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### **A renaissance period**

With Toronto FC set to debut in Canada's biggest market, many are wondering whether this latest love affair with the global game will reverse the fortunes of the national team. It was getting to be late on a Monday afternoon when [Darren Siddorn](#) rose from his seat to stretch. Empty pint glasses twinkled from the corner of the downtown Toronto pub where he stood, happily, among a group of fans who had also wiggled free of their weekday obligations to watch a soccer game.

"I've got a doctor's appointment," Siddorn said with a laugh.

It was halftime, and the group's beloved English Premier League side, Everton, was winning. The window between halves became a time for socializing and waitressing — the lone server had been politely hushed during play — and for discussing whether their love for the sport could be transferred to a team based a little closer to home.

Toronto FC will begin its first season in Major League Soccer tonight against Chivas USA at the Home Depot Center in Carson, Calif., 20 minutes on the freeway south of Los Angeles. It won't be as flashy a display as the game Siddorn and his friends were watching on the big screen at the pub, but an undeniable sense of optimism has crept into both the league and its newest franchise.

This will be the summer of David Beckham, the English heartthrob who will leave Europe for a lucrative contract and an awaiting fleet of paparazzi with the Galaxy, his new team in Los Angeles.

But some in Canada also wonder if this season might not also provide the type of spark needed to revive the flagging fortunes of the national men's program and, perhaps, finally push the sport into the mainstream.

Toronto FC decided to cap season ticket sales at 14,000 to leave space for the casual fan inside its new 20,000-seat stadium, BMO Field. The club, owned by Maple Leaf Sports & Entertainment, also reached out to suburban families and communities with soccer backgrounds, but was caught off guard by the volume of tickets purchased by young urban professionals living downtown.

"The standard can be good," Siddorn said. "From what I've seen, it's very much like England's first division. It's not Premiership class, but it's still a good league to watch."

MLS opened its doors in 1996 as the fulfillment of a promise made to FIFA, the world soccer governing body, after the United States was awarded the 1994 World Cup. The league met with some initial success, but it was fleeting, and the fallout was unforgiving.

It has been reported the league lost around US\$250-million during its first five years. The Wall Street Journal reported that officials nearly closed operations following a meeting in Colorado six years ago, going so far as to prepare a media release declaring the death of MLS.

The league survived, but only in the pockets of its two wealthiest benefactors, billionaires Philip Anschutz and Lamar Hunt. At one point, Anschutz controlled six of 10 MLS franchises, though he is down to three (L.A. Galaxy, Chicago Fire and Houston Dynamo), along with his other Los Angeles holdings, the NBA's Lakers and the NHL's Kings. Hunt was the late owner of the National Football League's Kansas City Chiefs and cherished builder of the NFL into the sporting behemoth it is today.

"I don't believe there's any one thing that's going to make Major League Soccer one of the dominant sports in [the U.S.] in the short term," MLS commissioner Don Garber said in a conference call earlier this week. "We have lots of individual things that are happening that are making the league more popular ... but it's growing at a slow, steady pace. And that's our goal."

For the first time, television networks have paid fees for the rights to broadcast MLS games. ESPN, ABC and Univision have all signed deals that will reportedly produce about US\$12-million in revenue per season.

Garber is also keen on expansion. His plan would have MLS grow to 16 teams from 13 by 2010. During his conference call, he suggested interest in Atlanta, Cleveland, Milwaukee, St. Louis, San Diego and Portland.

Toronto has shown signs of being his most successful test case.

When the team opens its home schedule against the Kansas City Wizards on April 28, it will become the first team in league history to christen its entry with its own soccer-specific stadium.

"Without doubt, there's more buzz and anticipation with this team than any other in our history," Garber said. "And we think that's an exciting indicator of— if you have the right market with the right ownership with the right facility — how things can really come together nicely with an MLS expansion team."

Toronto has shown a tendency, though, of welcoming new teams into town with a smile and a warm embrace before forgetting about them entirely.

Remember the Arena Football League? The Toronto Phantoms arrived in 2001 and disappeared after just two seasons. Their collapse might have warranted a story, had anyone noticed.

"This is not the Arena Football League, and this is not the United States Soccer League," Garber said. "I don't necessarily expect that we're going to have 18,000 season tickets next year. It would be nice if we did, but if we do our work right, if our players get out in the community, if MLS continues to be very committed to it, there's no reason to think that we won't be successful in that market, long-term."

Long-term success in Canada's biggest market is something that could potentially help soccer on another stage: internationally. Since taking Canada to the 1986 World Cup, then head coach Tony Waiters has watched the national side slide back into obscurity.

Canada dropped 16 places in the FIFA's most recent world ranking to 103rd, leaving the country behind such soccer powerhouses as Libya (97), Latvia (98) and St. Vincent and the Grenadines (100).

"If people do the right job in the next little while, the game looks to have an incredible chance here in Canada," Waiters said. "But the Americans have gone way past us. And in the '80s, we were ahead of the Americans. It's pretty obvious what's happened in America, with three World Cups — two women's and one men's — that's put resources at their disposal."

According to the Canadian Soccer Association, 854,750 Canadians registered to play soccer last year, a 1.5% increase from 2005. The vast majority — 719,625 — were under 18 years of age.

Bruce Wilson has been monitoring the grassroots level for 20 years as coach of the University of Victoria men's soccer team. Wilson, who was captain of Canada's 1986 World Cup team, said he hopes plans for MLS expansion include Vancouver and Montreal.

"I think there is room in our country for another pro sport, being soccer," he said. "Without a doubt, it's the No. 1 sport in the world. Only in North America has it not really broken through, and I think time will tell, and I think it will happen."

The change might already be underway.

Ian Kane, a 29-year-old accountant living in Barrie, Ont., snapped up Toronto FC season tickets last summer, along with his brother, wife and two friends. He was officially the third person to buy a season package, which is a source of annoyance because he said he doesn't "know who the two people were who got them in front of me, but being No. 1 would have been nice."

"I came from England when I was 11, so I was a huge football fan from the age of, like, three," Kane said. "For me, this is basically the first time we've had professional soccer. It's obviously not at the same level as the Premiership or the Italian league, but from watching quite a lot of MLS games over the last couple of years, it's a pretty decent quality."

His seats are in Section 115, right behind the goal. In England, that area is generally home to some of the most boisterous fans in the stadium.

"That's the thing I'm hoping we can recreate at the BMO, because it's the atmosphere, more than anything," he said. "You go to the Leafs games where having 'Go Leafs Go' coming on the screen is the only reason anyone starts cheering. It's kind of depressing, really."

Toronto FC is planning to stage viewing parties at four Toronto pubs tonight, including Scallywags, where Siddorn and his friends were ultimately left disappointed when Everton conceded a late goal to draw 1-1 with Aston Villa.

They represent one of the most intriguing groups of potential fans for Canada's MLS experiment, as educated soccer connoisseurs used to watching the game performed at its highest levels. And many in the group suggested they would at least give Toronto FC a chance.

"For me, it's a local sports team," Ivan Bunner said. "But I'm just not going to blindly support them — they've got to earn it."