

## Football in Canada: Out of the Relegation Zone

Welling United Football Club, *Game Day Programme*,  
August 2008

What is the most popular sport in Canada based on participation? Ice hockey? Wrong! Ice hockey (just 'hockey' as we call it) is only second in player registrations. Soccer is number 1. There are 545,000 registered hockey players and almost 855,000 soccer players.

Oh, and let's get this out of the way right now. 'Soccer' is an English term imported into Canada in the 1880s, according to Canadian sports historian Colin Jose. The term association football, later shortened simply to soccer, was originally used by Oxford and Cambridge students to distinguish the game from rugby football. But I won't let that word grate on you anymore – I'll try to refer to it as 'football' unless I can't avoid it.

The game is mainly a youth recreation sport in Canada. But there are signs that the professional version is flourishing. Toronto, Montreal, and Vancouver all have teams in the lower North American divisions and this April Toronto FC began its season as the newest member of Major League Soccer (MLS), the top league on the continent.

The club also opened the season in a new, football-only facility, BMO Field. The stadium is a 20,000-seat ground on the shore of Lake Ontario in the city of Toronto. It will also serve as the country's national stadium. On August 5<sup>th</sup>, David Beckham was scheduled to make his MLS debut there. However, continuing problems with fitness – the ankle injury that he carried through the end of Real Madrid's season – kept him out of the game.

BMO Field is the MLS venue where English (and probably South American) fans would most likely feel at home. The stadium has been filled for every home fixture with singing, chanting supporters. The team's first goal, which didn't come until a month after the season began, set off a wild scene with seat cushions raining down from all over the ground. Not something Becks is likely to experience in LA.

That's not surprising since Toronto is described as the most ethnically diverse city in the world. In fact, the Canadian Soccer Association briefly abandoned Toronto as the main site of Canada's matches because visiting countries – despite bringing virtually no traveling fans with them – were often better supported than the home side.

In June of this year, FIFA ranked Canada's national side 56<sup>th</sup> in the world, which was a dramatic improvement from its 94<sup>th</sup> place ranking the previous month. The high point of our international history was a victory in our Confederation championship in 2000 – that's *Confederation of North, Central American and Caribbean Association Football* or, as everyone quite sensibly calls it, CONCACAF (*kōnka – kaf*). In this year's tournament

we were eliminated in the semi-final by the eventual winner, the USA (... but please don't ask me about the officials' decision not to allow a clearly onside tying goal for Canada in the 95<sup>th</sup> minute!).

For Canadian fans, however, there are reasons for optimism. The MLS now provides a North American outlet for the best youth players to play professionally. We are starting to see more Canadians in Europe. The best known 'Canadian' is Owen Hargreaves who was born and raised in Calgary, Alberta and who left to join Bayern Munich at 16 years of age. There are other names that might be familiar to English Premiership fans: Paul Stalteri (Spurs), Paul Peschisolido (formerly of Derby), Tomas Radzinsky (formerly of Fulham), and David Edgar (Newcastle). Canadians play elsewhere in the UK and Europe, including Julian de Guzman with Deportivo la Coruna in Spain. It may seem like a very modest representation, but this is an enormous leap forward from even 10 years ago.

One other dramatic improvement on the Canadian football scene is the greatly improved television coverage of the Premiership and other leagues. During the last 2 seasons, a minimum of 4 Premiership games were shown each weekend with also some mid-week matches. In addition, fans have access to FA Cup, Serie A, la Liga, Bundesliga, Argentine and Brazilian games. I realize that many football purists are not happy with early kick-offs in England. I would have to agree. But that's mainly because I live in western Canada – 7 time zones away from London – so a 12:30 pm kick-off has me up at 5:30 each Saturday morning (yes, each and every Saturday morning).

Canadian football has a long way to go before it attains the quality and importance of the sport in, say, Australia. But the fears that it would be crowded out by North American sports and would wither can probably now be laid to rest. Over 850,000 young people currently playing the game will carry some experience of the sport into later life. A proportion of them will become serious fans, if not players, as adults. Exposure to the game as a young player and exposure to the best professionals via television cannot help but increase the place of football in Canadian sports culture. Even the most ardent fans of baseball, American football, and hockey are grudgingly starting to admit that there is a glamour to the beautiful game that can't be denied.

For those of us who are native-born Canadians and who love the sport, these are good days.

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