

This Vermont Soccer Team Plays for the Planet

The Vermont Green Football Club champions environmental work and draws sold-out crowds, with the help of free ice cream.



By [Cara Buckley](#) Photographs by [Kelly Burgess](#)
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It was game night in Burlington, home of the Vermont Green Football Club. The evening, in early June, was unfolding in its usual way. The stands were packed, the crowd was roaring and stamping its feet, with hundreds of Crocs and Birkenstocks pounding metal bleachers.

But there were signs that the team was playing for bigger stakes. Players wore jerseys made of recycled fabric, spectators who biked to the game were rewarded with raffle tickets, and the food trucks offered vegan eats. Before the night was over, the announcer, Tom Mientka-Proctor, made the same announcement that he does at every home game.

"Please take all your trash and recycling out of the stands with you

and put them in the appropriate bins,” Mr. Mientka-Proctor, who is from England, thundered through the loudspeaker. Bottles and cans should be empty, he continued, and food waste should go into the compost containers. “Thank you for pitching in for the planet!” he added brightly.

50 States, 50 Fixes is [a series about local solutions](#) to environmental problems. More to come this year.

Vermont Green is an amateur soccer club with a mission. Its founders want to offer quality soccer while championing a larger cause befitting Vermont, a state that has pledged to conserve half of its land by 2050 and that generates nearly all of its electricity renewably. Inspired by the Forest Green Rovers in England, [known as the world’s greenest football club](#), the Green’s founders embraced climate action.



Volunteers collect and sort recycling at the end of every Vermont Green Football Club game.



A refillable water station near the field.

“We love sports, we’re guys that dig the game, but it’s not enough to just watch and see who wins,” said Patrick Infurna, who helped found the four-year-old club. “We needed to attach something to this that meant something.”

The club works to reduce the amount of carbon emissions from its operations, sells merchandise made almost entirely out of recycled and upcycled materials, gives money to environmental groups and donates sustainably produced balls and lightly worn gear to a local

donates sustainably produced balls and lightly worn gear to a local soccer club for refugees and immigrants.

Halftime speakers have included maple sugar makers who highlighted how climate change had hurt production. Most of the club's sponsors are local, and some are well-known, including the eco-friendly cleaning product company Seventh Generation and Ben & Jerry's, which sends an electric ice cream truck to dole out free scoops, including a vegan flavor, at every home game.

As of Tuesday night, the Vermont Green's men's team was leading the Northeast Division of USL League Two, a 144-team spring and summer league of mostly college players who often go on to play professionally. There is a women's team that plays exhibition games, though the hope is to one day expand.

At the men's match in early June, the specter of an overheated planet loomed. Flooding is a persistent threat, and the sky was hazy with wildfire smoke from Canada, with airborne particulates at levels unhealthy for sensitive groups. But the game would go on.



On Saturday, June 7, the men's team drew its match 1-1.





At a match on June 14, the women's team won 2-1.

The team's roster this season includes players from across the United States, Europe and Canada, as well as from Ghana, Japan, Libya and Senegal.

Speaking before the game, Zachary Zengue, a co-captain, said that since joining the Green in 2023, he had begun taking shorter showers, hectoring his roommates back at Georgetown University to recycle and, as a theology major, looking for ways that religion intersects with the environment.

Victor Akoum, a defender, added that it was high time for everyone, athletes included, to talk about climate action. "How can we shift the paradigm from climate change only being emphasized by scientists or weather watchers?" Mr. Akoum asked. "The climate ultimately is going to affect all people."

As players headed to their warm-up, fans began arriving, outfitted in Vermont Green merchandise: hats, shirts imprinted with wildflowers and leaves, bandannas and flags worn as capes. There were season ticket holders, empty nesters, parents, toddlers and soccer-obsessed teens and children.

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Victor Akoum, a defender for the Vermont Green Football Club.



The Vermont Green Football Club jerseys are made of recycled fabric.

A line quickly formed for the free Ben & Jerry's ice cream, and a giggling 6-year-old squirted her mother with water at the water refill station. Environmental groups staffed information tables across from orange porta-potties, supplied by a company that turns waste into fertilizer and adorned with signs reading “thanks for the donation” and “pee you soon.”

Fans included Lydia Cheresnick-Dix, 11, who is the goalie for her own soccer team and loves the Green's support of the climate. “That’s something I believe in,” she said. “I just really like plants and animals, and I think they’re really important to us and the world.”

Eli Scheer, who was with their spouse, Casey Engels, said that the upbeat atmosphere and cheery messaging helped make the issue of climate change — not exactly the lightest of topics — engaging and fun.

“It infuses everyone’s awareness in a way that’s much more joyful, much more connected, much more community oriented,” they said. “When people experience climate action and environmental focus in that way, they see that joy can be a part of the work.”



During the men's game on June 7, the sky was hazy with wildfire smoke from Canada, and airborne particulates were at levels unhealthy for sensitive groups.



U.S. Representative Becca Balint of Vermont spoke during halftime at the women's game. Kelly Burgess for The New York Times

The Green plays at Virtue Field at the University of Vermont, and the team routinely sells out all 2,500 seats. Mr. Infurna said that he dreamed of one day having solar-powered locker rooms, a pitch made of natural fibers and an electric bus, and that the club tried to be transparent about the challenge of meeting its climate-friendly goals.

"We have an interest in showing what it actually takes, and showing that it's quite the effort," Mr. Infurna said. "For us, it's really just about continuing to show that process and trying to get a little bit better."

That night, the Vermont Green was playing the Boston Bolts, a team they had beaten a few weeks before. In the first seven minutes, Mr. Zengue scored a goal, and people in the stands leaped to their feet.

At halftime, cheers broke out as Sam Mewis, a former World Cup winner and bronze medalist with the U.S. women's national team who is coaching the Vermont Green women's team, was introduced. "All my time through professional soccer, we were so wasteful with plastic bottles and not reusing things," Ms. Mewis, who has [written about the effects of climate change](#) on sports, said before walking onto the pitch. "To see the way they're operating, and to see that it is possible to have that mission be a core part of a club, is so inspirational, and should be something that more clubs pick up on and feel inspired by."





Sam Mewis, a former World cup winner and bronze medalist with the U.S. women's national team, is coaching the Vermont Green Football Club's women's team.



Zach Zengue, a co-captain of the Vermont Green, signing autographs after the game.

The Green were ahead until the last minutes of play, when the Bolts scored a goal, eliciting groans from the crowd. Despite a spirited rally by the Green — and a near fight between two players — the game ended in a draw. “That was the most stressful game of the season,” Ms. Engels said.

After the game, kids poured onto the field to have their jerseys and scarves signed and to turn cartwheels. Interns and volunteers began tackling the recycling, which they would sort and take to a local depot. Under the glare of the stadium lights, the haze from distant fires drifted in an eerie fog, and the moon glowed a rose gold. The people who biked began cycling away, their bright lights receding into the night.



