



**NATIONAL
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New Player Development Program for Canada Kicks-off

The most important player development program in the history of Canadian player development recently kicked off thanks to the Toronto Maple Leafs Hockey Club. Who would have ever dreamed of such a thing? So what is this program? Simply put, a first class professional soccer team backed by the best sports marketing machine in the country. That's it!

No, this program does not include a list of coaching books, DVD's, philosophies, academies, coaching licenses or certificates. All it takes is a big league team with a big league soccer stadium and with big league TV exposure. The rest will fall into place on it's own. It won't be long before Canada's Men's National Team will be back in the race for a serious spot in upcoming World Cups. Let's see, 2010 may be premature but nonetheless possible but by 2014 we will be there challenging because all those 14-16 year-old boys of today will have a serious attainable dream to aspire to. They will be between 22 and 24 by then and give us a bigger pool to draw from. I predict that by 2014, we'll be in. The kids of today will keep up their training instead of getting turned off by 18. That's especially true for all those who invest so much time in training between 12 and 16. Don't hold me to my prediction because a couple of bad bounces, goalposts or crossbars at the wrong moment in a key game could cost us a chance to advance but by and large, we will challenge from here on in, every time!

All of this will be possible thanks to the Maple Leafs. No other person, program or policy will have as much impact to player development and getting to a Men's World Cup than this. Heavens we have tried! Over the past 20 years our associations, starting from the local districts to the Provinces and to the Canadian Soccer Association have all tried to implement a variety of programs all promising to take us to the World Cup. Today, we have more coaches with licenses, paid coaches, academies, camps, personal trainers and professional help from all over the world than ever before. We have had help from overseas teams like Everton, Ajax, AC Milan, Santos etc etc etc. yet nothing has taken our Men's National Team to the World Cup. We have structured and re-structured the game with various pyramids of play and implemented new rules and regulations all with the hope of helping our National Men's Team. Nothing has worked and none will without the help of pro soccer and the media. That savior is MLSE. The Maple Leafs has taken soccer to the next level. They have been the first to put their money where their mouth is. And when I say money, I'm talking about lots of it. They have taken the risk.

This is not to say we have not developed some great and knowledgeable coaches or instructors. We have, but we are asking them to build skyscrapers without cement and steel. You can only go so high. Italy has a host of ex NHL and pro hockey players teaching and coaching hockey in Italy. You will not see them competing for a World Hockey title for the same reason. Now if AC Milan or Juventus were to invest and build a state of the art hockey arena and bring pro hockey to Italy, then

down the road you would see results. They won't win a World Hockey Championship but they will compete.

So here in Canada, such a thing has happened. A packed soccer stadium enjoyed their first game with an enthusiastic soccer crowd. The Manchester United of hockey, the Toronto Maple Leafs, are promoting soccer with it's own stadium, team, and everything that goes with it. Right off the bat, things are looking better than expected. As a result, they have already recouped much of their investment for their stadium. Good for them, they deserve it. Don't listen to those who are complaining about this because MLSE still took the initial risk by putting up the big bucks. In business it takes money to make money and sometimes the bigger risk you take the bigger the potential rewards. But if you make some bad decisions you also pay dearly for it, so for the sake of the game, thank you for taking the risk and in return you have started the path to the real player development program we have been waiting for.

Toronto F.C. has just announced a TV contract allowing us to follow the team on Television, which is an even more important element of player development. Hopefully radio, newsprint, along with regular sports coverage on TV will include Toronto F.C. in their daily news. We can also thank the Leafs for making the U20 tournament possible with their financial support with the stadium. Without this, the tournament may have been doomed.

There have been many critics, especially from coaches, of the many attempts made to create an effective player development program in Canada with many offering their own ideas. Many are good ideas, but they all break down because Canadian kids have not had a true dream that would stand a chance of coming through. Now that has all changed. Before long, Montreal and Vancouver will have soccer specific stadiums and join the MLS. The timing is ripe for soccer culture to grow as people with an open mind to different sports make their way through to more prominent positions in the media and big business. It doesn't hurt to have the Toronto Maple Leafs on your side when dealing with these issues. The challenge now will be to keep the momentum going, making sure the kids are enjoying the game for the sake of the game and keep them salivating for soccer information as they get to know our team and follow players through to our National team. This will create a major buzz around National team games and make their games virtual sell-outs in the near future all over the country.

From here on in, player development will take off on it's own. Thanks to our beloved Toronto Maple Leafs. With all due respect to fans of the Habs, Senators, Canucks, Flames and Oilers, we expect those of you who are avid soccer fans to change over and cheer for "The Leafs".

Thanks for Reading,

John DeBenedictis
(Executive Director of the National Soccer Coaches Association of Canada)