

# WHOLE OF FOOTBALL PLAN

## MELBOURNE KNIGHTS FOOTBALL CLUB ALTERNATIVE SUBMISSION

### INTRODUCTION

After reading and digesting Football Federation Australia's Whole of Football Plan released last week, we felt compelled to truly present an alternative view on the next 20 years for the benefit of the entire football public. Whilst we accept that there may be people that do not agree with our approach, we hope that it serves to promote healthy debate in the football community and to avoid the situation of a one-sided view being presented, adopted and implemented with potentially chaotic results.

In preparing this report, we have been guided by four central pillars of ideology and philosophy;

- True equal opportunity for all clubs at all levels
- Recognising that there are many different reasons for being part of the football community not all of which align - this shouldn't be seen as a weakness but as an indication of our sport's diversity and accessibility.
- Freedom for all stakeholders to choose their involvement in the game and to shape the framework of the sport democratically.
- That the success of the Socceroos and Matildas is above all else and is the ultimate goal of Australian soccer.

### THE FOOTBALL ECOSYSTEM

It is our position that we should all aim for the football ecosystem to closely mirror the most successful national football structures in the world. We can't be an economic peculiarity that is immune from the global football economy. Ultimately our attempts at circumventing the realities of the football system and how it functions will be our downfall.

We should aim to totally reject the American model of Major League Soccer. Although the MLS is, like the A-League, a new top-tier domestic competition that began from a starting point of a blank slate, unhindered by history and any sentimentalism – so did the Japanese J-League.

It is our view that the Japanese have adopted a much more robust and inclusive system of football whereby clubs of all types and ambitions can naturally find their level and place in the landscape and ultimately contribute to the sport in whichever way they please.

### THE FOOTBALL COMMUNITY

The football community is a loose affiliation of a body of people centered around the sport. Whilst these people come from a vast cross section of society with very different cultures and traditions – football is the tool that unites them all.

We should aim to leverage the Australian national teams as much as possible to foster good will at the micro and macro levels within Australia – it is our belief that the Australian National Teams are the single most unifying factor within our sport.

It is therefore important to put into perspective that for various cultural reasons domestic Australian soccer is not truly embedded into the national psyche – but that shouldn't be perceived as a flaw.

It is of no consequence whether we aim as a sport to be 'number one'. Regardless of how we measure this tally of the populism of sport – this is an area that is truly out of our control and we should concentrate on efforts on areas within the game that are totally within our control yet are neglected.

It is of the utmost importance to attempt to convert as many children as possible through the education system into football fans as stated by the FFA. However we are firmly of the belief that it is not the goal of this program to convert all school-aged children into fans of the A-league primarily.

The A-league has to be seen for what it is – our highest national domestic competition. However the A-league cannot continue to be treated with such distinction by the Governing Body at the expense of every other facet of the sport.

## **COACHING**

Whilst we agree that there are many positives to be gained by insisting on accreditation of coaches – there are still two major barriers for true uptake of certification and education.

Firstly, the costs of coach education in Australia are enormous and truly out of sync with our universal acceptance that we all want more accredited and better coaches coaching our kids.

If that was truly the case the prohibitive nature of the Licenses offered by FFA would be offset by connecting with Universities and other education providers across Australia that would be able to deliver the courses at a much cheaper rate.

The second stumbling block is the insistence of certain sections of the Governing body's Technical Department that heavily rely on and apply the 'Dutch 4-3-3 system'. This approach is totally out of step with the philosophy and principle of innovation, freedom of expression and variety.

It is silly to accredit all of our coaches and then expect them to coach using the same handbook – where is the benefit for the game under that premise?

It is our strong belief that we equip our coaches with strong tactical knowledge to be able to break down various formations and systems whilst giving them the tools to solve these problems through innovation.

## **FACILITIES**

Football has always had a problem with access to facilities at all levels. Aggressive competitor sports, apprehensive councils and government have all been historical hindrances to gaining access to and improving facilities. Whilst these cultural issues have subsided over the years, our sport does not have a truly central plan for facilities of all types, from A-class stadiums right through to park space for amateur and social teams.

It is our recommendation that for football to truly earmark itself as an ambitious future sport, and to leverage the envious position we find ourselves in with the number of participants we have, we should coordinate a concerted approach to the design and provision of facilities.

It is the role of our governing bodies at National and State level to lobby aggressively to not only procure facilities but secure funding for infrastructure works. We should be aiming for a one billion dollar (\$1b) facilities fund to be administered by Government for the next 20 years. This equates to approximately \$50M being invested nationally into facilities yearly – preferably to be weighted towards those facilities that will have the most impact for parts of the sport that aren't buttressed by commercial support.

The principle that clubs are encouraged to be partly responsible for the administration and maintenance of said facilities should be stimulated. This gives rise to clubs and the people they represent having a feeling of ownership of a facility. Immediately clubs and general patrons are more respectful of the facility extending its usable life and quality. People are also more willing to make improvements to facilities they feel they have some sort of ownership over, external to government support.

## **REFEREES**

Without referees – organised football can't happen. The efforts in humanising referees by the Governing body should continue and both the national and state governing bodies have done good work in this area.

Respect for match officials is paramount in achieving a higher retention rate of referees. Achieving a higher retention rate of referees increases the pool of referees, which in theory should yield better quality referees in the future if coupled with other crucial environmental factors.

An area that has been neglected in regards to referee education and recruitment has been through the clubs.

The governing body would be well advised to work with clubs in achieving these goals.

Two simple ways in which clubs and the governing body could work together for the benefit of referees are;

- Informal player and coach education programs to all players at all levels by referees. This could be done in a conference style whereby a couple of referees come to a club and address all of its players and take on questions. This breaks down barriers between players and officials whilst also fostering a greater understanding between the two.
- Referees that have been earmarked for an accelerated program of learning (or those that are willing) to be made available to clubs for intra-club practice matches. It is a great alternative to the traditional fitness training that referees do. It could also be formalized through a referee assessor and/or educator being present and stopping the game in the same way a coach would stop his team during a match to correct error or provide advice.

This also gives referees the chance to potentially adjust to higher paced matches and once again foster good understanding in a non-pressurised environment.

## **ADMINISTRATION**

We are of the strong opinion that the whole game should not be administered by a central authority.

Whilst we agree that all levels of the administration of the sport need to loosely pull in the same direction, it seems the mooted approach by the FFA in centralising delivery of the sport can be interpreted as dangerous if it is going to serve the interests of the national body only – whilst neglecting the needs and wants of those that fund it. It is imperative that should such a situation arise, all parties have a clear understanding of the structure under which they will operate.

Under the current structure this move could potentially be leading football in a direction that the national body feels is right – regardless if there are true concerns.

We cannot remove the current inadequate checks and balances and give the Governing body carte blanche.

Conversely, we need to strengthen the ability of all stakeholders to have a meaningful and powerful voice in how the sport is governed.

The Governing Body exists to serve the sport, to create an environment for clubs to exist, grow and ultimately play. Anything above and beyond those simple principles needs a majority mandate of all participants – otherwise there is no plurality in ideas and we could potentially be walking off a cliff edge.

We would also like to see greater transparency within the sport which has seemingly become a closed shop when it comes to understanding why the governing body has arrived at a certain strategic decision. A perfect example is this Whole of Football Plan itself.

Basically, our position is that the sport be administered in accordance with the wishes of the majority of its stakeholders.

Whilst we accept that there may be times when a strategic direction must be taken for the benefit of the sport – we'd like to see tangible results from these sorts of decisions. The problem has become these days that it seems that such unilateral decisions are made but there are no tangible benefits to be had.

## **FAN ENGAGEMENT**

At the basic level it is unacceptable that a serious National Association has as a cornerstone of its strategic direction the topic of fan engagement.

The Governing Body's ultimate responsibility is not to a singular league consisting of nine Australian clubs.

It is the responsibility of the clubs to create and foster a fan engagement program.

It is the Governing Body's job to make sure that it has fans engaged with the National teams and nothing further than that.

As an aside, if and when the A-league does become an independent commission, it would be wise to consider adopting the English model of Supporter's Trusts. These trusts are recognised entities by the Governing Body whereby ordinary supporters (not only so-called 'active' supporters) can have a legitimate voice at the table of the Club, League and Federation. This also helps convey issues that currently face many fans of the A-league teams and others in a more measured and legitimate way.

## **COMPETITIONS**

Whilst the A-League and W-League are under the control of the FFA – the Governing body's role will never be clearly defined nor can the league truly start to take off.

It is imperative that the two leagues be disentangled from the FFA as soon as possible.

The A-League/W-League should be led by an independent commission appointed by the majority of the clubs with the FFA still being able to exert some influence over the league only when absolutely necessary.

In the short to medium term, the FFA should still be able to negotiate the crucial Television Broadcasting deal which braces the sustainability of the league and the FFA.

The separation of this arrangement will be difficult to achieve but an agreement could easily come to fruition whereby the league is paid a certain amount for its ongoing viability with the rest of the moneys to be retained by the FFA for all other programs unrelated to the professional leagues.

The FFA must aim for a truly national second division within the short term.

The principle of this national second division would be to aim to operate under a similar framework to the A-League, at ten or twenty percent of the salary cap, crowds, turnover and so forth.

The National Second Division would be played concurrently to the current A-League calendar and would have promotion and relegation with the state NPLs.

The National Second Division would be a competition constituted of ambitious clubs already within the NPL system and any new club that wishes to prepare for the A-League.

It would later be assessed how the principle of promotion and relegation to and from the A-League would work – with the aim to completing the Australian football pyramid.

It is extremely disappointing that the FFA has totally ruled out even conducting a feasibility study on this issue.

In 20 years' time, our National Body should be concentrating only on our National teams and the domestic competitions should be left to the State bodies and/or separate commissions constituted by the clubs and the people they represent.

## **PLAYER DEVELOPMENT**

The environment for player development in Australia is all but non-existent. If we follow the journey of a young child beginning his path at the lowest under sevens or eights level – the path to the top has become muddled and confusing.

This is applicable for both boys and girls.

In the past, the pathway to the top of the sport was quite simple.

You began for a junior club and rose through the ranks of the club with each age group until you got to the serious age groups where you'd aim to make the club's youth team and/or seniors. Ideally this club would promote as many young players as possible into the seniors giving them an opportunity to develop against players that are older and more experienced.

Currently, there are an unacceptable number of programs offered by the Governing Body that effectively undermine the ability of the club to develop players.

Either it's the responsibility of the club or the governing body to develop players – it can't be both.

Whilst there is a place for State and national institutes like the AIS, these are meant to be complementary to the programs that clubs offer – not in conflict with them.

Also these programs should be constituted as a sort of finishing school where players would be prepared and educated for professional football.

On another point, it is very naïve to think that we are able to develop players to a world class standard in house, which is in Australia.

We should be aiming to develop as many players as possible to a high standard. Those players need to get an opportunity to play senior football in the highest echelons of the sport and after they reach that level of competitiveness, they must be moved on overseas. The purpose of this is to enable the player to develop with other quality young players – the principle of the best playing the best.

We need to use the world's best academies to our advantage and farm as many young Australian players as possible for the success of our national team which is our main and ultimate purpose.

NPL clubs need to be stimulated in truly being part of the player development pathway in being able to offer semi-professional contracts (in between the current Amateur and Professional Contracts in the NRR) which will promote club-player loyalty and vice versa. The issue of player 'ownership' must be discussed.

It is still mind boggling that a ruling introduced 10 years ago (the so called transfer cap) is still in place today.

Initially this was designed so that A-league teams in season one could sign the best Australian talent to make up the new national league. Once this end was achieved it should have been scrapped.

Clubs must have the right to their players and in turn have responsibility towards its players. The current merry go round where players and clubs are in a constant game of cat and mouse has created an atmosphere of chaos where staying ahead of the game is more important than the actual game.

Therefore no true development actually occurs, clubs are being sent to the wall more and more often and the structural integrity of the sport continues to weaken.

## **NATIONAL TEAMS**

The move into the Asian Football Confederation has been the single greatest achievement of the FFA since its inception. We have been blessed with a so called golden generation that has been the backbone of our World Cup qualifications which have provided the whole sport a great wind gust of accelerated growth.

Our national teams must be seen as the single most unifying factor in the sport that transcends all other issues and agendas. Every person must feel connected to our national teams. The national teams should be used as much as possible for promotion of the sport generally.

Our national teams must have a scouting network over the world, especially in Europe. The benefit of our people being able to physically see the performance and track development of our young players – but also to act as a bridge between the FFA and these players is invaluable.

How many players have been overlooked by Australia because they have not even been in contact?

These scouts would be used to not only track progress but help players with cultural settlement issues and encouragement external to the clubs – a reminder that Australia is there and supports their development.

## **GENERAL COMMENTARY**

One of the biggest issues in the sport that hasn't been covered in these main points is the cost of participation. The cost of playing soccer is prohibitive. It's basically too expensive. Of course if you begin at the point of comparison to other sports, it can be justified.

Our position is that playing structured and organised football should be accessible to all people that wish to participate. The cost of playing should be as small as possible.

To drive down the costs of registering your child to play there are a few strategic decisions that can be instituted to help this end.

Firstly, the FFA must reassess the insurance they are providing players and the amount of cover it provides. We need to investigate whether the FFA and by extension clubs, are doubling or tripling up insurances especially on public reserves and parks where councils already may have insurance. There is a strategy and discussion to be had to decide the bare minimum in insurance costs to drive down the registration dollar.

Secondly, the National and State federations should investigate pooling our collective buying power with apparel suppliers. If we were able to centrally procure equipment (balls, goals, cones, kits and other apparel) at a drastically reduced rate – clubs if they chose to use this service - would be able to drive down the costs of apparel.

As mentioned earlier – the delivery of coach education must change and aim to be totally cost neutral to deliver. If this was the case the FFA could select the best candidates to complete the higher qualification courses whilst also eliminating the prohibitive cost of accreditation which is ultimately passed onto the kids that play. The more accredited coaches we have and the less it costs to be accredited drives down the cost of employing these coaches which drives down the cost of getting a good football education.

The facilities plan mentioned above is also crucial to these costs – for some clubs facilities are 20% of total expenses for the year which are also passed onto the kids.

If we can evaluate these four points and take some decisive action we would be in a position to lower the fees for kids dramatically.

We also must look at implementation of this (or any other) plan. We are curious to see a concrete strategic plan with set dates for each key milestone that we can all aim and aspire towards.

It is very important for clubs to have a clear picture of the future that is going to be set by the FFA and its subsidiaries to be able to positively plan for the future. If we continue in a state of flux, the opportunities that are currently in front of us will not come to fruition and it'll be another false dawn for Australian soccer.

As a general comment, it is important to recognise that the vast majority of players playing the sport do so socially and semi-seriously. This is the majority of people playing football. It is these people that we must cater to and allow clubs to cater to.

The majority of people want to play football because it's fun. Let's not take away their fun. Let's make it easier for people to join a club. Let's make it easier for clubs to exist and be financially strong.

The future is ours – but only if we're truly in it together. To be together, we have to be the football family and truly sit down and work out our problems in private.

This is a challenge to the FFA to meet with all concerned parties today and into the future and finding joint solutions for the betterment of the sport we all love.