

## Up front



# The Olympic dream

It's always a bad sign when I start an editorial by talking about myself, but some years ago I got involved in schoolboy soccer.

Partially it was to do something for my own kids, though it was also a wider response to the unrealised potential at a school which fielded 14 teams, but which had somehow lost its way as a force at elite level. The first XI coach, decent chap though he was, wasn't bothered about national tournaments, because with the way his team was playing, he reckoned he had no chance of winning them. So what was the point? Waste of money.

To cut a long story short, we formed a "soccer club" at the school to better promote and foster the code. We set the usual broad visions of seeking to be the best, promote excellence, create the right environment, blah blah.

But most importantly, we instituted a policy that the school would always contest national tournaments at the highest possible level. This was our line in the sand. Only by competing at top level could we provide a transparent performance indicator for ourselves, and one by which others could measure us.

We wanted to be recognised as a serious soccer school in much the same way as Sitter! readers would like New Zealand to become recognised as a serious soccer nation.

I was reminded of all this by New Zealand Soccer's decision not to contest the Olympic women's qualifiers. The argument goes that this policy of omission was not a finance issue as such, but taking the senior national women's team into other activity (A four team tournament in Brisbane, which Australia used as preparation for the Olympic qualifiers) represented a better use of funds.

Under the new philosophy, NZS will no longer send teams -- male or female -- to every Oceania tournament "for the sake of it". They will instead "pick and choose" events where they feel they can be successful, rather than stretching limited resources.

This approach rings alarm bells for me. The Olympics -- and the World Cup -- have a clear purpose. They are where we look ourselves in the mirror as a soccer nation. Wheel and deal in other friendly tourneys by all means, but leave the yardstick there.

Women's Soccer Association of New Zealand (WSANZ) president Allan McLarin labelled the move discriminatory, arguing our women players deserve the opportunity to play for a place in Athens and in the Under 19 World Cup, just as the men did.

I'd go further and argue this was another one of those classic "shooting ourselves in the foot" moments. As Goalnet (internet) mailing list poster Tony Smith has eloquently pointed out: "Young women in NZ have so many sporting options that soccer can ill-afford to admit, in effect, 'we aren't good enough to go to the Olympics'. There has to be a shop window for the game -- and ours is boarded up for most of the year..." (See also Barbara Cox letter elsewhere in this issue.)

NZS talk a lot about "pathways" with their international philosophy at present. In this instance women could well ask "A pathway to what?" Ironically NZS has recently signed up with a sponsor that is famous for the tag-line "Just do it". The subliminal message here is "Let's not do it".

Other questions abound. Having preferred a friendly tournament over an Olympic

qualifier, it must be asked how, in the long run, will the benefits of playing Korea and China in a friendly, as opposed to Australia in real competition, be measured? Further, if you accept NZS reasoning, we shouldn't even have Olympic qualifiers. Only the teams deemed to be the best should go.

On the wider front I find it alarming to see the general fade of national squads. Up until the last six months we used to have a New Zealand Under 20 or Under 17 team at the Napier tournament, an Under 17 team in the women's national league, a national academy squad competing in the national youth league and national academy age squads contesting all age group federation tournaments.

These, incidentally, used to be known as "identification tournaments". Not any more. There was nobody even "identifying" at them last year. National coach courses were being held at the same time.

Part of the rationale of the absurd "seven federation" system was to have a berth for an eighth national squad at all these tournaments.

Meanwhile it is harder than any time I can recall to get a national handle on who deserves to be in our national squads at any level.

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By contrast, I really enjoyed the men's Olympic campaign.

The quality of our squad covered a vast spectrum, from the excellent Leo Bertos to chaps who simply should not have been there, when you consider Ben Sigmund, Peter Howe, Sanjay Singh, Jason Rowley, and Joey Waugh weren't required.

It was great to see the rare treat of a couple of televised matches that didn't feature the Kingz, while the group games in Auckland all had a certain charm, whether it was the thriller against Vanuatu, or the morbid fascination of a grinding, labouring effort to beat the might of Tonga 2-0 – whose senior team is ranked about 185 in the world, from memory.

It was great to see players we have only heard about in media despatches for the past two years. But again, some questions abound. Why was there so little cover in the squad when captain Steven Old got injured in the opening match? Left back Tony Lochhead looked out of position in covering for him, which is hardly surprising because he was. In a squad of 20, we had just five defenders, and they were mostly specialist fullbacks. By contrast we had six strikers (plus James Pritchett, who was duly named as one in some starting formations).

And while it was perfectly understandable to sit back and try and eke out a draw in the first leg of the final against Australia, why the hell didn't we do it with some brains and play with a sweeper? The return draw against Australia was a real tonic, even if they were technically superior. We played with real purpose, and it evoked memories of a great effort against South Africa in the previous Olympic qualifiers.

Some player observations: For all his time in the English pro game, David Mulligan -- who seems to get smaller every time he comes home -- seemed no further advanced technically or tactically than Dunedin student Rupesh Puna, for whom soccer is mixed in with studies and cricket. Makes you wonder whether we shouldn't be trying to get more kids into Med School down south rather than into lower division English clubs.

Allan Pearce spent far too much time on the bench. Steven Old worked hard, but his distribution was poor and he is simply not a natural captain. Glen Moss was Jekyll-and-Hyde in goal. I was disappointed in Pritchett but can see a spark of hope in Brent Fisher, even though he bottled a few chances.

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It's been fascinating to see new Australian Soccer Association chief executive John O'Neill (of rugby fame) try come to grips with the code's fundamental problems across the ditch.

O'Neill has acknowledged it is his job in the coming months "to communicate a vision and a mission for soccer in this country and to get people to buy into it and feel they have ownership of it".

In my view that's one area where we have largely failed in New Zealand. Here we effectively don't have "ownership", as is best reflected by the fact the national board and all federation boards are dominated by appointed people.

Further, NZS registered a new set of rules on October 1 – using Force Three personnel as witnesses, no less -- rather than their own board members.

As we have mentioned in previous issues, NZS' previous appointee system was not in accordance with Fifa statutes which say an election or appointee process must be independent. NZS have now changed their system – you won't have seen a press release on this -- so that all board members now have to be elected, but four positions are subject to a recruitment, interview and report process -- which actually conspires against the notion of independence).

How can it be democratic for a person nominated to then be subjected to an interview and recommendation prior to the electors having any vote? That cannot be compared with a political party that makes a selection of a candidate because such a candidate is standing for the party. In soccer he stands as an independent.

Why are we making simple election processes so complicated? Why can't "the game" simply elect its board?

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Anyway, back to John O'Neill. He recently came out and said it was "shameful" Australia were ranked 82 in the world, when they should be in the top 20. His solution was to halve the number of Aussie players plying their trade overseas, and to make the Australian national league a "must see" competition.

That is of course the complete opposite of New Zealand Soccer's approach, where they are busting a gut to get players offshore. Oddly enough the difference in philosophy makes sense.

Given its far greater playing resources, it makes sense for Australia to set its sights on building a product for domestic consumption. That has got to be the ultimate aim.

But in New Zealand we are a lot further behind. We desperately need more players plying their trade in the world's professional leagues.

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One of our more sceptical readers has, in the nicest possibly way, pointed out that my gushing editorial of last issue -- feting Nike's sponsorship as having signalled New Zealand soccer stepping aboard the sponsorship gravy train – was bollocks.

I've been invited to recollect the absolute millions that Rothmans contributed to the game here which of course disappeared with anti tobacco legislation. He has a point. Will Nike support the game in both cash and other support to the degree that Rothmans and Winfield did for generations?

Or to take his more cynical view: "Is there any other apparel or equipment sponsor left? NZS has had le Coq Sportif, adidas, Pony, Mitre, Ribero, and Lotto over the years." Touche. I must be going soft.

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I desperately hope the new national league, due to start in October, succeeds (and at this point should declare an interest in having helped out at the periphery of my local prospective entity). However it won't surprise me if it doesn't.

The price and standard of facilities required is far too high for the objective reality of soccer in our communities. If a national body was pumping \$45,000 a year into franchises rather than extracting it, you might have a better basis for success.

If the experience of the last 10 years has taught me anything it is that the more expensive you make a competition, the harder it makes it to sustain over a number of years.

My favourite national league memories actually related to a ground with rotting hoardings, peat surface and a smelly Bitumix works behind the southern goal. There was no drug testing room, no health and safety officer on site, not a steward to be seen. But the place didn't half have some atmosphere.

Pooling of club resources (into a handful of "franchises") will certainly help on the resourcing front, but I fear we will still be a situation where, for every punter through the gate, they'll still be subsidised to the tune of at least \$30 a head with the very expensive criteria laid down. How sustainable is that in the long term? For all that, the last thing the game needs is for people like me to bagging the league. While we might not be able to afford a national league, we can't afford not to have one either.

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Studying the national league competition manual, which sets demanding new criteria for the summer league, got me wondering how many venues elsewhere in the world would scrub up to the quite strict requirements.

Amongst other things, the national league competition manual states that dressing rooms must have a minimum of two toilets (with seats) and at least one urinal in each dressing room. (Refs get by with one seated toilet.) As well, there must be "sufficient toilets for both sexes".

Let me tell you something. Despite the Stade de France in Paris being touted as a "state of the art" sports stadium in everything from its own publicity to the Lonely Planet Guide, it would not have qualified for the national league.

Their toilets were just a hole in the floor. Yes, squatters. The lack of seats would, in the national league, have had them in, er, deep shit.

It was even worse at Lyon's Stade de Gerland. It wouldn't have qualified because it didn't have sufficient toilets for both sexes. In our stand we were treated to the dubious site of the female All White fans having to trawl their way along an open-air men's urinal to a lonely lav with a swinging door when they had to go.

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Talking of what's professional and what isn't, attending the Kingz aftermatch functions in the season just finished was a revelation. You will recall how when the Kingz began five years ago, the players and fans were kept separate. It was the professional way, remember.

I attended the two aftermatch functions at Waikato Stadium following the Kingz losses there this summer, and found they weren't much different to what you'd get at a northern league club (apart from their being fewer people and the visiting team not being part of things).

There was almost a touch of pathos in seeing the Bloc 5 diehards and the players find solace in each other, along with a sprinkling of media. (Gordon Irving and Fred de Jong were even seen to buy their own drinks.)

There are speeches, players sheepishly receive player of the day awards, Michael Utting loons around like a nutter and there is a great little quiz, in which Harry Ngata (King of the Kingz) beats various challengers in football trivia.

For the Sydney Olympic match he comes from behind to spank New Zealand Soccer Writer of the Year Simon Kay (Truth) 5-2. It's a cathartic experience for the affable Kay, who later goes on the record to complain ("well how many of you would have known who David Beckham's Best Man was?").

No doubt this tradition will again wither away as the Kingz rediscover their professionalism in coming seasons.

For some reason it's axiomatic of professionalism that you must establish a Chinese Wall between players and their fan base. But meanwhile, the Kingz are at least tapping into New Zealand's great democratic traditions of the free-for-all aftermatch.

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My favourite moment at the two Kingz matches in Hamilton related to Paul Harries, who I'd like to nominate as the Kingz worst striker of all time.

At the Parramatta Power match on December 28 one of my mates spent the whole 90 keeping up a steady chant of "Run, Harries, Run" -- having observed his general lack of effort, application and mobility.

When Harries belatedly took the field as sub against Sydney Olympic on January 31, it was to an encore of "Run, Harries, Run". As it happened Harries did run for a couple of minutes. At the end of the game my mate eyeballed him at the tunnel entrance and said: "see, it's not that hard when you try it".

Excellent stuff. We shouldn't forget that being a (constructive) critic is an integral part of being a fan.— **Bruce Holloway**



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