



Planning the Future of High Performance for Canada Soccer and its National Teams

A whitepaper about technical ambition for Canada drafted for stakeholder consultation

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Introduction and Purpose of Document

Building on the work of people across the country over many years, Canadian soccer has entered a new era. Canada's Women's and Men's National Teams have demonstrated that, at our best, we can compete with the world's leading football nations. Success in global football – the world's most popular and visible sport – can also contribute to something larger: bringing Canadians together, strengthening national pride, and representing Canada on the world stage. Note that we use the term 'football' in the context of high performance, in deference to global terminology.

Sustaining and building upon this progress will require continued improvement across the Canadian soccer system. International success is not created by national teams alone. It depends on the quality of the environments in which players are identified, developed, challenged, and prepared throughout their pathway.

This whitepaper outlines Canada Soccer's technical ambition for high-performance football and the principles we believe should guide the continued development of Canada's high-performance system. High-performance football sits at the core of Canada Soccer's mandate and is therefore an important component of the organization's broader strategic planning process. The paper identifies areas where greater clarity, alignment, investment, and collaboration may be required across player development, national teams, and the wider high-performance ecosystem.

We recognize that broad participation is an essential foundation for high performance. As Canada's soccer participation environment becomes larger, healthier and more accessible, the opportunity to identify and develop exceptional players also increases. The broader questions of participation, access, and grassroots growth are addressed elsewhere in Canada Soccer's strategic planning process.

The whitepaper is organized into three sections. The first sets out Canada Soccer's fundamental beliefs and guiding pillars for high-performance football. The second considers the development of a clearer Canadian football identity, including a national-team style of play and common football language, and explores what that could mean for the broader soccer system. The final section examines the player pathway and areas where Canada Soccer believes greater focus or structural evolution may be required to strengthen the development of high-performance players.

The primary purpose of this whitepaper is to stimulate discussion and gather stakeholder input as part of Canada Soccer's strategic planning process. It presents ideas and potential directions for consideration, rather than predetermined conclusions. Throughout the paper, we have included specific questions intended to encourage discussion, challenge assumptions, identify areas of agreement and disagreement, and help shape Canada Soccer's future approach to high-performance football.

The future of Canadian high-performance football will depend on the collective expertise, commitment, and ambition of people throughout the game. Thank you for engaging with these ideas and contributing your perspective as we work together to strengthen Canada's high-performance system and build the future of Canadian soccer.

1. Fundamental Beliefs and Pillars of Emphasis

The Men's National Team ended 2016 ranked No. 117 in the world. Less than a decade later, Canada reached No. 26 and advanced to the Round of 16 at FIFA World Cup 2026. The Women's National Team has consistently been ranked in the world top ten. Maintaining this strength and consistency will require continued progress as women's football continues to grow and become increasingly competitive globally.

International football is among the broadest and most competitive environments in global sport. FIFA's 211 Member Associations field national teams across multiple age categories, competing for rankings, regional championships, World Cups, and ultimately a place among the world's leading football nations. Canada's rise within this environment has been remarkably rapid, but we remain a developing football nation with significant opportunity to strengthen the system beneath our national teams.

Recent progress therefore cannot be taken for granted. International football is inherently competitive: for Canada to move forward, we must improve faster than the nations against which we compete. Sustained success requires more than talented generations of players or strong performances at individual tournaments. It requires an intentional, effective, and appropriately resourced high-performance system capable of developing more high-quality players, more consistently, over time.

Our approach to building that system is grounded in several fundamental beliefs:

- **The daily development environment matters most.** Talented young players develop fastest when they train regularly with and against other talented players, under highly qualified coaches, in environments that challenge them technically, tactically, physically, and psychologically.
- **Coaching and purposeful training matter more than simply playing more matches.** Competition is an important part of development, but match volume alone does not produce better players. High-quality coaching, deliberate practice, appropriate challenge, and consistent expectations are the foundations of long-term development.
- **Coaches with deep qualifications and experience at the highest levels of competition are critical to driving player development most effectively.** At every level of the high-performance pathway, the quality of coaching has a significant impact on player development. More Canadian coaches should be provided with training and experiences that enable them to have a greater impact on player development and team performance. These experiences should include opportunities to work abroad.
- **Collaboration produces stronger outcomes than institutional competition.** Canada Soccer, professional clubs and academies, Provincial and Territorial Associations, leagues, and community clubs have different responsibilities, but share an interest in developing more and better Canadian players. The system is strongest when these organizations work together in alignment to achieve mutual objectives.
- **Clarity of roles is essential.** Organizations throughout the pathway should understand their purpose and responsibilities, as well as the complementary roles played by others. A

strong system requires clear accountability, effective coordination, and fewer gaps or unnecessary overlaps.

- **Development pathways must remain open.** Talent identification is imperfect, particularly during adolescence, when players develop physically, technically, and psychologically at different rates. Players should have opportunities to enter, leave, and re-enter high-performance environments as they develop. The system should identify potential without prematurely limiting opportunity.
- **Football continually evolves, and Canada must evolve with it.** The technical, tactical, physical, and developmental demands of the game will continue to change. Canada Soccer's technical direction must remain current and adaptable while being anchored in enduring principles about how players learn and develop.

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| <p>1.1 <i>To what extent do these fundamental beliefs reflect your experience of how high-performance players are best identified and developed? Where do you agree or disagree?</i></p> <p>1.2 <i>Are there important principles or realities of the Canadian player-development landscape that are missing from these fundamental beliefs?</i></p> |
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These beliefs are intended not as rigid prescriptions, but as principles against which decisions about Canada's high-performance system can be considered and tested. Translating them into sustained international success, however, requires clear priorities to guide decisions, investment and collaboration across the Canadian soccer system.

Together, these beliefs describe what we consider the pathway to sustained international success. Better daily development environments, supported by high-quality coaching and purposeful training, produce better players. The best of those players must then have opportunities to progress into professional football and increasingly demanding club environments. As more Canadian players establish themselves at higher levels of the professional game, the quality and depth of our National Teams will improve. The role of the high-performance system is to strengthen each part of this chain and the connections between them.

From these beliefs emerge three interconnected pillars of emphasis: the *outcome* the system must increasingly produce, the *footballing identity* that should connect our technical work, and the *pathway* required to develop players capable of succeeding at the highest levels.

1. More professional players competing at the highest levels

Canada must produce significantly more players capable of competing in the world's strongest professional leagues and club environments. The quality of our national teams is ultimately shaped by the level at which Canadian players train and compete every day. Developing more players capable of reaching and succeeding in these environments is therefore both a fundamental player-development objective and a national-team performance priority.

2. A clear and consistent footballing identity

Canada Soccer will establish a recognizable footballing identity that connects our national teams and informs player development. Canada Soccer will also develop a style of play model that is

used across our teams and informs coaching education curriculums. Players should experience greater continuity as they progress through the national team pathway, regardless of age group or coaching staff. This identity must be clear enough to provide consistency while remaining adaptable to the evolution of the game and the characteristics of Canada's current and future player pools.

3. A connected player development pathway

Canada must strengthen the connections between the environments and organizations responsible for developing players—from grassroots and youth clubs through professional academies and leagues to our National Teams. Canada Soccer, Provincial and Territorial Associations, clubs, academies, leagues, and other development partners have distinct roles, but the pathway should operate as a connected system that is aligned. Sustained international success will require greater alignment, collaboration, and clarity about how each part of the system contributes to developing Canadian players.

1.3 Do these three pillars capture the most important structural priorities required for Canada to achieve sustained international success? What, if anything, is missing?

2. A Canadian Style of Play and Common Football Language

Canada Soccer will establish a unified style-of-play framework and common football language across its high-performance pathway. The framework will connect national-team programming, talent identification and development, performance analysis, and coach education. From the first time a player or coach enters a Canada Soccer environment, they should encounter consistent terminology and a familiar set of principles that support their progression through the pathway.

Football is dynamic, complex, and non-linear, and any model of the game is necessarily a simplification. Effective coaching and player development nevertheless require clarity. A shared framework organized around the phases, moments, and recurring situations of the game will give players, coaches, analysts, and technical staff a consistent way to understand and communicate what is happening on the field. It should help players recognize cues, understand the intentions of teammates, and make better collective decisions, while allowing learning to transfer more efficiently between teams, age groups, and coaching environments.

The purpose is not to impose a single formation, tactical system, or rigid way of playing. Canada Soccer will distinguish between an enduring *style of play* and the *tactics* selected for a particular match. Our style of play will express the principles, behaviours, and competitive identity that we believe provide Canada with the best opportunity for sustained international success. Tactics are the contextual application of those principles—the formations, game plans, and solutions selected in response to opponents, competitions, available players, and match situations.

The framework should therefore be understood as a common foundation rather than a prescriptive manual. National-team coaches will retain the flexibility to make tactical choices and bring their own expertise and personality to their teams. The objective is to establish sufficient commonality that Canadian players and coaches share an understanding of how we want to approach the game, while preserving the adaptability, creativity, and judgement essential to high-performance football.

Developing a Canadian Football Identity

Canada's style of play cannot be chosen in the abstract or borrowed wholesale from another country. It must reflect the current and probable future characteristics of Canadian players, the realities of our development system, and the evolving demands of international football. The process must begin with an honest assessment of the players Canada is producing—and can reasonably expect to produce at scale—rather than an idealized image of the players we might wish to have.

Developing the framework will therefore require several forms of analysis. Canada Soccer will assess the characteristics of current national-team players and emerging generations; examine the environments in which Canadian players are being developed; study trends in successful international football; and gather perspectives from national-team coaches, former national-team players, technical staff, player-development experts, and other stakeholders.

Together, these inputs will help identify the principles best suited to Canada and translate them into a clear technical and visual framework, supported by age-appropriate learning objectives throughout the national-team pathway. The framework will then be tested in practice and refined through evidence and experience.

While this work remains underway, an emerging hypothesis is that Canada's identity should emphasize *aggressive, purposeful, and direct football*. Speed, power, collective commitment, resilience, and competitiveness have long been evident in Canadian sport and are also visible across important parts of our current player pool. The development process should test how these attributes can form part of a distinctly Canadian football identity while identifying the additional technical and tactical qualities required to compete consistently with the world's best.

Building Continuity Through the National-Team Pathway

Consistency across the national-team pathway will allow these principles and qualities to be developed progressively. Players entering Youth National Teams should begin learning the language, principles, and expectations they will encounter at senior level. Age-appropriate learning objectives should provide increasingly sophisticated building blocks without simply asking young players to reproduce the Senior National Teams' tactics.

Over time, this continuity should accelerate learning, improve player understanding and confidence, and make transitions between age groups and teams more efficient. It should also provide coaches with a clearer understanding of what players have previously learned and what they should be prepared to learn next.

The style-of-play framework will belong to Canada Soccer rather than to any individual coach. National-team coaches will influence how its principles are expressed and contribute to its continued evolution, but the underlying identity should endure through changes in technical leadership. This will provide greater continuity across generations of players and coaches while reducing the disruption that can accompany changes in personnel.

Relationship with the Broader Canadian Soccer System

The framework is not intended to dictate how Canadian professional clubs, academies, or community clubs must play. Diversity among club playing styles is healthy for player development, exposing players to different systems, problems, and demands. Clubs should retain the autonomy to establish their own football identities.

Canada Soccer's responsibility is to clearly articulate the principles and terminology used within its National Teams, communicate the attributes required to succeed in international football, and work collaboratively with clubs and other development environments to help players meet those demands. Elements of the framework may also inform coach education and broader technical discussion without becoming mandatory prescriptions for every team in the country.

Implementation and Evolution

The initial framework is intended to be presented before the 2027 FIFA Women's World Cup. Its influence should begin to become visible during the cycles leading to the 2030 Men's World Cup and 2031 Women's World Cup, although its greatest impact will take longer. The full benefit will emerge as generations of players spend more of their formative years within a pathway informed by common principles, terminology, and development priorities, particularly in the cycles leading to the 2034 Men's World Cup and 2035 Women's World Cup.

The framework will not be static. International football will continue to evolve, as will Canada's players and development system. Canada Soccer must regularly evaluate and refine its approach, preserving the principles that define our identity while adapting to new evidence, emerging players, and changes in the game.

The objective is not simply to document how Canada wants to play. It is to create a shared football language and enduring technical identity that helps Canadian players learn more effectively, transition more seamlessly through the national-team pathway, and ultimately compete successfully with the world's best.

- 2.1 What qualities should define a distinctly Canadian style of play, and which characteristics of Canadian players and Canadian sporting culture should it seek to maximize?*
- 2.2 Looking at Canada's current player pool and development landscape, which strengths can we realistically develop at an internationally competitive level—and where must we improve?*

3. The Canadian High-Performance Pathway

The objective of Canada's high-performance pathway is not simply to produce professional footballers. It is to develop players capable of impacting matches at the highest levels of club and international football.

The sections that follow examine the major stages and environments within Canada's high-performance player pathway. We begin by defining the roles and responsibilities of the organizations that contribute to player development. From there, we start with professional football – the environment in which Canada ultimately needs more Canadian players to succeed – and work backwards through the pathway to grassroots youth soccer. This approach begins with the desired outcome and asks what must happen at each preceding stage to produce more players capable of reaching that level.

The intent is not to comprehensively address every aspect of player development in Canada. Rather, this section identifies specific opportunities to strengthen the high-performance pathway and puts forward ideas for stakeholder consideration and discussion.

Roles and Responsibilities

An effective high-performance pathway requires more than strong organizations operating independently. It requires clarity about the responsibilities, decision-making authority, and contribution of each participant in the system. Canada Soccer proposes the following broad definition of roles and responsibilities as it relates to high-performance:

- **Canada Soccer** should define the international performance benchmarks and national technical direction that guide the pathway, while establishing national frameworks for coach education, club and competition standards, talent identification, and player monitoring. Canada Soccer should expose players with the highest potential to international football, provide technical knowledge and leadership, challenge the system to improve, and facilitate collaboration – without assuming responsibility for the daily football decisions that belong to clubs.
- **Professional clubs and academies** should own the daily high-performance player-development environment after a certain age. This includes player recruitment and selection, coaching, individual development planning, training and competition decisions, transitions into professional football, and the club's playing identity.
- **Provincial and Territorial Sport Organizations** should lead implementation and capacity-building within their jurisdictions. This includes developing coaches, supporting participation growth, strengthening clubs and development environments, supporting the implementation of national standards in ways that recognize regional circumstances, and operating talent identification programs that are aligned with Canada Soccer.
- **Leagues and competition organizers** should provide appropriate and meaningful competition environments that support player development. They should align competition structures, regulations, and incentives with long-term development objectives and contribute relevant data and information to the broader player pathway.

- **Community clubs, schools, and post-secondary institutions** should provide accessible opportunities for players to participate and develop while maintaining viable entry and re-entry points into higher-performance environments. These environments play an important role in ensuring that players who develop at different rates are not prematurely excluded from the pathway.

These roles are distinct but interdependent. A strong pathway requires each organization to perform its role well and to understand how that role connects with others. Shared objectives, transparent information, effective collaboration, and clearly defined decision-making authority should provide the foundation for a more connected Canadian high-performance system.

- 3.1 *What are the biggest opportunities to create more clarity and better alignment as it relates to roles and responsibilities of stakeholders?*
- 3.2 *What feedback to you have about these role definitions?*

Senior Football: Preparing Players for Professional Football at Younger Ages

The pathway to elite football is accelerating. Across leading football nations and professional leagues, the highest-potential players are increasingly being exposed to first-team training and meaningful senior competition during their teenage years.

As Arsène Wenger, FIFA’s Chief of Global Football Development, has observed: *“We see a trend in the world in the biggest five leagues that the age of players who made their debut is getting younger. And in the national teams as well, we see more of a trend that the young players get a chance earlier.”*

By the time elite clubs are recruiting players in their early twenties, many of the strongest prospects already have several years of experience in professional environments. If Canada wants to develop more players capable of competing at the highest international level, we must create pathways that allow exceptional young players to transition meaningfully into appropriate professional training and match environments earlier – while ensuring those environments remain developmentally sound and responsive to the needs of the individual player.

Transitioning Earlier to Senior Football

The transition to senior football is not defined by a player turning 18. It is a progression that begins when a player starts entering first-team environments and concludes when the player is capable of training and competing there consistently. The timing and duration of this transition will differ between players.

For the highest-potential players, however, Canada should aspire to begin this transition earlier. Players who are ready need exposure to the speed, intensity, physicality, pressure, and decision-making demands of meaningful senior football. These experiences can accelerate development in ways that youth competition alone cannot replicate.

As a general developmental ambition, the pathway should make it possible for high-potential players to begin experiencing first-team training at 16 or 17, earn meaningful senior competitive minutes around age 17, and progress toward regular senior minutes at 17 or 18. This should not become a rigid timeline or expectation for every player. Rather, Canada should ensure that players who demonstrate the readiness and potential to progress early are not prevented from doing so by the structure of our system.

Some of Canada's leading Men's National Team players have followed versions of this pathway because of investments made by Canadian MLS academies and first teams. As professional football continues to mature in Canada, creating similar opportunities at greater scale should become an increasingly important objective in both the men's and women's pathways.

The timing of progression may not be identical between the women's and men's games. Differences in development environments and physical maturation may mean that appropriate transitions into professional environments occur at somewhat different ages. The underlying principle, however, should remain consistent: progression should be determined by readiness and potential rather than chronological age alone.

Creating More Opportunities in Canadian Professional Football

The Canadian Premier League (CPL) and Northern Super League (NSL) should be central components of the high-performance pathway for young Canadian players. As domestic professional leagues, they provide an important opportunity to give talented young Canadians meaningful senior football without requiring them to leave the country at an early age.

With Canada Soccer's support, the CPL and NSL should explore a common framework designed to increase meaningful opportunities for high-potential young Canadian players. The framework could combine minimum expectations, transparent measurement, and positive incentives, including:

- **Starting opportunities:** Establish expectations that create genuine opportunities for U18 and U20 Canadian players to start senior matches, rather than simply occupy roster positions.
- **Meaningful and consistent minutes:** Measure not only appearances or starts, but the volume and consistency of competitive minutes young players receive throughout a season. Developmental objectives should encourage sustained opportunity rather than thresholds that can be satisfied through isolated appearances.
- **Player visibility:** Create reliable and accessible information on eligible young Canadian players through a shared monitoring framework that improves visibility across the pathway.
- **Individual development plans:** High-potential young players should have clear development plans that identify objectives, progression opportunities, and areas of focus, with appropriate communication between clubs and Canada Soccer.
- **Recognition and incentives:** Clubs that consistently develop and play young Canadian players should be recognized and, where appropriate, rewarded through positive sporting or financial incentives.

- **National monitoring:** Canada Soccer should maintain a national view of the progression of high-potential young players, including senior starts and minutes, movement between levels, and progression into higher-level professional environments.

The objective should not simply be to make professional squads younger. It should be to create more high-quality opportunities for young Canadian players who are ready for senior football—and to ensure that playing and developing young players is appropriately valued within the domestic professional system.

Strengthening the Bridge to Professional Football

Canada's pathway cannot be viewed solely through the lens of MLS, CPL, and NSL. The continued development and alignment of the Premier Soccer Leagues network—including British Columbia, Alberta, the Prairies, Ontario, and Ligue1 Québec—is also an important component of the senior football ecosystem.

Together, these leagues form Canada's Division III pathway. They can reduce the distance between youth and professional football by providing meaningful senior competition for players who are not yet ready for full-time professional environments. They can also provide valuable opportunities for players to accumulate senior minutes while remaining connected to local development environments, education, or emerging professional opportunities.

Canada Soccer should continue working with these leagues to strengthen standards, improve alignment, and facilitate player movement across the network. Over time, the objective should be for the Division III pathway to operate increasingly as an integrated national development platform under a common standard.

3.3 How can we better prepare Canada's highest-potential players to be ready for professional football at younger ages?

3.4 What changes to the structure, incentives, regulations and collaboration within the Canadian football system would create earlier meaningful senior opportunities for young Canadian players?

Maintaining Pathways for Later-Developing Players

Earlier access to senior football for exceptional young players must not result in a narrower pathway for everyone else. Player development is non-linear, and talent identification – particularly during adolescence – is imperfect. Canada must continue to identify and create opportunities for players who develop later.

A strong national pathway therefore also requires better connections between professional football, U SPORTS, and the CCAA. While professional environments should be the preferred destination for players who are ready for full-time professional football, university and college soccer provide valuable competitive, educational, and developmental opportunities for many Canadian players.

Professional and post-secondary pathways should not be treated as competing alternatives, but as complementary parts of the same ecosystem. Canada Soccer should work with professional leagues, clubs, U SPORTS, and the CCAA to create greater flexibility and welfare safeguards for players moving between environments, and explore models that allow high-performance football and educational attainment to coexist. Better connectivity can expand the number of viable pathways while reducing the number of talented players who leave high-performance football prematurely.

The NCAA also remains an important pathway for Canadian players, particularly in the women's game, combining strong competition with educational opportunity. Where a player is ready for an appropriate full-time professional environment, however, the pathway should allow and encourage that progression. Questions relating to eligibility, contracts, amateur status, and movement between professional and post-secondary environments are complex and evolving and should be considered separately.

The broader objective is a pathway with both acceleration and permeability: one that moves exceptional players into senior football as early as their development warrants, while preserving multiple routes for players whose progression follows a different timeline.

3.5 What measures must be taken to ensure that the Canadian pathway is able to accommodate later-developing players?

3.6 What collaboration structures should be developed to combine education with professional football in Canada?

Exploring a National Residency for Elite Youth Football

Canada Soccer believes that the country's highest-potential young players would benefit from training more frequently with and against other high-potential players in demanding, high-quality environments. Daily exposure to strong players, high-level coaching, and consistent performance standards can create developmental benefits that occasional camps and competitions alone cannot replicate.

Canada Soccer is therefore exploring the potential creation of a national residency program for selected U16 to U18 boys and girls, supported by a national network of regional development hubs. The objective would be to provide an additional high-performance environment for players whose development could be accelerated through more intensive daily training, while creating stronger connections between regional talent identification, professional academies, Youth National Teams, and the broader player pathway.

The concept is being explored as a response to the current stage of development of Canada's soccer system—not as a permanent substitute for strong professional academies. Canada's geography, the uneven distribution of high-performance development environments, and the relative youth of our professional academy system mean that not every high-potential player

currently has access to the quality and intensity of daily training required to maximize their development.

A properly designed residency program could help address this gap by concentrating high-potential players and high-quality coaching within an intensive development environment. It could also provide an opportunity to establish and demonstrate leading national standards in areas such as coaching, individual development planning, sport science, education, player welfare, and integration with Youth National Teams.

Any residency model would need to be carefully designed in collaboration with professional clubs and other development partners. It should complement rather than compete with strong existing academy environments and PTSO programs, create clear mechanisms for players to move into professional football, and avoid unnecessarily removing players from environments that are already meeting their developmental needs.

Canada Soccer's long-term ambition is for a mature network of professional academies to assume primary responsibility for the daily development of Canada's highest-potential players. A national residency should therefore be considered in the context of that longer-term objective. It may provide a way to accelerate player development in the near term while simultaneously helping raise standards and strengthen the professional academy system that should ultimately become the foundation of elite player development in Canada.

Further analysis and stakeholder consultation are required to determine whether a national residency is the right intervention and, if so, how it should be structured, where it should sit within the pathway, which players it should serve, and how its success should be measured.

- 3.7 What are the opportunities and downsides of creating a national residency program?*
- 3.8 How could a national residency program work alongside professional academies, clubs and existing development environments to complement them?*
- 3.9 How should Canada Soccer, clubs and PTSOs work together to identify, monitor and support players across the national and regional pathway?*

Growing Professional Academies

Professional academies are essential to Canada's long-term high-performance success. As the domestic professional football ecosystem matures, Canada Soccer believes professional clubs should increasingly become the primary environments for developing the country's highest-potential players. Clubs can provide what player development requires most: high-quality daily training, sustained relationships between players and coaches, individualized development, strong competition, and a direct pathway into professional football.

Strengthening professional academies is therefore a central priority for the Canadian pathway. Over the coming years, Canada Soccer should work collaboratively with professional clubs to raise academy standards – including linking academy standards to club licensing – and expand the number of high-quality development environments across the country. The federation's role

is not to prescribe how clubs should play or manage their academies, but to establish clear development standards, share knowledge and expertise, support coach development, and help create the conditions in which professional academies can consistently produce players capable of succeeding at international level.

For this model to grow, player development must also make economic sense for professional clubs. Academies should not be viewed simply as a cost of operating a professional team, but as an investment in both sporting and enterprise value. Across global football, successful development systems create value by producing players for the first team and generating revenue through player transfers and development-related payments. A sustainable Canadian academy system should similarly allow clubs that invest successfully in player development to participate in the economic value they create.

Canada Soccer should therefore protect and encourage investment in professional academies through a clear and effective training compensation framework. Clubs that commit resources to identifying, coaching, and developing young players should have appropriate opportunities to benefit when those players progress and generate value elsewhere in the football system. These mechanisms can create a virtuous cycle in which successful player development generates resources that can be reinvested in coaching, facilities, recruitment, and future generations of players.

This ambition also provides important context for the proposed national residency discussed in the previous section. A residency program should not compete with strong professional academies or remove players from environments that are already meeting their developmental needs. Rather, it should address gaps that exist while Canada's professional academy network continues to mature and, where possible, help strengthen connections between talented players and professional clubs.

The long-term objective is clear: a growing network of strong, sustainable professional academies, connected to the broader Canadian pathway and incentivized to invest continuously in player development. Over time, these environments should become the foundation of Canada's high-performance system—developing more players capable of succeeding in domestic professional football, progressing internationally, and ultimately competing in the world's strongest leagues.

- 3.10 What do professional clubs need to put in place to create academy environments that consistently develop players capable of succeeding at the highest levels of domestic and international soccer?*
- 3.11 How can Canada create a sustainable academy model where investment in player development generates both sporting and financial value, allowing clubs to reinvest in future generations?*

More Robust Youth National Team System

Youth National Teams represent the final stage of the player development pathway before senior international football. Their primary purpose is to prepare players for the demands of the Senior National Teams while accelerating individual development through exposure to elite

international competition, environments, and standards. Professional and youth clubs should prioritize these opportunities for players.

Canada Soccer will continue to prioritize meaningful international competition against the world's strongest soccer nations. These experiences expose players to different styles and cultures of the game and challenge them against the technical, tactical, physical, and psychological demands of international soccer. Winning matters, but it is not the only measure of success. Every camp, match, and tournament should contribute to the development of players and increase their readiness to succeed at senior international level.

Canada Soccer will also expand the role of Youth National Team coaches beyond camps and competitions. As the number of full-time national team coaches grows, a significant portion of their time between international windows should be spent supporting player development within the domestic ecosystem. Coaches should regularly visit professional academies and other leading development environments to observe training, monitor players, support talent identification, exchange technical knowledge, and build strong relationships with club technical staff across both the men's and women's games.

The ambition is to establish dedicated national team coaching leadership across priority age groups in both the men's and women's pathways, creating greater continuity between youth and senior national teams. National team coaches should have deep and current knowledge of Canada's leading players and development environments, while clubs should have regular access to the expertise, expectations, and perspective of the national program.

Youth and Senior National Team coaches should also contribute to coach education and broader technical development. By sharing knowledge, engaging with professional academies and leading development clubs, and creating stronger connections throughout the pathway, Canada Soccer can extend the impact of its national team expertise well beyond the players selected for any individual camp.

The responsibility of a Youth National Team coach is therefore broader than selecting and preparing a team for competition. It is to help develop future Senior National Team players and, in doing so, contribute to raising the quality of player development across Canada.

3.12 How can Youth National Team participation be prioritized as an essential part of the development pathway, while ensuring that camps and international competition maximize each player's development and readiness for senior football?

3.13 How can Youth National Team coaches work more consistently with clubs and the wider football ecosystem to support player development, talent identification and coach education throughout the year?

Youth Competition Framework: Defining the Future of Competition in Canada

Canada Soccer, in collaboration with PTSOs, has made significant progress in creating meaningful competition opportunities through the Player Development Program (PDP) and

National Championships. These competitions support player development, strengthen clubs, and connect the game nationally while responding to Canada's unique geography and operating realities.

Competition, however, is only one part of player development. It should reinforce the work taking place in the daily training environment and cannot compensate for inadequate coaching, insufficient contact time, or the absence of an intentional development plan. The future Youth Competition Network should therefore be designed as part of the broader player pathway, with competition formats, schedules, and standards aligned with the technical, physical, psychological, and welfare needs of players at each stage of development.

The environment is also changing. Professional academies are playing an increasingly important role in developing players, participation patterns are evolving, and expectations for competition quality, player welfare, and development outcomes continue to rise. Canada Soccer should use this moment to review the Youth Competition Network and ensure it remains aligned with the long-term needs of players, clubs, leagues, professional academies, and the broader Canadian soccer ecosystem.

This review should begin not with a predetermined competition structure, but with a clear definition of the role competition should play in player development. A future framework should provide appropriate levels of challenge for players at different stages; create incentives for clubs to invest in player development and organizational excellence; integrate professional academies into the broader pathway; and balance national development ambitions with Canada's geographic and financial realities.

As part of this work, Canada Soccer should explore a Competition Licensing Program that establishes clear national standards and classifications for youth competitions. Building on the principles of club licensing, competition licensing could establish standards related to development purpose, season structure, appropriate match volume, competitive balance, coaching qualifications, player welfare, facilities, officiating, and operational requirements.

Importantly, the number of matches should not itself be treated as a measure of competition quality. The objective should be to create the right competitive environment: one that provides appropriate challenge, supports learning and player health, and contributes meaningfully to progression through the pathway. Different competition levels may therefore require different formats, schedules, and standards.

Canada Soccer should initiate a comprehensive consultation to define this next generation of the Youth Competition Network. Provincial and Territorial Associations, professional academies, licensed youth clubs, leagues, players, coaches, technical leaders, and pathway experts should help determine the appropriate role of professional academies; the competition environments that best support development; the relationship between local, regional, and national competition; the standards that should define different levels of play; and the incentives that encourage clubs and leagues to invest in development.

The intended outcome is a coherent national Youth Competition Network that strengthens player development while recognizing the diversity of soccer environments across Canada. By aligning competition with development objectives, establishing clear national standards, and engaging stakeholders in the design of the system, Canada Soccer can create a framework that is both ambitious and sustainable.

Ultimately, success should be measured not simply by who wins competitions, but by whether the system develops better players, strengthens clubs and development environments, and creates appropriate opportunities for players to progress. Competition should serve the development pathway—and the pathway should serve the long-term future of Canadian soccer.

3.14 What competition environments best support player development at different ages and levels of play?

3.15 Should Canada Soccer establish a national Competition Licensing System for youth soccer, and if so, what standards and classifications should it include?

Grassroots Development and Identifying Potential

A detailed discussion about mass participation is beyond the scope of this particular paper and will be covered in other parts of the strategic planning process. Nevertheless, we agree that the future of Canadian high-performance soccer begins with children falling in love with the game at the grassroots level. A player's first coach can be as influential as any coach they encounter later in their development. Canada's grassroots system should help as many children as possible become confident and skilful with the ball, learn to solve problems and develop a lasting passion for soccer.

The Canada Soccer Grassroots Standards provide the national framework for such a system. First introduced in 2020 and mandatory for member organizations beginning with the 2026 playing season, the Standards establish expectations for areas including pitch and game formats, numbers of players, mixed-gender soccer, the environment surrounding the field and appropriate pedagogical oversight. They draw on Sport for Life's Long-Term Athlete Development framework, Canada Soccer's Long-Term Player Development model, research and international best practice, adapted to the realities of soccer in Canada. Implementation of the Standards by clubs, academies, districts, regions and leagues should create a more consistent foundation for young players across the country.

Program quality alone does not ensure equitable access in the first place. Cost, geography, transportation, facilities, coach availability, cultural relevance and accessibility for players with disabilities can all affect whether children participate and progress. Canada Soccer, PTSOs and clubs should monitor these barriers and develop targeted responses so that opportunity is not determined primarily by a family's income or location.

Players should leave the grassroots stage with strong fundamental movement skills, sound technical foundations, growing problem-solving abilities and an enthusiasm for learning. The objective is to prepare every child for the next stage of development—not to classify players as elite at increasingly young ages. Decisions should remain flexible and reflect the needs of each child.

The identification of potential must follow the same philosophy. Development is individual and non-linear, and many international players emerge later than expected. Consistent with the Canada Soccer Grassroots Standards and Grassroots Programs, identification and selection processes should remain inclusive, provide opportunities for players to enter and re-enter the pathway, and recognize potential rather than reward only early physical maturity or short-term performance.

Through this approach, Canada Soccer seeks to keep as many players as possible in the game for as long as possible, in the best environments possible.

3.16 Does our grassroots philosophy strike the right balance between broad participation, enjoyment and development on one hand, and the identification of potential on the other? What, if anything, should Canada Soccer clarify about expectations for children, parents, coaches, clubs and selectors through the grassroots stage?

3.17 What will be required to ensure that the Canada Soccer Grassroots Standards are implemented consistently and create meaningful value for children across the country? Where are the principal gaps - in coaching, facilities, affordability, accessibility, local competition structures, monitoring or support for clubs and PTSOs - and which should be the highest priorities for action?

4. Conclusion and Next Steps

This whitepaper is intended to begin a conversation, not conclude one. The ideas and potential directions described throughout it reflect Canada Soccer's current thinking about how our high-performance system can improve, but none should be considered predetermined outcomes of the strategic planning process. We are seeking the experience, expertise and perspectives of players, coaches, clubs, professional academies, leagues, Provincial and Territorial Soccer Organizations, technical leaders and others across the game to challenge these ideas, identify what is missing, and help determine where Canada should focus its efforts.

The opportunity before us is significant, but so is the challenge: international football will continue to improve, and sustained success will require Canada to improve with it—and, in critical areas, faster than our competitors. Following this consultation and the completion of Canada Soccer's strategic plan in 2027, we will set out a clear articulation of the specific improvements we intend to make to the Canadian high-performance system, how those improvements will be prioritized and sequenced, and how we will measure progress over time. Our ambition is not simply to build on a successful moment, but to create the conditions for Canadian players and National Teams to compete consistently with the world's best for generations to come.