



The minor soccer revolution

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PHOTO ALAIN ROBERGE, PRESS ARCHIVES

Soccer Canada has introduced a system of recognition levels for minor clubs.

“There is a big revolution right now in Quebec and Canadian soccer. I hope it will give good results.”

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FREDERICK DUCHESNEAU
PRESS

Otmane Ibrir had this intriguing remark during our interview as part of his appointment as under-23 coach at the CF Montreal academy.

The “revolution” he was talking about was the Club Appreciation Program. Launched in 2017 by Soccer Canada, it begins to take effect this year.

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First, the why.

“Basically, the internal thinking is that we didn't really have a definition of a good club,” says Dominic Boudreault, program implementation manager at Soccer Quebec. It was going a bit in all directions.”



PHOTO MARCO CAMPANOZZI, THE PRESS

Dominic Boudreault

In all directions, but two tangents often returned. Probably too much. The overvaluation of victory at the expense of development, even among the very young. And dependence on one or two key individuals in an organization to the detriment of sound administrative management in due form.

Soccer Canada therefore wanted to make a clean house by standardizing practices from all points of view, both in the offices and in the field.

And, to do this, it has established a system of recognition levels for clubs. From the base to the highest, there are “quality soccer”, “regional”, “provincial” and “national” recognition.

This system is the foundation of the program. It is hoped that, by 2023, each club will succeed in obtaining one of these certifications.

We will come back to that.

From 4 to 12 years old

But, in concrete terms, what will the program for young people change on the ground?

The major metamorphosis takes place in 4 to 12 year olds. An age group that represents 65 to 70% of some 130,000 soccer players in the province this summer.

New Club Development Centers (CDCs) will be built around the following principles.

« The big change is that we no longer have a selection process for players in the U12 [12 and under] and younger categories. »

— Dominic Boudreault, from Soccer Quebec

He gives the example of a club which, from U9, had an A team and a home team. This was the case for the majority of them.

"And if you weren't, at 9, in the 12 best players who will make the team and have access to one or two practices per week, you were in the local program with - without denigrating - a volunteer coach who is not supervised by technical staff and no training. So the youngster who wanted to improve, train and be supervised, he could not, "says Mr. Boudreault.

Therefore, this 9-year-old child who would have been “cut” can now, if he so wishes, participate in regional competitions until he is 12 years old.

“Because it will be based on interest and not on selection,” continues Dominic Boudreault.

For 4 to 8 year olds, there will be no more official competitions. Instead, we opt for informal matches, integrated into the training sessions which will be held in the form of workshops.

Also, it is the end of closed or fixed teams.

“We promote the development of young people and not the development of a team,” says Étienne Lussier, general manager of the Richelieu-Yamaska Regional Soccer Association (ARSRY).

Finally, we will focus on the standardization of supervision, which must be similar for all young people, wherever they live. This requires uniform training for educators of the same level, in particular.

Parents pay for a service offer. It can contain different numbers of training sessions per week or a game schedule for 9 to 12 year olds, for example. The variety of these service offerings is left to the discretion of the clubs.

From 13 to 17 years old

If the central change among U4 to U12 is the death of the selections, that among U13 to U17 is the gradual abolition of the system - well known in the world of soccer - of promotion-relegation.

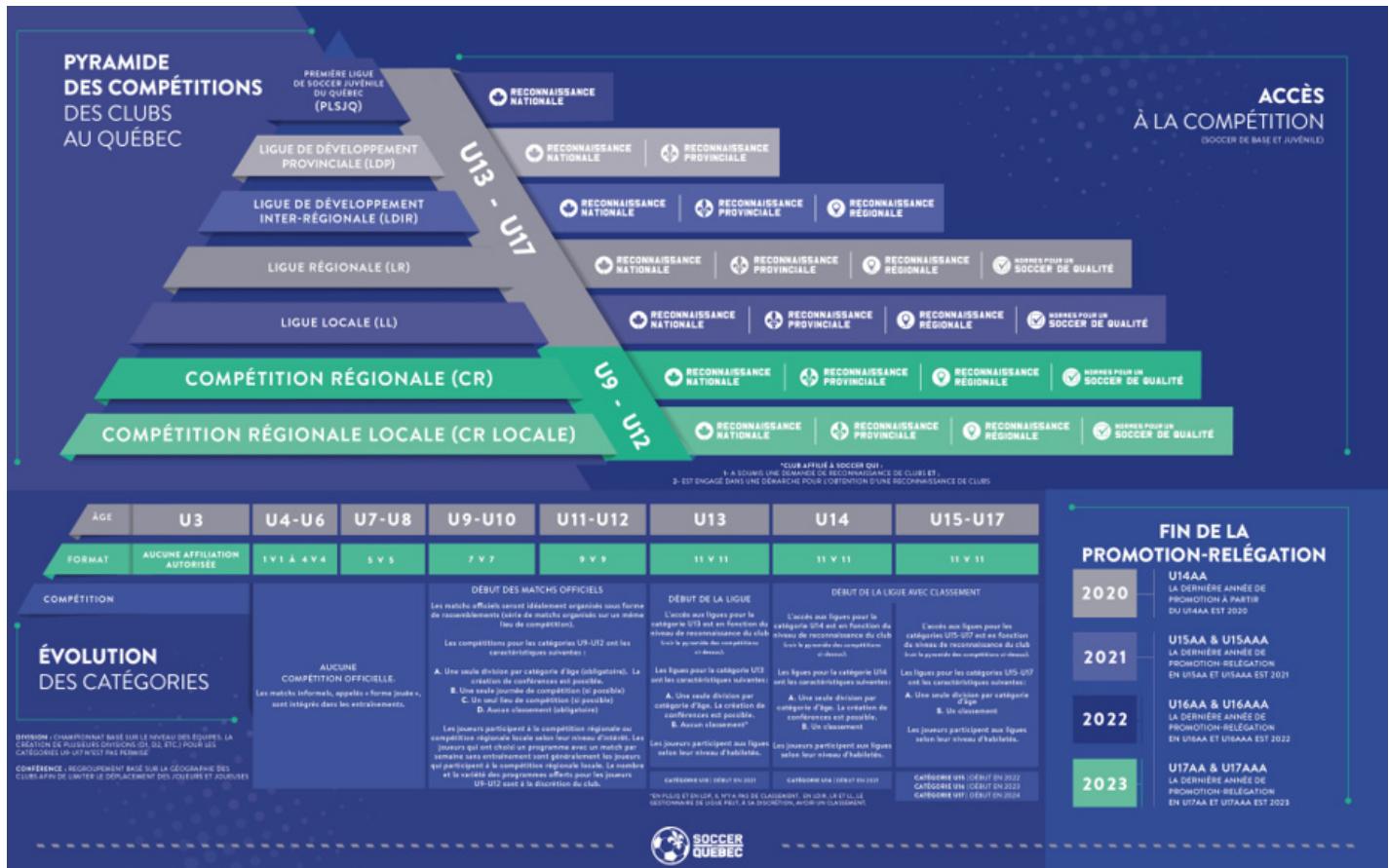
Under the old regime, all clubs could register a team in U14 AA and hope to finish first in the standings to join the U15 AAA.

~~In the future from U12 - where players will start to be selected according to their~~

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different levels of competition and will close the door to it. 'others.



GRAPHIC PROVIDED BY SOCCER QUÉBEC

“So we are in the process of orienting the clubs. Instead of aiming for victory in U14 to be labeled as good clubs, what we want is for them to focus on the service they give to their 12 and under, that they ensure that their financial and administrative policies make it well organized and it is this work that will give them access to more elite competitions from the age of 13,” explains Dominic Boudreault.

In short, Soccer Quebec wants the clubs to stop having only the elite, while the service for 12 years old and under - "a little neglected in the past" - is lagging behind.

"We tell them: 'Concentrate on that, if the job is done well, it will be validated by the visits that we do each year, and you will have access to the elite competition level from the age of 13.' "

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Each level of recognition gives access to higher levels of competition from the age of 13. But it is not because a club applies for a level that it will obtain it.

Of the 57 clubs which had applied for national or provincial recognition, only 23 succeeded in their bet for the current year: 7 obtained national recognition and 16 acquired provincial recognition. Nearly thirty have obtained regional recognition.

More than 70 applications for the basic level - Standards for Quality Soccer - are being assessed.

Consult the list of recognized clubs

The program targets some 190 clubs in Quebec (senior clubs are not affected). However, 85% of them have gained their recognition or are in the process at the moment. And these 161 clubs represent 98% of the players.

But how do you get one of the recognition levels and how are they awarded?

Without going into details for each one, the general notion is obviously that the higher one goes up in the four levels, the higher the requirements are. Regarding the training of coaches, among others.



PHOTO BERNARD BRAULT, PRESS ARCHIVES

The recognition program targets some 190 clubs in Quebec.

The validation of the list of technical criteria is done during visits to Soccer Quebec which relate to the service offered to U12s and under. A final decision is rendered by Soccer Canada at a later date.

Take for example the basic level - the one called "Standards for quality soccer" or "Quality soccer recognition" - to which Soccer Canada wants all affiliated Quebec clubs to meet, at least, within two years. Its standards are mainly broken down into three areas.

1. Safety of participants

The background check of educators was already in place, but we add the training "Respect and sport", required for years at Hockey Quebec and in many other sports

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kinds. "We can't cut corners with that," says Dominic Boudreault. A coach who has taken hockey training does not have to redo it for soccer. In total, 15% of soccer educators also work in hockey.

2. The culture of development for all

We come back to it, the CDC is bringing a redesigned approach for those 12 and under. Gone are the days when a handful of gifted people enjoyed the best supervision while the others were overseen by volunteer parents "left to their own devices with balloons and cones". Soccer Quebec values the centralization of training in the form of workshops so that these volunteer parents, if necessary, benefit from the support of a respondent of trained technical staff.

3. Good governance

Soccer Quebec wants general regulations to be enacted everywhere, for minutes to be drawn up, for annual meetings to be held. So that organizations are not caught off guard and are no longer "in trouble for lack of documentation" if a key individual leaves. It was often the case.

These are basically the minimum elements required for quality soccer recognition. The goal is to provide an accessible, fun and safe environment that gives each child the chance to flourish and reach their full potential.

At the other end of the spectrum, national recognition allows Soccer Canada to have "some influence" on the clubs that have reached it, recognizes Dominic Boudreault.

"We hope that the Club Recognition Program will serve as a motor for the development of players called up for the national team and players dedicated to a professional career," reads the Soccer Quebec website.

So, yes, at a young age, we want to put a stop to some discrimination. But, among the

Let's not forget that Canada is one of the host countries of the 2026 World Cup ...

[Visit the Soccer Québec website for all the details on the program](#)

"We play soccer for Montreal and Quebec"

Any major change brings obstacles and even criticism in its wake. The Club Licensing Program is not included in the exceptions section.

For parents, this "shopping" for service offers can lead to confusion.

Then there is the abolition of the game schedule for 8-year-olds and under.

On his territory, Étienne Lussier, director general of ARSRY, takes the case of Acton Vale, who had a schedule of matches from the age of 5. "That's the old mentality and that's changing that..." he said.

From now on, we offer a calendar of activities and, within it, workshop number 4 can be a friendly match, he gives as an example. However, we repeat, there is no longer a game schedule per se for this age group.

But the main fault attributed to the program concerns its application in the smallest settings.

In general, Sophie Poujade, general manager of the Mauricie Regional Soccer Association (ARSM), is not against her ideology, on the contrary.

"The philosophy behind is interesting and I adhere to it," she emphasizes.

"But my perception is that we are playing soccer for Montreal and Quebec. And the others, who cares."

From theory to practice

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The DG relies on different arguments. First and foremost, the pool of players in the villages - sometimes in small towns - makes the implementation of the CDC difficult.

“The CDC as such is doable for big structures that have big numbers,” she says.

On its territory, it is notably a problem in Notre-Dame-du-Mont-Carmel.

On the side of Soccer Quebec, we encourage in these cases the grouping of age categories - even gender - to compensate for the low number of players by year of birth.

Ms.

But Poujade points out that sometimes, even by combining two or three categories, we end up with a group of ten. Difficult to hold short friendly matches, or even to vary the exercises in these conditions.

The case is not identical, but in general terms, Étienne Lussier also experiences this type of inconvenience, in Sainte-Christine, in particular.

While he sees the program as a whole as 'beneficial', he makes no secret that for small organizations there is work and thought to be done in terms of its implementation, especially among 8 year olds and older. less.

Dominic Boudreault is aware of the criticisms and the issues raised by the program in certain regions. "I agree and I do not question that at all," he says.

But in more than one respect, in the solutions put forward, there is sometimes a gap between theory and practice, argues Sophie Poujade.



PHOTO OLIVIER JEAN, PRESS ARCHIVES

The main fault attributed to the club recognition program concerns its application in smaller settings.

Finances

Then there is the financial aspect, continues ^{Ms.} Poujade.

"The cost of registration in an average club - we live it - is \$ 100 to \$ 200 more than last year so that, financially, they manage to meet the obligations and constraints of training, she says. It becomes, in my opinion, a race for money. We are not in the right dynamic. "

The need to absorb these additional expenses explains, according to her, that club mergers take place. And these mergers thus create large entities.

« We are not on the same soccer planet, we cannot offer the same things »

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Some clubs see economies of scale in these mergers, said Boudreault for his part. The program did not limit them, but it is not a new phenomenon, he points out.

The effects of the pandemic

Add to that the challenge of respecting the ratios requested on the number of players per host and, in summary, that's for the bottom. But Sophie Poujade also addresses the context.

Dominic Boudreault noted that the clubs still have two years to comply with the minimum standards, namely those of quality soccer recognition.

But anyway, some of them, already grappling with the aftermath of the pandemic, had more urgent issues to settle.

"The program comes at the same time as COVID, which has wreaked havoc in a lot of clubs, not only for the number of members, but also for the volunteers who have disappeared," relates Ms. Poujade. So running a soccer club with fewer, if at all, volunteers, well, the La Tuque club didn't want to get into the process and didn't affiliate [with Soccer Quebec] this year. "

In these cases, soccer becomes a municipal leisure activity, entirely and exclusively managed by the City.

There are also impacts in the Louiseville region, for example. To avoid the disappearance of small clubs, we have regrouped.

"It's not a real merger, but a regrouping. That is to say that we created a club which oversees all the administrative and technical aspects to relieve the volunteers, to keep them, and that the small sectors survive. So these small clubs become parts of the big club, she explains. It's still difficult, but we got through it a bit like that."

Ultimately, in small clubs, already precarious by the collateral effects of the pandemic,

a problem. In the short term, at least.

"Because in reality, there are good foundations in there", reiterates Sophie Poujade.

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