

Robert's Rant: Is the merger of these two youth soccer clubs a sign of things to come?

By Robert Belardi

Opinion

At the end of the day, it is all about the youth.

Just months after the Toronto Blizzard began a historic partnership with FC Bayern Munich, one of the city's most prominent development academies did it again.

Just a few weeks ago, Toronto Blizzard began an exclusive partnership with FC Emery to promote the long-term development of young soccer players.

FC Emery, which currently houses a few players from Aurora, was established in 1991, originally as a men's futsal program. But over time, the club grew and became an academy, poised for competitive soccer. HFX Wanderers player Mohammad Omar, earned his trade in this system.

The Toronto Blizzard, on the other hand, formally competed in the North American Soccer League from 1979-1984. This elite academy is also where players in the past have earned full rides and their structure is one of the best around.

In speaking with the head of FC Emery, Angel Granja said when he spoke to the head of the Toronto Blizzard, Joe Parolini, he approached him with a plan and had numerous players in need of his infrastructure.

"It's more affordable for the kids and it works out for us as well. They have the coaching staff, they have the players. He has the accessibility for the USA that we needed. He has everything that we're looking for, for the next phase of our development," Granja said.

In his experience, Granja has seen players enroll into the Ontario Player Development League (OPDL) and opt out due to high costs, a key factor for many players who financially cannot pay to play in the league.

"It's about working together for the sport. Even though we're seeing the national team developed in Canada, promoting the game has never been our gold standard. Even if the kid can't play, do we have a development program? We generated a beginner's program for U13 and up," Granja said.

"We're not looking for superstars. We're looking to make kids' opportunities better. That's all it is. If they continue the sport, we're growing the sport. If they get a degree, or if they continue professionally, that's even better."

With this merger, yes, more players will have flexibility with less monetary strain on families.

But in its totality, can we potentially see this to happen between clubs in the foreseeable future?

When asked, Granja said no. Each club might not be keen on merging with another. Lots of clubs can be competitive that way and want to have a better system than the other. The cold truth, unfortunately, but in reality, it can most certainly be the nature of a competitor.

If this is something that can happen in other communities, this isn't particularly a bad thing. If a player doesn't fit right at one club, they should be recommended to try out for another. The care into player development has most certainly grown. The players are

looking for outlets and they are seeking clubs in prime positions for their services.

Canada Soccer has become a lot better in recent years. It is why we currently see the success of our national team. To finally return to the World Cup since their first and only appearance in 1986 speaks volumes on all of the work this country has been doing to get this nation there.

And there will be another in 2026 ? the first time in the country's history to have back-to-back appearances. Now isn't that something?

To say every club should merge might be overstepping a fine line in some instances. But, if we're all in it for the development of the players and to further promote the game, is there truly a harm?

With the Toronto Blizzard merging with a second club ? and this time a local one ? can this happen with others? There are many questions. We'll have to wait to find out.