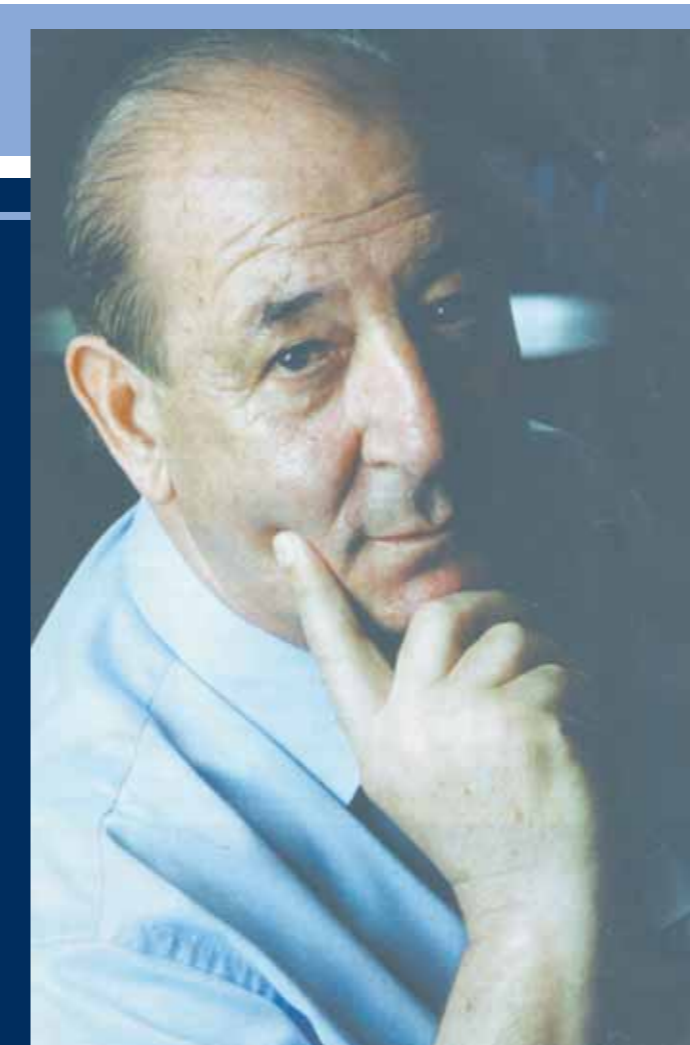




I love what I do, but my biggest passion of all is football.



Con Constantine

Whether in football or business, Con Constantine likes to play hard ball. The controversial entrepreneur tells NEIL JAMESON that despite his sometimes prickly relationship with bureaucracy and fickle football fans, he remains committed to the Hunter.



Man for all seasons

Con Constantine knows when his daughter Maryann 6, is running a credibility check. "She says, 'Hello?... hello?' he says, raising his eyebrows in mock disbelief. He has been asking pretty much the same of Football Federation Australia (FFA). The Newcastle Jets owner is still hopping mad that they didn't extend him a courtesy call to say they were poaching his coach, Gary van Egmond.

In the long-running battle between the recalcitrant owner and the sport's peak body it was a rare opportunity to get one back. Since the A-League kicked off five years ago, the FFA has been doing its level best to make Constantine play by the rules. Now it's his turn. By his account, the game's governors stand guilty of failing to practise the professionalism they preach. And he wasn't about to miss them.

"What is it - double standards, or triple standards?" he rumbles. "No one from the FFA rang me to say 'We're negotiating with your boy'. Somebody should get the sack for this. We always get knocked for not being professional".

You get the impression Constantine keeps them on their toes down there at the FFA. Makes you want to go in there and take a look at the file they have on him. Bet it's a whopper.

Business is a funny game. Some can cut through it, quietly banking the profits, leaving barely a ripple in their wake. That's not Con. Oh, he's banked the profits all right - BRW magazine had him just outside its latest Rich 200 list with a fortune estimated in ex-

cess of \$100 million - but he's managed to create a few waves along the way.

In just 15 years as a part-time Newcastle resident and business operator he has made overtures to build a casino, privatise the Knights, he's taken over and run the city's national football team at an estimated outlay of \$15 million, gone to war over ground rental of EnergyAustralia Stadium, made expensive forays into rundown West End property, locked horns with the players' union over unpaid entitlements, incensed local communities over



contentious developments, and, along the way, managed to keep an army of lawyers and local government bureaucrats busier than Baghdad's bomb disposal experts. You have to admire his energy.

When I open my eyes each morning I say, "Thank you God for giving me another day", he says. "Then the phone calls start - press, TV radio - for an hour and a half. I love what I do but my biggest passion of all is football".

For a man who spends most of his time in Sydney, Con Constantine is very busy in Newcastle. In just three weeks his A-League Jets kick off a new season and this week he was putting his Wickham markets plan out for public display, finalising the paperwork on his \$8 million purchase of the Old Newcastle Museum site, running The Store retail complex and the Newcastle United licensed clubs and pushing on with plans for a major West End development, "something that will be close to people's hearts".

Had he chosen to confine his business interests to his lucrative Parklea Markets in western Sydney, it's more than likely most of us would never have heard of Con Constantine.

But fate took a hand when a daughter from his first marriage enrolled at the University of Newcastle and her dad pointed his Mercedes up the F3 to have a poke around the town. His nose for business and a bargain got the better of him.

"I've been around" he says. "I've travelled all over the world. Let me tell you this: Newcastle is one of the best places. It has it all. Here, you can be wherever you want in just 10 minutes. In Sydney it takes you 10 minutes just to get out of your driveway".

Today, he divides his time between his Sydney home and a modern apartment overlooking Newcastle Beach.

From his rooms inside the Old Store building in Hunter Street West, Constantine can almost see the masts of the yachts bobbing at their moorings at Newcastle Cruising Yacht Club. He could easily afford the biggest boat in the fleet. As a means of telling the world that you're worth a few bob, yachting - the equivalent of shredding \$100 bills under a cold shower - will do the job. Ditto for thoroughbred horses; just ask Nathan Tinkler. But neither boats nor chaff-burners do it for Con.

Football does. And there's the rub, you see. Football, with its players, coaches, administrators and fans, has way more stakeholders than any other hobby. And in this most passionate of businesses, those stakeholders have a tendency to express their opinions.

In 2000, when Con Constantine bailed out Newcastle's football future by taking over from the failed breakers, supporters turned up at the ground bearing signs that acclaimed him as "The Saviour". Last week, fan Roderick

Toombs blogged the following on The Herald's site:

"The Jets are a national sporting joke. A cautionary tale against private ownership... No other club in living memory can win a grand final then allow the Man of the Match to leave, along with the scorer of the game winning shot. The coach... now walks, and with him the last hope that the Jets can turn the corner. I wish Con would disappear back to his... market place in Kellyville and never haunt the Newcastle sporting landscape ever again..."

Those nine years have been an absolute roller-coaster ride for fans and players alike with the giddiest peak, the 2008 grand final victory, offset by the troughs of departing coaches, expensive duds, a mass player exodus and a wooden spoon.

Constantine shrugs philosophically: "Sure, you get disappointed when things aren't right, but every story always has two sides. When you're winning, the coach gets the credit, when you're not, the management gets the blame. But if you love the game, it overrides all of that."

Can't live with him, can't live without him. Newcastle owes its place in the A-League to the depth of Con Constantine's pockets. It's impossible to believe that anybody else would have tipped the same amount of cash into such a loss-making venture. On the other hand, there is an argument that had he been less au-

tocratic had he been better advised, had he taken on shareholders with both football and local savvy, he might have wasted way less money, got more bang for his buck and brought stability to the erratic Jets. Who knows?

The entrepreneur, known for his generosity to various charities, remains convinced his intentions are for the best. He'd rather poke his eye out with a blunt stick than damage his good name.

"As my old man used to tell me, 'You are better off to lose one of your eyes than lose your credibility'."

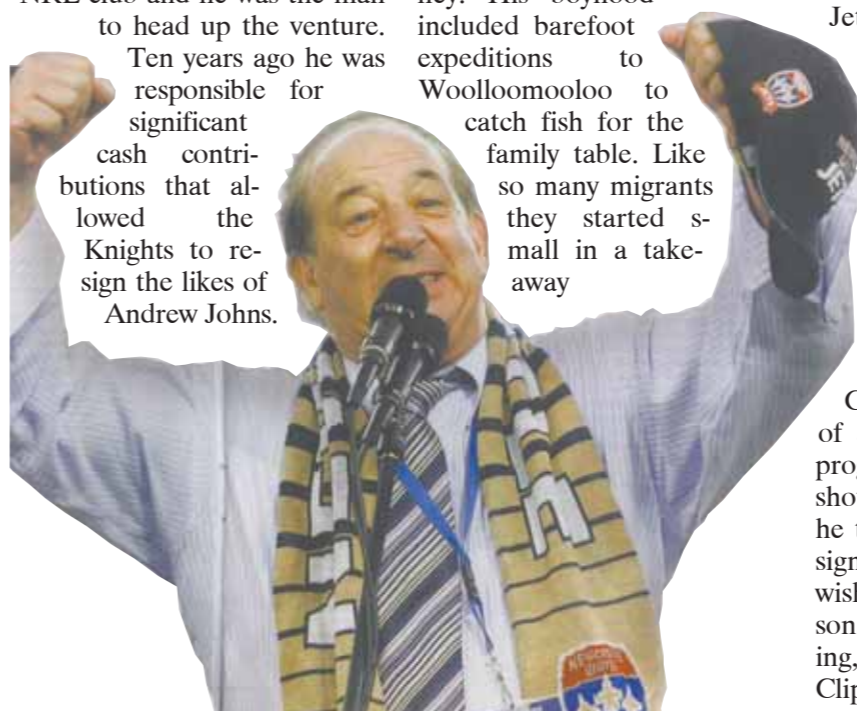
Watching all this with acute interest are the Newcastle Knights. Before the Jets, Con had long expressed the view that privatisation was the way ahead for the perennially cash-strapped NRL club and he was the man to head up the venture.

Ten years ago he was responsible for significant cash contributions that allowed the Knights to resign the likes of Andrew Johns.

He still believes the Jets and Knights should be a combined entity. In last week's edition of The Post, the weekly paper he owns, one of his columnists offered the view that the Knights would shortly have to revisit the privatisation option. The rancour between the two footy clubs over shared use of the ground suggests that peace in the Middle East might be an easier prospect than a Knights-Jets union.

Meanwhile, Constantine is pushing on with his Newcastle business ambitions with a zeal defying his 64 years. It's hard to imagine this Greek wheeler-dealer, born in Cyprus on July 1, 1945, first day of a new business year, being anything but an entrepreneur.

He was 10 when he and his dirt-poor family landed in Sydney. His boyhood included barefoot expeditions to Woolloomooloo to catch fish for the family table. Like so many migrants they started small in a take-away



food business at La Perouse where the boy worked behind the counter after school and on weekends. On 60 cents a day, he says he soon learned the value of money.

Twenty years ago he bought a disused drive-in cinema and started selling wholesale plants to the new home-starter hordes in the booming 'burbs of the western Sydney. Council approval came later. Parklea Markets still sells plants and just about everything else you can name. For 20 years it has been a major retail destination in Sydney's west and the driver for Constantine's personal fortune. During this time he adopted two strategies he would later repeat in Newcastle: he became a generous supporter of the Greek Orthodox Parish, and he acquired a local newspaper.

In the late 1980s Constantine attempted to replicate the Parklea formula on land at Kotara. After a long battle with the community he was knocked back the approval but still managed to flog the real estate for a considerable profit. In subsequent years he would turn his focus to Newcastle's ailing West End where in recent months he has added to his portfolio with an \$8 million purchase of the former museum site. His intention is to use it and the sprawling store on the opposite side of Hunter Street to create a multi-storey gateway development to the city as a counter-weight to the East End CBD redevelopment proposed by GPT (General Property Trust).

"I would love to see the GPT proposal become reality," he says. "But, at this end of town, it is different. To see it grow we need high-density, 20 storey buildings between Beaumont and Darby streets".

Newcastle has been good to Constantine. It was here that he met his new wife Anastasia (Natasha), a marketing graduate who was working in the Jets office. Despite the 30-year age difference, theirs has been a productive partnership. She is said to be a very intelligent operator responsible for rounding off many of his rougher edges, including smartening up his dress sense.

From among his papers on a table at The Store, Constantine extracts a copy of a recent Socceros match program adorned with a cover shot of Harry Kewell. Smiling, he taps the cover. It has been signed by Kewell with best wishes to Con's seven year old son Apollo. There is no doubting, the guy is a football fan. Clipped to the cover is the

business card of Kewell's agent, Bernie Mandic. Obviously, he and the Jets owner have been chatting.

Football was an Anglo creation and its origins reflected the British appreciation of order and systems. It's fair to say that the Constantine model for running a club is far removed from that culture. His simple view is that whoever pays the bills has the first, last and only say. No argument. When things get tense, employees often chafe under the limitations of this design.

Privately, every senior coach who has worked for the Jets - from Lee Sterrey in 2000 to Gary van Egmond in 2009 - has expressed deep reservations about the shortcomings.

Constantine doesn't abide disloyalty. When Englishman Richard Money allegedly opened discussions with another club, Constantine was livid and Money gone. Now the Jets boss insists that the email trail reveals Gary van Egmond was in negotiations over a new job while in Korea supposedly preparing the team for a sudden-death Asian Champions League game which Newcastle lost 6-0. "Filthy" doesn't even begin to describe the owner's mood over this development.

Early this year, when members of the Jets' hard core fanbase, The Squadron, derided the team's wooden spoon status, the owner summoned the leaders to his box and allegedly threatened to have them tossed off the grandstand. That incident alone added another chapter to his growing FFA file.

Sometimes it ends in tears. More often it ends in court. The issue is usually one of slow pay or no pay. For his part Constantine makes no apology for his reputation as a man in no hurry to honour an invoice. He is on the record as saying it is standard business practice used by "every company in the world". The Professional Footballers Association (PFA) disagrees and has assiduously pursued him for shortfalls in player entitlements. It might be canny practice in conventional business, but in football it tends to poison the water. Players talk to each other. It makes the task of attracting quality footballers increasingly difficult. Like the FFA, the PFA has a fat dossier on the Jets.

But, he's also won his share of legal battles. In 2004 he found himself in the NSW Supreme Court where Mrs Susan Zaronias was seeking a part of his fortune on the basis that she had been his de facto wife, living with him at his Parklea home. Justice Young found in favour of Constantine and ordered her to pay costs.

Football is even less predictable than family law. While the fans have been calling for stability rather than volatility, Constantine believes it all goes with the territory.

"In business, your fortune slowly but surely goes one way or the other", he explains. "In short, you can go from the silver spoon to the wooden spoon in just one season. But one thing I know as a businessman is that you can't go back; you've got to go forward."

In his defence Constantine has endured where others have failed. Of the original eight A-League clubs, the Jets are the only franchise that has not undergone a change of ownership.

"In eight years I have never asked for a handout from the FFA. The other clubs have", he says. "I don't want people to think the Jets don't know what they're doing. We're a lot smarter than the people running the other clubs".

His constancy has brought rewards for Newcastle. The owner's insistence that his side play at Energy Australia Stadium not only re-established the ground as a football venue but put the city smack in the planning for Australia's bid to host either the 2018 or 2022 World Cup. The major re-development of the stadium is being driven, in part, by that strategy.

Constantine's lobbying clout should not be discounted in the challenge of convincing the politicians to come up with the cash for the western grandstand.

"Morris Iemma gave us the \$50 million to get it done", he says. "Nobody should forget than".

He is aware of Newcastle's resistance to change but is determined to press on with his many plans. "Newcastle was a country town that has had to find a way to become a true city. It presents great opportunities for entrepreneurs but some people want to attack outsiders. In fact, we need more to come here, invest and create jobs".

The business owner who spends so much of his time between the two towns says he finds it incredible that each day 10,000 people leave the Hunter to work in Sydney.

"We should be able to create enough jobs so that they can live and work right here in Newcastle", he says. "I'm going to create employment. I don't want to see anybody going to Sydney".

Even his critics would agree with that.

Travel to Sydney every day? You'd rather poke your eye out with that blunt stick.

Article from The Weekender (The Newcastle Herald)