**Editorial - Clubs v provinces: By Bruce Holloway**

Soccer is a club-based sport almost everywhere in the world.
But nearly everyone outside Auckland I speak to in New Zealand acknowledges - either willingly or grudgingly - a provincial basis for competition would suit us best in terms of geography, spectator support, pooling financial resources and concentrating our often lean administrative and playing talent.
Perversely, provinces as a geographical and political concept stopped having any meaning in New Zealand after 1876. It has only been sporting rivalry which has kept the provincial thing alive.
The question soccer must address is: which takes precedence? In other words, to which should our cream primarily aspire?
The problem in soccer is how we get the two systems - clubs and provinces - working in harmony, particularly now we have surrendered summer to the Kingz.
I've long since lost track of what exactly New Zealand Soccer is aspiring to on the club-provincial divide. The story seems to have changed several times since the masterplan of Federations was first announced with its major plank of a provincial (federation) league being as the Next Big Thing. Since then, following pressure from clubs, we've settled on - in the interim at least - a return to a club-based national league.
In this tug of war, those who see the provincial competition as "an end-of-season thing" are in effect relegating provincial play to being an afterthought, a token addition to the main club event.
If provincial football is to be the flagship, then the competition must offer "critical mass" - enough matches to constitute the major part of the season for those interested in aligning themselves playing-wise or spectator-wise.
However if the club is the primary unit of soccer in most people's eyes then the provincial thing is automatically redundant.
Unless of course, the top club "becomes the province" - which is possible in most set-ups outside the Auckland metropolis, though there are all sorts of emotional problems to work through in these cases, with soccer being such a passionate game. However there is a recognisable process by which a sense of common soccer interest, evolves.
Assume your local clubs pool their energies to form a united-front provincial team. They are serious about contesting a national competition.
The best elements become the backbone of the team, doing the lion's share of the work. But if they do even a half-decent job, then by their very nature they will be drawn to the stage where their over-riding priority will become the provincial team, not the club from whence they came.
This would be their period of transition. It would be their initiation into "another club", if you like.
If on the other hand, these good people decided their home clubs were still more important than the new-found purpose that threw them together at provincial level, they would effectively be disowning the provincial concept.
There would be huge problems.
The question is whether soccer people are ready to take a qualitative leap forward rather than the token step I suspect any Federations provincial competition will become. If provinces are the way to go, then rep teams will need to be built around the same rigorous structures as existing elite clubs, otherwise they will mutate into cheap and messy marriages of convenience.
The fact that many top clubs outside of Auckland are already operating as de facto rep teams only confuses matters.

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I was astonished at the suggestion from NZS chief executive Bob Patterson that New Zealand should seek to play its 2002 World Cup qualifying matches in a one-off tournament in Australia rather than in the traditional home-and-away format.
In the wake of the Fifa draw for the qualifiers in Tokyo, in which New Zealand was lumped in with Tahiti, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu and the Cook Islands, Patterson reckoned we would get better pitches to play on that way "It might be better to suggest the games be played in a neutral country like Australia," Patterson said. "We have to ensure games of this importance are played on decent grounds."
This is a real betrayal of the aspirations of All Whites fans, who so seldom get to see their team.
At a time when we should be working to build on the interest in the code which has been fostered by the U17s and the Confederations Cup, we shouldn't even contemplate such an alternative. Try and recall the last time a full All Whites team played anywhere in the South Island.
Of course this whole issue would never have arisen if Oceania operated like any other Fifa confederation rather than some grisly joke.
Minimum standards should be prescribed for World Cup qualifiers like they are elsewhere. If countries can't meet these standards, they should forfeit the home advantage.
That won't happen in Oceania because our leading soccer politicians are forever caught in the bind of trying to buy votes off soccer's various banana republics around the South Pacific.

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Amid criticisms of the U17 World Championships programme, Wellington reader Joe Fraser has pointed out I missed the "bleedin' obvious" flaw with the publication.
Its feature centrespread progress chart to map the paths of the teams through to the finals was totally dysfunctional. It simply doesn't work.
According to the programme we should have had the US playing Ghana at North Harbour and Australia playing Brazil, not in the final, but in the other semi at QEII in Christchurch.
This programme is set to become a collector's item - but for all the wrong reasons.
Okay, it's not a huge deal, but bear it in mind next time somebody bones on about the immaculate organisation of the tournament.
Incidentally Fraser, a former Waikato United programme editor, also had some words of advice for the Kingz matchday publishing effort.
"I don't think they haven't really looked at what makes a good programme," he said. "One of the major problems is we learn very little about the life of the club. Chris Turner never has anything to say, which is all the more reason why there should be a column by the coach and the team captain."
Fraser also suggested rather than wooden profiles, the players should be made to write a column on their thoughts or experiences.
"Fans might be interested to hear from Che Bunce what it was like playing in Iceland, or how the Australians compared the Kingz set-up to their previous clubs."

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ER, WHICH ONE IS JOSH STICK THEN? Talking of programmes, what a disappointment it was to bowl up for the All Whites opening qualifier and discover there was no programme or even cursory team listing for the squads even for team management, let alone the public.
As occasional Sitter! contributor Colin Cook has noted on the Goalnet internet forum, "with all the overseas based players in NZ teams these days, the soccer public really need something just to know who we have on the field, let alone the opposition..." It's also nice to know who the ref and dodgy linesmen are, and where they come from. Too bad the Fifa mafia, so impressed with New Zealand's hosting of the champs, didn't hang around, complete with their chauffeurs and tailors to see how an Oceania tournament is run at the final frontier.
While we're giving it plenty of Stick, it's worth noting young Josh is the first of the U17 squad which went to Egypt in the 97 competition to graduate to the full All Whites squad.
And speaking of Oceania, it's a pretty big place. So why is Oceania Football Confederation's marketing arm based outside the region, in Hong Kong?

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Norman Tasker, publisher of Aussie cricket rag Inside Edge, recently noted how the traditional ethos of sport is under fire from so many quarters now, largely due to the changes massive television exposure and high commerce have brought.
"The bottom line has overwhelmed the traditional line that 'the game's the thing' and many of our sports seem to have become a means to a commercial end, rather than an end in themselves," he wrote. This struck a chord with me in the light of recent media reports that both Tainui and Sky TV have made offers to buy more than half of the Football Kingz.
The Sky deal was purported to be worth $2 million. It spoke volumes that even in the wake of articles in late December, the club had no message on this to the fans in subsequent programmes. (As Fraser noted, the Kingz prefer to tell you nothing about the club's future.)
The cold hard facts are that the more fans who go through the turnstiles at Albany, the more the value of the club will rise on the market.
Bear this in mind the next time somebody associated with the Kingz laments low crowd numbers.
They want us to take ownership of the club in terms of the old-fashioned core ethos of loving a team.
But the bottom line is fans are just pawns in a far bigger game when directors wheel and deal in the club's future with not a hint of consultation, or even a mechanism by which they are answerable to supporters.

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AN ICKY BUSINESS: One of the stars of the U17 tournament for me was the commentary of Gordon lrving on Sky and Prime. Comments men such as Mike McGarry, Steve Sumner and Adrian Elrick impressed as well. But there was an infectious enthusiasm in lrving's calls in particular, he makes some wry observations, and I love the way his voice turns into a bass growl when he gets excited.
Having said all that, I must admit I was irritated by his call on the Under 23 Oceania Olympic qualifying final at North Harbour, Irving's class was sullied by continual mispronunciation of Paul Uriovic's name.
It is pronounced UrIovICH (as if it had a hidden h on the end) as the lads at Central - or anyone of Croatian extraction will testify. (As in Dokic, the tennis player).
So we had the ground announcer saying UrIovICH, comments man Elrick saying UrIovICH, and lrving saying UrIovICK.
When a player is good enough to make our senior All Whites, I reckon it's good enough for fans and media to learn how to say their name properly.
Not that Urlovic helps himself. In a one-on-one interview at the ground he did nothing to correct the error. Still, that's players for you...
It was a little bit rich everyone (except John Adshead - remember, it adds to the legend of a soccer guru to mispronounce names) going to the trouble of pronouncing Kris Bouckehooghe's name right, then cocking up on Urlovic's.
I raised this with Irving. He replied: "I was eager to find out how to pronounce Kris Boucken's name so I asked him before hand. All I can say about Urlovic was that I was going from a reliable source, namely his former Central coach Ricki Herbert, who told me it was pronounced Urlovic." Hmmm.
Still on the subject of broadcasting, I was less than impressed with the camera work in penalty shootouts at the under 17 tournament. Our rugby-reared cameramen invariably failed to show the whole goal when the kicks were made. The result was they often had to jerk to the side they weren't showing when they were surprised by the kicker's choice of corner.
It was like a throwback to the dreadful coverage of the old summer league. Somebody really should have a word... ***- Bruce Holloway***.