

Olympic gold the key to unlock domestic league

By Robert Belardi

There are times when hard work doesn't have a reflection in the mirror. You might question why. You might wonder if your concerted efforts might not go anywhere.

But then there's a spark ? a cataclysmic change to the cosmos ? where talk begins to walk and where promise turns to action.

For years, there has always been a lengthy and detailed conversation about running a professional women's soccer league in Canada. Our women's national team has far exceeded not just expectations but have provided Canadians with excitement, joy and heartbreak in past World Cup appearances and honour, bringing home two Olympic bronze medals in 2012 and 2016.

When the women's national team lifted Olympic gold this summer in Tokyo it became abundantly clear this is the time. This is the time to move the conversation forward that a women's domestic league in Canada would be a monumental success.

?I'm hoping something that Canada Soccer - from what they have been telling us - and what they have been working towards has been very promising,? said League 1 Operations Manager and assistant coach at Wilfrid Laurier University, Julie Maheu.

?It might take five to ten years. Who knows what they might look at. They might look at NWSL (National Women's Soccer League) first. They might look at the league at the ultimate goal. What we have heard from Nick Bontis at Canada Soccer is they are looking at the NWSL as a first option.?

Although going into the NWSL might divert ourselves away from the eventual goal, if that's what it would take to hit the ground running then so be it. Tennis stars like Serena Williams and Naomi Osaka joined the NWSL boardroom this past year. So, why wouldn't Canadian and other worldwide stars invest into a domestic league here if we had one?

The Canadian Premier League for the men began just three years ago, and, since then, Executive Vice President and Chief of Staff Eva Havaris was brought on board. She asked the CPL panel about a women's league.

?When I started at CPL. Having a men's league caused a lot of people to say, what about a women's league? We've gone on to that question a lot,? Havaris said.

?There was a time I was asked to join a panel at the Ontario Soccer summit. I was on the panel with Carmelina Moscato. I never met her before. Me being the CPL person on that panel and I had the question from the audience on what we're doing for the women. I said, I'm going to hire Carm and she's going to tell us what we need to do.?

Both Havaris and Maheu who have been in the game their entire lives know exactly what would need to be done. Amidst plenty of speculation of what the direction is to move forward, the point is there is at least a direction.

?A lot of the women here, they don't necessarily want to go abroad. If they play pro here, they can build a life locally. This is where their friends and family are. How exciting would that be?? Maheu said.

Both women attested to the fact this isn't just about a domestic league for the players. It is for the coaches. Maheu never had a female coach growing up and Havaris played with the boys. Having women at the forefront of this operation might just be the light for many young girls who are interested in getting into soccer in the future.

?I think something that needs to be stressed is I love that Diana (Matheson), Carmelina (Moscato) and Karina (LeBlanc) are at the forefront of this conversation because they've lived it and done it at the highest level,? Havaris said.

?We need women at the forefront of this effort. That is not taking away at all from the many men, even the ones that have influenced or had a hand in my success growing up and playing and coaching. But women need to be at that table because it's an experience and we need their perspective.?

One thing is for sure: soccer in Canada has a lot to offer for women who love this game.

If investors and logistics can be worked out and a domestic league can be formed, it can be one of the most remarkable events in Canadian sports history. Because here, we have it all already. We just need to get the ball rolling to see where it leads.