

# Zenon Caravella: My vision for Far North Queensland football

In his own words, A-League veteran and FFA honouree Zenon Caravella opens up about his desire to put Far North Queensland football on the map, and the inspiration behind the Caravella Football Academy.

**W**hen I first retired from professional football in 2014, I returned to my hometown, Cairns, and started coaching while running the family business. While I didn't stay retired for long (I re-signed for the Newcastle Jets shortly after) I knew that when I retired for good, I'd go back to coaching full time.

Even while playing in the A-League, I returned to Cairns for coaching spells in the off-season or during my breaks. When I moved back home permanently I knew my passion was for youth development, so from there I started the Caravella Football Academy.

Now, nearly three years on, it's something that's very important to me. It keeps me in the game, and I love remaining involved. But in a place where many kids have never even seen an A-League game, simply because of the distance, growing

the game has its challenges.

The biggest problem for junior footballers, particularly those with aspirations to go pro, is Far North Queensland's population; finding regular, good-quality games and competitions is a struggle.

Another big issue is the travel. Distance becomes a huge issue for kids who want to develop as footballers. For me, as a footballer growing up in Cairns and even still now, we have to travel large distances to find quality opposition. Without this, there's almost no development.

I think scrapping North Queensland Fury from the A-League had a massive impact on support for football in Cairns. There's no top-flight representation for these young kids. You've got one A-League team covering the vast area of Queensland,



Brisbane Roar, where before there was an A-League team in driving proximity.

Based in Townsville, you could become a season ticket holder and travel down to watch the team regularly. I think a second Queensland A-League club will work. Even at Gold Coast United under Clive Palmer - despite all the problems we had - the first couple of derbies were great rivalries with fantastic support.

There's room for another club, it just has to have the right people behind it.

## HAS THIS WANDERERS' RECRUIT EARNED A SOCCEROOS RECALL?

Western Sydney's recent recruit Chris Ikonomidis is loving life at the Wanderers and hoping regular game time can make an impression on new Socceroos boss Bert van Marwijk. Ikonomidis is on loan from Serie A club Lazio, and from the time he joined the Wanderers the attacking midfielder has made an instant impact.

**T**he fringe Socceroo has played three games, helping Western Sydney to two wins and a draw, with the 22-year-old scoring one goal and unluckily having another ruled offside.

After struggling to nail down a spot in Lazio's first team, Ikonomidis is happy to be back in familiar surroundings.

"Being back here in Australia is very inspiring to me," he told FourFourTwo.

"I'm really enjoying being back in my home country and playing in front of my home fans. I've come to play football and obviously to get more game time which is the most important thing.

"I've been happy with the team's progress and I'm just working well with

my teammates day in and day out. That's the real job.

"I feel like I've settled in very well, it's a really nice club and everyone has been welcoming to me. The players, the staff and the fans have been excellent."

Ikonomidis revealed that linking up with Wanderers coach Josep Gombau has made the change in clubs easier and a key to why he's settled in so quickly.

"I've got a good relationship with Josep," he said. "We first met a few years ago when I was called up to the Socceroos and we kept in touch.

"He was always helping me out giving me pointers and we also spoke while I was in Europe and our paths crossed again.

"I'm surrounded by talented and



intelligent players so that always makes the transition into a team much smoother. They're all players that understand how I play and I understand pretty well how they play.

"It's just a matter of getting to understand each other in training and making that happen on the pitch."

Ikonomidis has played six times for the Australian national team but the last time

was a friendly against Greece back in June 2016.

Ahead of the World Cup in June, the talented attacking midfielder was hopeful of showing new Socceroos boss Bert van Marwijk that he is worthy of a recall.

"Obviously I want to show what I can do on the pitch, that's important," he said. "Every footballer has their up and downs. They try and stay strong and stick it through.

"The player always stays the same but the conditions can change around him, and obviously form can also change.

"But regardless of who is watching, if there are only two people in the stands and they're my parents, I'll try and do my best.

"Even if there is 100,000 people screaming my name that doesn't change what I do on the pitch.

"So regardless of who is in the grandstand I always put on my best performance first and foremost for myself.

"If I can be happy with my own performance, so can everyone else around me."