

BUILDING MEMORIES

USISL GETS DIVISION II STATUS FROM USSF

Federation board grants unanimous approval for elevation of USISL Select League; 12-24 teams expected to be part of Division II loop for 1997

The United States Soccer Federation Board of Directors voted unanimously at its April 20 quarterly meeting in Arlington, Va. to grant provisional approval to the USISL to elevate its new Select League to Division II status for the 1997 season.

The decision, which is pending a full review of the USSF's revised standards for soccer leagues that were also passed last weekend, could be ratified as early as the USSF's July 13 meeting and clears the way for the USISL to complete its developmental structure for minor-league soccer in the U.S.

The decision is provisional in that the USISL must meet USSF rules and requirements within a specified time frame.

"Obviously I'm very happy. This essentially completes the design of our pyramid blueprint for our entire system," said USISL commissioner Francisco Marcos, who attended the USSF board meeting. "We will soon have a Division II league, a Division III league and what amounts to a Division IV league, plus a women's league and an indoor league as well as our national pilot program of a youth league which we also hope to start soon."

From its humble beginnings as a five-team indoor league in Texas, Oklahoma and New Mexico, the USISL has experienced phenomenal growth. Celebrating its 10th anniversary in 1996, the league now counts its membership at 118 teams in 37 states. The Select League, new for 1996, is the highest-level men's outdoor league under the USISL umbrella and presently enjoys Division III status. The bulk of teams moving to Division II status would come from the 21-team Select League, which will include between 12 and 24 teams in 1997, Marcos said.

"The United States Soccer Federation has taken great notice of the wonderful developments within the USISL by granting provisional status for Division II to begin in 1996," said USSF executive director and secretary general Hank Steinbrecher.

"It is our hope that the USISL will continue to develop the needed infrastructure to ensure that professional soccer in the U.S. thrives. We look forward to working with them on this exciting project."

The USISL's other men's outdoor entities are the Pro League (Division III) and the amateur Premier League, which is generally recognized as "Division IV," although the USSF has no such designation.

The USWISL, or "W" League, is the only national soccer league for women currently operating in the U.S. And the USISL Indoor League completed its 10th season in February. More than 1-million spectators attended USISL games in all five leagues during 1995.

"The process to get ready for the move up to Division II status will begin immediately," Marcos said. "We will intensify our marketing and public relations efforts in anticipation of the move even though we won't be Division II on the playing field for another 11 months."

The A-League, which operates in the U.S. and Canada with seven teams, is the only other Division II league sanctioned by the USSF, whose rules allow for up to four Division II leagues.

The New Major League Soccer is sanctioned as a Division I league. In February, the USISL joined forces with MLS in a significant developmental alliance that made the USISL the official minor league of MLS, encompassing player movement, coach and referee development and cooperative marketing efforts.

USISL teams aspiring to Division II status will be required to meet newly-approved budget guidelines, with team budgets at an average of \$500,000, but the federation gave the USISL until 1999 to upgrade and meet all of the standards.

"By the turn of the century, we will have become the entire base of the soccer pyramid – providing the complete developmental support structure for American soccer," Marcos said. "You can think of the USISL as the one-stop shop for all but the most elite level of soccer in the U.S."