

(All) Star gazing

Contributed by Gerry Prince
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All that was missing from the pre-NPSL all-star game press conference was the big tent that comes with your basic old-fashioned medicine show.

All, except maybe a little snake oil.

There were no discouraging words from NPSL commissioner Steve Paxos or Edmonton Drillers owner Wojtek Wojcicki before Team Canada and Team USA were introduced.

Yep, when it comes to the NPSL in general and the Drillers in particular, everything is just ducky.

Predictions that upwards of 10,000 souls would flock to Skyreach Centre for the NPSL's mid-winter classic abounded. That, apparently, would herald the dawn of a new era of professional soccer in Edmonton.

Expansion into Toronto, Calgary, Vancouver and cities in the Midwest and western U.S. At least five more teams in the next five years, don't ya know it. More Canadian players in the league.

Great. Fantastic. Huge, even.

The bulk of these revelations, however, were coming from the same man who just over five weeks ago officially awarded the all-star game to Edmonton.

NORTH OF THE BORDER

Five weeks isn't a whole lot of time, given Wojcicki and Paxos began kicking around the idea of holding the all-star game north of the border last summer.

"I really can't explain what happened," said Paxos. "Our schedule is so heavily loaded at this time of year that the date was the main problem.

"We came up with Canada-USA and we wanted to make sure we had enough Canadian players to complement the team. Unfortunately, we got bogged down in red tape and it took a little longer than I would have liked. But we're here, so that's history."

The gospel being preached on that subject by Wojcicki was obviously from another book of the apostles.

Wojcicki maintains the Buffalo Blizzard were vying for the game which, ultimately, delayed Paxos' decision.

Be that as it may, the always-optimistic Drill owner figures he's going to make a buck or two on the all-star tilt which is good news.

Still, the prospect of making a buck isn't likely to deter Wojcicki from taking on a partner or two. After taking a bath last season and struggling to break even this season, somebody with a fist full of dollars isn't likely to be shunned.

Despite rumblings to the contrary, the Edmonton Investors Group, owners of the Edmonton Oilers, aren't, however, in that group.

"There's been a lot of interest from a lot of people as far as this franchise is concerned," Wojcicki said. "I've always said, I'm not in any way, shape or form pushing anybody away. As I started this thing I was a conduit. If I'm a conduit at this particular stage, what's next?

"Maybe there is involvement with other people and that will be positive.

"There's been conversations and there's been positive feedback in terms of the Oilers organization and ourselves working closely together but no (partnership) at this stage."

No matter how inclined one might be to swallow the lines being tossed around by Paxos and Wojcicki yesterday, don't lose sight of the fact both are promoters of the first water and each has an axe to grind.

UP THE FLAGPOLE

The NPSL has been running its expansion flag up the pole ever since Edmonton entered the league in 1996-97. Only now the NPSL has three fewer teams than it did back then.

Wojcicki has raved about the Drill's increased season-ticket base and enhanced ad revenues since taking the club off Peter Pocklington's hands two summers ago.

The harsh reality is it takes shoe leather to sell tickets in this or any other town.

With or without expansion into Canada, Paxos maintains the Drill brass have to take a long look at what they're doing to put bodies into seats.

"The doomsayers are always going to look at the negatives," Paxos noted

"Yes, there are negatives. I'm not going to deny that. But there's just so many positives and somehow we're going to be in Edmonton.

"We'd like the attendance to be higher, but it's been supported and there's a great base here. With a little tinkering, a little more marketing, a little more enthusiasm and maybe a couple more Canadian cities, I think we can go over the hump."

Funny thing is, that's pretty much what Paxos has been saying about the Drill franchise since Day 1.