

Does Canada's future lay with the MLS?

■ **Tim Graine, Toledo, Ohio**

As Major League Soccer in the United States celebrates its tenth anniversary season, Toronto has recently been among the top candidates for one of up to four expansion franchises for 2007. **Don Garber** released a statement in early June confirming that MLS would concentrate on the following candidate cities: Toronto, Houston, Seattle, St. Louis, Rochester, Cleveland, Detroit, Milwaukee and Philadelphia. This was after the announcement in May that the proposed **York University** stadium—to have housed the **CFL's Toronto Argonauts**, the final of the **2007 FIFA World Youth Championships** and professional soccer—had been terminated. York University killed its stadium deal after the Argonauts decided to stay at **Rogers Centre** (formerly **Skydome**). The \$20 million dollars that the Argos were contributing was too much for York to offset through design changes or reducing capacity.

Canadian soccer was hurt the most by the decision. Edmonton will now host the final game of the u20 World Championship in 2007; Metro Toronto is not a lock to host any games and the city is still without a true home for top flight soccer. **Toronto University** failed earlier this year to follow through on a plan to build on the site of the former **Varsity Stadium**, former home of the **NASL Toronto Blizzard**. Ironically, the setbacks have not slowed efforts by the **Canadian Soccer Association** to use federal grants to help spur the construction of a Toronto stadium suitable for MLS and international games.

Stadium unlikely necessity

Guy Bradbury, executive director of the **Ontario Soccer Association**, described two sites within Toronto proper that are being considered; the **Canadian National Exhibition** grounds, and **Downsview Park**, a former military base with some zoning for recreational areas. In addition, three suburban communities have shown interest including Oakville, Mississauga and Vaughn.

The stadium is a necessity for a MLS franchise, as the league wants all new franchises to either own or have primary access to a soccer-specific facility. Bradbury felt that “for MLS, the promotion aspect is key. With strong marketing and sales support an MLS franchise would have mostly an upside. Within an hour's drive we have 250,000 registered members.” Bradbury also said that construction would have to begin by November to be complete in time for the u20 tournament.

Location and promotion

One group experienced at selling professional product has held talks with MLS Commissioner Garber — **Maple Leaf Sports and Entertainment** (the holding company for the **NHL Toronto Maple Leafs** and **NBA Toronto Raptors**). CEO **Richard Peddie** said in an interview with *WFP* in mid June that Maple Leaf Sports has done preliminary business and consumer research. He confirmed Maple Leaf Sports' discussions with MLS, saying it was a

good league, and that “the single entity management concept provides cost control.”

He described Maple Leaf Sports' position as having “the will to do it,” though he has not taken the MLS franchise issue before the Board. He said that they needed to have a predominantly soccer stadium with seating between 20,000 and 25,000 or “we are not interested.” Furthermore, Peddie said they would not want to play in a preliminary site while the stadium is being built, as **Salt Lake City** is doing. He felt that the team “should be displayed and presented in the best light of a new building.”

Of the five sites, MLSE is most interested in the CNE site though Peddie acknowledged interest in Downsview. Complementary towards the three suburban cities, Peddie felt that a Toronto location would give the team the best chance to be financially successful.

Garber receptive to Canada

From a **US Soccer Federation** perspective it would seem to be a competitive advantage to keep Canadian teams in the minor leagues (**USL First Div.**) and reserve MLS largely for US-developed players. Only a couple of Canadians have played in MLS in any one season. The league's orientation changed substantially when **Don Garber** became commissioner in Aug. 1999, though he was seen by some as a poor choice since he had no soccer experience, having spent 16 years with the NFL.

Garber played a key role in the development of **NFL International**, created in 1996, which included **NFL Europe** however, his international orientation is now making an impact on MLS. Garber has a less provincial perspective than many in US Soccer's extensive youth-based governing body, particularly when it comes to finding investors in his centrally run league, for which “owners” retain stock in the league and manage franchises.

As one MLS team executive who wished to remain anonymous said when asked if Toronto would stand a serious chance for admission “If Toronto can put together the financial package the league would want, and a workable stadium package, they would be welcomed.”

New investor groups are imperative since two owners-investors control two-thirds of the franchises (**Philip Anshutz** with five and **Lamar Hunt** with three.) Garber doesn't really care where new teams come from as long as they can be viable. An example is the entrance of **Chivas USA** playing in LA. Garber brought in Mexican investor **Jorge Vergara**, who owns **CD Guadalajara** of the **Mexican League** and **Deportivo Saprissa** of Costa Rica's **First Div.**. In effect, as opposed to the efforts of promoters in the early 1990's, to place a LA franchise in the Mexican League, LA now has a Mexican flavored franchise—openly catering to Mexicans—playing in an American league. Chivas' rivals **Club America** of Mexico City is finalizing the purchase of the **San Jose Earthquake** and plans to have the franchise compete in Houston in 2007.

CSA and Toronto opinion mixed

For a Canadian perspective, *WFP* talked with CSA president **Andy Sharpe**, who felt that a franchise would not only be a “breeding ground for young stars,” but allow older veterans to return from overseas to finish their playing careers in Canada, mentioning **Thomas Radzinski (Fulham)** who started his career with **North York Rockets** in the old **CSL**, and **Jason DeVos (Ipswich)**. Sharpe saw no disadvantages to a MLS franchise in Toronto, while acknowledging that the **Toronto Lynx (USL)** might disagree, even though he felt that they could be a feeder team.

Bruno Hartrell, the chief financial officer for the Lynx told the *Toronto Star* in March that he doesn't think any Toronto team will draw more than 10,000 a game: “As if soccer's doing so really well, we don't need one professional team, we need two teams in Toronto!”

Past experience in, principally twice in Columbus, has shown that an MLS team effectively kills a USL franchise in the same city.

The quota compromise

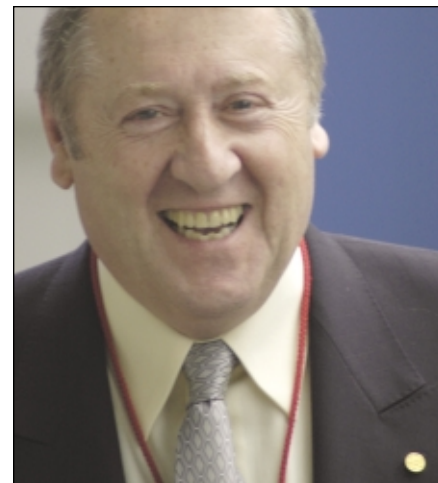
Benefits for a Toronto franchise would include attracting top-caliber international players. Toronto could build around a core of Canada's top players, sprinkled with some international talent, providing Canada with a group of players familiar with each other.

Italian players would be particularly well received in the Queen City, as **Juventus** great **Roberto Bettiga** at the Blizzard. Talk around MLS is that a Canadian team could use a majority of Canadian citizens, while they would still count against international quotas on American teams. This is a compromise, though not quite at the level of the NASL that allowed Americans and Canadians to play on either side of the border, counting towards a North American quota. Concerns that **FIFA** would not approve of the cross border team, as there is technically a rule that club teams cannot play in leagues outside their home country, are largely unfounded. FIFA has looked sideways at this rule on a number of occasions—**Derry City** of N. Ireland has played for years in the Republic's **League of Ireland**; Singapore has fielded teams in Malaysia's top league and; Canadian teams played for years in the NASL and the USL. FIFA will not stand in the way of a Canadian team in MLS.

Build it and will they come?

Beyond the stadium issue, a giant unknown is whether Toronto soccer fans would accept and support a MLS team, a league with an average attendance of 15,559 a game in 2004. There are some historical reasons to be pessimistic. Between 1975 (**Pele's** first year) and 1985, for all but two years, Toronto's attendance was below average, even though they reached the Final in 1981 and 1984. **Vancouver** was consistently above the average beginning in 1978, and finished in the top four in attendance from 1979 onwards, even leading the league the last two seasons.

Another benchmark is USL attendance. In 2004 **Montreal Impact** drew 9,279, second only to **Rochester's** 10,181. Vancouver attracted



I would like to see a MLS franchise, which I believe would have an immediate impact in the future of our national team, especially the young players across Canada — Andy Sharpe

4,833 a game, fifth best and ahead of the league average of 3,879. Toronto Lynx averaged less than 2,500 per game last year, playing in 5,000 seat **Centennial Park Stadium** in Etobicoke.

Peddie was not concerned about Toronto's support. In terms of fan support he felt that Toronto has changed since the NASL days, with more ethnic diversity, and that the market was “ready to embrace soccer. (Toronto) now has the financial clout and entertainment experience of Maple Leaf Sports.”

Supporting Peddie's point was that, on consecutive nights last summer in the Skydome, 40,078 saw **Porto** defeat **Liverpool** and then 50,168 watched as **Roma** beat **Celtic**. Toronto is great for one-time events, particularly involving Italian teams.

The next six months could provide some exciting news on the stadium and league fronts for Toronto. With proper promotion and some international class players, a Toronto MLS franchise could draw substantial crowds on a regular basis, significantly impacting soccer in the Queen City and in Canada in general, perhaps paving the way for Vancouver and Montreal to one day join MLS, and ‘team Canada’ to reap the eventual benefits. ●

