



Sydney Olympic exemplify bigger battle

A FRAGILE truce has broken out at Belmore, but don't be fooled. The core issues surrounding the dispute between Canterbury Bulldogs and Sydney Olympic haven't gone away. And the much bigger battle - a long-awaited campaign by football to protect its rights in the turf war with other codes - has only just begun. It just might be that history will record what's happened at Belmore over the last few weeks as the moment the worm finally turned. The detail of the dispute between the Bulldogs and Sydney Olympic - who should be using the field and when - is mostly a smokescreen for a much more fundamental question. Exactly what were the terms of the \$8.7 million government grant handed out in 2010 to begin the process of revitalising a decaying stadium, and were those terms supposed to have both clubs treated equally? The view of Canterbury council is clear. It has offered the rugby league side a head lease, and the football side a sublease. Sydney Olympic might not be the club it once was - the two-time national champions now play in the semi-professional NSW Premier League - but might is not always right. Sydney Olympic believe they have a lease until 2032 that gives them rights equal to the Bulldogs', and they won't be signing anything to the contrary. Thus the stalemate persists. It was the local federal MP Tony Burke (member for Watson) who handed over the cheque in front of the cameras two years ago, and he knows better than anyone the substance, and spirit, of the agreement. Burke met both clubs and Canterbury council on Thursday. There seems to be a consensus to ramp down the rhetoric to try to take the sting out of the situation. We'll see how long it lasts. The fact Des Hasler had his team again training on the main field yesterday suggests he couldn't care less.

As an avowed Bulldogs fan, Burke's impartiality will be scrutinised. There are three local football associations in the district - Canterbury, Bankstown and St George - with about 20,000 registered players in Burke's electorate. It might be a safe Labor seat, but that's still a lot of voter angst to be mobilised through social media if the football community feels it's being shafted. Those associations, in particular Canterbury, must ponder whether they should bury their differences with the NSWPL club in order to achieve the common good. Sydney Olympic's plight today could be someone else's tomorrow. Football in Sydney at every level faces a massive challenge in the battle for sporting real estate (see above story). For Sydney Olympic right now it's about showing discipline, and unity - qualities not normally associated with the club through its tortured 51-year history. The board will meet tomorrow, and the test has only just begun for president George Giannaros and his fellow directors. Make no mistake, this is about survival. Full stop. If Sydney Olympic can't secure a meaningful long-term future for themselves at Belmore, they're gone. There's a lapsed Sydney Olympic fan running every second cafe in the inner-west. How much do they care? A historical note: while Belmore is the spiritual home of the Bulldogs, Sydney Olympic also have a title claim. The club moved there in 1996 for five seasons - pulling almost 14,000 to a match against Marconi Stallions in 1997 - and after a brief diversion to Shark Park returned in 2004, and have been there ever since. Last year they pulled 10,000 to the NSWPL grand final when the ground, shamefully, was marked for rugby league. When the Bulldogs completely abandoned Belmore eight years ago - who can forget "Oasis" - it was Sydney Olympic who kept the gates open. Now that the Bulldogs are back, should Sydney Olympic's 13-year tenancy count for nought? It didn't, of course, when the Bulldogs needed them a few years ago to get money from the federal government. Plenty of nice noises were made about co-operation. The facade didn't last long once the money came through. In a letter to Canterbury council's general manager, Jim Montague, in December 2010 - less than six months after the funding was approved - Football Federation Australia's chief executive Ben Buckley was sufficiently disturbed about what was happening to write: "... it appears that what is currently being proposed is not consistent with the basis upon which the federal government grant was approved. It is also of great concern that it appears that the current proposed use will be converting an essential public facility into virtually an exclusive use facility for a professional rugby league club. This is contrary both to its historical use and to the proposed use as represented in the Commonwealth funding grant ... it is disturbing to learn that the use being proposed significantly increases

CANTERBURY clearly don't want Sydney Olympic at Belmore Sports Ground now that they've got what they wanted out of them. The Bulldogs are an NRL powerhouse with more than 20,000 members. Sydney Olympic no longer play at the national level, and have a membership base that has shrunk to 600 now they are playing in the part-time NSW Premier League. It's the law of the jungle out there. But here's the rub. Sydney Olympic have a lease at Belmore until 2032. There are about 20,000 registered football players in the local electorate, Watson, of the federal MP Tony Burke, a Bulldogs fan who was the driving force behind the \$8.7 million grant to upgrade the stadium, supposedly for the benefit of both clubs. It's no surprise it's the football club that's getting shafted. It usually happens whenever there is a co-tenancy with rugby league. Ask Wollongong Wolves. Ask Newcastle Jets. Ask North Queensland Fury. Ask Central Coast Mariners. Surface issues. Training times. Ground markings. Signage. The list goes on. Rugby league clubs need football partners to justify government-funded upgrades, but as soon as they get the money any semblance of a partnership goes out the window. But after decades of copping it on the chin, football is starting to stand up for itself. Look what happened with the Birchgrove Oval fiasco. Balmain District Football Club used their greatest strength - their playing numbers - to win a cross-code stoush with Leichhardt council. Sydney Olympic intend to do the same. They aren't going anywhere. And they aren't staying quiet as an unofficial alliance between the Bulldogs and a compliant Canterbury council tries to squeeze them out of Belmore. Burke's apparent lack of impartiality in what's becoming a drawn-out dispute also warrants closer scrutiny. The minister has a lot more football voters in his electorate than rugby league ones. But that's a story for another time. The story now is what's happening to Sydney Olympic. In mid-June, they were told they could no longer play there because of the condition of the ground. Theoretically, the Bulldogs were also told they couldn't train there, except on the perimeters, until the surface was repaired. The Bulldogs have been training with impunity there, and there are pictures and video to prove it. One of those pictures you can see here. They were taken between July 18 and 24. On July 17, Canterbury council general manager Jim Montague said in a letter to both clubs "no use of the field would be permitted until at least August 21". Somebody forgot to tell Des Hasler. Or he simply didn't care. The secret was out on July 18, when Kieran Loveridge was arrested at a Bulldogs training session by detectives after the high-profile murder of Thomas Kelly at Kings Cross. Last Tuesday, Sydney Olympic officials met Montague to see if they could return to Belmore for last week-

BULLDOGS DO DIRTY TO END CODE SHARE



end's NSWPL match against APIA Leichhardt. Montague said yes. The next day council officials told Sydney Olympic that as long as they shifted their youth leagues games on Saturday, everything would still be OK. On Thursday they were told the field would be marked and set up 24 hours before for the Sunday first-grade game. Despite the short notice, Sydney Olympic shifted their juniors to Hensley Athletic Field at a cost of \$4000. On Friday, just before close of business, they were suddenly informed they couldn't play at home after all. They hurriedly had to shift their game to APIA's ground, Lambert Park. The change of venue came too late for many. Former Socceroos midfielder Peter Katholos was one of hundreds of fans who turned up at Belmore at kick-off time only to discover the shift. That's the fifth NSWPL fixture in a row Sydney Olympic have had to move. It's cost them about \$60,000 in lost signage, canteen and gate revenue. That's a decent whack out of an annual budget of about \$300,000. Bulldogs football manager Alan Thompson denied they'd been flexing their muscles to shut out Olympic, telling the local newspaper yesterday: "I think it's a good decision [to close the ground at weekends] by the council." Thompson then claimed the Bulldogs trained only on the edges of the ground. Pictures don't lie. Sydney Olympic president George Giannaros has had enough. "I keep hearing how Belmore is the spiritual ground of the Bulldogs, but eight years ago they abandoned the ground [to move to ANZ Stadium], and we've been there ever since, meeting all our obligations," he says. "Since they've come back, everything's changed. We have no issue with rugby league, and plenty of our fans also support the Bulldogs. But we don't disrespect their game the way they've disrespected ours."



the use for the Bulldogs rugby league club and, conversely, significantly reduces the access for not only Sydney Olympic, but also for community and school groups." Since then, the Bulldogs and the council have essentially ignored the FFA's concerns, perhaps assuming their back was turned. It's not. Yesterday Buckley told the Herald: "We took a close interest in this matter in late 2010 when Sydney Olympic's tenure was under threat, and we welcomed the outcome of a 21-year lease to enshrine football access. We are now watching

the current developments and liaising with Football NSW. We both have real concerns. Our view is that the Commonwealth funding for Belmore Oval was based on a community benefit for multiple sports, not just one." In the scheme of things, it might seem a stoush between an NRL heavyweight with a budget of about \$17 million and a semi-pro football club with a budget of about \$300,000 could have only one winner. And does it really matter anyway? It does. The FFA (and its predecessors) have sat idly by over decades while the nation's biggest participant sport has been routinely duped by a cosy alliance between rival codes and their government boosters. In terms of facilities and ground use, football, at every level - from grassroots to professional - has been left with the scraps. Sydney Olympic are somewhere in the middle, but fate means they can become the catalyst for change.

It's a challenge, but they're up for it. And, for once, so is the FFA.