



By George Stavroulakis

CENTRAL COAST MARINERS.. ARE A DYSFUNCTIONAL FOOTBALL TEAM

If you look at the stats to see how often the team who scores first wins a match, I reckon it would be at least 50%, but the Mariners have led eight times so far this season for just one result. What's going wrong?

Everyone knows the Mariners are already behind the ball when it comes to squad building in the market place, so they've always needed to find other ways to rise above the pack – as they have done so memorably in the past.

Lawrie McKinna's players would run through a brick wall for him and for each other.

Graham Arnold's players were super disciplined – especially without the ball. If you took your eye off the ball and just watched the team shape, they were unbelievably tight. It was really hard to score against them and they exploded into effective attacking shape the instant they won the ball.

So what is going so wrong with Mike Mulvey's crop?

There is some quality here but he whole doesn't add up to more than the sum of its parts, as the best teams always do (and as the Mariners used to do).

For a start, the tight structure without the ball is long gone. If you take your eye off the ball and watch the team these days you no longer see them working in close formation – you see the closest guys to the ball moving but the whole is very sluggish.

That suggests a lack of discipline (in the Arnie sense) but also a lack of desperation in the Lawrie sense. Individual quality (as occasionally shown by all current team members) will not make up for those.

With the ball, the situation is also problematic – especially in the second half. The most obvious issue is a lack of connection between the forwards and the midfield. If the



ball does get to the forwards the midfield are rarely in support.

Coming out of the backline into the midfield there are no third man runs. Too often we see just a couple of players trying to move the ball forward with the rest of the team ball watching.

Ninety-five percent of football is played off the ball. All the best players understand this and all the best teams are made up of players who know automatically that there is always a right place for them to be.

Lawrie and Arnie's Mariners knew this, but Mike Mulvey's lot are too often standing still or walking when the ball leaves their immediate vicinity.

That's all bad enough, but worst of all is the lack of resilience.

There is just no mental toughness when the hard work needs to be done in the second half. The mentality of the halves is very different – the run out and the run home – and it's the run home that really matters when your quality has put you one or two up at half time.

It's that lack of resilience that most shows up in a lack of cohesion between the lines, bad decision

making and unforced errors. The number of times I've seen the Mariners turn away from the easy ball or best option, hit the ball out under no pressure, or generally play without a plan does my head in.

And as soon as they concede they expect to lose, and play accordingly. **Obviously it's** the coach's job to bring players into the club, pick the first eleven and the subs, and send the players out with a plan – but what exactly is the Mariners' plan?

Sydney FC have a trademark. Victory and Perth play in a very predictable (but effective way). Melbourne City have the money and Mark Rudan has turned Wellington into an excellent team who are fun to watch.

The Mariners trademark seems to be: win the first half and then crumble.

It really troubles me to have to say all this because the Mariners are my team and I yearn for a return to the glory days. I'm not exactly blaming Mulvey – he's had success before and can certainly coach a first half team.

Although, having said that, the fact Matt Millar has chosen the Mariners' greatest enemy over the team that gave him a chance speaks volumes about team culture and man management.

Something rotten has seeped into the

club since Arnie left and it will take a long time to fix given the way player contracts work.

The famous spirit is gone and there's no money for the sort of quality we need to rebuild both spirit and discipline. The right sort of manager (and let's just assume Mulvey is the right sort) needs time to sweep out the old and bring in the new to suit a new template.

I do hope he gets the time, but at the moment the Central Coast Mariners are a dysfunctional football team and desperately need rebooting. Something really big needs to change. It's hard to change the players; easy to change the coach; and really, really hard to change the owner...

The Mariners are the small community club and need to tap into that sense of community, in both its broadest and narrowest sense, in order to start punching above their weight again.

Maybe it takes someone from within that community to get the ball rolling? Pity Hutcho has already signed for Western Melbourne.

Adrian's latest book The Fighting Man is in the shops right now or available through Booktopia. Adrian also wrote Mr Cleansheets and will have a couple of exciting announcements shortly.