

Controversial gov't program had little cash for Drillers

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Wednesday, 11 February 2004
Last Updated Sunday, 22 October 2006

The now-defunct Edmonton Drillers soccer team received only a fraction of the funding awarded to its Montreal-based counterpart under a scandal-plagued government sponsorship program, federal Auditor General Sheila Fraser says.

The Montreal Impact indoor soccer team received \$150,000 in government advertising dollars for its 1998-99 season. That same year, says Fraser's bombshell probe of the \$250-million federal sponsorship program, a similar funding request from the Drillers was rejected by the government, which cited a lack of funds.

"We were told there was no money," said Wojtek Wojcicki, former owner of the perennially cash-strapped Drillers, who folded midway through the 2000-01 season.

The Drillers received \$30,000 in funding from the program for the 1999-2000 season.

Coming up empty in their original grant application hurt the Drillers, Wojcicki said Tuesday, but he doubted the extra money would have saved the franchise from collapse.

"Did it affect us? Of course it affected us, but a lot of things affected us," said Wojcicki.

"I sent off the application and they came up with a dollar amount," said Ron Knol, the Drillers general manager in 1998.

"When I looked at it I could never figure out what it was based on."

Knol thought a possible reason for the monetary differences between the deals could have been based on Montreal's larger population.

Montreal also had year-round exposure, as they also fielded an outdoor team, and still do in the A-League -- the same league as the newly formed Edmonton Aviators.

During the 1999-2000 indoor season, the Impact averaged a league- low attendance of less than 3,000 fans, at least 1,000 fewer than the Drillers drew on an average night, said Knol.

According to the Impact website, the team has changed ownership several times since 1998-99, when they were then owned by a group of Toronto businessmen and current president Joe Saputo. Currently, the team is owned by Saputo Dairies, Hydro-Quebec and the Quebec government.