



By George Stavroulakis

Hired or fired? The top candidates for A-League expansion

It took far too long, but there's finally some certainty over A-League expansion, with two new teams set to be named in October. So who will they be?

Among the myriad of high-profile candidates - extending the length and breadth of Australia - there's opportunities to break into un-rivalled territory in Tassie, or stack the chips even higher in New South Wales. But how do you pick a Western Sydney Wanderers, rather than a Gold Coast United? While many bids still don't have physical-club representations, here's the current favourites to be your next two A-League franchises...

1. BRISBANE CITY

Brisbane City are a former NSL club and current Queensland NPL club based in the north-west Brisbane suburb of Newmarket. They're coached by former A-League coach, John Kosmina, and included in their bid are ambitious plans to redevelop 18,000 capacity Ballymore Stadium. As a city, Brisbane are favourites to secure a second A-League club. The Roar are one of the A-League's most successful teams, capable of average attendances exceeding 18,000 people. As Australia's third largest city, they also have the infrastructure and investment.

Following the success of expansions clubs in Melbourne and Sydney, Brisbane seems one of FFA's safest bets, however, Brisbane Roar's precarious position - unstable ownership under the Bakrie Group and average attendances that have dropped by more than 10,000 in the last four years - may dissuade FFA from bringing in local competition.

2. BRISBANE STRIKERS

While Brisbane City have already boasted about their



80-page official bid proposal, Brisbane Strikers are a slightly more-recent entry to the field. What the Strikers do have, however, is history on their side.

The reigning Queensland NPL champions were a force in the NSL - four-time finalists and Grand Final winners in 1996/97 (they famously drew over 40,000 people to that match).

They have a planned re-development of the Strikers' homeground, Perry Park, as part of their bid. Strikers' Chairman, Bruce Atterton-Evans, told Foxsports that the Strikers would be front-and-centre of any expansion conversation.

"I can assure our fans, and supporters of the game in Brisbane, that when FFA announces expansion plans, Brisbane Strikers will absolutely be at the forefront of that conversation," he said.

3. WOLLONGONG WOLVES

With the 23,000 capacity, rectangular WIN Stadium behind them and a population of close to 300,000 people, former NSL champions Wollongong Wolves have been a constant nomination for A-League expansion.

South Coast Football have already pledged their support behind the bid, while former Socceroos Scott Chipperfield and Adam Federici have acted as bid ambassadors.

"What really impresses me about the Wolves is they are engaging the entire region and genuinely looking to provide the best options and opportunities for our juniors," Federici said.

4. SOUTHERN EXPANSION

With Craig Foster and former NSW Premier Morris Iemma as their public face, Southern Expansion - encompassing the Illawarra, Sutherland and St. George regions - are the Wolves' major rivals to secure a franchise.

The bid has already former provisional partnerships with technology companies, stadiums like Kogarah and NRL club Cronulla Sharks. Iemma told The Australian that Southern Expansion can deliver.

"It is a no-brainer," he said. "If you want to expand into areas that are passionate about football, that have the numbers in terms of registrations, that have the population, that have a historical football background ... Southern Expansion can deliver all of that."

Could Jedinak solve the Socceroos' centreback woes?

Mile Jedinak starred in central defence in Aston Villa's win over second-placed Cardiff City, prompting claims he could be the solution to Australia's defensive problems.

In fact, it could solve a lot more than the Socceroos' defensive frailties.

Jedinak started as a central defender in the absence of John Terry for the Villans as they kicked Cardiff City out of the automatic promotion places with a 1-0 win at Villa Park. The Aussie captain started alongside Wales' James Chester and was a rock for Villa against the nous-and-experience of Neil Warnock's Cardiff side, as

coach Steve Bruce's decision - notorious as he is for defensive pragmatism - proved a masterful choice.

With Terry set to return, there's doubt over whether Jedinak will continue to fill the role.

Although if he can prove his worth in the position over Chester, who's had a mixed career so far at Villa, it could prove a ligh-bulb moment for Bert van Marwijk.

The Socceroos boss has a serious selection dilemma on his hands between Aaron Mooy, Massimo Luongo and Mile Jedinak.

In van Marwijk's 4-2-3-1 formation, the two holding

midfield roles would have traditionally gone to Mooy and Jedinak, however, Luongo's sensational performances for club and country have rocketed the 25-year-old into contention. Luongo has four goals in his last eight appearances for Queens Park Rangers and was Australia's Man of the Match against Colombia; his acceleration, technical ability and crunching tackles the sole spark in an otherwise fortunate result.

Conversely, Jedinak was poor in both the Socceroos' recent friendlies. His passing was slow and easily intercepted and his lack of mobility, especially



alongside a similarly slow midfielder in Mooy, presented a significant weakness for the Socceroos.

It's worth mentioning that Jedinak's positioning and aerial presence - as always - were on point.

Meanwhile, Bailey Wright, Milos Degenek and Mark Milligan all looked shaky at times as the lack of leaders in Australia's central defence was

stark without Trent Sainsbury. Even alongside Sainsbury and Matt Jurman, Jedinak could be the force-of-nature Australia needs to maintain a defensive style against our World Cup opponents.

Whether he could fulfill the role permanently remains to be seen, but Bruce has provided van Marwijk some food for thought leading into June's friendlies.