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## Sports World

With LAKIS KONISTIS

### “GOLD COAST TO WIN THE A-LEAGUE IN THEIR FIRST YEAR!”

According to the Godfather of Football Peter Gray, who is heavily involved with Gold Coast United, “Gold Coast United will WIN the A-League in their first year!”

A HUGE prediction but based on what's been secretly going on behind the scenes up north, don't be surprised if the “Godfather's” bold prediction becomes reality.

Gold Coast United (soon to be also affectionately known as ‘Bling FC’) have already signed 4 Socceroo internationals, 1 Chinese international and of course a Kiwi one as well. Multi-billionaire owner Clive Palmer, whom the Godfather sees as “passionate and committed to the game” is leaving no stone unturned in his quest for instant success in the A-League.

The owner has 3 private jets for the Gold Coast outfit one of which his squad will use to fly around 1st class and the one which is currently being painted in the club's colours!

The others will entertain supporters and sponsors where necessary.

Coach Miron Bleiberg is currently in Brazil speaking to more players in preparation for the team's official starting date of..... wait for it, April Fool's Day 2009!

The squad will head to China in June and paly against its brother club Beijing in the ‘Bird Nest’, thanks yet again to the strong ties its multi-billionaire owner has with Chinese iron ore interests.

Still not convinced that ‘Bling FC’ will really make a big go of it next A-League season?

Don't say you weren't warned.

### BETEZY BET OF THE WEEK.....

The boys from Betezy re back i ction this week after a goo Melbourne Spring carnival- and here's their tip for this weekend.....

“This Saturday is the running of the Carlton Draught Railway Stakes at Ascot. This is a \$1 million race with a good class field. it willbe extremely difficult to beat the local horse MARASCO, who won in brilliant fashion last start, but I believe that the run knocked the stuffing out of him and he will not be able to repeat that effort. So you should be looking for a horse to beat him- and I believe that horse to be RIGHTFULLY YOURS. The horse is on a winning streak, which I expect will continue”.

So the tip from Betezy this week?

“LAY MARASCO AND BACK RIGHTFULLY YOURS IS THE SCOTSMANS TIP”.

### “SOCCER IN A SAD, SAD STATE?”

So the headline read last Saturday in sports jounalist Rebecca Wilson's column for the “Daily Telegraph”.

Here are just a few of her interesting assertions on football in Australia:

“Adelaide United FC was comprehensively humiliated by Japanese club Gamba Osaka in the Asian Champions League... In what can only be described as an embarrassing performance, the carefully constructed masquerade around the A-League was fractured”.

“The capitulation by Adelaide against Japan showed us just how far behind the rest of the world the A-League clubs are. The sport must surely realise there are gaping holes in soccer coaching and management that must be addressed”.

“The truth is that Australian soccer is not up to scratch and only those dozen or so players who represent Australia as Soccerooos are good enough to compete on the international stage”.

“Scratch the surface of the sport at every level and you come up with a code that is in grave danger of going the same way as basketball did a decade ago”.

“Unlike rugby league or AFL, soccer does not have coaching structures in place that ensure the development of good players with finely honed skills. It is no coincidence that the best Australian players leave here around the age of 16. The likes of Tim Cahill and Harry Kewell fled to Europe as teenagers, knowing they would be taught technical skills that simply are not taught by Australian coaches”.

“Either the game does surgery on itself here or soccer faces a future that is very bleak indeed”.

### ENTER FFA CEO.....

Obviously stung by this harsh criticism, Football Federation Australia CEO, Mr. Ben Buckley, wanted to set the record straight as far as football being in so-called “crisis”.

The CEO penned a letter to the entire football community immediately, and in response to fellow sports journalist Rebecca Wilson's assertion in her article over the weekend tha the Hyundai A-League and football in general is “in crisis”.

Really?

According to the FFA CEO, “I thought it might be helpful to let you know just how wrong her view is. For a start, I've always thought that a team which makes it to a final of a competition has actually performed very well. Whether it be the NRL or AFL Grand Finals, the finals of the cricket One Day Internationals or finals of the Super 14s, it is generally accepted that the two teams competing have excelled to get

that far”.

Fair call I think you would agree.

He then goes on to put Adelaide United's achievement in making it to the final of the Asian Football Confederation's (AFC) Champions League against Gamba Osaka into perspective.

“To get to the final, Adelaide had to:

(a) finish as either minor premiers or champions of the Hyundai A-League,

(b) come through a group stage playing six home and away matches against teams from Korea, China and Vietnam,

(c) navigate through the quarter finals and semi finals, playing a further four home and away matches, against one of the most successful teams in J-League history, Kashima Antlers, and Bunyodkor from Uzbekistan, and

(d) meet another top team from the Japanese league which is widely considered the top national league in the Asian confederation”.

What about the game's other shortfalls highlighted by Ms. Wilson?

“Since 2006, we have been actively addressing the shortcomings of the sport with a long term plan for Australia to improve its technical skills and to achieve sustained success internationally. Last year, Football Federation Australia (FFA) released the first ever national strategic framework for the development of the sport in this country. The plan addresses development at two distinct levels:

\* ‘game development’ which focuses on the grassroots that underpins the sport's popular base as well as the development of talented players who may well become the next Brett Emerton, Heather Garriock or Lucas Neill, and

\* ‘talented player development’ which is focussed on a nationally coordinated talent identification system involving the Australian Institute of Sport, the State Institutes, the member federations and the Hyundai A-League clubs”.

“Since then, we have delivered a number of the initiatives outlined in the national football development plan all of which have the aim of improving the skill levels and technical proficiency of players. These include:

\* introduction of Small Sided Football which aims to improve the skill levels and technical proficiency of young players

\* establishment of a National Youth League

\* establishment of the Westfield W-League

\* improved integration of pathways for talented players, and

\* a customised development program for the top 50 talented players”.

According to Ben Buckley, after just one year, 70,000 children are playing small sided football and this number will increase further over the next two years.

What about the coaching ineptness highlighted by Rebecca Wilson?

“To date, we have:

\* introduced a national coach accredited

itation scheme from grassroots upwards

\* held our first ever national coaching conference with leading experts from around the world, for coaches from grassroots to elite

\* set out minimum coaching qualifications for elite level coaches, and

\* awarded the first four scholarships under our new Elite Coach Development Program – to two former Socceroo captains, Alex Tobin and Paul Okon; to another former Socceroo, Alistair Edwards; and to Nicola Williams.

In time for the 2009 winter football season, we will have a new online course available for accredited coaches to supplement and complement certificate courses”.

The article also suggested that the best players go overseas. Ben Buckley added,

“This is a reality which has been ever-present in football for 25 years and reflects the fact that football is the truly global game... It is a reality which other sports are only now just starting to experience as the epicentre of some of the other sports shifts”.

Is the A-League's future ‘bleak’?

“At the end of season 3 of the Hyundai A-League, average crowds were 15,350, club memberships increased by almost 100% on season 1 and FOX Sports continued to report increasing viewer numbers.

Even though there has been a small reduction in crowds to date in this season, we are light years ahead of the old national soccer league.

Expansion will not only give us the best geographical footprint of any national sporting competition in the country, but more teams will help make the competition even more vibrant and attractive.

We are expanding to ten teams next season, with the addition of the Gold Coast and North Queensland Fury, and to twelve the season after”.

So, far from being “in crisis” we are rebuilding from the grassroots up.

\* We are expanding the Hyundai A-League

\* We are involved in regular quality competition in Asia

\* 1 million Australians enjoy playing the sport

\* We have launched a national plan to address technical failings

\* The sport is back in the ‘black’ financially (which we will be announcing later this month), and

\* We are bidding for the right to host the 2015 AFC Asian Cup and the 2018 FIFA World Cup”.

In closing, Ben Buckley had these parting words of encouragement for the sports journalist to consider:

“Thank you for your commitment to football. We hope to see you at a Hyundai A-League, National Youth League, Westfield W-League and Qantas Soccerooos match in the very near future”.

And based on her current knowledge about the game and where it's heading, it's pretty good advice- don't you think?