

**Soccer Academy Alliance Canada (SAAC)**  
**Position Paper on the Request for Affiliation with**  
**The Ontario Soccer Association (OSA)**

**Introduction**

Soccer Academy Alliance Canada (SAAC) has applied for associate membership with the Ontario Soccer Association (OSA) in order to obtain recognition and support for the player development program it has introduced.

Player development has been a hot button issue for many years in the Ontario soccer community, and there have been many proposals, pilot projects, initiatives, symposiums, etc. dedicated to finding the best system for our environment.

The founders of SAAC have identified what we believe are the key inhibitors to player development in this province and have implemented a system that attempts to solve those issues.

The main concerns are centred around three key points:

- Elite players need more, and consistent exposure to professional coaching
- The current youth system places too much emphasis on winning and losing
- Players need to train more often and in more age appropriate settings

Although there are a number of dedicated and qualified coaches in this province, the hard truth is that there is no guarantee that they will have access to our best players. They are scattered across the province across divisions. In most cases they are volunteers, which means they are subject to the pressures of outside influences (i.e. full-time jobs) affecting the time and effort they are able to put into their teams. As well, these coaches are usually committed to their teams rather than clubs, leading to an inconsistent level of coaching being offered by some clubs as they are constrained by the number of qualified volunteers that make themselves available.

By providing qualified individuals the opportunity to collect full or part-time salaries in the coaching profession, Academies are ensuring that all players that enter their system are exposed to a consistent, high-quality level of instruction. Professional technical directors will ensure that there is an integrated development program that starts from the moment the player enters the academy to the moment he/she graduates to the next level.

Competitive anxiety was another significant issue that SAAC felt needed to be addressed in the development of an alternative player development model. Simply put, SAAC believes that the team-based Pyramid of Play currently employed by the OSA is not the optimum environment to promote player development.

The pressure to win is always present in a competitive environment, and dealing with that pressure is a critical component to a player's development. However, the fact that this element is such a significant portion of the overall program at such a young age is almost certainly affecting the progress of some potentially very good players. Promotion and relegation starting as young as nine years old, Ontario

Cup Championships at Under-12, and high-pressure game environments with screaming parents and coaches at all ages point towards a less-than-favourable development environment.

Finally, the need to refocus our effort on the training aspect of the overall soccer program is something the academy directors all agreed upon. Today, the elite youth player is participating in anywhere between 50 to 100 competitive matches per year. Between league play, cups, tournaments and indoor programs, most players are averaging around two games per week, and playing competitive matches almost 12 months per year.

SAAC believes that much of this time would be better served in a training environment that would create players better prepared for the competitive component of development. It is a prevalent and misguided belief that games make the best trainers. In fact *trainers* make the best trainers and games should be used to demonstrate and incorporate skills learned in a controlled training environment.

The academy system will also employ age-specific programming that will maximize the benefits of these training programs for the players. Gradually increasing team and field sizes are methods used to maximize touches on the ball while maintaining a realistic game setting.

### **The State of the Game**

*reference: Wellness to World Cup, First Edition (May 2007)*

Those responsible for governing the game of soccer have essentially reinforced the observations of SAAC by the release of a new Long-Term Player Development (LTPD) Plan - Wellness to World Cup. In this document, the Canadian Soccer Association (CSA) acknowledges the deficiencies in our game when it comes to elite player development. Specifically,

- Young players over-compete and under-train.
- Competition to training ratios are too high, particularly in the early years.
- Training/practice in the developmental years often focuses on winning and not on development (short-term result versus long-term process).
- Chronological age influences coaching and selection rather than biological age (physical maturation).
- Poor programs between the ages of 6-16 result in athletes never reaching their genetic potential.

Most Canadians are not instructed in fundamental movement skills at an early age. Instead, young athletes find that much of their training comes in the form of competitive games in a “win at all costs” environment. This omission in basic athletic preparation is the first key failure that prevents Canadian athletes in all sports from developing their full genetic potential.

Due to shortcomings in coach education, many coaches are not aware that this approach fails to utilize the natural windows of “trainability” for developing certain playing qualities and skills. Sadly, the deficits that players develop can never be fully remedied.

As these young players progress through their playing careers, their lack of basic skill mastery means that they are unable to play and enjoy soccer to their full capacity. Consequently, they fail to develop the deeper satisfaction and appreciation of the game that would motivate them to remain lifelong participants or inspire them towards long-term elite development.

## **The SAAC Program**

Once the need for an alternative system was identified, SAAC looked no further than to the development programs employed by professional academies throughout Europe and the world for inspiration.

Academies have long been the avenue of choice in the development of elite professional players in Europe, Africa, South America and Asia. These programs are based upon fundamental principles which SAAC has embraced:

- Professional Licensed Staff working with the players
- Standards for Training-to-Game Ratios
- Reduced emphasis on game results (no standings kept at the younger age groups)
- Safety and well-being of the player is paramount – Therapists on site at all training and or games
- Coaches dedicated to the development of goalkeepers
- Standards for Player-to-Staff Ratios

Although many have argued that the philosophies used in places where soccer is a ‘religion’ would not translate well in North America, it has not stopped the United States from fully embracing the Academy system through the creation of the US Development Academy system.

The U.S. Soccer Federation has taken the initiative in formalizing a nationwide development academy to provide players with the best possible opportunity to develop. The U.S. Soccer Development Academy is being initiated after a “comprehensive review of player development systems in the United States and around the world”.

SAAC has implemented a set of standards for its members to uphold these same ideals. One of the roles of SAAC is to implement, enforce and continually seek to upgrade these standards amongst its members. It is vital to the success of SAAC and the academy concept that all members adhere to the high standards expected by SAAC and ultimately deserved by the elite player.

The academy program is separated into two components. The academy-specific program includes all training and assessment programs, staff development programs and any off-field player services (i.e. scholarship assistance, professional trials) provided by the academy. SAAC does not administer these programs but does set standards and expectations that the academies are expected to follow.

The other component is the competitive program. It is the responsibility of SAAC to implement and administer this program.

The competitive program can be further divided into three segments:

- Inter-Academy Competition
- U.S. Competition & Showcasing
- International Competition & Exposure

As the name implies, the inter-academy competition is a program involving the SAAC member programs that runs from March to November each year. Games are played at various levels involving players between 8 and 19.

All programs are age-specific, meaning different elements will be stressed at different times in the player's development. At the younger ages, the focus will be on developing the fundamental skills and

techniques required to become elite soccer players. As the players grow and develop, the emphasis will move more and more towards game play and tactics, preparing the players for a future beyond the academy programs, either at the collegiate or professional level.

The academies form teams at five different levels. When players are chosen for the full-time program, they will be placed at the level appropriate for their age, physiological development and skill. As they progress through the academy, they will be continually evaluated and given feedback in order to focus on their individual areas for development.

The goal of the development & academy system is to prepare players for the next level of their soccer development. The academies are committed to working with each of their players to identify what these goals should be and what are the necessary steps required to achieve them.

To complement the inter-academy program, SAAC has developed a strategic relationship with U.S. Club Soccer which allows us to take advantage of the vast resources available south of the border while maintaining our identity as a unique Canadian entity.

SAAC hopes to leverage this relationship in order to provide additional competitive experience to its players as well as to showcase the senior level players to collegiate coaches and scouts in order to support the goals of the players that are looking to further their careers in the United States.

At one point in every young player's soccer career, the dream of playing the game professionally becomes a prime focus. Although opportunities in North America are increasing, the most lucrative route to realize this dream goes through Europe. To that end, SAAC academies are committed to forging partnerships with international clubs in order to provide a pathway for academy players to show their stuff to professional scouts. These partnerships are taking many different forms and whether an academy is inviting technical staff from overseas to interact with its players or is travelling with a team to play in Europe or South America the end goal is the same. The purpose is to maximize opportunities for these players to further their soccer careers.

## Implementation

Understanding that a formal working relationship between the OSA, its current members and SAAC will require extensive negotiation and some compromise, SAAC hopes to provide a starting point for this process by providing a summary of the role we see SAAC playing as a productive and useful member of the OSA.

Based on our first two years of operation as an independent entity, we believe we can integrate seamlessly with the current system. SAAC has provided the following services for its members and recommends the continuation of these responsibilities under the OSA umbrella:

- SAAC will administer the inter-academy competition per our published rules.
- SAAC will sanction properly registered academy teams to apply to US Club Soccer tournaments or events
- SAAC may hold events in Ontario involving members of US Club Soccer and other internationally affiliated organizations.

SAAC also believes that the following additional rights should be afforded to its members:

- A mechanism for academy directors to recommend players for provincial/NTC programs.
- OSA approval to use OSA-sanctioned referees
- Ability to sanction properly registered academy teams to schedule exhibition games with Competitive Club teams
- Ability to sanction properly registered academy teams to apply to Ontario-based tournaments classified as 'North American' or 'International'
- Ability to request OSA travel permission for inter-provincial tournaments (involving North American and/or international competition).
- Ability to request CSA travel permission via the OSA for international tournaments.
- Ability to request OSA sanction to run an annual tournament that would be open to Canadian and international soccer academies.

SAAC is also committed to contributing to the overall development of soccer in the province. To that end, SAAC plans to:

- Register it's players with the OSA and remit an appropriate fee to the OSA commensurate with the services being provided.
- Continue to make our greatest resource – the technical expertise of our coaches – available to provide guidance and support to our fellow OSA members.
- Work in conjunction with the OSA and its members in the development of new and/or improved facilities for training and competition.
- Provide an opportunity for players that for whatever reason, do not have access to the type of program they need to fulfill their potential.
- Provide the OSA with a vehicle for input into the long term vision and direction of SAAC.

## Issues and Risks

With any significant culture shift in an organization, there comes some fear and apprehension. SAAC understands that our affiliation will bring with it some substantial impacts to the current system, but we believe these impacts will benefit the system as a whole if we keep the following in mind.

Does the course of action I support **increase** or **limit**...

- opportunities for players to be exposed to qualified, licensed coaches on a consistent basis?
- the chance that a player will leave the game prematurely due to competitive anxiety?
- the chance that a player will receive immediate medical care if injured in training or at a game?
- opportunities for coaches to earn a living as coaches?
- incentive for coaches to obtain their B or A licences and continually seek to increase their soccer knowledge and experience?
- the likelihood that one of our bright young prospects will be exposed to an exciting opportunity to broaden their soccer experience?
- opportunities to develop young referees in non-pressure situations?
- the ability of the soccer community to engage corporate sponsorship and support through strategic partnerships?

We believe SAAC has already, and will continue to provide a positive influence in all of these areas. We believe that the OSA, Districts, Clubs and SAAC can come together to quickly and efficiently establish the logistics of a working relationship. SAAC is committed to an open exchange of ideas and concerns in order to achieve a positive outcome for all parties.

To try and alleviate some concerns right off the bat, SAAC has identified some potential roadblocks to affiliation and has attempted to provide some background and rationale to show that instead of risks these are actually opportunities for growth and/or improvement for the current system.

### Issue 1: Dilution of the Pyramid of Play

We would like to first address the concerns that the incorporation of academies under the OSA umbrella would adversely impact the existing Pyramid of Play.

Dealing strictly with numbers, the SAAC projections for registrations across Ontario over the next 5 years is less than 10% of what we consider our target market, which would correspond to levels 1-3 of the new OSA pyramid of play. That comes out to about 4 teams per age group – in other words less than one per region.

SAAC believes that this would not dilute the competition level but actually improve it in at least two ways. Most importantly, SAAC will help to reverse the trend of athlete burn-out that can, in most cases, be attributed to competition anxiety – a condition that is substantially reduced in the academy program.

SAAC also believes that the greater choice offered to elite players would ultimately allow a greater number of players to be exposed to better coaching and better programs (both in the academies and in some of the Level 1-3 club teams).

## **Issue 2: Migration of Club Players & Staff to the Academy System**

As mentioned above, the overall academy numbers versus those for the club system are very small. At best, Ontario academies will train approximately 1,000 – 1,500 full time players and employ in the neighbourhood of 100 licensed coaches.

Player movement may be a contentious issue in the early years, as the academy programs ramp up to their optimum size. However, this would be no more pervasive than the roster juggling that currently plagues the club system. Ultimately the choice lies with the player, and no system should try and limit that choice.

The academies understand and appreciate the fact that the club system has been firmly entrenched in the soccer landscape for many years. We will do our best to minimize the impact of our programs by keeping lines of communication open with surrounding clubs.

Increased opportunities for committed, qualified coaches, whatever the format, should never be seen as a negative result. No one would fault any other trained professional (doctors, lawyers, teachers, engineers) for choosing to make a living in the chosen field rather than be strictly a volunteer.

SAAC believes that limiting the opportunities for coaches will, in the long run, only hurt clubs and soccer overall. Think about how many more coaches are likely to pursue their qualifications and seek professional development if they know that there are opportunities to make a living doing what they love. By providing these opportunities today, SAAC is opening the doors for the coaches of tomorrow.

## **Issue 3: Perception that SAAC Academies will be afforded freedoms not available to clubs**

At first glance it appears as though SAAC is asking for something that is not available to existing clubs. In reality that is not the case. There is no secret formula required to implement the program SAAC has put in place. It is a proven system (recommended by the CSA) used with great success around the world, which SAAC has shown can be implemented in Canada under the right conditions.

These conditions are not about changing rules and giving unfair advantages, they are about putting the right infrastructure in place to achieve your goals. SAAC has brought together technical people with the commitment to the academy vision and with the resources and knowledge to put together an organization to maximize that vision. In turn, the directors have assembled a quality staff that shares this vision.

The result is a system with one central focus – elite player development. It is an indisputable fact that community clubs have a mandate that is much broader than that of the academies. Clubs are built on the foundation of their local community, whether it be through the preferential use of facilities, the recreational population that is its base, or through the tireless work of unpaid volunteers, the community club has the responsibility first and foremost to address the needs of the entire soccer community which it serves. Ultimately, this means the elite player, which normally only makes up a small portion of a club's population, sometimes has to take a back seat in order to meet the needs of the majority.

The fact that SAAC Academies will not be required to field recreational teams in order to run its competitive program may seem like an unreasonable concession to make given that community clubs are not afforded this right. However, academies have an additional set of challenges inherent to private enterprise that make this concession necessary in order for the concept to work. In order to attract

quality coaches and ensure that they are able to make the commitment required by the academy, SAAC members have to invest heavily in every coach they bring in. Without a professional league to subsidize this investment (as is done in most other countries) the costs of this investment have to be transferred to the end user. Academies have to focus their efforts on providing their strengths to those that will benefit most from them. In this case it is the elite player that benefits most from professional coaches, where recreational players and lower level competitive players are more than capably served by the community club system.

**Issue 4: How will the OSA ensure that Academies are delivering on their promises to the consumer?**

One of the greatest controls for quality service is free enterprise. The SAAC academies are for-profit enterprises that are providing services of a certain value to the public. If the value of the service as perceived by the customer is not equal to or greater than the cost, the academy will lose its members and ultimately cease to exist.

As well, the OSA and its members can be comforted in the fact that SAAC has been mandated by the founding academies to implement and enforce a set of standards we feel will ensure all academy customers will receive only the best service.

SAAC will be diligent in both the approval of new members as well as in assessing the ongoing performance of existing members.

Ultimately, academies will be measured by their end results. If players graduating from the academies are not progressing to the levels they expected to achieve, the system is not working and those that are not fulfilling their obligations will have to evolve or fall by the wayside.

**Conclusion**

SAAC has identified some the key inhibitors to player development in this province and have implemented a system that attempts to solve those issues.

The focus of the SAAC initiative centred around three key points:

- Elite players need more, and consistent exposure to professional coaching
- The current youth system places too much emphasis on winning and losing
- Players need to train more often and in more age appropriate settings

Based on our first two years of operation as an independent entity, we believe we can integrate seamlessly with the current system. SAAC has provided the a multitude services for its members and recommends the continuation of these responsibilities under the OSA umbrella.

SAAC can only provide a positive influence to soccer in Ontario. We believe that once the logistics of a working agreement are established, the final terms will benefit all parties involved, including the most important stakeholders – the players themselves.



Lino Terra, Commissioner