

CAN FOOTBALL CHANGE LIVES? BIDS AIM TO BE 'MORE THAN JUST CLUBS'

Can what unites us also divide us? Prominent expansion bids Team 11 and South Melbourne couldn't be more different, and yet also, more alike.

Despite both A-League bids emerging from the same state and passionate fervour for football, it's nigh impossible to compare South Melbourne and Team 11 like for like. One is a club with 59 years of rich history, the other doesn't really exist yet.

But there's a lot more to the Dandenong club, and this discussion, than meets the eye. Not least the over saturation of the Melbourne sporting market, not most the – at times – divisive effect of South's fervent fan base.

What brings these two bids closer together than almost any other is a desire that borders on necessity. Both bid spokesmen elicit a passion that borders on desperation; not for themselves, or even their clubs, but their communities.

South have been both dynamic and polarising throughout the extended campaign leading up to today's FFA decision, but bid spokesman Bill Papastergiadis remains supremely confident in his side's suitability.

When he gets the opportunity to espouse his club's values, he does so with the reverence of a preacher.

"We think we have a world class boutique stadium," he begins. "We recently built a \$3 million social club and a futsal centre to create 24 hour experience at a football game. We have 30 accredited coaches, 90,000 social media followers, a million views of our YouTube channel.

"We set most of the attendance records in the NSL and some of them are still standing. When we played Sydney FC in the FFA Cup, we out-rated 70% of the A-League games that season.

"We believe we're the most successful club in Australian history. We're a men and women's club. We were awarded the Oceania Club of the Century. We do a fatality Friday fundraiser for the police, walking soccer for pensioners, we've been recognised by the FFV for blind and female football leagues.

52 Socceroos, a former national head coach in Ange Postecoglou. A number of A-League coaches. Hundreds of professional footballers. We developed the Australia-China football federation, headed by senior members of the largest ethnic group in Victoria.

"We've trained 80 teams in China, we're linked with Real Madrid and we won virtually every junior competition in Victoria last season..."

He continues, but the point is clear. There's a reason why South fans are so ardent that their team deserves a shot in the A-League; it's impossible to argue in a perfect competition that such a prepared, passionate and important part of Australian football should be left out.

The problem FFA faces as it seeks "sustainable" expansion, is who needs it more. Who can provide the feel good story Australian football so desperately requires?

Unlike South Melbourne, which Papastergiadis says is the "most accessible club in Melbourne", it takes almost two hours on a train and a bus to get from AAMI Park to central Dandenong on a Friday night.

While you stare out the window as you slump along the Pakenham line, you almost feel as if you're travelling through the 160 nations the region represented in its last census. The diehards who make this pilgrimage after watching one of two Victorian A-League clubs herald from the most multicultural community, in one of the most ethnically diverse countries on earth.

As project officer for the Team 11 A-League bid, Matt Windley, remarks hopefully, "90% of people in this area come from countries where football's the number one sport."

But now the region that describes itself as 'The City of Opportunity' – a city that offers a home to more refugees than any other in Victoria – is asking for a chance itself.

"I've got a young family and building a better community for them is something that's really important to me, and that rings true for many families," Windley says from his Berwick home. He's taken the morning off for "dad-duties".

"The social benefits to an A-League club are numerous here. It's hard for people to integrate into a new society, but giving them an outlet to rally behind can make a massive social impact and give better role models to our boys and girls."

Football Federation Australia's expansion criteria for two new A-League teams didn't prioritise the community impact of hosting a football club, but with a new era of governance beginning, Team 11 are keen on highlighting the positive effect they could have in an area where almost 65% of residents are born overseas.

The Greater Dandenong region has one of the highest-crime rates in Victoria, its median income is just over half the

national average and its unemployment rate is over double. **These issues** have a significant effect on the region's families, with seven incidents of domestic violence reported in Greater Dandenong each day, and one in six single-parent households reporting in 2009 that they had ran out of food and been unable to afford more in the past year.

Branded the 'home of the Apex gang', in 2016 news.com.au called Greater Dandenong "the worst part of Melbourne". Former Mayor and local councillor Jim Memeti says he is "well aware" the region has copped a lot of bad publicity.

But the Team 11 backer believes the A-League has the opportunity to not only attract a hotbed of football fans in Dandenong, but through hopes for a 20,000 seater stadium, turn the region's fortunes around.

"Everyone knows we're a low socio-economic area," Memeti says. "But a new stadium will generate more hotels, more cafes and more restaurants.

"Dandenong is the heart of Victoria's industry and we have massive local companies that are interested in sponsoring the club.

"The economic benefits to choosing Team 11 are huge and I've already been approached by many people looking to build hotels if the stadium gets built."

If a group of passionate local councillors and a former Herald Sun journalist teaming up to form an A-League super-club sounds like a shonky TV plotline, it's because in some ways it is. The bid started with no name, stadium, business or football experience, just an ambitious plan to bring the world game to cosmopolitan south-east Victoria.

But what began as a pipedream has quickly become a frontrunner among the six remaining bids for two A-League licences, garnering broad support for what the public dares to dream could be another Western Sydney Wanderers.

Windley's the first to admit that it's "quite a bizarre" situation, as he says: "Councils are definitely not in the business of running and creating professional sporting clubs."

But surprisingly, none of this appears to faze the journalist who gave up a career at Australia's biggest newspaper to grasp the optimistic role.

Perhaps it's that with FFA governance in turmoil and great uncertainty surrounding the sport's future, Team 11's unlikely journey doesn't seem that strange for Australian football.



Team 11 is the result of an MOU between three local councils