

16 TEAM A-LEAGUE WITH PROMOTION/RELEGATION TO A B-LEAGUE?

If you could get Chris Nikou in a corner and hassle him about his plans for the next few years, what would you ask him?

In the writing biz there's a thing called the elevator pitch – a thirty second expression of your pet project in case you happened to run into a major film producer or book publisher in a lift and had until the 22nd floor to interest him/her in your work.

What would be your elevator pitch if you ran into Chris Nikou – Chair of the FFA? You've got thirty seconds... Go!

Okay, I have several things I'd want to pitch to him, so I'd have to hang round the foyer in his building quite a lot. These are the things I'd like to see the FFA doing in the short term:

Reuniting the Football Tiers

Football has a history of self-destruction in this country. Any number of people with any number of agendas stand on the edges of debate lobbing hand grenades while the other codes (and their media sycophants) continue making hay – terrified that one day we'll get our house in order and start our inexorable march to the top of the sports fans' consciousness. **The FFA** must reunite all levels of football and that means an unbroken continuum between all tiers culminating with the A-League. **They have** at least started on expansion but I would like to see the clear articulation of a vision of how the league will look in ten years, or at least how they'd like it to look. I would like to see a 16 team A-League with promotion/relegation to a B-League, and perhaps further promotion/relegation from the NPL into the B-League (or the A2-League).

It's simple enough to add new teams to the A-League (given the money) but there are some obstacles to instituting P/R, not least the existing A-League licenses which guarantee the current clubs (with the exception of Wellington) a spot in the league until 2034. How can such clubs be relegated?

Unless there is a clause in the license which empowers the FFA (or the new A-League controlling entity) to introduce P/R then P/R could not begin until 2035 at the earliest. So there's my first question for Chris: Can you please explain whether and how P/R would be possible before 2035 (assuming we have a B-League by then)? And what are the criteria for participation in the B-League?

The other big issue with P/R is when the respective leagues are played. A-League is a summer competition (which I think works well in Australia) but all other football is played in winter. This potentially means a lag between seasons for promoted or relegated teams.

Would the B-League also be played in summer, or should the B-League be a winter comp aligned with the NPL and scheduled to end just before the A-League kicks off?

That would mean no off-season for the B-League players but they would at least be battle hardened going into the higher division. Relegated A-League teams would also get no



off-season going into the B-League but would also be battle hardened for the fight to go back up.

Such an arrangement would mean, necessarily, that the B-League season would be shorter than the A-League with implications for numbers of teams and/or concentration of matches. It does however give football tragi-comics (like me) a national league to follow all year round.

Incentives for player development

I've long believed that clubs ought to be encouraged to develop and keep their own youth products. This could take any number of forms but an obvious method would be to give significant salary cap concessions for players who've played at youth level and/or spent long periods at the same club.

A player who has spent (say) seven years at a club ought to be on a scale so that an increasing proportion of his salary is outside the cap, culminating in (say) 50% at ten years. This would encourage clubs to invest in players as there would be less likelihood of them leaving for small increments.

The other side of the player development coin is that clubs ought to be able to make money from player transfers. At the moment, any disgruntled player can hold a club to ransom if he wants to leave.

A club like Melbourne City can afford to ride out the furore if (say) Bruno Fornaroli wanted to leave, but a club like the Mariners can't afford to have its best talent withering on the vine so the likes of Danny De Silva, Nick Fitzgerald, Mitch Austin, Anthony Caceres et al could be sold if they wanted to leave the club.

The loan system does help but I see no reason why transfers should not be permitted between

A-League clubs.

In the past, when there was less money in the game and the FFA was trying to keep clubs afloat, it made sense to ban player transfer fees but clubs like Central Coast and any new smaller clubs coming in would certainly be better off now with a transfer system.

Junior Fees

One of my biggest bugbears (and I've written about this for years) is the way we are forcing kids out of the game with such horrifically high registration fees – especially for so-called rep players.

The thousands of dollars per season now being charged for rep and sub-rep teams is appalling. Is this some new operation of Parkinson's Law so that registration fees must increase proportionate to the number of professional coaches who need to be employed? **I know** that other codes have major advantages in this area – the huge TV deals of AFL and NRL, coupled with the proliferation of licensed clubs, means they can massively subsidise their junior players. (And of course, there are not as many junior players wanting to play those codes so the subsidy goes a lot further.) **Football, however,** is a victim of its own success in terms of junior participation. More people play football than the other three codes combined, but we're charging them too much to play and running out of fields.

We need to get creative about how fields are used and we need to base rep team selection entirely on merit – not the capacity of their parents to pay for the honour – so that the best young players stay on the escalator.

Skills training and junior development

A lot has been done, in recent years, to improve the knowledge of coaches (including

volunteer coaches). There are a vast array of resources available for anyone who wants to get into coaching and any number of programs and clinics for players – not least the National Curriculum.

As for that, the much maligned National Curriculum is (I think) starting to bear some fruit. It was always going to take a while but players brought up on small sided games to increase the number of touches on the ball and enforce a basic knowledge of team shape are now in their mid to late teens.

There are some incredibly gifted kids out there and the best of them are already banging on the A-League doors, which is another reason why we desperately need more professional clubs. (Parkinson's Law of Good Players?)

But the one thing we still haven't done is create strikers – certainly not strikers good enough for the very top leagues, so how do we improve that?

I'd like to see a Strikers' Curriculum which focussed on the special skills and qualities of those who work in the final third, like speed of thought and foot; vision; accurate finishing and ruthlessness. Maybe there is already something like that happening but, if so, it's not getting any oxygen.

Active Support and Media

Finally, and maybe most importantly in the short term, the new FFA Board must reach out to the disgruntled active fan groups to let them know they're on their side.

The FFA surely wants the active fans to go on creating the unique atmosphere that only football (and its fans) can bring both to the stadium and the small screen. If so they've had a funny way of showing that in the past. **Of course** there have been some fan excesses but those (to my mind) are more often overblown by an anti-football media or done in reaction to bad policy or over-zealous policing and security.

The FFA needs to be more assertive with police and security, and with stadia (until we can afford our own) about how the matchday experience differs from the other codes. They need to call out the anti-football media, and they need to re-engage with the active support and treat them as valued stakeholders rather than barely tolerated quasi-criminals.

It will take a while to rebuild trust in some quarters but, as the leaders of the game, the FFA has to get the ball rolling.

So, over to you Chris Nikou. Get that lot sorted and you'll be the best loved Australian football personality since Laszlo Urge.

Adrian's latest book The Fighting Man is in the shops right now or available through Booktopia. Adrian also wrote Mr Cleansheets.