

Academy program a first for Niagara

By **JIM WALLACE, STANDARD STAFF**

It's a win-win situation for Elite Soccer Development and the Club Roma minor soccer association. Elite Soccer Development is the first academy soccer league in Niagara with a mandate to take competitive soccer to another level, founder and technical director Clayton Rosario said.

"We have qualified, licensed coaches -- it's mandatory -- and the quality of the field we play on is generally much better than the travel system," he said.

For the uninitiated, the academy system, Soccer Academy Alliance Canada, started in Ontario four years ago as a private enterprise and has strict guidelines for its six member clubs.

"To be an academy member ... you must have B-carded coaches and higher, and coaches with professional backgrounds, year-round training facilities and good referees," Rosario said. "There are so many trainings per week and a set number of games per year, depending on the age of the player. This allows time for recuperation and avoids player injuries and burnout."

Rosario, a Port Colborne resident who started a similar program in Toronto, has been trying for four years to set up the program in Niagara and the partnership with Club Roma made it happen.

Eventually, Rosario would like to see the program provide players to Roma's Canadian Soccer League team.

Wolves head coach James McGillivray is Rosario's partner and academy director.

"It's all about development," Rosario said, noting that until players reach the under-14 age level, nobody keeps score. "So there's no pressure to win."

At present, teams practice three to four times a week and play Saturdays, with a two-week vacation schedule in the summer to give families some vacation time.

Response so far has been excellent, he said, with 17 to 18 players at each age group starting at under eight years old. It works out to 60 in the program and another 70 to 100 students

With the partnership with Club Roma, players from the minor system can attend training sessions as guests.

"If they like the system, they can get involved full time," Rosario said.

He has already had professional coaches from Germany attend one of the training sessions and is planning yearly trips to Europe for players.

"In April 2010, we will travel to France for a two-week tour with a boys under-14 academy team,"

he said. "The players will experience coaching from top French coaches, play friendlies and get an opportunity to see a men's pro team train and play."

Elite Soccer Development has also produced its own DVD to help with technical and physical training.

Along with developing the players' talents, Rosario hopes to obtain scholarships for players, with an eye toward eventually playing professional soccer.

"We contact universities and find out what they're looking for, then send that player there. We have contacts in Michigan, Buffalo and Syracuse, and try to work with them."

Rosario feels the academy must be run like a business, as they are in Europe, to be successful.

Long term, Rosario hopes to make the academy one of the leading player development programs in Canada and hopefully build an 11-a-side indoor facility and a full-time training centre.

"They are ambitious plans and hopefully they come together," he said.

Further information on the program is available from the academy's website at www.elitesoccerdevelopment.com

Source: www.stcatharinesstandard.ca