



By George Stavroulakis

FFA'S NEW BOSS MUST UNDERSTAND THE CULTURE OF THE GAME

It struck me recently as I listened to the PFA chief executive John Didulica expound the findings of the soccer players union's latest piece of research - entitled Culture Amplifies Talent - how important a role the organisation has played over the past three decades.

Not so much as an industrial body representing the interests of its members but as a think tank for the Australian game.

Plenty of senior executives at the FFA, board members and club owners have historically been critical of the union, blaming it for driving an escalating wage spiral and increasing the sport's professional cost base.

But a union is meant to lobby for wages and conditions and agitate over issues of member welfare, so it can hardly be blamed for so doing.

I first wrote about the PFA more than two decades ago when I interviewed a young Brendan Schwab.

He was then working for a law firm but had been busy establishing the PFA along with his friend and former Soccerroo Kimon Taliadoris, now the chairman of Football Federation Victoria, and others, including former Soccerroo, A-League coach and now television pundit John Kosmina. Schwab was articulate, painstaking, smart and at times combative, particularly in pursuit of his members interests.

But crucially he was a strategic thinker, a man who imagined the best for the Australian game and who saw the pathways that needed to be connected for it to prosper.

And it was the culture he and its founding fathers created within the PFA which I believe has made it a vital part of Australian soccer's infrastructure, an organisation that thinks and plans and has ideas far beyond wages and conditions for its membership.

Didulica was explaining how and why the former golden generation of Soccerroos (the group who qualified for the World Cup in 2006 and played in major European leagues for big clubs) had been spawned in an environment where soccer was less well funded than it is now and was much less mainstream.

It was impossible not to be impressed by the depth of feeling, the research that had been done and the message that was being promulgated.

It also struck me how little the game's body has used the union as a source of senior personnel.

The AFL, in particular, has used expertise in union affairs



as a potential recruiting area in a way that soccer never has.

Andrew Demetriou, the former CEO of the AFL, ran the players union, while Brendon Gale, the chief executive of premiers Richmond, is also an ex-players' association chief.

In the time that the PFA has existed, Australian soccer's governing body FFA has transformed itself from the hand-to-mouth organisation it was in the Soccer Australia days, to the glossy, "high-powered" body it is with a CEO who has enjoyed a seven-figure salary for years, alongside other highly paid executives.

Yet it has rarely - and certainly not consistently - come up with long-term strategic research and ideas for developing the game in the way the PFA has.

Under the FFA the national curriculum has been introduced - a subject that still generates diverse opinions and debate as to its efficacy - and it did produce its world of football plan in 2015.

That was a 20-year vision that articulated a series of hoped-for outcomes including a prediction that the "football community" would grow from 7.5 million to 15 million in two more decades and that participation numbers would double from two million to four million over the same period.

It was the subject of much fanfare at the time, but it is rarely heard or spoken about.

The FFA has been run by a succession of well-credentialed leaders who have been hired from other sports. They might have excelled in other fields but they don't have football in

their DNA and don't really understand the culture of the game.

You can't blame David Gallop (from rugby league), his predecessor Ben Buckley (from the AFL), and John O'Neill (from rugby union) taking well paid jobs if they are offered.

But you can blame the board for making the wrong choices, something they have to get right this time when Gallop exits in December.

Myriad candidates have been touted for the role, including Peter Abraam (a former NSL player and vastly experienced sports and corporate executive), Peter Filipoulos (ex-South Melbourne and Perth Glory CEO and head of FFV), James Johnson (a former Joey who has worked for FIFA, the AFC and now the City Football Group) and Schwab, (executive director of the Swiss-based World Players Association) to replace Gallop as FFA's chief executive.

This time round, when they come to selecting the man (or woman) to replace Gallop chairman Chris Nikou and his colleagues should make sure they at least get a candidate who knows, understands and loves the game and how it can be developed in not just the Australian sports market but within society as a whole.

It doesn't have to be someone with a union background, although Johnson worked for Schwab at the PFA earlier in his career so two of the front-runners come from that sphere.

But it has to be someone who gets the game, like the union leadership has consistently proved it has.

SAM SILVERA.. SUPERB SOLO EFFORT

Talented teenager Sam Silvera has scored in his first A-League start to help Central Coast Mariners to beat Perth Glory 2-1 in an upset at HBF Park.

The 19-year-old's superb solo effort just before halftime on Sunday secured the Mariners' first win of the season after drawing their first two outings.

Scores were level at 1-1 before Australian youth international Silvera picked the pocket of sleepwalking Glory substitute Jacob Tratt and curled in a superb low finish from a tight angle.

The Glory had plenty of chances to find an equaliser after halftime but couldn't convert to the frustration of the 8148 crowd.

Central Coast's first win in Perth in six years was also just their sixth away victory since the start of the 2014-15 season.

"Short term, it's a great result," Mariners coach Alan Stajcic said.

"Long term, I think it's just added so much to the belief

and confidence in the group that they can play against probably the best front three or four in the comp and come away from home with a win."

Perth had been strong favourites but looked off the pace all day with vaunted forward trio, Bruno Fornaroli, Diego Castro and Chris Ikonmidis, unable to have much impact.

Central Coast had the run of play early and there were danger signs in the opening minutes when Milan Duric found space to unleash a sizzling hard and flat shot which hit the woodwork.

Former Glory player Danny De Silva ran onto the deflection directly in front of goal but couldn't bring it under control.

De Silva redeemed himself in the 17th minute when he was on the end of an intelligent cross from Jack Clisby and delivered a pinpoint low finish from the edge of the box.

Perth drew level in the 32nd minute, Juande forcing a great save from Mark Birighitti and Ivan Franjic pouncing on the

deflection from close range.

The hosts had all of the play in the second half but couldn't break through the Mariners' determined defence.

Glory fans thought they had an equaliser in the 49th minute when Fornaroli fired a volley into the arms of Birighitti but VAR confirmed the Mariners' keeper had not stepped over the goal line.

The result leaves the reigning premiers with just one win from their first four games.

"We're disappointed to lose at home," coach Tony Popovic said. **"We looked** lethargic in the first half ... we weren't quick in the challenges, we weren't covering quickly. We lacked intensity."

Perth travel to Newcastle to play the Jets on Saturday then have the bye.

The Mariners face another tough road game on Friday night when they take on Melbourne City.