

FONSECA: "We want our players to play for BC, and we want to work together to have non-confrontational soccer"

LENARDUZZI: "We have a pretty good relationship with BC soccer, and we certainly want to build upon it"

MILLER: "Play for BC. I'm all for it, but communicate with each other openly, and work together."

Super Y poses questions of provincial player equity

■ Ian Kennett

As the USL's Super Y-League gets ready to kick off the 2004 schedule, an unfortunate rivalry exists with the BC Provincial program, that has resulted in some players having to make difficult choices between their Y-League club and provincial aspirations.

There are some sticky political issues to resolve between Y-League and BCSA administrators, including the fact that provincial and Y-League schedules conflict, making it next to impossible for top youth players to participate in both. The big question then is: if player development in BC is the common goal of both the BCSA and local Y-League clubs, then what is the best option for players?

All in agreement

In April's WFP, BCSA coach Michael Findlay made it clear that players who want to play for the Provincial team can not play in the Super Y-League. Schedule conflicts and an increased risk of injury were the primary reasons given.

Colin Miller, head coach of Abbotsford Soccer Association, and Vancouver Whitecaps FC Dir. of Ops. Bob Lenarduzzi, agree.

"The seasons overlap and it is not practical for players to try to do both", stated Lenarduzzi.

"The players should play for the province if they are selected," adds Colin Miller. "We think that's a great thing, but we don't want to compete for the players during the same time".

There are also differences of opinion regarding quality of play in the Y-League, as well as ongoing discussions about other jurisdictional issues and priorities.

Caps & Abby – practical models?

Whitecaps FC and Abbotsford SA are both developing club structures modeled after the European club system, where clubs develop players from youth to the professional level. Defender Wes Brown of Manchester United is a good, recent example of a player who spent several years developing his game within the club structure, before winning a spot on the senior team.



MARK OKOTH/DIGITAL ACTION

Running scared: Youth players (Abby and Burnaby pictured here – 2003 Provincial Cup) need the powers that be to develop a system that neither tugs at their loyalties nor limits their options

"The Whitecaps hope to see, in due course, players on the senior team who have been developed in our youth system, through our soccer academy, and through our Y-League participation", says Cap's Lenarduzzi. We currently have u13 to u16 levels, and we will soon begin a u18 team".

Whitecaps are training coaches under the watchful eye of head coach Tony Fonseca. "I direct them in the philosophy of our club, our style of play, and I see that they receive proper training. This way, we can establish continuity as the players progress from level to level".

Abbotsford have a similar system, one which Lenarduzzi says "is the model for youth soccer in this province".

Abbotsford operates teams from recreational youth, through Metro, Y-League and on to the Abbotsford Rangers of the PDL, the most senior squad. Top players are also directed to its School of Excellence.

"We want to develop players for future opportunities in soccer," declared Miller. "If that is a professional career in soccer, or if that is helping to create an opportunity for a scholarship in soccer for a college or university, then that is what we will try to do. We want to get the best out of, and for our players."

Why the Y?

The Y-League schedule runs from May to August, providing a summer league for top players, yet it is not intended to take the place of regular club teams or to prevent participation on provincial teams. This year there will be four Y-League teams in BC including Whitecaps FC, Abbotsford, Okanagan, and Vancouver Island.

"Y-League provides a realistic picture of what playing soccer at a very high level is all about," contends Miller. "We play local clubs, but we also play against American teams which, of course, means that we have to travel".

The Abbotsford Y-League experience "helps the players to learn about ongoing fitness, about proper nutrition for an athlete, and about appropriate sleep and personal needs. It really is more than just soccer."

As to the quality, Lenarduzzi concedes that "there are certainly stronger and weaker teams in the league; however, we know that the level of play is steadily improving. We have to remember that the Y-League is new, and that the Americans always get right into things. In other words, the Americans will build the league rapidly, and we will benefit from a much higher standard of play. The Whitecaps and the Y-League allow top prospects to play

against strong competition which will only get better every season."

Overcoming the Obstacles

"I've said all along that every player should, if selected, strive to play for the provincial team," espoused Miller. "We have had 34 players involved in provincial training over the last two years, so it is definitely something that we support. It is, though, sometimes a tough choice for players and parents. Sometimes players will choose to play for BC, and we wish them well, and sometimes they will opt to play for Abbotsford and the province loses out. It is a serious commitment either way."

"It's definitely tough," explains Fonseca. "While we can play all the year around, — both the Y-League and the BCSA want to take advantage of the good weather and play in the spring and summer. Unfortunately, — it makes it

hard to choose. Of course, players should play for BC if possible. The Whitecaps support this. We need to find a way to avoid splitting the kids up. We need to make scheduling decisions that help both us and the province. We need to keep the players together as much as possible".

"The Y-League, is new", admits Lenarduzzi, "and there is always resistance when something new comes along and perhaps seems to threaten what is already in place. For us, there are those who do not think that a professional organization like the Whitecaps should be involved in youth teams at all. We feel that we should, because that is how most of the world, and all of the successful countries develop their players. But conflict, and there has been some, is not in the best interests of the players, and, so, our club and the province need to work hard together." ●



MARK OKOTH/DIGITAL ACTION

Tried and tested: Though Bob recognizes that days are young, both the Y-League and the emerging club philosophy spells promise for Whitecaps youth

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KENT KALLBERG/FROM THE BOOK 'CHAMPIONS'

WHITECAPS FC MEN'S 2004 PRE-SEASON SCHEDULE

- Mar. 27 vs. Aldergrove u18's
2:00pm @ South Aldergrove Park
- Apr. 3 vs. Trinity Western University
3:00pm @ Trinity Western
- Apr. 7 vs. PCSL All-Stars
7:00pm @ Brandrith Park (Tsawwassen)
- April 10 vs. Seattle Sounders
7:00pm @ Civic Stadium (Bellingham)
- April 18 vs. Seattle Sounders
5:00pm @ The Landing (Chilliwack)
- April 24 vs. Abbotsford Storm
2:00pm @ Kinsmen Stadium (North Van.)

Whitecaps FC men open their 2004 regular season, Apr. 30 vs. Edmonton Aviators at Swangard Stadium

You and who's Possee: Whitecaps over Cosmos, 1979

See Kindel run: During Whitecaps FC pre-season action, Steve Kindel (8) paces with an Aldergrove u18 player Mar. 27, at South Aldergrove Comm. Park in Langley. Kindel and clan held on desperately to a 9-0 victory in front of a decently-sized, stunned crowd, who hadn't witnessed so many Caps' goals since, well, the last pre-season.

Truth is, the result never mattered... unless the Whitecaps lost! These matches are the classic win-win scenarios and we can give the nod to Bob for giving regional amateur and semi-pro clubs a crack at the Caps. A brush with greatness as it were. And hey, who are we kidding, Jeff Clarke needs the exercise.



vs. aldergrove u18

DEVON ROWCLIFFE