

Aurora FC looking to make a mark in third League 1 Ontario season



By Jake Courtepatte

With the Jimmy Brennan era over, the Aurora FC are looking to move on under new leadership.

Close to three years after ex-pro Brennan brought semi-professional soccer to town in the form of both a men's and women's League1 Ontario club, the executive director stepped down in December to take advantage of new opportunities.

Brennan was also key in rebranding the Aurora Youth Soccer Club to its current status as Aurora FC, putting both the semi-pro and minor clubs under one umbrella.

He left behind a men's side still looking for answers, while their female counterparts enter the 2018 season as a .500 club on the up-and-up.

However, men's head coach Derek O'Keeffe has high hopes in turning over a new leaf as a developmental program.

"In regards to the way we run League1, and our approach for player recruitment, this has changed," said O'Keeffe. "The way we are running the program this year is very youth orientated. League1 was originally created to promote young exciting Canadian players and a pathway for them to make it to the professional game."

O'Keeffe said the league must "focus on youth and promoting players from within."

"Yes we have recruited from universities this year, but not as much as previous campaigns" we are focusing on talented youth who we believe need to be given their shot."

"This may take time, but if we want to make Canadian soccer better we must bring our young players through."

Leading the way for the men's side will be Morey Doner, the club captain, whom O'Keeffe said brings "excellent leadership skills" to the squad.

Players to watch out for also include Max Ferrari, a "talented midfielder who is box to box and has a sharp eye to the goal," as well as Karamvir Mehmi, whose "electric speed" can be a "handful for defenders."

With a strong shift in the program, O'Keeffe also wants to acknowledge the leadership behind the curtains in the budding club, like technical director Dave DiPlacido and assistant director Marco Campia, who he said have done "a tremendous job organizing the program."

Despite a lacklustre 2017 season on the field, both Aurora sides have already proved their worth as a developmental program: the women's team sent twelve Aurora players to the NCAA's division I this past fall, highlighted by the play of both Victoria Pickett and Sarah Stratigakis, competing in the prestigious Big Ten conference.

Pickett, a native of Aurora, joined the Wisconsin Badgers for the 2017 season before being named to the United Soccer Coaches All-Midwest Region First Team and the Conference All-Big Ten Second Team.

Stratigakis, a key member of the Canadian senior women's team since joining the roster early last year, plied her trade with the Michigan Wolverines while being named to the Conference All-Big Ten Second Team as well.

On the men's side, defender Justin Broome joined the American collegiate top ranks with Stetson University of the Atlantic Sun division, notching a goal in eight games as a starter for the Hatters.

The men open their season this Saturday at home in hosting Master's Futbol in Toronto, while the women will host Vaughan Azzurri in the first half of a doubleheader.

Both clubs have moved their home turf to the new state-of-the-art field at Stewart Burnett Park for the 2018 season, a move O'Keeffe said the club is "delighted" about.