

Roger lets rip

By Bruce Holloway

If the federation structure is such a good idea, why isn't it employed at governmental or even local body level?

How come we don't have a majority of appointed representatives _ selected by people who themselves are not subject to public selection _ governing us, rather than all these democratically elected personnel?

And who selects the selectors anyway, and what are their qualifications?

Those are among a host of rhetorical questions former Waikato United coach and New Zealand Soccer coaching co-ordinator Roger Wilkinson posed in a brief but feisty return to Hamilton during the holidays -- before jetting back to his current post as director of private soccer coaching company Premier Skills Ltd in Wolverhampton.

After more than two years away from what used to be a hotbed of soccer, Wilkinson was distraught to see the state of the game in the Waikato: no national league team, the worst northern league finishing positions in 30 years last season, and a Force Three federation seemingly in administrative chaos.

Wilkinson, a driven man and as much a soccer junkie as ever, spent most of his fortnight in Hamilton agitating for clubs

and grass roots elements to start taking control of the game again.

As guest speaker at a Centre Circle Waikato function he stretched the normal apolitical conventions of that soccer service organisation by savaging the shortcomings of organisational structures which have been in operation for the past two years.



It was a rousing 90-minute address, encapsulating a summary of the major trends in the game in the UK, a string of anecdotes too defamatory to be repeated here, and some blunt observations on coaching developments -- or lack of them -- in both hemispheres.

But most critically, Wilkinson used the platform to argue the federation system is a case of the cure being worse than the disease.

"What got me going," Wilkinson says, "was talking to good soccer people in Waikato and the Bay of Plenty. They said 'we know everything is wrong, but we daren't say anything, because our club might be victimised'.

"Well that's either nonsense or bully-boy stuff, but it doesn't change the fact the federations aren't working. There may be the odd one that is doing quite well, but it is not a cohesive package. In fact I think

federations are increasingly proving to be a waste of time.

"We used to have two reasonable associations in Waikato and Bay of Plenty. Sure, we all moaned about them, but the fixtures always came out on time, and they didn't stop you doing anything provided it didn't mean too much work for them. And they always had money in the bank for clubs if they needed low-interest loans for development.

"From that we've moved to an organisation which is all over the show, from what I can see. It has a website which hasn't been updated in two years, its clubs are failing, staff are on stress leave, chief executives come and go and team selections seem to be on the basis of who can afford the money.

"But even worse than that, I think the federation system has fuelled an institutional-type apathy simply because they don't want people challenging the party line, even if the party line is wrong.

"The word is: 'don't argue, just do as we say, sit down, oh you think something is wrong _ you're a troublemaker'. The problem is the federations are driven from the top down and are more answerable to the national body than the grass roots."

Wilkinson offers his own historical take on how soccer, which has seldom starred on the administrative front, has ended up with its current structure.

"It goes back to the late '90s when people were volunteering less, there was more out there for them to do, more problems socially, and even the old raffle disappeared as a means of fundraising.

"Everybody was looking for change, but nobody particularly knew where to go. Then, after a lot of head office incompetence in soccer, in comes (New Zealand Soccer chairman) Kevin Stratful, and everybody, including myself, thought: 'oh, this is a chance, we've got a top businessman.'

"But all he did was force through this concept of seven federations, all run by a majority of non-elected appointees.

"Why seven federations? Nobody can ever explain that. Somebody's just plucked that out of the air.

"And it's a major error thinking some champion of business can come in and run the game. Almost everywhere you look that approach has been proved wrong. I can't think of any top businessman taking hold of a club and actually doing well.

"And when people come in and don't know what to do, you find they always restructure.

"In actual fact what NZS should have said was: 'the associations we've got are not good enough. What we will do is give you a benchmark as to what a good association looks like and give you three years to get up to standard'."

Despite doubts about federations, Wilkinson is just as quick to acknowledge Waikato clubs must also look very carefully at the way they are operating. He challenges clubs to re-form the Waikato Football Association.

"Local rivalry on the pitch is great, but once that is out of the way, the club chairmen have got to get together and discuss how they can push the game up, and make it better, just as the English premier league chairmen do twice a season. Through that you can effectively form an association which should become the conduit for good practice.

"This was the way soccer started. You had men who played and they formed clubs, then clubs formed associations, then associations formed a national body to represent them. That's what we have to get back to, rather than having appointed people telling everyone what to do."

Wilkinson reckons there is a case for NZS chief executive Bill MacGowan, and perhaps even his whole board, to resign.

But hang on, Roger, let's back the truck up a bit here. Isn't New Zealand soccer on the crest of a wave, what with the All Whites ranked in the world's top 50, the books balancing at national level, and participation numbers going through the roof?

"Well, what you've got here is a two-edged situation. It's like one of those 1984 things, where, yes, you've got head office telling us we've just had a great victory over Australia. But then you look out your back door and see the game is crumbling and going backwards.

"The game has shrunk in quality quite considerably in the Waikato. If you were a CEO of a big firm and you saw so many of your districts -- like the Waikato -- failing badly, you'd want to do something about it, wouldn't you?

"A good chief executive will not so much use his power as empower people within the game. A good administrator innovates and encourages others to look outwards. But

under the federation system they don't want that. They want the opposite, with people in a region doing as they are told.

"The first thing they should be doing is asking: 'what does a good club look like? What does a good association look like?' Find a benchmark and get everyone doing it.

"Somewhere, somehow, someone has got to look at our structures and say 'sorry, no, this isn't right'."

For all his criticisms of the game here, Wilkinson is under no illusions that the grass is necessarily greener in the UK.

He just as quickly ticks off a list of failings and complaints about the English game, from financial cons, through

unbalanced lifestyles, to the low priority given to coaching at top level.

So why is Wilkinson so passionate about the state of Waikato soccer when he lives 20,000km away and, incidentally, now boasts the biggest-selling soccer DVD in the US with his Dads 'n Lads training video?

"Because once I have achieved financial independence I want to return to Hamilton, resume coaching, and rebuild Waikato United."

Roger on the Small Whites video: I went to sleep watching it, it's a 100 years

behind the times, and actually has examples of bad practice. I thought it was a case of dressing something up to show sponsors. "Look, here's a promotional tape and there's a booklet." Of course the sponsors don't know.

Roger on the English academies: The big thing that is happening in England is the academies.

Howard Wilkinson introduced the academies about 5-6 years ago. It was going to be the best thing for English soccer, but unfortunately it hasn't worked.

What we've got is the coaching system over there with less qualified coaches than any other country in Europe. Though it's supposed to be an academy, they haven't got enough coaches. I've been working with Wolverhampton wanderers and West Bromwich Albion. West Brom have got a centre of excellence, Wolves have got an academy. But academies can only play other academies. A typical example is that the other week Wolverhampton Wanderers U13s played Newcastle U13s. That

***"Somewhere,
somehow,
someone has got
to look at our
structures and
say 'sorry, no,
this isn't right'."***

meant 3 hours in the bus there, played for one hour, and 3 hours back. On a seven hour day they played for one hour. What they are finding in England is that the kids and the coaches are actually becoming disenfranchised by that.

I know that when I signed for Luton, going in as a 16-year-old into the offices it was great, there was something magical. It was something you aspired to.

Now you've got 13 or 14-year-olds who have seen it all. At grass roots level there are less kids playing.

Roger on coaching juniors in the UK: A lot of the practices that go on aren't actually coaching football. They're coaching something, but it's not football.

We see loads of coaches over there, and apart from a few, the level of coaching at grass roots is not very good. What you have is a group of kids running through cones. And when you dribble through cones, what that prepares you to do is dribble through cones.

There is no decision-making on time and space. The example I give you is that when you taught your kids to walk down the street, you didn't look out of the door and say 'oh, look, there's an empty road, I want you to walk down it and cross the street and cross the street again -- well done, now you're ready to walk in the street'.

You wouldn't do that. Well why would you do it in football, because it's the same analogy? What you did do, was you got hold of your child, you walked with them in your hand and they learned from day one to go in and out of crowds of people and across the road, and they were making decisions with you. Later on they stood by you, and later they went over the road. But from day one they made decisions on time and space. And yet in football we don't do that.

And don't get me wrong, because I've done it too. But running through cones

does not prepare you for play. You must practice playing. When you play you use your senses. You see things, you hear things, you feel touch if you are a front man so you know where the player is.

But the most important sense you've got is the sixth sense. The only way you get that is by playing the game. The big challenge for coaches is to develop practices where kids are making decisions on time and space. That is the work we are doing at the moment.

Roger on coaching myths: There are loads of myths in English football. The FA puts the thing out that they are working at grass roots level. Well, in the last two months we've dealt with 45 junior coaches in the Midlands and we haven't stepped across the FA once, so where they're working I don't know. Football over there is about that top bit. It's about the greedy bit.

Roger on coaching in the premier league: Managing and coaching in the premier league is hard work. John Trewellyn from our firm was Derby County first team coach last year. He said it was a nightmare. You're dealing with about 18 millionaires. They're on telly, they're on the radio, they're on the catwalk, they're everywhere. But getting them out of bed to try and work is a nightmare.

Look at any of the coaching manuals in England -- and Sven Goran Eriksson wrote one -- and there is no coaching in them. It's all about psychology, how to get them to play.

That is the big problem you've got, actual coaching is very low down the agenda at the moment.

A lot of people have stepped out and said: I don't want to work at first-team level -- I'd rather coach the youth team, because the lads are fresh, they'll actually try for me.

Roger on scouting for Crystal

Palace: The only reason I scout for Palace is I get free tickets to the big matches. You can laugh, but to get a good ticket costs an arm and a leg.

I watch, for example, Shrewsbury versus Hartlepool on a cold wet Saturday afternoon. You go down there, the bovril is horrible, they put you in the worst seat in the corner and you could leave after 20 minutes. There is very little quality, because there are not enough individual players coming through.

They're wondering why the crowds are down, but it's because they don't see anything. I can remember seeing Emlyn Hughes at Blackpool or Duncan McKenzie playing in a reserve game at Manchester City and thinking, they're going to be good players. You don't see that any more. They all look the same. They get the ball, they pass it, they get the ball, they pass it. The big boys are in there, they charge up and down, it's blood and snot and away you go.

Roger on young English talent: The other problem they have got is bringing in their own players. Manchester United are struggling. What made them great was not the overseas signings, but that they got five or six very good players through at the same time -- Beckham, Giggs, Scholes, one of the Neville's was actually quite good at the time, and Butt. There's not much coming through at the moment. The things that made them good they stopped doing. I've watched Manchester United's academy teams and they're awful.

Roger on "the chaos game": From

day 1, when they start a game, the aim is to try and score. What they should be trying to do is keep the ball.

Brazil have won the World Cup five times in my lifetime, so they must be doing something right. When a kid comes down to play, he actually wants to get on the ball and show what he can do.

What the coaches over there say is, 'no, come on, we play as a team'. What Brazil do is get their 11 best individuals then try to get them to play as a team. We do team work far too early. We don't let the kids get on the ball and twist and turn.

Coaches always want everything to be crisp. But it's not like that -- it's a chaos game. You see a slow motion of a great player like Maradona -- when he's making a run he's bouncing off people, twisting and turning and hanging onto the ball. That's the first thing we coach at Premier Skills: get on the ball and stay there. When England come up against Brazil, you see they have no-

body who can dribble, because in our foundation play we stopped them doing it.

Roger on coaching grids: I've been watching some work over here, and the first thing that strikes you is the coaching areas are too big. We (Premier Skills) coach in the tight. Great players play in the tight. All of the junior work in this country should be about skill and aiming to produce great players. To do that you need great coaches, including great soccer mums and great soccer dads.

Roger on the bigger picture: You can't divorce football from what is happening in life and there are a lot of

"When England come up against Brazil, you see they have nobody who can dribble, because in our foundation play we stopped them doing it..."

things impacting on the game. One of those things is kids over-eating: 80 per cent of them in England eat their own bodyweight in crisps in nine months. There are more one-parent families than ever before. The school system, which was very good, has fallen away with teachers doing less and less. At least the school coaches were educationalists. Many of the club coaches now think they're mini-Alex Fergusons. There are all sorts of problems there and they actually don't know how to coach.

Roger on defining a club: The cradle of the game in New Zealand is the club. We must think of the club as a soccer

centre. Every club should have a written plan. The one thing you should be talking about all the time is sustainability.. A club is not a club unless it has a coach development programme. You also need an administration development policy. You've got to have a facilities policy.

If your facilities are going backwards, you're going backwards. It doesn't matter if it's just one floodlight a year, improve the facilities. And you need active membership. In the old days it was easy to get people active. You only had a black and white television, and it hurt your eyes. If it's \$100 for membership, it should only be \$50 to be an active member, because they're the ones you really want.

All Whites scarves



An essential accessory for the All Whites match against Iran next month and the Confederation Cup in France

These two-sides scarves feature the flag and a fern at each end and the wording:

The All Whites Oceania Champions 1973, 1998 and 2002.

Only \$20 (incl courier delivery within New Zealand)

**Cheques payable to
Sitter! Merchandising PO Box 10-284 Hamilton
(Remember to include your name and address)**

For inquiries about bulk orders, please contact ronaldo@world-net.co.nz