



By George Stavroulakis



Second division paper reveals plans, challenges for new competition

A national second division would serve as an «incubator» for future expansion teams and could potentially include reserves sides from bigger A-League clubs, according to a document that is set to be tabled to the Football Federation Australia board.

The Herald has obtained a copy of the 40-page 'white paper' written by FFA, in conjunction with the Australian Association of Football Clubs (AAFC) and Professional Footballers Australia (PFA), which has been borne out of the National Second Division Working Group's recent meetings.

It recommends the formation of a second division in time for the 2021-22 season, comprising between eight to 12 clubs - with a focus on key markets not currently serviced by the A-League - and operated by FFA in the initial period.

The document, which is marked as a draft and is understood to be for discussion purposes only at this stage, is by no means a final blueprint and many details remain scarce or unresolved. For instance, whether the second division's season would take place in the winter or summer is subject to further discussions amongst stakeholders.

Nor does the paper prescribe a financial model for the second division, which remains one of the major sticking points between the AAFC and the PFA, whose independent modelling has yielded starkly contrasting figures. The AAFC believes each club could operate on an annual budget of \$2.5 million, while the PFA believes \$5.36m would be required to cover costs each year.

However, the document is intended to serve as a platform upon which these issues, and others, can be reconciled in accordance with the ultimate «financial parameters» of the new competition.

«**FFA has** also completed high level analysis on a cost basis for a national second division ... (and) is of the view that the commercial model should be aligned with the principle of being financially sustainable,» it says. «As such, a cost structure should reflect the amount of revenues that are likely to be achieved by the NSD.»

As for promotion and relegation, the paper describes it as «arguably the most vexed question» in the game but also the ultimate objective of any second division.

«**To purists** it is the holy grail of football ... counterbalancing this system of meritocracy however are the twin realities of challenging economics and the existing licensing framework which (A-League) Clubs are operating under, and which has guaranteed participants a closed model at the highest level of Club competition in this country,» it says.

Second-tier competition models for other codes including the AFL, NRL and National Rugby Championship are considered and examined by the document, as well as lower-tier football leagues in countries such as Japan, the United States and the Netherlands.

It proposes an «runway» phase of between two and five years at the start of the second division during which clubs could prepare for possible consideration in becoming the next A-League expansion team, as the top tier grows from 12 to 14 or possibly 16 franchises.

Lessons learned: The National Rugby Championship is one of several second-tier competitions the white paper refers to as an example for Australian soccer. Credit: Matt King

A mix of existing NPL teams and new entities is anticipated for the second division. Failed A-League expansion bids such as Team 11, South Melbourne, Canberra and Wollongong would be viewed favourably, with an aim for all clubs to average attendances of at least 3000 by year three.

Foreign players would be capped at two for each team, while feeder relationships with A-League sides are proposed, as well as the possible future admission of A-League reserves teams.

«**Consideration ...** needs to be given to the uniqueness of the Australian sporting landscape and the need to not just reflect but indeed continue to nourish the national footprint of our game, which is its great comparative advantage to the other football codes,» the paper says.

Thomas: 'We stayed rock solid'

Lawrence Thomas paid credit to Perth Glory after Melbourne Victory's convincing 2-0 win at HBF Park, but the subtext was clear: Victory will consider themselves favourites to retain the Championship now.



It was a professional, clear-cut performance from the Big V from start to finish, nullifying a record Perth Glory crowd keen to see their side confirm the Premiership, and a maiden piece of A-League silverware.

Over 17,000 fans departed disappointed and possibly a little nervous however, after Victory's two foreign stars, Keisuke Honda and Ola Toivonen capitalised on a rather lethargic Perth outfit to run-out winners.

«**It's a** massive time of year to start getting our form back, to come here in front of their crowd and get the job done is an achievement,» Thomas said.

«**There's a** lot of pressure come the end of the year, it's a long travel after a win so we'll enjoy the team back.

«**They're top** of the table for a reason. It's a credit to the entire team that stayed rock solid.»

While Perth are still near-certainties to take out the Premiership, six points clear of Sydney FC with equal games played, the Championship is now wide open.

«**The crowd** tonight were fantastic and it was really disappointing not to give them the win,» Chris Ikonomidis said.

«**We played** well but just couldn't put the ball in the back of the net and that's what football is about.

«**It would** be huge for the club and on a personal level, to get our first bit of silverware, we deserve it.»

A LEAGUE Results 23 ROUND

Central Coast Mariners - Adelaide United 0-1
Perth Glory - Melbourne Victory 0-2
WS Wanderers - Melbourne City 3-0
Wellington Phoenix - Newcastle Jets 4-1
Brisbane Roar - Sydney FC 1-3

Next Round 24

Next Games Round 5

05.04.2019
Melbourne City - Brisbane Roar
06.04.2019
Newcastle Jets - WS Wanderers
Sydney FC - Melbourne Victory
07.04.2019
Adelaide United - Wellington Phoenix
Central Coast Mariners - Perth Glory

A - LEAGUE Table 23 Round

	Team	GP	Pts	W	D	L	GF	GA	+/-
1	Perth Glory	23	51	15	6	2	47	22	25
2	Sydney FC	23	45	14	3	6	39	25	14
3	Melbourne Victory	23	44	13	5	5	46	28	18
4	Wellington Phoenix	23	37	10	7	6	41	31	10
5	Adelaide United	23	34	9	7	7	28	28	0
6	Melbourne City	23	33	9	6	8	28	28	0
7	Newcastle Jets	23	26	7	5	11	29	32	-3
8	WS Wanderers	23	23	6	5	12	38	46	-8
9	Brisbane Roar	23	15	3	6	14	31	55	-24
10	Central Coast Mariners	23	10	2	4	17	27	59	-32