

news

The Road to Redemption

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For the past six years, the Johnny Warren Foundation has succeeded every year in inventing a new formula in attracting the football community to support its annual showpiece dinner. However, last Thursday at the Parkside Ballroom in Sydney, the Board members achieved a response which would have even surpassed their greatest expectations. In co-operation with David Flaskas and the Future Sports and Entertainment organisation, the promotion of the greatest ever footballers and team was a sensational hit.

For months, an amazing atmosphere was created as supporters cast their votes for the heroes of the present day or yesteryear. As Ross Warren stated on the night, Johnny prayed for the day when all the differences which existed in our game would disappear and transcend it to a new level. This was one such night when the only topic of conversation was the players who were nominated for selection in the contest. The first duty of the night was to take an inventory of the players in order of appearance so a team could be selected. It is only fitting they be named as there was no official announcement of their presence apart from those who were interviewed on stage.

John Doyle, Ron Corry, Milan Ivanovic, Ray Richards, Paul Wade, Mirko Radosavljevic, Doug Utjesenovic, Ron Lord, Craig Moore, Ross Warren, Harry Williams, David Zdrilic, Tony Vidmar, Jim Fraser, Bertie Mariani, John Aloisi, John Watkiss, Col Curran, Ray Baartz, Alan Davidson, Ante Covic, Adam Griffiths, Gary Cole, Simon Colosimo, Francis Awaritefe, Charlie Yankos, Alex Tobin, Jack Reilly, Craig Foster, Jimmy Rooney and Richie Williams represent a formidable array of talent so to pick a team, excluding those selected for the greatest ever team, was a great challenge.

This was the team selected in 4-3-3 formation... Goalkeeper .. Ron Lord, Defenders .. Col Curran - Alex Tobin - Charlie Yankos - Tony Vidmar, Midfield .. Paul Wade - Jimmy Rooney - John Doyle, Strikers.. John Watkiss - Gary Cole - John Aloisi, Coach .. Zoran Matic

The first official announcement was the greatest ever moment in Australian football which was accorded to John Aloisi's goal in the penalty shootout against Uruguay in November, 2005 which qualified the Socceroos for the 2006 World Cup finals in Germany. There was fierce competition in this category including, Timmy Cahill's brace against Japan in that tournament and the Socceroo's 4-1 defeat of Argentina in the 1988 Gold Cup. However, for the nostalgia buffs, Jimmy Mackay's 30 yard piledriver against South Korea on November 11 th, 1973 which gained Australia's first World Cup qualification, had to be the moral winner. The serious business subsequently commenced when Cheryl Salisbury was named the greatest ever woman player followed by the men's eleven. Alan Davidson was selected at left back, despite the protestations of some people who claimed he never played in that position but I was privileged to witness this gifted player appear in that position for South Melbourne against Hakoah Eastern Suburbs at the Sydney Athletic Field during the 1978 NSL Championship. Davidson was so good on the left side, you would never have known he was a natural right footer as he made those raiding runs down the left side and produced those pin point crosses with either foot. It was an emotional time for Davidson as he announced to the audience that his father Keith, was in poor health but true champion he is, still made the trip from Melbourne with his wife Effie to receive the award. It was a great shame his team-mate, Peter Katholos, the former Socceroo midfielder, was not present on the night to witness the presentation but significantly there is now a new generation of Davidsons emerging with Jason Davidson a permanent fixture in the Eredivisie with Socceroo call up beckoning. Lucas Neil was selected at right back with the central defenders, Joe Marston and Craig Moore being preferred to sweepers Paul Okon and



Milan Ivanovic. I salute Craig Moore in criticising Australia's failure to nail the Italian team in the 2006 World Cup when they were reduced to ten men with the sending off of Materazzi. For people who know football it was obvious at the time that Josh Kennedy should have been used as a substitute, rather than John Aloisi, due to the extreme height advantage Kennedy would have commanded over the shorter Italian defender, Cannavaro. The selection of John Warren was a popular choice with the fans but ignoring Craig Johnston, arguably the greatest export, if not the most successful, is to be questioned. Ned Zelic will always be remembered for that goal scored at the near post in the demise of Holland in the final qualifying match for the 1992 Barcelona Olympics so it is hard to argue with his selection, although most of his career was played in the sweeper role. Tim Cahill was an automatic selection in midfield, although frequently being used by Everton and Australia in a striking role. In his telephone hook-up on the night, Cahill mentioned Charlie Yankos as a player who he looked up to but the man he praised for providing so much advice was Craig Johnston. It continues to be a mystery why Cahill rarely mentions his great coach of 11 years, John Doyle, who for 26 weeks in 1997, coached Cahill intensively when Milwall recommended he come back to Australia to improve his body technique and strength.

The rest is history.

There were breaks in between the announcement of the selections during the night and as I sat at my table, I couldn't avoid noticing the mercurial Ray Baartz, sitting at a table with



his wife and patrons who didn't know him. Without wanting to interfere I went up to Baartz and asked him what it was like sitting at a table where nobody talked to him. The great man, gentleman and great ambassador he has always been simply shrugged his shoulders and smiled. Thankfully, his mood changed when he was included as a striker in the greatest ever team and at last the people at his table recognised him as they all rose to congratulate him on his selection. The remaining choices of field players in the front line Mark Viduka and Harry Kewell were obviously the popular choice of the younger generation but many informed critics would've been surprised places could not be found for the great strikers

John Kosmina, Marshall Soper and Adrian Alston. Mark Schwarzer deservedly won the best goalkeeper award but the announcement of the greatest player, Harry Kewell, was contentious. While Kewell was plagued by injury for many years, Timmy Cahill was doing the business for club and country. His record as the highest goalscorer for the Socceroos and highest number of headed goals in EPL history will be hard to beat and it's hard to believe the voters didn't take this into consideration. Furthermore, Guus Hiddink only gained the award for the best coach because Cahill saved his bacon with the two goals he scored against Japan in Germany when brought on in the second half as a substitute in the first round of the 2006 World Cup. A pleasant task for the night was to extract the signatures of the 32 professional players who attended on the night for two supporters. Except for Jack Reilly and Jimmy Rooney, all signatures were obtained which sent the two supporters home in a happy frame of mind. Jaimie Warren and his Board are to be congratulated for conducting a night to remember and significantly Jaimie's request for all people to rise and charge their glasses in respect of Johnny Warren's famous saying, "I told you so", was one of the most moving moments I've experienced in my 54 years following Australian football.

The final duty was to pick a greatest ever team in 3-4-3 formation and a coach.

Goalkeeper .. Ron Lord, Defenders .. Alan Davidson - Alex Tobin - Stan Lazarides, Midfield .. Tim Cahill - Ray Baartz - Craig Johnston - Terry Butler, Strikers.. Marshall Soper - Adrian Alston - Willie Rutherford, Coach ... Joe Venglos