

# Soccer Stalemate

PAUL S. HENDREN AND COLIN JOSE • CONTINUED FROM FRONT COVER



With more participants registered in soccer rather than Canada's passion, ice hockey, one would assume that soccer grounds, like the infinite number of hockey arenas, would be similarly scattered across Canada.

International David Jack played at Ulster Stadium in 1926 and when he returned home he told the Athletic News that the Toronto based soccer stadium had one of the best enclosures that he ever played on. Today, Ulster Stadium, like many other vintage parks, has been redeveloped for housing. Toronto's Maple Leaf Stadium, a baseball park, attracted 23,137 patrons in 1968 for a game between Inter-Milan and Olympiakos and during the same year, a few blocks away at Exhibition Stadium, Glasgow Celtic and AC Milan attracted over 30,000 for a friendly.

Varsity Stadium, known for years as the home to Canadian soccer hosted one of the most memorable matches in recent history. In 1972, Santos played Bologna with a capacity crowd bursting every inch of Varsity Stadium. Thousands of fans who were unable to gain entrance scaled the northern wall and lined the touchlines to get a glimpse of Pele in his famous white shirt. As recently as November 2000, Canada versus Mexico played to a 0-0 tie in front of 6,500 fans.

In 1981, Exhibition Stadium hosted the North American Soccer League's Soccer Bowl and 36,971 turned out to see Chicago upset the mighty New York Cosmos resulting in many revellers from the windy

city spilling out into Toronto's downtown core. In Vancouver, Empire Stadium, site of the famous Roger Bannister-John Landy sub-four-minute mile, quickly established itself as one of North America's premier soccer grounds attracting large boisterous audiences for Whitecaps games. Empire Stadium, like Callister Park in Winnipeg and Delormier Stadium in Montreal has since been reduced to rubble unable to avoid redevelopment.

Montreal's Olympic Stadium attracted 71,617 for the 1976 Olympic soccer final and the Montreal Manic frequently drew over 40,000 to the same venue during their banner season in the North American Soccer League in 1981. Many large stadia in Canada, however, have been ruined for soccer with the introduction of synthetic playing surfaces. A trend that appears to

have been reversed over the past decade south of the border.

## Cold Reality

With more participants registered in soccer rather than Canada's passion, hockey, one would assume that soccer grounds, like the infinite number of hockey arenas, would similarly be scattered across Canada's expansive landscape from the Atlantic to the Pacific. Nothing can be further from the truth and the cold reality is that Canadian soccer is now faced with a stadium crisis. Canada's small fleet of soccer facilities are either too old, too decrepit, too small, too cavernous or just too inappropriate to house big soccer events.

On the West Coast, considered a hotbed for soccer due to its moderate climate, there is little doubt that ... *continued page 8*

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Swangard Stadium in Burnaby, British Columbia; situated overlooking the Rocky Mountains has an unmatched charm. During the hey days of the Canadian Soccer League it was the favourite destination for most players but even with its expanded capacity of 6,800 it is limited in size restricting its use for top international games.

Former national team coach, Bob Lenarduzzi, now one of Canada's top soccer broadcasters, is of the opinion that British Columbia will never again see big soccer events and he proclaimed that: "I think it is a disgrace that when you consider the size of Canada and we don't have one appropriate national soccer stadium."

Commonwealth Stadium in Edmonton was targeted to be Canadian soccer's saviour throughout the nineties and leading to the next millennium. A near capacity crowd jammed into the 60,000-seat facility to cheer on the mighty Brazilians before they embarked on their World Cup campaign in 1994. Commonwealth Stadium was the place to be and huge partisan Canadian crowds were expected when the men wearing the Maple Leaf touched down in Edmonton. The bubble quickly burst with extremely poor gates turned out for subsequent international friendlies and Olympic qualifying leaving Canadian national team head coach Holger Osieck with an empty feeling. Osieck, who assisted Franz Beckenbauer with the German national team in 1990, is not used to stadia with more empty seats than pay-

ing customers and he has been very critical of the Commonwealth as a venue for the national team.

In Manitoba, there was a glimmer of hope from the recently held Pan American Games. A small little intimate Soccer Park was erected outside of Winnipeg that was believed to lead to greater things. Unfortunately, the legacy of the Soccer Park lasted just a few weeks as the portable bleachers were quickly dismantled in Lego-like speed and shipped off to a distant auto race. The residuals that remain would only be suitable for a local amateur soccer team.

In La Belle Province, the Montreal Impact's (in North America's sanctioned second division) experiment of hosting both outdoor and indoor soccer at Center Claude Robillard has been impressive but the outdoor stadium's small capacity of 8,000, its intrusive running track and postage sized playing surface makes it less than ideal. Talk of converting the 20,000 seat Molson's Stadium in the city centre with a more soccer friendly playing surface and the Quebec Soccer Federation's scheme of erecting a large portable stadium on the grounds of the Olympic site using bleachers from the Montreal Grand Prix have never graduated from the drawing board.

### Hogtown Headaches

The worst scenario comes from Canada's largest urban centre affectionately known to locals as Hogtown. Originally



The Canadian Soccer Association has officially applied to FIFA to stage the 2010 World Cup. They believe that Canada's army of CFL stadia can easily be retrofitted for the event regardless of the fact that all stadia will be committed to a full football schedule during summer months.

built in a charming period in the 1920s, Varsity Stadium's ideal capacity of just 20,000, its rectangular shape and intimate sight lines has served Canadian soccer well over the decades. Waiting for its date with the wrecking ball the East grandstand is now unfit for human habitation and the stadium capacity has been drastically reduced to a mere 9,000. After the grand old lady is converted to student housing for the University of Toronto next year what is left for soccer fans in Canada's most populated area are two municipal multi use stadia that are not even close to being suitable for big league soccer.

Toronto's top professional soccer club, the Toronto Lynx, has identified the pending problem and they are busy striking a working committee to examine stadium options. It appears that all stadium initiatives have been put on hold until the decision is made regarding Toronto's bid for the 2008 Olympics. Insiders believe that the spin-doctors at Toronto's Olympic bid have underestimated the magnitude of Olympic soccer and they have not made adequate provisions for new soccer stadia. A decision that concerns Kevan Pipe of the CSA who pleaded with the committee to spread the wealth by erecting or retrofitting stadia from coast to coast. The experiment of soccer indoors at the Skydome was never repeated and the fuzzy concrete playing surface has never been a favourite of international teams.



## Capital Idea

Frank Clair Stadium, situated in the nation's capital, has been sitting in mothballs for several years uncertain of its fate. It appears that the stadium's destiny has been turned over to the regional government who recently assumed full control of its operation. Built in 1967, with a capacity of 30,000, Frank Clair Stadium's cantilevered roofs, doubledecker stand and rectangular shape shares many of the same characteristics of many football grounds across the United Kingdom. The stadium is fully equipped with a 150-seat press box and the first row of seats is as close as five metres to the touchlines.

With the Francophone Games scheduled for the national capital region in 2001 the stadium will undergo a significant facelift including installing a natural turf grass field. Initially there were serious discussions about installing Fieldturf, another Canadian innovation, but the Canadian Soccer Association has made it clear that a natural playing surface is their preference given FIFA's policy about playing surfaces. Kevan Pipe is a strong believer that Frank Clair Stadium has tremendous

potential to be a first rate soccer facility and a saviour for the national team program.

## Coveting the Cup

Despite its obvious stadium shortcomings, the Canadian Soccer Association made the bold announcement in 1997 that it has officially applied to FIFA to stage the 2010 World Cup. CSA Chief Operating Officer Kevan Pipe is a strong believer that Canada's army of large grid-iron Canadian Football League stadia can be easily retrofitted for soccer's global spectacle. Pipe's scheme will include Ivor Wynne Stadium in Hamilton, Ottawa's Frank Clair Stadium, McMahon Stadium in Calgary, Taylor Field in Regina, Winnipeg Stadium, BC Place, Skydome in Toronto and Olympic Stadium in Montreal. All stadia with tremendous potential to house soccer but fully committed to their primary grid-iron football tenants throughout the summer months.

Located deep in the archives of the Canadian Soccer Association's headquarters sits detailed plans for a mid sized soccer specific stadium that were drawn

up in the early nineties. Occasionally Kevan Pipe pulls the plans out for a quick review wishing that his national federation had an infinite bank account to payroll such projects. It is a crime that Canada's national soccer body is unable to get into bed with the gifted architects who have been recruited from right under their noses to display their immense talents abroad.

Many pundits in the Canadian soccer community are painfully aware of the widening gap between our stadium wish list and our stadium reality. Indeed renowned author Simon Inglis' comments are apropos and without proper stadia, top-flight soccer in the Great White North will never engender passion or support. ♦

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