

The Failure of Professional Soccer in Canada: A View from the Inside

An often overlooked aspect of the question, why has professional soccer failed in Canada, is the input of two groups that would form the core of any professional soccer fan base, the players and coaches. Their input is valuable not only in ascertaining why previous leagues have failed but also to the successful implementation of a new one. A recent survey conducted by Greg Zorbas, former coach of the Laurentian University Men's Soccer team and current chair of the technical committee of the Ontario Soccer Association, fills this void and attempts to explain the previous failures and offer important ideas for the success of a future Canadian professional soccer league.

There are many explanations and theories explaining the failure of professional soccer in Canada. Despite the creation of over fifteen professional leagues in the last hundred years ¹only two leagues currently exist outside the amateur level, the semi-professional teams in the American based A-League,² and the Canadian Professional Soccer League, which despite its name and aspirations, is also currently semi-professional.³ Furthermore, it appears that the current state of professional soccer in Canada will remain as it is for the next couples of years at least. The Canadian Soccer Association recently commissioned the Winnipeg based firm, KPMG, to complete a feasibility study on the viability of a Canadian Professional Soccer League and their conclusion was that such an enterprise was not practical at this time.

The KPMG report noted that "critical success factors," specifically the long term financial support of an ownership group, proponents, venues, and organizational structure required for a successful league are missing and that a new league would still face "financial hurdles, facility challenges, and public perception issues." The focus of the report was how to make a league succeed, not why previous leagues failed. That question, however, is of crucial importance and it is for the purpose of finding the answer that Zorbas began his work.

Zorbas envisioned the survey as the first step in trying to understand why professional soccer leagues become like the seeds in the biblical parable which fall on thin soil. They sprout strong then quickly wither and die because they lack suitable depth in which to grow. To this end he arranged to survey those who are closest to the game and ascertain their views on soccer's remarkable failure as a professional enterprise in Canada.

Approximately 500 people responded to the survey, in which there were twelve questions. The survey was directed primarily at soccer players and coaches (61% of respondents) but a number of administrators and parents responded as well. There was a nearly equal division between age groups and household income, but three quarters of the

¹ Vancouver and District F. A. (1909-1910); Interprovincial Professional Football Association [IPFA] (1913); Eastern Football League (1913-1914); Inter-Cities League (1922-1923); Inter-Provincial League (1924-1925); International League (1926); Pacific Coast League [PCL] (1930-1973); North American Soccer League (1946-1947); International Soccer League (1960-1965); Eastern Canadian Professional Soccer League [ECPSSL] (1961-1960); United Soccer Association (1967); National Professional Soccer League [NPSL] (1967); North American Soccer League [NASL] (1968-1984); Western Canada Soccer League [WCSL] (1969-1970); Canadian Professional Soccer League [CPSL] (1983); Western Soccer Alliance [WSA] (1985-1986); Canadian Soccer League [CSL] (1987-1992).

² Toronot Lynx; Montreal Impact; Vancouver Whitecaps; Team Calgary (formerly the Calgary Storm).

³ For more information on the CPSL visit their website, <http://www.cpsl.org/>

respondents were male. Some of the results reaffirm the convention wisdom and others suggest that new perspectives are needed.

The key problem that most soccer players and coaches see in the failure of Canadian professional soccer is the media, or more precisely, the lack of media coverage. 93% feel that national television coverage is necessary. A virtually identical number, 94%, of those surveyed state that national newspaper coverage is equally as important and 85% think it is necessary for that coverage to be extensive, at least three times a week or more. The utter lack of coverage that the two fledgling semi-professional leagues in Canada receive from the two major national dailies (the *Globe and Mail* and the *National Post*) seems to reaffirm this point. Though the *Globe and Mail* is better in general at sports coverage and specifically at soccer, the stories tend to focus on overseas news, the many Beckham dramas for example, and not Canadian soccer.

In an ironic twist the national teams do receive some coverage, particularly when they are successful (take for example the recent run at the World Cup by Canada's national women's team) but the professional coverage remains sparse to non-existent. The winner of the CPSL did not make either paper and the A-league seems to manage news coverage only when the Vancouver organization is under ownership problems.

Vancouver is a partial exception. The Whitecaps have managed to maintain a small but firm fan base thanks to a long and storied history in the area and intensive community involvement. So despite the limited media coverage, the A-league Whitecaps averaged 4,292 spectators per game. How much greater could this attendance be with a stronger connection to the media?

Tied into the problem of the media is the promotion of the sport. The vast majority of soccer players surveyed feel that soccer is not marketed or promoted properly in this country (79%). Once again, these results are supported by current events. The incredible success that the under 19 women's national team enjoyed, with a sold out crowd of 47,784 watching the final in Edmonton, demonstrates that Canadians will watch soccer, at all levels, regardless of gender. The recent run by the women's national team only re-enforced this. Sportsnet has now moved its *Soccercentral* to a twice weekly showing and T.S.N. continues to show champions league fixtures. Canadians do watch soccer, just not our own professional teams.

In addition to national coverage regional coverage is signalled out overwhelmingly by respondents (96%) as being essential to the success of professional soccer. In many areas the lack of regional coverage is based more on a lack of communication and effort on the part of local soccer association. In August 2003, the city of Saskatoon played host to an A-league game between the Calgary Storm and the Vancouver Whitecaps. The local paper and radio stations both advertised the game and the game was a sell-out, drawing 5,850 fans. Unfortunately, this is not the norm in the larger venues, such as Toronto, Vancouver and Calgary. Local media form the most important connections between fans and the game.

An exception is the Montreal Impact. The Impact have done an excellent job in courting the local media, both print and television, and the results speak for themselves. Many of the Impact's home games are sell-outs and the average attendance for the 2003 season was 7236 fans per game. Considering that the capacity of Claude Robillard Stadium is 8000 and this translates into an excellent environment to play soccer.

The importance of local media is also underscored by the success of some soccer organizations in smaller communities. In Newfoundland, the success of the St. Lawrence Laurentians is proof that small communities can and do support and watch soccer. They regularly draw over a thousand spectators for the provincial men's finals and when they hosted the 2002 Challenge Cup the fans turned out in numbers. Similar events occur throughout Canada where the local media has been actively courted and responded with coverage, both at the club and at the university level. The success of the Laurentian University Voyageurs men's soccer team in courting the media is another example of an amateur team successfully drawing fans. The Voyageurs regularly drew between 1500 and 2000 fans for their play-off games and during the 1983 national final drew over 3000. If amateur teams can succeed, professional teams certainly have a shot.

Soccer also has the advantage of low ticket cost. When asked if the tickets were too expensive only 13% of respondents thought they were. Considering the high cost of tickets for professional hockey, baseball, basketball or football, this is an advantage that should be pressed. Along with ticket prices another concern examined by the survey was the importance of soccer-only stadiums. Once again a majority of respondents did not feel that it is necessary for each professional team to have its own stadium. It is a costly endeavour and one that has already been proven unnecessary. The National Football League's Miami Dolphins and the Major League Baseball's Florida Marlins share a stadium and it has done little to diminish the popularity of either team.

Another question on the survey asked "if the Canadian professional soccer players who play in Europe came back to play in the Canadian Professional League, would that attract more fans?" A majority of respondents (65%) said yes, and once again there are contemporary examples that support this. The American Major League Soccer has drawn most of the American players who previously plied their trade abroad back to the United States. The result is a stronger league and the development of domestic players capable of playing at the international level. This was amply demonstrated by the success of the American men's national team in the 2002 World Cup.

The study also probed two subjects often discussed in the locker rooms but rarely in the board rooms; the role of ethnicity in Canadian soccer and the impact of the British influence. Regarding the question of ethnicity, the results contradict the often prevalent idea that soccer players believe that ethnicity needs to be exploited in order for a professional team to survive. A majority of respondents stated that they believed that Canadians would support a non-ethnic professional soccer team. The success of the Montreal Impact and the Vancouver Whitecaps would appear to re-enforce this conclusion. Concerning the second issue, that of the British influence, the results are far less clear cut, with a majority of respondents stating that they are uncertain as to whether it has been a positive or negative impact.

Ending the study on a pessimistic note, the last question asks, "Can professional soccer in Canada compete with the other established major professional sports?" Only 43% of respondents said yes, underscoring the lack of belief in the professional enterprise. Considering the sheer number of soccer players (789,289 total registered players in 2002) and the high ratings that soccer consistently brings in on television in Canada, the pessimism is undeserved. Professional soccer can work in this country and the view from inside seems to be unanimous, get the media on board.