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The Flyers' Icebreaker: A Boisterous Game of Soccer

By [DAVE CALDWELL](#)

PHILADELPHIA — About 75 minutes before every home game, up to 15 [Philadelphia Flyers](#) leave their locker room and walk to the loading dock at the back of the Wachovia Center.

The big garage door has been pulled shut, and a wide spot on the smooth concrete floor has been cleared of cardboard boxes and delivery vehicles. The players form a circle and begin kicking a soccer ball that could use a little air.

The Flyers are getting ready to play hockey.

Kicking a soccer ball back and forth is a time-tested way to loosen up for a game, common in loading docks around the N.H.L. and nearly universal before games in Europe. The Flyers joined the trend two years ago and their games are energetic, intense, boisterous, hilarious and good-naturedly profane. The walls and ceiling are inbounds, and some players bang into them to keep the ball in play, although they seem to be able to limit their reckless abandon.

“Oh, it’s not that serious,” said Flyers defenseman Lasse Kukkonen, who said pregame soccer is ubiquitous in his native Finland. “You save some of that for the game.”

Much to the relief of Philadelphia Coach John Stevens, no one has been hurt. Last season, [Carolina](#)’s Erik Cole injured a foot playing pregame soccer and became a cautionary tale.

“I don’t mind them doing it,” Stevens said. “A lot of teams do it, and the guys love it. It adds a little bit of spirit, I think. Now, there’s always a fear of injury, but guys can get hurt doing a lot of different things.”

In the game, called two-touch, the Flyers form a circle and kick the ball back and forth to one another in no particular order. They can touch the ball with their feet or body before passing it, but they cannot let the ball hit the ground.

Violators are eliminated. A player who kicks the ball wildly so a teammate cannot play it is also eliminated. The winner is the last one standing. A 20-minute session includes seven or eight of elimination matches.

“Every team I’ve been on has done this, but maybe not to the same level they do it here,” said Joffrey Lupul, a right wing from Fort Saskatchewan, Alberta. “We’re here at the rink for a long time, and this is more fun than hopping on a bike. It’s good for morale, and it gets you moving a little bit. It stretches you out, too.”

The Flyers keep track of the victories. Kimmo Timonen, a defenseman from Finland, has won the most

matches, with Kukkonen second and Lupul third.

Two Manitobans are usually out of the game quickly: Riley Cote, a left wing who is the Flyers' enforcer, and Arron Asham, a pugnacious right wing. Cote often shadow-boxes as he stands to the side, and Asham runs in place to stay limber.

"On disputed calls, everybody gets fired up a little bit," said Mike Richards, a center from Kenora, Ontario, who is the Flyers' captain. "People get angry with each other at different times, but it's really more for fun."

In one spirited match, the ball was kicked so high that it stuck between two air ducts, defying left wing Scott Hartnell's best effort to dislodge it by throwing a soda bottle at it.

So a Wachovia Center worker was dispatched with a forklift, and Asham was hoisted up to punch the ball free. Cheers and laughter erupted, and the game continued. Another worker mopped up Hartnell's spilled drink.

"Knock on wood, no one's been hurt," Hartnell said. "Some people have their routines, and have them for some time. Well, this is our routine. We have fun, we have some laughs, we loosen up, we break a sweat before the game."

Hartnell, from Regina, Saskatchewan, acknowledged he felt as if he had two left feet when he joined the group. But he is one of the group's loudest and most spirited players, sometimes thumping into cardboard boxes to keep the ball in play.

There is a devoted intensity to the matches. Delivery trams inch past the scene, as do officials and executives. The Flyers believe they help morale.

"They've gotten a little closer than they were before," Stevens said.

As the match ended, fans began to trickle through the doors next to the loading dock. Some paused to snap photos. Timonen called out, "Last game," and the players jogged back to the locker room as they were eliminated.

Lupul was the winner and he dribbled the ball, basketball style, back to the dressing room. An hour remained before the Flyers played Boston and the serious game would begin.

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