



By George Stavroulakis

# How Australia's soccer past is keeping the football flame alive

A rare reunion of former National Soccer League players, coaches and officials has brought home the stark reality that despite the many problems at the top of Australia's football pyramid the old fire is still burning underneath the surface where the game matters a great deal.

**Just under** 300 football people associated with clubs and organisations from all over Australia gathered in Sydney at the weekend as part of a fund-raiser for the 'heartbeat of football' charity that yielded an estimated \$55,000 profit. The organisation set up by football identity Andy Paschalidis aims to promote healthy hearts in sport via player education, reduce health risks and install defibrillators at all sporting fields around Australia. As the struggling A-League prepares to expand its boundaries to include some of the country's more traditional clubs, two dozen former Socceroos answered a call to help the charity institution and took the opportunity to celebrate a period in Australia's league football history between 1977 to 2004 that had its critics but that established a solid platform from which the game could prosper.

"**This room** is where our football was born," said retired Socceroos legend and foundation ambassador Tim Cahill, who regards defender Charlie Yankos as his childhood idol.

"**Clubs in** the old days - even the smaller ones like Marrickville, Lakemba and Canterbury - were all about family, culture and tradition.

"**The game** needs harmony and everybody coming together to help in any way."

**The event** drew many former NSL heroes like goalkeeper Ante Covic, defenders Milan Ivanovic, Alex Tobin and Yankos, midfielders Zarko Odzakov, Peter Katholos, Scott Ollerenshaw and Craig Foster and forwards Dez Marton, Graham Arnold, Robbie Slater and Scott Chipperfield. It was a gathering of Australia's football royalty in all its glitz and glamour. It was a throw-back to an era when semi-professional footballers had to perform on many sub-standard pitches in between their full-time jobs and received scant recognition from a largely uninterested media that treated the competition as a hotbed for ethnic rivalries yet the NSL never failed to produce top players who would go on to represent their country with pride and distinction. Clubs like Arnold's former club Sydney United - "I never played for Sydney United but Sydney Croatia" he said - Adelaide United, Melbourne Knights, Heidelberg United, South Melbourne, Marconi and Sydney Olympic were able to do this because there was a common bond between club, coach, players and fans.

"**These clubs** valued their loyal supporters who followed them every week and treated them as fans not clients or customers as many football entities do today."

**They gave** their faithful fans the feeling that they belonged because they were part of the family and every

decision in the boardroom had to be in the best interests of the whole organisation not aimed at the bottom line which is something the A-League would do well to learn from as it navigates the roughest waters it has encountered in its 15-year existence. The game's governing body and the NSL had their problems in running a game that was deeply divided along cultural and parochial lines. Rival organisations called our game a basket case, which was not unjustified. Yet the NSL never failed to deliver when it came to player development particularly because there were far more outlets and opportunities for young kids to take the next step up. Examples of promising juniors becoming NSL stars and ultimately achieving great success abroad are plentiful.

"**I was** not the most skilful of players but I really enjoyed the game and I ended up playing for the Socceroos because of my passion and determination to succeed. The NSL gave me that chance," said Yankos who will always be remembered for his spectacular goal from a free kick against Argentina in a Gold Cup match in Sydney that the Socceroos win 4-1. **Socceroos winger** Chipperfield, who played in that epic 2000 grand final between Perth Glory and Wollongong City, was a late bloomer but he would probably not have made it had he been playing today because of the lack of proper pathways and opportunities.

