

HOW JOHN TSATSIMAS MADE HISTORY — TWICE

The Western Sydney Wanderers CEO shares the secret of his A-League success

“We were told very early on please do not come last by much, but we said no, we want to make the finals,” John Tsatsimas tells Neos Kosmos about the club’s early beginnings.

“But when we started in pre-season, we had no training ground, no badge and only six players with no understanding of where we could train tomorrow. The first meetings were at my house, where I operated out of my kitchen and my Hotmail account. There was so much happening during that period that I didn’t know if I was Arthur or Martha.”

One thing that Western Sydney did have in their favour was former Socceroos defender Tony Popovic as their inaugural head coach. Tsatsimas says that being able to lure Popovic from his role as assistant manager of English club Crystal Palace to join the Wanderers was key to what the club wanted to achieve.

“At that stage he showed me a presentation that he had prepared for the player and it listed three words: preparation, performance, and premiership. Then he clicks the slide and it said: Asian Champions League Winners. This is before a ball is kicked by the way and I say, ‘this is great, but how about we get a squad of 11 players first?’”

Before joining Western Sydney, Tsatsimas was CEO of Newcastle Jets, when the club won the 2008 A-League Grand Final – which to date is the area’s first and only national championship trophy. During his time in the Hunter, he would commute from his home in Western Sydney to Newcastle, despite the gruelling four hour and 20 minute round trip.

“I did that for four years, six days a week,” Tsatsimas revealed. “It was a very exciting time and Newcastle was a fantastic place. Very parochial, very proud of their football heritage and we had fantastic success bringing home their initial Championship.

It certainly was taxing and was a big commitment. But I was passionate about the job, I was passionate about the role and about football. While I did love Newcastle, Western Sydney was always my heart, my family, my home.”

Growing up in Australia, many children of Greek migrants came across the joke, ‘why is Greece so bad at soccer? Because every time they get a corner they put a fruit shop on it.’ Yes, Tsatsimas’ family had a fruit shop but he’s proof that Greeks are not only good at

soccer, but as football CEOs as well.

“Working at Flemington Markets in Sydney provided me [with] a great platform to be in this role,” he admits. “When I was six to eight years old, every holidays my dad took me to his work. It was very blue collar, but very educational nonetheless. Both my parents were hard working and not only had a good work ethic, but strong family values as well. They ensured we maintained a Greekness in our family home and it has certainly filtered down to my kids.”

History shows that during their first A-League season,

through that team on the pitch. It was only through belief and passion that this happened.”

After that first A-League season, the Wanderers embarked on their first foray into Asia and ended up becoming the first club in Australia to win the Asian Champions League (ACL). It was a remarkable achievement, as their journey to the 2014 ACL trophy saw Western Sydney beat teams with greater financial resources.

“When we played Guangzhou Evergrande, they had over \$100 million of value in their team and we had a budget of \$2.5 million,” Tsatsimas says.

“It’s just inspiring, just unbelievable, the vision and what we believed in as a club. You take those values and that working class ethos and transfer it into your team and those boys believed. It’s a credit to the players.”

Remember that presentation that Popovic wanted to show to his team? Well, Tsatsimas reveals that once they signed more players, he let his coach present it and he believes it’s another factor behind why the Wanderers have been successful.

“We went on a training trip to Lismore [and] we stayed in one of those low budget motels that you can drive your car to the front door of your room. The owner had closed the kitchen restaurant area, because we had nowhere else to go and Popovic delivered this presentation which still resonates with me.

“The players wanted to prove themselves to say ‘this is what we can achieve’ and every single one of them believed in it. And let’s not sneeze at the fact that we also made three A-League Grand Finals in the first five years of the club’s history.”

Tsatsimas isn’t one to look back but when he does take

the chance to reflect on his achievements, he knows it will be as a proud Western Sydney Wanderer.

“There will be a time and an opportunity to do that at a later date. But the fact that it’s where I grew up, where I was born and where I reside, that is what drives me every day to look at the next challenge, rather than at the ones that have come and gone. That’s the motivating factor for me – to ensure that this club reflects the Western Sydney people on a national or a global stage as it has done in previous years.”



Western Sydney Wanderers CEO John Tsatsimas (R), with the team’s inaugural head coach, Tony Popovic.

Picture this: It’s three months before the start of the 2012-13 A-League season and newly formed club Western Sydney Wanderers don’t even have enough players for a team. But that didn’t stop its CEO from dreaming big.

Western Sydney not only didn’t finish last but backed by vocal fans and the tactical nous of Popovic won the Premiership and were Grand Final runners up. Tsatsimas is adamant that Western Sydney’s working class roots filtered into how the team performed on the field.

“Were we the best team? That is arguable,” Tsatsimas admits. “But what we did have is the greatest determination as a group and as a club that propelled us to having the success that we had. That is reflective of that working class ethos and that hard work resonated and came