	India
Caribbean	England
Greece	Scotland
Canada	Fiji
Serbia	Croatia

Women's Open

Canada	England
Greece	India
Ireland	USA
Scotland	First Nations

Men's Over 30s

India	Ireland
Scotland	China
Italy	England
Greece	Germany

Men's Over 38s

India	Ireland
China	Canada
Scotland	Germany
Poland	Fiji

Men's Over 45s

China	Ireland
First Nations	India
Scotland	Poland
England	Canada