

Small but **MIGHTY**



Little Kickers makes franchise history with
third consecutive CFA Awards of Excellence in
Franchising Grand Prize win

By Christine Rosal



It was a feat that no other franchise had accomplished before. On April 18, 2016, children's soccer franchise Little Kickers took home the Canadian Franchise Association's [CFA] prestigious Awards of Excellence in Franchising Grand Prize for the third year in a row.

Little Kickers' Chief Operating Officer Frank Stanschus credits his franchisees for the company's historic win. "There's a real feeling that we won this award together," he says. "It's not just head office doing a good job; it's the franchisees making it easy for us to do a good job."

A fitting statement given that strong partnerships are at the heart of the Awards of Excellence. Launched in 1992, the annual awards program recognizes franchise systems with the strongest franchisor-franchisee relationships, as demonstrated by the results of an independent survey of participants' franchisees.

As one of the smaller companies to participate in the Awards of Excellence, Stanschus views Little Kickers' multiple wins as a victory for small franchise systems in Canada. "It shows it's possible – a small company can win this and win it repeatedly and they're taken seriously by the CFA," he says. "It's a fantastic testament to our country and how we recognize the importance of small businesses."

GROWTH GOALS

Little Kickers might be relatively small in Canada, but worldwide, the franchise has more than 240 locations. The concept originated in the U.K. in 2002, when Stanschus' wife Christine couldn't find an age-appropriate soccer program for their two-year-old son.

She founded Little Kickers to fill that void, offering soccer programs specifically for pre-school aged children. In addition to soccer skills, classes cover everything from understanding colours and numbers, to social skills like taking turns and waiting for instructions.

Since expanding to Canada in 2009, Little Kickers has grown to more than 30 units in Ontario and British Columbia. Ultimately, Stanschus hopes to expand to all of the provinces but, he says, supporting existing franchisees will always take priority over selling new franchises. "What matters to me most is that everyone who has put their faith into our company actually succeeds."

To that end, the support provided to franchisees has grown just as rapidly as Little Kickers' physical footprint. For example, the franchise recently hired a Director of Coaching to help franchisees perfect their classes, and a newly-launched online training platform enables coaches to train on the go. These new resources, plus personalized support from head office, are designed to help franchisees succeed.

Clearly, Little Kickers is on the right track. All of the system's franchisees participated in the 2016 awards survey and gave their franchisor top marks for communication, operations, training, and support. Given that Little Kickers has nearly doubled in size over the past three years, Stanschus is encouraged by these results. "That we've been able to keep everyone on board and satisfied means we're doing a good job through this constant massive growth we're experiencing."

COVER STORY

A WINNING TEAM

Participation in the Awards of Excellence is just one way Stanschus facilitates franchisee feedback. Everyone in the Little Kickers network communicates regularly via an online forum, and when important issues arise, Stanschus reaches out to each franchisee personally. “Almost everything we do, we do through communications with the franchisees,” he says.

Stanschus describes this leadership style as “consensus management,” where everyone is invited to provide input before a final decision is made. “It gives us a lot more and better ideas,” he says, noting that franchisees come from diverse career backgrounds and bring their own unique skills and experience to the table. Franchisees are even involved in the franchise sales process so they can offer Stanschus feedback about a potential franchisee. “It’s a good qualifier for me to judge whether the potential franchisee will work or not.”

So what makes the ideal Little Kickers franchisee? First, franchisees must be passionate about getting children involved in sports. “Every now and then, a prospect will ask ‘how much money can I make?’ We usually discount those people right away because that’s not what it’s about,” he says. “You will make money, but it’s more about giving back to the community. We’re successful because all of our franchisees think like that.”

Many franchisees even partner with charitable organizations to offer free classes to children from low-income families. “Our mission is to give every child a positive introduction to sport, not just kids who can afford it,” says Stanschus, adding that he would eventually like to develop a system-wide charitable initiative.

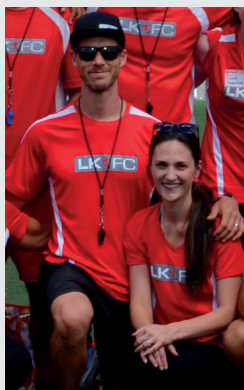
In addition to being passionate about the concept and devoted to their communities, Little Kickers franchisees

(continued on page 24)

ALL-STAR FRANCHISEES

The franchisees have spoken and they clearly agree that Little Kickers is best-in-class. After all, it’s their enthusiasm for the franchise that earned Little Kickers the Awards of Excellence in Franchising Grand Prize three years in a row. We spoke to five franchisees to find out what they love about owning a Little Kickers franchise:

“We’ve been given the freedom to really innovate and push the boundaries of what were previously thought to be the limits of the business – and we still feel there is room to grow!”



Courtney and Kevin Lyman, Toronto West and East York

Courtney Lyman was on maternity leave from her job as a Regional Manager at Lululemon when she decided to look for a business she could run with her husband, Kevin.

As a new mom, she immediately recognized a great concept when she discovered Little Kickers, and thought it would be a perfect fit. “We both value athletics and knew having the chance to instil the love and habit of sport at a young age would be incredibly rewarding,” she says.

Since opening in 2013, the Lymans’ Little Kickers franchise has grown to become the biggest in Canada, and one of the largest in the world. Lyman credits their coaches for this success. “Without incredible coaches, it doesn’t matter what we do,” she says.

The Lymans pay it forward by partnering with community organizations to ensure that any available space in their programs is given to children who can’t afford to enroll.

Courtney Lyman says her favourite part of owning a Little Kickers franchise is watching her students improve. “It’s been so fun to watch these kids progress both in their physicality, but also in their social skills over the years.”

With their commitment to their students and their community, the Lymans are only just getting started. Says Courtney: “We’ve been given the freedom to really innovate and push the boundaries of what were previously thought to be the limits of the business – and we still feel there is room to grow!”

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Melanie Webb, Scarborough

Melanie Webb discovered Little Kickers at a critical time in her life. “I’d just been through a bad divorce and was having financial difficulties,” says the mom of two, who left a career in investment banking to raise her children full time.

With two young children to support, Webb needed a source of income that would allow her enough flexibility and time to look after her children. The solution to Webb’s dilemma turned out to be Little Kickers, as it offered a home-based business with relatively low start-up costs.

Today, Webb is co-owner of Little Kickers Scarborough and appreciates the training and support she received. “We were provided with a wealth of information on how to run our company, ways to develop our business, insurance information, and more.”

Webb says she “couldn’t be happier” with her decision to become a Little Kickers franchisee. “I’m able to work from home and spend my time in the best fashion possible for my children.”

“There’s nothing more rewarding than having a child listen to their coach and complete a drill properly for the first time.”



Clark Webster, London

While living abroad in Seoul, South Korea, Clark Webster operated several bars and restaurants. When he returned to Canada, he wanted to buy a business, and found a posting for an existing Little Kickers franchise in Brampton, Ontario. “I’ve always been active in sports and I love being an entrepreneur,” he says of Little Kickers’ appeal.

“Becoming a Little Kickers franchisee offered me the best of both worlds.”

He was outbid for the Brampton location, but inquired about other opportunities in Southern Ontario, and eventually opened in London in 2016 with fully-booked classes.

His favourite part of the business is seeing his students improve. “There’s nothing more rewarding than having a child listen to their coach and complete a drill properly for the first time.”

Going forward, Webster hopes to get involved in the local community, something he was passionate about when he lived in Seoul, where he organized charitable events, sports tournaments, and fundraisers for various causes. “I look forward to getting involved in London’s local community in a similar capacity.”

COVER STORY

(continued from page 22)

should be prepared to work hard. “Everyone needs to recognize it’s their own business and it’s not a guaranteed success,” says Stanschus.

Franchisees can expect to do a lot of grassroots marketing to build their classes, which includes tasks like posting flyers around town and networking with other local business owners. “If you’ve been at a corporate job, it might seem like demeaning work, but it’s critical to what we do,” he says.

His advice to new franchisees is to take advantage of the support offered. “Some franchisees try to reinvent the wheel and don’t ask for help or listen in training. It’s a simple business if you do it the way it’s set out.”

With a proven concept, a passionate group of franchisees, and a committed head office team, Little Kickers shows that when it comes to success in franchising, it’s not the size of the system that matters, but the strength of the franchisor-franchisee relationship. 🍁

LITTLE KICKERS STATS

Franchise units in Canada: 33, International: 210

Corporate units in Canada: 1

Franchise fee: \$16K

Start-up capital required: \$5K

Available territories: All of Canada

Training: Initial and ongoing training provided

In business since: 2002

Franchising since: 2003

CFA member since: 2009



“I really feel there is no limit on how much I can grow the business.”



Larissa Gibson, North York

As an office manager for a soccer supply company, Larissa Gibson met many Little Kickers franchisees over the years, and noticed they all seemed to love what they did. Whenever she asked them about their experiences with the franchise, they only had positive things to say.

In 2014, she decided to take the plunge and become a Little Kickers franchisee herself. “I wanted to be happier at work and have the opportunity to make more money.”

As a franchisee, she loves the satisfaction that comes with working hard to build her business. “What I put into the business is what I get out of it,” she says. “I really feel there is no limit on how much I can grow the business.”

To build her business in the local community, she hosts numerous events throughout the year, including an annual Open House featuring games, face painting, and draws to win free classes. She also offers discounts to low-income families where possible.

She says the most rewarding part of her role is providing a supportive work environment for her coaches and receiving positive feedback from parents. “A parent recently shared with us that their children practice our games in their backyard and take turns pretending to be their favourite coaches leading a class. Hearing feedback like that is rewarding because we hope to make a difference in the lives of the children who attend our classes.”

“We love hearing how much fun their children are having, how they’re looking forward to their class every week, and how much they love their coaches.”



Vivijana and Vlado Cajic, Milton

Vivijana and Vlado Cajic were no strangers to business ownership before they became Little Kickers franchisees. The husband-and-wife team owned a computer store for 15 years before deciding to seek out another business opportunity.

Sold on the benefits of franchising, they discovered Little Kickers on LookforaFranchise.ca (CFA’s online member directory). “It was a perfect fit for our combined skills and strength,” says Vivijana Cajic, referring to their backgrounds in administration, customer service, and soccer. They also shared the company’s commitment to getting kids active.

The couple opened in Milton in 2013 and give back to the local community by supporting the Children’s Aid Foundation and the United Way. Cajic says their favourite part of owning a Little Kickers is hearing positive comments from parents. “We love hearing how much fun their children are having, how they’re looking forward to their class every week, and how much they love their coaches.” But the best feedback, she says, is seeing the same happy faces in their classes week after week. “That’s why we truly love what we do.”