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**How to build
a football club:
Western United FC**

As Western United FC prepare for pre-season training ahead of their debut campaign in the Hyundai A-League, read what it takes to set up a new club, in this exclusive interview with director of football Steve Horvat.

There's less than four months before Mark Rudan and his side will play their first Hyundai A-League match

Putting the players through their paces on the training grounds will be another significant milestone for a club that only won a spot in the competition on December 13 of last year. Along the way they have announced their official name, and formulated their colours, badge and playing strip, all the while assembling a squad and coaching staff they hope will hit the ground running in 2019/20. It's been a whirlwind journey so far for the Hyundai A-League's newest club – but the most exciting times are still to come. We caught up with the club's director of football, former Caltex Socceroo Steve Horvat, to find out how things are tracking and just what goes into building a new club from scratch.

HAL: Steve, it's been more than six months since confirmation came that you would be in the competition, how has that time been?

SH: "We spent such a long time in the bid phase that when the decision came we had to quickly switch into operational mode. There was a real sense of 'what do we need to do first and what's the most important elements of the club that need to be built?'

"As we sit back now we have the football department, a head coach, the majority of the squad signed and we revealed the strip and the badge.

"When you look at a club – and we're building one from scratch with a blank sheet of paper – these are the things that will live on forever."

"In terms of the name Western United, it's really about all of the west of Melbourne and Victoria under one colour and badge and ideal. It's been a rollercoaster ride, but really enjoyable. To be able to build something and to leave a legacy to the game was really important to us."

After you found out the bid had been successful, where did you start?

SH: "The first thing we did was start up a shortlist of players we were interested in. There's a list given to us from FFA [Football Federation Australia] of players that are un-contracted come the end of the season, so we were able to start working on that. **"Building the** football department was really important. I was keen to get some really good people around us to make the right decisions and who have some really good experience in the game. Those two roles, [assistant coaches] John Hutchinson and John Anastasiadis – were made early. The coach was a real key appointment in our football club and that took longer than we wanted it to, but it was the process we wanted to follow.

"We wanted this to be a club of opportunity. When you talk about the expansion of the A-League...there's often a perception that there's not enough opportunities, not only for players but for coaches, admin people, so we wanted as best as we could to make sure this is an opportunity for players and coaches for a fresh start."

United FC's director of football, Steve Horvat

What did you look for when beginning to sign players?

SH: "We wanted players that wanted to test themselves. Whether that's a youngster like Josh Cavallo, or Scott McDonald coming back after 15 years out of the country, or Panagiotis Kone who's had an incredible career in Serie A.

"Since [coach] Mark [Rudan] has come on board, he's been very big on the character and culture of the football club, which I back completely. We've got some incredible people, not only good players but great people in that squad, which is so important to drive the culture of a fresh club in year one. And we've really been keen on that blend of players.

"We've tried to sign some great young Australian talent – some of those players who have played around 100 A-League games and are at the halfway point of their career, as well as players that are in the latter stages of their career that will not only bring experience on the park but also that element of leadership and culture in the dressing room. A lot of people when they look at squads look at who are the marquee and superstars. But what is as important, if not more so, is the culture and chemistry of the group."

How important was it to make that initial signing of marquee man Panagiotis Kone?

SH: "We knew he had that leadership quality and he was really looking to try something different. When you get a marquee player, they have to be coming here for the right reasons. The more we spoke to him, the more we got an understanding of what he was about, we knew he was going to be the right fit culturally for this club. What cemented that was when we brought him out here for a few days to do some PR and get amongst the local community. I could see immediately we were comfortable with that decision because nothing was a burden for him.

"Whether it was getting up early to do an interview on radio or go out to a local club, he did a great job and wanted to do every interview and appearance. He was out here on Grand Prix weekend and could have been out in the pit lane for three days but he was fantastic."

How important were the community and fan forums

in establishing the ideals of the club?

SH: "When we were going around to the community and the clubs and spending time with the fans, you really got a sense of how parochial they are this side of the Westgate Bridge. There's so much development and so much happening on the other side of the bridge, the west seemed to be getting neglected.

"There's a huge amount of growth in the area but there's just no infrastructure so we knew from that point on we were on a winner because it was really evident the fans are going to be invested. Especially as we're investing this money in building a sports precinct and community hub for people, which is unlike anything they have in this region.

"As great as it is that we're going to have an A-League team in October, nothing excites me more than what we're going to build in the west."

Will the club look to get a Westfield W-League team in the future?

SH: "No doubt about it. We're actually looking to start a girls' academy next year which I'm super excited about. The Matildas are a wonderful example of what a national sporting team embodies in this country. I see the number of girls playing every weekend and we want to make sure we give equal opportunities to boys and girls throughout our academy. As soon as there's an opportunity to bid for a W-League licence, I'm sure we'll be bidding."

Mark Rudan There's less than four months before Mark Rudan and his side will play their first Hyundai A-League match It's less than four months until the club plays its first game in the Hyundai A-League, I imagine there's a real buzz?

SH: "We've been going out to schools and local clubs over the last couple of weeks and the sense of excitement is incredible out there. It becomes real when you go out and talk to these kids and prospective fans. It's not long now but it's super exciting. "We've been given 10 months to build a club from scratch and I can guarantee that every person on staff is working day and night to make sure that first game of the season at home is memorable."

What happens next?

SH: "Training starts in July and we're planning a run of pre-season friendly games, with a trip away for the team. Being a fresh group of 23 players and coaches together for the first time, it's really important the team goes away where there's no distractions and where they can really connect, not just on the park but off the park."