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A SHARED VISION FOR PLAY AND PURPOSE: ONTARIO SOCCER AND ISWO UNITE TO BUILD A LASTING PATHWAY FOR INDIGENOUS YOUTH

TORONTO, ON | SEPTEMBER 19, 2026 – While anchored by Indigenous Sport & Wellness Ontario's (ISWO) five-year *Spirit of the Pitch* legacy initiative and Ontario Soccer's current Strategic Plan Indigenous Futsal/Soccer initiative, the overarching goal of this landmark collaboration is the enduring, generational development of a sustainable soccer pathway for Indigenous youth and communities across the province. Marked by shared values, mutual respect, and a deep love for the beautiful game, Ontario Soccer has formally welcomed ISWO as an official Associate Member – an extraordinary honour that bridges grassroots community joy with provincial high-performance excellence.

"This partnership reflects our shared commitment to growing the game in a way that is inclusive, respectful, and representative of the diverse communities we serve. By continuing to broaden and diversify our membership, we strengthen soccer across Ontario and create more meaningful opportunities for Indigenous youth, families, and communities to feel welcomed, supported, and connected through the sport." said Alan O'Brien, Chair, Board of Directors, Ontario Soccer.

Guided by the spirit of Team 88 and directly advancing Call to Action #88, #89 and #90 of the Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada – which calls for sustained athlete development, national initiatives, and systemic collaboration in Indigenous sport – this alliance unites both organizations under a common banner. Together, ISWO and Ontario Soccer are committed to creating welcoming environments where children can fall in love with play, communities are empowered, and systemic barriers are dismantled.

"Being welcomed into Ontario Soccer as an Associate Member is both an incredible honour and a historic turning point," said Frank Horn, President of Indigenous Sport & Wellness Ontario. "At its core, this partnership is driven by a shared heart for the game and for the children, youth and communities we serve. Beyond building structured technical pipelines, our true purpose is to bring joy, confidence, and community connection to our youth. Seeing kids smiling, laughing, and discovering what they are capable of on the pitch tells us we are making a genuine difference. Working alongside Ontario Soccer under the Team 88 banner allows us to turn reconciliation into active, tangible empowerment."

As the governing body of soccer in the province, Ontario Soccer is the largest provincial sport organization in Canada and a member of Canada Soccer. Supporting more than 380,000 registered players across 16 district member associations and 9 associate member associations, Ontario Soccer oversees provincial leagues, high-performance talent pathways, and the development of thousands of registered coaches and match officials. Its commitment to

leadership, diversity, equity, and inclusion makes this collaboration a natural, purpose-driven alignment.

"Since its inception in 1901, Ontario Soccer has led the way in welcoming diverse communities to the sport of soccer and ensuring the game reflects the people and places that make our province so vibrant," said Johnny Misley, Chief Executive Officer of Ontario Soccer. "This new partnership with Indigenous Sport & Wellness Ontario is especially meaningful because it builds on that legacy with purpose, respect, and action. Together, we have an opportunity to create lasting pathways for Indigenous youth and communities, support reconciliation through sport, and ensure more young people can experience the joy, belonging, and opportunity that soccer provides."

The partnership focuses on four core, community-driven pillars:

- **Joyful Grassroots Engagement:** Aligning community learn-to-play futsal and soccer activations with age-appropriate physical literacy, ensuring youth experience the pure fun, camaraderie, and health benefits of sport.
- **Certified Workforce Capacity:** Delivering culturally grounded coaching and referee clinics directly within Indigenous communities, building sustainable local leadership for generations to come.
- **Integrated High Performance Pathways:** Connecting ISWO's talent identification directly to provincial development streams, and talent pools.
- **Provincial Accessibility:** Expanding sanctioned, safe, and quality futsal/soccer programming to First Nations, Inuit, and Métis youth in urban, rural, and remote northern communities across Ontario.

"This partnership unlocks a truly holistic pathway," said Zach Fraleigh-Whiteye, Senior Manager of Sport & Wellness for ISWO. "By combining ISWO's grassroots community trust with Ontario Soccer's technical structure, we can ensure every child – whether kicking a ball for the first time in a remote fly-in community or pursuing elite competition – has a supported path forward. Sport is more than performance, it's medicine, which creates community and a sense of belonging."

ISWO will officially launch its five-year *Spirit of the Pitch* legacy initiative at BMO Field on October 28 with a special media event, spotlighting the collaborative programs that will bring this pathway to life across Ontario.

About Indigenous Sport & Wellness Ontario (ISWO)

ISWO is the designated Provincial/Territorial Aboriginal Sport Body for Ontario, serving First Nations, Inuit, and Métis peoples. Funded by the Ministry of Sport and Sport Canada and recognized by the Aboriginal Sport Circle, ISWO creates opportunities for participation in sport and cultural activities that promote holistic wellness, physical literacy, and leadership development. Under its Team 88 initiative, ISWO leads efforts across Ontario to fulfill the Truth and Reconciliation Commission's Calls to Action through the transformative power of sport.

About Ontario Soccer

Founded in 1901, Ontario Soccer is currently comprised of more than 500 Clubs servicing over 24,000 teams with 380,000 registered players, 70,000 coaches and managers, and 9,400 match

officials, as well as countless volunteers, parents and supporters encompassing a direct, multi-cultural community of over 1,000,000 Ontarians.

Ontario Soccer develops and delivers exceptional and sustainable programs and services throughout Ontario with the mission of providing leadership and support for the advancement of soccer in collaboration and cooperation with our member District Associations and Clubs, partners and other stakeholders. Ontario Soccer owns and operates the Zanchin Automotive Soccer Centre in Vaughan, Ontario as well operating the Ontario Player Development League (OPDL); the province's premier standards-based youth development program, as well as "Team Ontario", Ontario Soccer's Provincial Xcel program. Ontario Soccer proudly supports Canada Soccer's National Teams, the Canadian Premier League, Toronto FC and the Northern Super League.

The overall objective of Ontario Soccer, as a hub for Coach, Match Official and Player Development, is to be innovators and leaders in sport and to assist with the equitable development of soccer as a healthy lifestyle choice, provide a talented pathway for participants to excel and encourage inclusive community involvement at all levels.

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Acknowledgement

ISWO honours the traditional lands and homelands of all Indigenous Peoples and communities across the province of Ontario, including First Nations, Inuit, and Métis living both on and off reserve, in rural and urban communities.