

Rule Change Could Attract Young Italians to MLS

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Alessandro Del Piero believes the time is right for Italian players to think about Major League Soccer as a destination.

The 36-year-old Italian international was a target for the Montreal Impact but has stated a preference for life in the cities of Los Angeles or New York.

Nonetheless, Del Piero's agents had two meetings with Montreal, one in the Quebecois city and the other in Torino.



Fiorentina won the 2011 Coppa Italia Primavera

Despite his personal preferences, his readiness echo the growing belief that the relative rarity of Italian players coming to North America may be about to end.

We talked about this with Giuseppe Pezzano, an Italian soccer consultant who was responsible for bringing Del Piero to the table with Impact and specializes in moving Italian players abroad.

“MLS is now a far bigger attraction that it once was for Italians. The standard is higher and some good World Cup performances have increased the profile of US soccer. Alessandro would probably not be considering it otherwise. It is about more than the lure of individual cities. The

league's reputation is good.”

Now the Italian press attention has moved on and turned to the prospects of Luca Toni going to play for Montreal.

However, many fans in the US and Canada are sceptical of the arrival of older established players in MLS and see the future of the Designated Player project in younger men like Dallas' Fabian Castillo and Portland's Jose Adolfo Valencia.

In **adding Valencia, Portland took advantage of the MLS rule on younger Designated Players** (<http://www.prostamerika.com/2011/12/15/timbers-add-another-designated-player/53974>) which allows for their arrival with a significantly lower amount of salary cap space being used. International designated players age 20 or younger will be charged just \$150,000 against the team's salary cap. Players aged 21 to 23 will count \$200,000 against the salary cap. The sum for older DPs is \$335,000.

Another development may be about to alter this landscape for younger Italian players.

The Italian reserve league, the Primavera, is looking to undergo a rule change. The Primavera although nominally the Italian reserve league has had an upper age limit of 21.

They are working to reduce the age limit to 20, which means twice as many players would become ineligible as normal in one single year.

This would mean a sudden glut on the market with twice as many players as the ability of Italian clubs to provide squad places for them.

Speaking from Kansas City where he is attending the draft, he said:

“The effect would certainly be to distort the market a little. Twice as many young Italians will be looking for places on senior squads as there are places. This would lead to a one year dip in their market value.

Together with the change in MLS Designated Player rules for youngsters, there could be a better opportunity for these youngsters to try their luck in America. MLS is more cosmopolitan than it has ever been.”

Top officials from Serie A club Fiorentina including the club president will be coming to the United States in March for the start of the MLS season so that they can get a first hand look at the progress MLS has made.

Until now younger Italian talents have been reluctant to come here.

However, Pezzano sees that the level of play is getting better and is convinced that if the MLS continues to encourage its clubs to concentrate on youth development the level will continue to grow. A higher level of play will make the MLS more appealing to younger Italians and other Europeans.

If the Primavera rules do change there will be a flood of young Serie A and B players excited about the possibility of coming to the states.

It is not just the lure of MLS. There is less money in Italian football than there used to be. A combination of

the EPL manifesting its commercial power and Italy's economic downturn means that more and more, the Italian player has to consider leaving Italy to make a living.

“The players are just as good. But the clubs have lost income as they watch the Spanish and English clubs reap the Champions League harvest. Italian players now realise that travel is necessary to play. America is a natural destination given the history of Italian immigration there. Most Italians have a relative somewhere in North America,” Pezzano added.

Despite the success of Robbie Keane and the Los Angeles Galaxy, there are many fans who believe that attracting and grooming younger players is the path forward for MLS.

And as Keane has shown, MLS is quite compatible with continuing your international career.

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Disclosure: OSA is a Prost Amerika partner. You can email Giuseppe Pezzano for more information about Primavera players on info@osasocceracademy.com