



COMMUNITY REP

Ky Horn is one of two native players on the Kahnawake Condors.

rounding them. The Canadiens have had to navigate a political climate in which they are seen as a nationalist symbol, where some say they should be stocked accordingly with French-Canadian players and coaches. And the Condors represent a community that's part of a nation-wide fight for the rights of native peoples. Both fan bases view hockey as more than a game. They see it as a symbol for who they are and one that should reflect the makeup of their communities.

A condor is a type of vulture and the imagery rings true this season, as the team struggles in the bottom half of the standings. They'll likely make the playoffs, but the consensus around the team, from fans and employees alike, seems to be this isn't their year. But even the bottom-feeders get to have their glory some games. On a mid-January night, facing the visiting Saint-Hyacinthe Laureats, the Condors find their offense, shutting out the Laureats 6-0. The game comes at the peak of the Idle No More protest movement, with demonstrations held across Canada during the winter months to protest the treatment of native peoples.

Unfortunately, the blowout comes before a smaller than usual crowd. Though Peter Thomas, president and co-owner, says his team can regularly fill the small arena with 300 fans, there is less than half of that present. Not that Thomas is bothered by the low attendance. A large, genial man whose smile regularly breaks through his dark goatee, Thomas has made the Condors a life-long passion project. He's been with the team in one capacity or another since they first moved to Kahnawake from nearby La Prairie in 1999, rising from water boy to his current role. Thomas has faced pressure to stack his team with natives, something he has thus far resisted. "I'm never going to have an all-native team from Kahnawake," he says. "It's impossible. Having players at this caliber, it'll never be a reality."

But if the Condors don't reflect the ancestry of the community, they definitely reflect its attitude. Kahnawake is a blue-collar kind of place. People talk proudly of the long line of Mohawk steelworkers. Locals have worked on everything from the original World Trade Center towers to the Mercier bridge that spans the river between Montreal's south shore and the island itself. Military service is also big, with members of the community serving in the First and Second World Wars, Vietnam, the two Gulf Wars and in Afghanistan as members of the Canadian Armed Forces, as well as in all

OF COLORS AND CULTURE

The curious case of the Kahnawake Condors – Canada's only native-owned team – involves strange allegiances and a community forging an identity through its team

BY ADAM KOVAC

JUST SOUTH OF THE ISLAND OF MONTREAL you'll find a native community that goes by the name Kahnawake, where the colors are a bit off. It's hard to put your finger on it at first – the cars, houses and trees all look the same as they do across the St. Lawrence River. Snow is still white, the cracked highways still grey, and on a winter's evening, when hockey is being played, the puck is still black. But then it dawns on you: where the red, white and blue of the Montreal Canadiens would be anywhere else in the province of Quebec, here there is way too much black and gold.

This is Bruins country.

Boston alumni came to town in 2008 and

2009 for charity games, which were heralded as the main events of Boston Bruins Day. There are Bruins flags draped out of car windows and outside doors of homes and ball caps are just as likely to bear the spoked wheel as the CH. Given that kind of love, it's probably not a coincidence that black and gold are also the colors of the Quebec Junior AAA League's Kahnawake Condors – the lone native-owned team in Canada.

Though Condors fans might not throw their NHL allegiances behind the Canadiens, the two groups of supporters have more in common than geographical proximity. Both are communities that to some degree feel apart from the world immediately sur-

branches of the American military. Those steelworkers and soldiers travelled around the continent, resulting in the melange of favorite teams: the Bruins are the most popular, followed by the Canadiens, there are also Rangers and Red Wings fans sprinkled around the community. Given the physical nature of those popular occupations, it's not surprising Kahnawake's fan base demands a certain type of hockey.

The Condors' play is chippy and aggressive, and everyone from the owner down to the coach has pledged allegiance to hard-hitting hockey. When it comes to the debate about fighting in hockey, the people in the Kahnawake Sports Complex tend to fall into the Don Cherry school of thinking. Sitting just inside the blueline at the far end of the arena, near banners celebrating championships and division titles for all level of hockey and lacrosse victories, Rene Lazare is a diehard resident of what has become

“SPORTS BRINGS EVERYONE CLOSE. WE'RE LIKE A FAMILY HERE” - Ky Horn

known as “Condors Corner,” a section occupied at each home game by the team's biggest supporters. Watching a game with Lazare and his son James is like sitting with the most knowledgeable, affable play-by-play men around. They'll point out players and tell you where they're from and what their stats are. Condors trivia and anecdotes flow freely. James nonchalantly mentions that former Condor Alexandre Burrows has owed him a hockey stick for 13 years. (Burrows doesn't remember but says, “I'll make it happen next time I'm up there.”) As players chirp each other between plays, Lazare is less than impressed with a league regulation that stipulates that any fight results in an immediate game misconduct. “We'd like one fight per game without them getting thrown out,” he says.

For fans like Lazare, the Condors aren't just local entertainment. The team is an extension of them. Slightings against the team are slightings against their people. When a Condors player is called for roughing, Lazare and his son vehemently decry the call as racism by the refs. Both recall times when opposing teams taunted the Condors and their fans with war cries and racist slurs such as

NOW THAT'S LOYALTY

Condors co-owner Peter Thomas started out as the team's water boy in 1999.

“savages.” But the play from both teams is aggressive. Not to mention that only two of the players on the team are native.

Ky Horn is one of them, a local boy born and raised in Kahnawake (defenseman Andrew Antsanen is a Cree from Manitoba). While coach Frederic Hebert and other players say they've never seen racism at play, Horn is more attuned to it. He remembers a former teammate who would openly tell him the only reason he was on the team was due to his ethnicity. “It's disrespectful, but I put it behind me,” Horn says. “I'm here to play as hard as I can. I have a lot of friends that are French, some Russians. Sports brings everyone close. We're like a family here. Everyone's on a team, not just



on-your-team still looks fondly on his time as a Condor, keeping in touch with some of his former teammates and crediting the team for helping him develop his signature pesky style. “I remember that year - I must have gotten over 250 penalty minutes,” says Burrows, who actually had 223, along with 24 goals and 69 points in 53 games. “I spent a lot of time in the box and I was never alone. That shows you how the people who were there were influencing the game, helping us out on the ice by supporting us. I knew they enjoyed the physical side of things.”

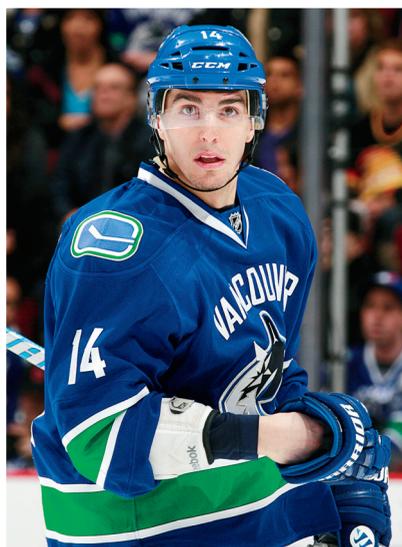
Because he spent only part of a season in Kahnawake, Burrows wasn't exposed much to native culture. But Hebert encourages his team to get to know its fans and that cultural exchange has resulted in players eager to take part in community events. “When I went into the room in December and said ‘I need five players to take part in the Christmas parade,’ I got 11,” he says.

Those Christmas festivities may be the closest the Condors get to a championship parade this season, but after their drubbing of Saint-Hyacinthe their low position in the standings matters just a bit less, at least until the next game.

After the game, the small crowd slowly files out into the January night. Laughter and music pour out of the Condors dressing room as the players enjoy a much-needed win. It's a reminder that though Kahnawake can be different from the island that neighbors it, there are constants that don't change. Politics gets ugly. Hockey does, too. But if you go by guys like Lazare and his son, that's a good thing. Hard hits and fights are rough aspects Condors fans respect. Hockey is not for the idle. That's the kind of universal truth that can even get Canadiens fans and Bruins supporters to agree. **T.M.H.**

in sports, but in the whole world.”

Considering Kahnawake's style of play, it's fitting that the only player to wear a Condors and NHL jersey is the Vancouver Canucks' Burrows, a fan favorite during his partial season in 1999-2000 as an 18-year-old, who Lazare remembers as a scrawny kid that didn't shy away from the rough stuff. Burrows was briefly captain following the mid-season move from La Prairie. The Canucks' resident guy-you-hate-until-he's-



WHERE IT ALL STARTED

Alexandre Burrows credits Kahnawake for helping him develop his feisty game.