

TALKS WITH THE COACHES

by John Cairns

Despite poor exposure at the professional level in Canada, basketball and soccer are sports growing ever more popular here. With this in mind, I went to talk about the games with U.P.E.I. coaches George Birger and Vince Mulligan.

BASKETBALL

Question: Which National Basketball Association players would you most like on your starting five?

Coach Birger: There are so many great players it'd be hard to choose. I know I'd have to include people like Walton and Jabbar and, of course, Julius Erving. I would probably put Ron Lee on there as an outstanding guard. These are the types of people I would like to have on my team if I were coaching.

Question: Choosing on an all-time basis, who would you like to have?

Coach Birger: I'd have to be again picking some of the recent stars because I'm sure that each year they come up with just stronger players as a result of the improving of the game. Again it would include some of these same people that I've just mentioned.

Question: Is it a general trend in sport that each year the players are getting better?

Coach Birger: There's no doubt that each year in sport we're getting more and more young people started at an earlier age, and as a result methods have been improved. There are much more and much better places for young people to grow up in sports, so we're going to see naturally more stars each year. Not that the old timers couldn't have played with these teams. There's no doubt they could have. There's no doubt in my mind though, also, that we have more and better players, a lot more in numbers than we've had in the past.

Question: Would an N.B.A. franchise work in Canada?

Coach Birger: I think it could, yes, in cities like Toronto and Montreal, possibly Toronto first of all. It could work there because I've understood that they've tried a couple of exhibition games there and had some pretty good turn-outs. So, yes, I definitely think so. The brand of basketball in Canada has improved vastly within the last ten years and

especially within the last five years.

Question: Would a professional team in Canada improve basketball here even more?

Coach Birger: I think there's no doubt it should encourage it and make it stronger. I have the feeling that the more exposure you can give any particular sport the more it's going to catch on because younger players seem to identify many times with professional players. There's a certain rub-off

SOCCER

Question: Is soccer the most up-and-coming game in North America?

Coach Mulligan: After Pelé came into that North American League he brought it up down in the Meadow Lands in Jersey and started packing them in - around sixty thousand people. It's starting to come. Whether the big networks buy a contract will be important. If ABC and NBC buy the contract, they'll start pushing it through their own channels. That will help it. What else will help it is that it's a cheap sport and the way the economy is going now. You

know all the gear you need is the ball and sweaters, so over baseball and football it's economical. It'll grow that way. The third and most important thing is that it's fun to play at an early age. You've got the basic fundamentals, just kicking and running, and kids like to do that.

Question: Will the North American Soccer League soon rival the other professional sports?

Coach Mulligan: It depends on the coaching backgrounds you have in North America. I'm trying to compare that to how long it took Europe to catch on to hockey. They brought in coaches from Canada and then they sent people over here looking at it, so if North America goes the same way Europe did with our hockey system, I'd say it would catch on within the next five years, ten years. In North America though, when you're talking about soccer they're in for the money, not the building up of it, so if it's easier to go over and buy players like George Best and those, and bring them over instead of training their own, they'll pick up the tab. That's the way I look at it.

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