



By George Stavroulakis

Kevin Muscat is back in a big way - and that's good news for Aussie coaches. Plus Mathew Leckie's potential move, the Olyroos' huge test, expansion talk and the A-League shooting itself in the foot.

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FORMER MELBOURNE VICTORY BOSS KEVIN MUSCAT TAKES FIRST STEP TO MAKING IT BIG IN EUROPEAN COACHING RANKS



6 FA CUP DREAMS

It's the stuff of dreams.

Tom Pope, a striker with fourth-tier battlers Port Vale, cracked Manchester City and England defender John Stones in pre-season.

"Just watched the highlights of the England game! I know I'm a league 2 player, I know he plays for England, I know he's on £150k a week, I know he's a million times better player than me but I'd love to play against John Stones every week! I'd get 40 a season! #soft #weakspiss," Pope tweeted.

Well, Port Vale not only drew Man City in the FA Cup third round but Pope scored a cracking header to equalise, after a clever run, with Stones caught out of position. The 34-year-old journeyman offered this retort.

"I'd just like to say I was completely wrong and bang out of order to say I'd score 40 a season..... it's more like 50," he wrote with the smiley face emoji.

Man City ran out 4-1 winners.

7 OLYROOS TEST

The Olyroos have a fight on their hands qualifying for Tokyo 2020.

Merely nine of Graham Arnold's 23-man squad are regulars - Keanu Baccus (Wanderers), Gabriel Cleur (Italian third division), Tommy Deng (Victory), Zach Duncan (AGF, Denmark), Connor Metcalfe (Melbourne City), Aiden O'Neill (Brisbane), Reno Piscopo (Wellington), Al Hassan Toure (Adelaide) and Jordan Holmes (England Non-League).

The Olyroos face Iraq on Wednesday, before taking on Thailand and Bahrain in Group A. The top three of the 16-team tournament qualify for the Olympics.

8 YOUTHFUL WESTERN UNITED

Western United's mini mid-season overhaul has seen them slash their average squad age by four years.

The average age of Mark Rudan's starters for the first four games of the season was 31.8 years, compared to 27.9 for

last Friday's loss to Melbourne City.

Incorporating the substitutes, it's reduced from 30.3 years (Rounds 1-3) to 26.3 against City, owing to the introduction of Sebastian Pasquali, Josh Cavallo, Thiel Iradukunda, Jerry Skotadis and Dylan Pierias.

9 FURTHER EXPANSION CRUCIAL

Football must expand aggressively in 2020 or risk dropping down the Australian sports pecking order.

The A-League is paying for conservatism and reactionary decision-making and many are living in denial while cricket and basketball continue to progress.

I recently spoke to the 11 bids who missed out on A-League expansion, and most were disillusioned at the lack of contact in the 13 months since the decision, not to mention the ad hoc process itself.

Western United has failed to deliver the shot in the arm the flailing A-League needed, but competition - further A-League expansion and a second division - is required to raise the bar and lessons learnt from the past.

10 MARKETING OWN GOALS

If the A-League wants to be taken seriously, it needs to start taking itself seriously.

The A-League official social media accounts have scored more own goals than a dodgy Sunday league defender.



Connor Metcalfe is one of only a handful of Olyroos playing regularly

The management of the league's social media has been outsourced this season as the league transitions to an independent competition.

In November, the A-League launched a much-celebrated \$1 million marketing campaign in an effort to recapture the attention of younger fans.

From misspelt names (Tom Glover instead of Glover, Izaka instead of Isaka Cernak), to factual errors to promoting suspended players,

to celebrating one of the A-League's most vexing topics in player turnover/recycling (celebrating players who've represented most clubs), the account has had a stinker of a start to the 2019-20 season.

11 CITY'S PLAN EVIDENT

Erick Mombaerts unveiled the Melbourne City 2019-20 blueprint in Friday's 3-2 win over Western United.

City's French tactician has only slightly tinkered with his first XI, until last Friday. He made it clear he wants 18 players competing for starting XI spots come finals time. **The form** of suspended Olyroo Nathaniel Atkinson, Frenchman Florin Berenguer and Austrian Richard Windbichler indicated that he'll have some headaches and that City may in fact have the deepest squad in the A-League, remembering four players are away with the Olyroos.