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It took a century, but 2012 is the Year of Soccer in Canada

You think I'm kidding? Read on

Before anyone starts tossing beer cans at me for being a rah-rah Canadian soccer cheerleader, I'd like you to know I won't apologize for what I believe is the coming-out year for the game in this country.



MARK BLINCH, REUTERS

The L.A. Galaxy's David Beckham prepares to take a corner kick against Toronto FC as fans throw streamers at him during the first half of their CONCACAF Champions League quarterfinals soccer match in Toronto on Wednesday.

Canadian soccer is bursting ahead on the international scene, the Olympic scene, the Major League Soccer scene, the Canadian Soccer League scene — and all over our own capital.

I'm in the mood to launch roll upon roll of streamers and confetti bombs in all directions, especially as we celebrate 100 years of the Canadian Soccer Association. It has taken all this time for the game to get a real hold on this country.

Today, fans can watch more English Premiership matches on TV here than they can in England, we are approaching a million official participants in the game and we are starting to fill stadiums with loudmouthed fans.

That's loud-mouthed in the nicest sense of the word. Did anyone watch Toronto FC'S CONCACAF Champions League match against David Beckham and the L.A. Galaxy at the Rogers Centre on Wednesday? If not, you missed the perfect example of the racing pulse of the Canadian game in 2012.

The place was packed with 47,658 spectators, at least 40,000 of them either wearing red or carrying red. And yes, if you want to know, I counted them! They were loud from the first moment to the last, and do not believe those who tell you this was a boring game and a boring crowd.

Beckham has played in front of crowds like this countless times, so when he tells the media after the game he appreciated the "amazing atmosphere," you'd better believe him. Of course, there had to be a couple of morons in the crowd to toss beer cans Beckham's way. The man tried to take it calmly, but when boos were added to the cans, you could see the flashing of steely eyes.

Had anyone chosen to ask, I am sure he could have remembered crowds that were far, far worse in his career. I can remember a game against Manchester City when coins were thrown at him. On this occasion, he restricted himself to being "disappointed" by a few fans tainting the atmosphere.

Beckham also had no complaints about the streamers raining down on him as he took a host of corner kicks. All part of an event that was about as colourful as we've ever seen in the Rogers Centre, whatever the sport.

So, if you think 47,000-plus fans for a game in Canada is huge, wait until next Saturday at Montreal's Big O when the Impact stages its MLS home debut against the Chicago Fire. Ticket sales have been racing, zooming past 32,000 by mid-february and not slowing since.

Impact president Joey Saputo confidently expects to attract 55,000, and is pushing for 58,000. Either would break the attendance record for a pro soccer game in Canada and would be the largest crowd for a regular-season game in MLS history.

Right beside the Big O, Saputo Stadium is on the grow. When the team gets onto that grass playing surface for a game — scheduled for July — it will almost certainly be playing regularly to capacity crowds of 20,341.

Next up for an international-class stadium in Canada? Lansdowne Park.

Apart from the Impact, Toronto FC ticket sales have picked up as fans realize their club has a legitimate shot at an MLS playoff spot for the first time in its short history. And it will come as no surprise to discover that Vancouver Whitecaps fans are rolling in for a new season with a completely overhauled squad assembled by new coach Martin Rennie.

Where else can we toss a few streamers? Let me list what we can look forward to as spring and summer approach. Our men's national team has a major date at BMO Field in Toronto on June 3 when the highly regarded U.S. team comes north for a friendly. It's a major show to help celebrate the CSA centenary, and we can be certain of a full house.

There are also high hopes for the big-crowd atmosphere for the three home World Cup qualifiers: June 12 against Honduras, Sept. 7 versus Panama and Oct. 12 against Cuba, although the Cuba game may not sparkle if Canada is already out of the running.

The Olympics beckons in late July for our women under John Herdman, a highquality coach, even if he is a Newcastle fan. And if they won Friday night against Panama our U-20 women will have booked a ticket to Japan for the U-20 Women's World Cup finals. Even if they lost, this team gets a second bite against the loser of the U.s.-mexico match since three CONCACAF teams win places in the finals.

Here in town, Capital City FC goes into its second Canadian Soccer League season with a confidence borne out of a remarkable first season during which coach Shaun Harris took them to the championship final. A bunch of new faces are being assembled as the squad is strengthened and Harris plans to continue with the attacking brand of soccer he believes is the way the game should be played.

The club had the best fan base of any CSL team last season with a small but vociferously enthusiastic chanting section making big noise at the Terry Fox facility on Riverside Drive.

The biggest news for the Ottawa Fury this summer will be the hosting of the USL W-league championships July 27-29 at the Algonquin College Soccer Complex.

In January, the Women's Professional Soccer league was forced to suspend operations for a year. It has every intention of returning, but in the meantime the W-league becomes the strongest for women in North America. That makes the W-league finals the most important women's soccer event on the continent. A well deserved major coup for Fury owner John Pugh.

There is also a major junior happening being staged by Ottawa South United. On the first weekend in August, the club is hosting a "showcase of champions" tournament designed to give junior boys and girls from U-13 to U-18 the chance to strut their stuff in front of U.S and Canadian university coaches. Operations general manager Jim Lianos said Friday he has 25 clubs signed and is expecting as many as 80.



OK, I'll stop there. Just take it from me, 2012 will be the start of something really, really special on the soccer fields of this country. And I don't care if any of you think that's too much rah-rah. Richard Starnes' column appears weekly in Citizen. He can be reached at richardstarnes@gmail.com. Also, look for his Citizen blog at ottawacitizen.com/starnes and listen to his weekly radio show, Corner-kicks, Monday at 7 p.m. on The Team 1200 AM.

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