

## Up front



## Soccer surrogates

When the federation system was set up in 1999, two very clear targets were set.

Federations were to deliver us the ideal platform to achieve two major, unchangeable targets: qualifying for the Women's World Cup (2003) and the 2006 (men's) World Cup.

That neither have been achieved means we need to take a good hard look not just at the Adelaide debacle, where we mirrored our efforts at under 20 and Under 17 level in dropping outside the top two in Oceania, but at our whole structures and

methods of work.

We've had years to plan those goals, but in the case of the senior men's team, have fallen at the first hurdle. It is not unreasonable, at a time when we seem to be drifting at U17, U20 and full senior level – and have a women's team not allowed to compete – to ask if our structures are compatible with our international objectives. We've tragically failed to build on the impact of the U17 Fifa World Championships in 1999.

When the code of rugby suffered a similarly huge setback with the loss of hosting of the World Cup, the middle layers of the game took action. To a large extent that was only possible because rugby's provincial associations were able to have their say, and a degree of grass roots accountability still existed.

It's hard to see the same thing happening in soccer because by its very nature the federation system, with its top-down control, has all but emasculated provincial activism.

Yet why should the All Whites and their coach be held to account, but nobody else? Coaches and players are accountable to NZS. But who is NZS accountable to under the current system? Who do the NZS board report to? Seven federation chairmen? Except federations have been set up as "branches" of NZS and can't do anything without NZS approval. So there you have it. A system of in-built unaccountability. Brilliant.

Presumably it was the board that set the targets and voted the resources for the Oceania campaign. But unlike rugby, there is no mechanism for activating a public review. No doubt there will be a review of sorts, though the experience of the Ineson Review – where findings are kept top secret – suggests we shouldn't be expecting anything like a cathartic experience at top level.

As I write, so far Mick Waitt has been the only casualty. And that was, in a sense, automatic, with his contract expiring when the All Whites failed to qualify.

But was anybody else surprised to see that in the post-Adelaide debrief, Waitt was interviewed by Bill MacGowan and Paul Smalley? Hang on. Weren't these two among those under criticism themselves for their role in the All Whites failure?

I could go on for pages in this vein, but sense there is little point. There is another reason why soccer won't replicate rugby, and it has nothing to do with the conspiracy theories so often canvassed on these pages.

If we step back from the internal politics of the game (and fingerpointing such as mine) there may be a more fundamental explanation for our international struggles.

Trawl around the football parks on a Saturday (or Sunday) afternoon and you'll see thousands of participants and a thriving sub-culture. But few of these people could even

tell you who the All Whites captain is.

The sad truth is so many of us get our consumer “fix” of top soccer from avenues quite distinct from any sense of national pride or sense of ownership of a national team. As consumers of the game we all get our weekly hit of top action by following overseas clubs or their national teams.

For example, in my neighbourhood, pubs were opening at 6.30am to show Euro 2004 matches. Our “outlet” or “release” for top-level football is mostly not from our own national team. To a certain extent we’ve reaped what we’ve failed to sow. It’s hard for fans to relate to a team they never see, though under this chicken-and-egg scenario, it must be acknowledged internationals in soccer are money-losers in New Zealand, not money-spinners.

The end result is the vast majority of Kiwi football lovers are totally alienated from any emotional link with the All Whites. Manchester United, Arsenal, England, Brazil, even Greece for goodness sake, have become our surrogate “national teams”. In turn this means there is less grass roots pressure “to get it right” with the All Whites. In that respect, it’s not overstating things to argue overseas football interest holds local development to ransom.

NZS has not been besieged by a swathe of resolutions, angry mobs or volcanic media pressure. Sitter! readers will be the exception, but out there in Soccerland too many people simply don’t give a rat’s arse. For the diet of soccer consumption, right now they feel completely sated, having sat through a brilliant televised Euro 2004. Portugal was their Adelaide.

It’s all very well for people like me to say we’ve instituted a top-down culture of failing to listen to the needs of the game. We do have a bureaucratic system of governance whereas we previously had a democratic one. But the bottom line is too few people care enough about the All Whites to say anything worth listening to in the first place.

That we succeed, occasionally, at international level is in spite of the fabric of our New Zealand game, rather than because of it.

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Before the Oceania tournament started, I suggested in other forums that the All Whites were one of the weaker combinations of the modern era.

Because we never see them, it is hard to say who of our overseas contingent deserve selection and who don’t.

But the writing was on the wall when we included 10 players from a pretty ordinary Olympic squad. These players we *had* seen. History suggests you get three or four players breaking through together from this level, but 10?

If I’d been selecting I’d definitely have had Michael Utting in ahead of Glen Moss and Tamati Williams, despite a mixed season with the Kingz. Ditto for Harry Ngata and Chris Jackson. Kris Bouckennooghe and Allan Pearce would both have got the nod far ahead of Neil Jones.

Billy Harris suggested Jonathan Perry a better bet at fullback than youngsters. I’m not convinced on my sole viewing of him this season (though Billy coaches him every week) though I’d definitely have his team mate Hoani Edwards – perhaps the best player in New Zealand never to “make it”.

If eligible, I’d take a punt on Miro Major, if only because he has international level technical skill and would also be valuable at free kick time.

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Good on All Whites captain Ryan Nelsen for having the courage of his convictions and speaking his mind about the All Whites in Adelaide.

In case you missed it, interviewed on Sky Sport, Nelsen said Waitt was given a rough deal by NZ Soccer and that others should also take some blame; that NZS was arrogant in not arranging warm-up matches; that he felt sorry for Waitt because he was a head coach who wasn't allowed to pick his own management team (assistant coach & manager) and he had a technical director staring down at him every minute of the day; that he didn't feel the management were on the same wavelength as a result and there were a lot of different agendas.

Yes, it might have been more diplomatic to shut up and say nothing, and you can empathise with NZS frustration at having their captain, role model and best player speak so frankly.

But the fact that such unprecedented dissension has become so apparent means it is time for the chief executive to acknowledge there is horrible dysfunction in our international coaching dept -- Sitter! publicised this last year -- and sort it out.

For fans at least, it has been a breath of fresh air to hear a leader speak so candidly. And a leader is what Nelsen is. Nelsen's personal integrity has been recognised everywhere he has played, from Canterbury junior reps though to DC United. We might have a multitude of problems at senior international level, but at least we have a skipper who knows real leadership is about more than tossing a coin.

Anecdotal evidence supplied to Sitter! suggests the following in-house problems with the All Whites:

- # The senior players generally didn't rate the newcomers.

- # The senior players were generally happy with Mick Waitt but the very presence of technical director Paul Smalley really got their backs up. ("Why can't he just stick to coaching coaches"). At least one player has privately suggested he will not play for the All Whites again while Smalley is involved.

- # A minor rift between "arrogant" US-based players and the rest.

Further, Ricki Herbert appears to have had significantly different ideas to Waitt (nb: this suggestion was relayed via other coaches, not players) prior and during the tourney. The very purpose of a No 2 is to be there to support a No 1. If not, he should step aside and let the No 1 fail/succeed all by himself.

It's not so long ago that the sense of camaraderie was one of the strengths of the All White camp. So what has changed/gone wrong? Players hopefully will pluck up the courage to say publicly what they are saying privately.

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The Adelaide disaster means its only natural our development programmes will also come under scrutiny.

The other day I was at the hairdressers and the bimbo with the scissors proudly told me her girl was doing New Zealand Soccer's International Player Development Programme (IPDP).

"She thinks she's going to play for New Zealand one day", Scissor-Lady said.

"That's fantastic," I replied.

"Umm, she's actually not very good," Scissor-hands said. "We're just humouring her and trying to encourage her to get into sport."

To be fair, that's great too. But what on earth is she doing on a programme supposedly designed to make New Zealanders "totally competitive against the likes of

the David Beckhams, the Zinedene Zidanes"? (NZS IPDP pamphlet.)

There seems to be mixed messages on whether the IPDP is an elite development programme or just a low-quality experience that can raise a lot of money.

(Not that that should be sneezed at – at least such programmes offer a financial pathway for more people to get into coaching professionally.)

I particularly dislike "the blackmail factor" NZS has built into its IPDP programme. The NZS pamphlet described IPDP as: *"the only means by which any player will be able to participate at the international level for New Zealand"*. In other words, if you are a good player and choose to fine-tune your game by getting specialist coaching anywhere else apart from having a kickaround with my hairdresser's daughter, you are ineligible to play for NZ. How stupid is that?

The fact is that many of our better younger players -- who are already in top school and club teams -- are over-committed soccer-wise. And these high achievers can get usually better value with first team coaching at club and school than hang around in massive groups with poor coach-player ratio, covering a vast spectrum of ability.

They either opt out (now officially out of the loop, despite their ability, remember) or pay the "blackmail tax" to remain in the IPDP system, but don't go. Evidence of this can be read in club internet forums around the country.

There is an urgent need to take a broader approach. The ruling mantra that "this is the only path" is as bad as saying there is only one way to play. To be fair, I know some federations are challenging this. They call it "the Paul Smalley approach", and they intensely dislike it.

Everyone will have their own view, but personally I'd rather have our national academies full of the very best prospects, regardless of whether they went to Mike Groom's samba soccer, Wynton Rufer's Wynrs or IPDP.

Clubs, schools and players themselves pretty much know who the best prospects are. They're the ones everyone wants to play for them. In my neighbourhood I see good players who are not part of IPDP and I see average players who are. Then, not unreasonably, I wonder if we have the best system, if good players are outside it, and average ones inside.

It may be fairer to people who pay big money, but will it give us better national teams (which was the original purpose)? You decide.

But if our better players are to be excluded from national academies on "blackmail" grounds, does that not raise a number of questions about the processes and what you are trying to achieve from them?

On the positive side, we do need broad community programmes like IPDP. The problem is, that on a week to week basis (apart from a couple of regional academies a year) we don't have our best young players working together under the best coaches.

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If we are to take the IPDP seriously, should we also be alarmed at the amazing variance in enrolments?

Force 3 has 185 boys in its 13s intake, Fed 4 has 20. Fed 4 doesn't have any 15s or 17s boys. Mainland only has four girls in total in 8s, 9s, 10s and 11s programmes. You heard me, four of them.

In our 15s national academy -- from where we might hope to find our All Whites for the 2014 campaign -- there are just 25 players. There are 28 in the 16s. Some of these things could be fixed/improved quite easily. Others require a change in mindset that

people at the coalface tell me they are not expecting any time soon. Meanwhile federation tournaments had their "identification" status removed last year. Just to make sure they were downgraded, NZS ran their coaching courses at the same time, so that all the top coaches weren't tempted to attend with their fed teams.

Remember how the initial theory on creating seven federations was that they would play, with the eighth team comprised of a national squad from the age group below, and from these good players would be identified. Dismantled.

A national youth squad also did not play at the Napier Youth Champs for the first time in ages last year. The philosophy today seems to be more about training than playing. In the circumstances perhaps it's hardly surprising there were no warm-up matches for Adelaide. I suspect the governing belief was that training sessions would be more useful.

Meanwhile, some more factoids. There are 88 players in the national 14s academy and 119 in the 13s. Of the 14s, just 30 live north of Taupo. The suggestion is, at that age group the bulk of the best players reside down South, rather than in the presumed junior powerhouse of the north. Of course, if we re-instituted "identification" tournaments, we'd have a better means of evaluating whether they were the best.

In girls soccer, there are just 24 players in the national 14s academy. How alarming is that, if IPDP really is the latest magic formula? There are also just 24 in the 16s academy. If the answer is getting them even younger, in the IPDP nationally there are just 40 9-year-old girls, and 23 8-year-olds. This future we are building for in wimmins soccer (rather than contesting the Olympics) looks dodgy.

On a similar subject, it alarms me even more that, after a dearth of significant coach education and development for years, we find that new programmes are founded on ignoring or refusing to recognise all previous domestic qualifications.

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There hasn't been enough information in the public domain to judge whether Ole

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Madrids have any sort of case against NZ Soccer after missing out on national league selection.

In case you've been on Mars, the Porirua-based consortium has filed for damages and legal fees against NZS in the High Court after not making the cut, and they are also seeking entry into the revamped league.

But I did chuckle at the news their court case included an application for costs of \$300,000 for "foregone profit."

At first I assumed this was some sort of accounting jargon to cover the profits the franchise personnel might have earned had they not been tied up with all this wrangling.

But no, their spokesman Mark Scott told me it was what they expected to earn in league profits. Ho, ho, ho.

I asked him for a copy of their league application to allow independent scrutiny, but he said it was central to the court case and could not do so.

A person not badly positioned to comment said the Madrid's league application was arguably the best of all submitted. (East Auckland's was the worst).

If I follow this correctly, Madrid's prime beef isn't that they weren't selected, but that the rules of the process, as prescribed, weren't followed.

They're arguing they weren't operating on a level playing field -- that they met the criteria and were excluded while entities that did not meet the criteria were included.

The suggestion is they lost out not for quality reasons, but for reasons (geographic spread, playing strength) which fell outside of the set criteria. If you were in that position, and believed in what you were doing, is a court case surprising?

My own view is that if you go through an exercise like this, and 11 or 12 or 13 or 14 teams meet the criteria, you go with them. That's the whole point of criteria. You either meet it or you don't.

If too many make the criteria for the logistics of a season-- settle it on the field.

And if a place the size of Wellington hasn't got the playing strength to support two teams -- (it was pathetic hearing Wellington people actually argue this was the case), it's about time somebody asked what the hell is going on in Capital Soccer?

The other thing about the court spat is all applicants signed a basically worthless pledge saying they wouldn't take legal action.

Here you can't help but note the irony of NZS making such efforts to court limited liability companies. It is of course much harder to brow-beat and intimidate other "non-soccer" entities once they have bought into such processes. And NZS doesn't have a great track record in court cases -- ask Nelson, who beat them 1-0 on an own goal in 1999.

For all that, I'd be more astonished if this court case went the distance.

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Steve Sumner was the pick of the Sky TV pundits for the Euro 2004 coverage. His comments were insightful and eloquent, added great value and never failed to capture the essence of the moment. I don't think it is overstating it to suggest Sumner is our pre-eminent football pundit by quite some margin.

Fred de Jong was also excellent value, furrowing his brow like a true fan, and never being afraid to offer strong contentious opinions on players and teams.

Quite what Virgil Tracey from Thunderbirds was doing there some mornings, I'm not sure, but all in all, there are signs that we are finally achieving some sort of maturity with our television presentation of soccer

– **Bruce Holloway.**