

# Wombat's review of 2002

By, er, Wombat

When one contrives a retrospective analysis of the preceding football season there are effectively two roads to take. Look at the positive aspects, or merely indulge about what is wrong in the game today. The Forrest Gump approach may be a tad too sanguine course to take, so perhaps I'll just mix it up as it comes to me.

The initial recollection that prevails is that old chestnut of Australian attitudes towards their Kiwi cousins. For so long we are obliged to be ignored, or alternatively if mentioned, dismissed as a protuberance of some sorts. The unintelligible rhetoric regurgitated by the Australian media and soccer administrators, and players alike, are that we New Zealanders are mere fodder, a minnow of the game, our participation in FIFA ranked events treated with similar expectation that would a row boat which had entered into the America's Cup.

And yet despite such imprudent contemptuousness, (I just wanted to use a 16 letter word) as dispensed by those kangaroo huggers, they incredibly manage to somehow surpass such objectivity with a new level of arrogance.

Having collectively dismissed New Zealand soccer for so long, along comes the unique opportunity that FIFA has granted, by bestowing upon nations in the Oceania region, the chance to secure immediate access to the upcoming World Cup Finals.

One would expect the indignation to continue. But no, instead we are

saturated with immature broodings that suddenly summarise that the Football Kingz be drop-kicked out of the NSL. Kneaded in the nuts would be a more apt description.

No sooner is a level playing field adapted, that they cry foul. I find this attitude beneath contempt, and undermines the whole sporting ethic.

Shouldn't they be glad that our soccer players improve, even with their support and so victory on either side would be the sweeter. I for one would gladly vote on the Kingz expulsion from the NSL, if the Aussies are so concerned that we may become too good for them in the future. But at the same time, their nation must agree to withdraw all their rugby teams from the Super 12.

I am not attacking the Australian soccer gonads, simply defending ourselves due to the incredibly conceited manner in which they dismissed our country's chances of soccer success.

It was to such a degree that barely a single soul professional plying his trade in Europe, earning in a week, what most of us would in a year, could be bothered to return to the southern hemisphere and slip on the green and gold.

At least New Zealanders are only too willing to return and wear the Silver Fern at every opportunity. The courage and pride is reflected in the deserved esteem in which they are held by NZ's soccer public.

It is an honourable trait many NZ sportsmen share, and I truly hope that no matter how successful our footballers

become that they will always remain humble, and jump at any chance to represent their country, as they do so today.

The Aussies were fortunate not to be knocked out in the semis of the Con Fed Cup by a bustling Tahiti team, nevertheless victory was more the sweeter when we dispensed of them ourselves. Then they have the audacity to want the Football Kingz removed from the NSL.

Their overseas based players are well remunerated, especially those in Europe or the British Leagues. They can make anything between \$20,000 to \$40,000 a week. Yet these players couldn't "afford" to fly themselves to Dingoland and so represent their country.

Of course the direct entry for Oceania into the 2006 World Cup and beyond is an exciting occasion for the teams in

and around Polynesia. This will ensure that the lesser lights will be more likely to improve. And the actual winners will stand to prosper like never before.

There is the concept that NZ could be better off if we competed in an integrated Asian section in order to qualify, where the exposure would be heightened on many levels. Such as far more fans in the crowd, especially overseas, and so bigger media attention would be applied in those countries, so not just ensuring a great experience and exposure for our players, but they would gain the much needed higher level of competition by playing against higher ranked teams.

NZ's FIFA ranking can really only improve by gaining positive results against those nations which are ranked

higher than ourselves, where-as beating Fiji or Rarotonga continuously won't necessarily help improve the game here much.

The risk of battling against a few Pacific Atolls, could even bring our performances down, or certainly leave us lagging while other Confederations improve against one another. Even worse is the possibility that with the higher rewards on offer, one resort island may humiliate a fancied country like ourselves and set us back a few decades, maybe it's a blessing to be the underdog!

Arguably the Kingz have produced

another season of indifference hampered by certain difficulties both on and off the pitch.

In my opinion the club and the NSL competition in general is a welcome addition to the sporting calendar, but the club does need uncon-

ditional support to strive in the future. The potential for the Kingz to promote themselves and become the new 'Perth Glory' is evident.

Having experienced the Western Australians' first hand, I have witnessed quite a lot of what actually contributes to their successes. Indeed out city and catchment areas for support is roughly the same as theirs, but perhaps we need a decent venue for a start. Perennial Scottish cellar dwellers Queens Park play at their country's' national stadium - Hampden Park, it may be suitable for bigger events or crowds, but what's the point of having 500 fans scattered in a massive modern stadium with a 50,000 capacity.

So this brings us to support: Or lack of

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it from spectators, sponsors and media. It certainly needs to be far more widespread and positive.

The worst culprits are the Hillary Commission, Lottery Grants Board, Internal Affairs - well I have probably named the wrong departments and maybe missed those really at fault, but the point is not enough public funding gets funnelled into the game, especially considering it's huge participation, especially amongst children.

If soccer in this country received it's fair allocation of funding that the oval ball code gets, this country would already be half way to the World Cup in Germany, 2006.

What I'd like to see is an influx of more entrepreneurs. Where are the other Chris Turner's of this world? The thinkers, motivators, and doers. A boat doesn't row itself you know. Let's not be flippant about this, the Kingz exist because of some forward thinking, a lot of work and some great belief.

I welcome more inclusion in all aspects of NZ soccer from any type of contributor, whether they deliver knowledge or experience, contacts, new or improved skills in coaching or administration, or even a monetary input or just plain vision would be definitely welcomed, not just by the Kingz but NZ soccer in general.

I am rather disillusioned by the apparent disintegration of local league clubs that are rapidly consuming themselves. I just hope that a lot of thought and planning goes into this before we lose too much of our heritage and traditional clubs. And I still harbour a point of contention toward the fact that in reality there is virtually no soccer at all, especially overseas stuff on free-to-air television.

Sure should you choose the monopoly of Sky TV, which does deliver a good product, you have to pay for it. But

there are anomalies. Where is the FA Cup or League Cup. Certain European Leagues are not shown at all. We have two Kiwis playing in the MLS in America, wouldn't it be wise to try and get these matches and highlight the success of these individuals not just for followers of the game but to inspire our burgeoning youngsters?

I think there is a lack of utilisation of the 1982 All Whites squad, especially in a prominent manner. Most of all, Wynton Rufer - who is of such youth, and has both played the game at the highest level and amazingly is on first names terms with many FIFA big guns, as well as past stars such as Platini and Pele and many other influential people in the game.

I would imagine any other nation would be jealous of such a contact, and attempt to make the most of such a situation. Petty jealousies and agendas in this code in NZ should have no place to fester.

Now to put some positive emphasis back toward the SKY coverage of live Kingz matches - both home and away. This is apparently unparalleled within the NSL, well done!

We should appreciate the things we do possess. And then there's the fledgling shows such as Kidz Kingz and Soccer Central, sure they need a little improvement, maybe be a bit more cutting edge, it just probably needs a bad boy on board to compliment all the current niceties. These are minor imperfections, and I feel that these shows are a great asset and a wonderful opportunity to document soccer on a national level.

I congratulate the efforts within NZ soccer under Bill McGowan and his team, which has seen a resurgence in our performances internationally. And the appointment of Paul Smalley in a prominent position. And the introduction of such a programme as the Small Whites

and the accompanying video and involvement of D.C. United's Ryan Nelsen.

I save special aversion to the greed displayed by many Auckland clubs who haphazardly hurl money in order to obtain players rather than concentrate on blooding their own youngsters.

This is detrimental to their own financial future and the overall good of the game. For too long I have observed the steady flow of sponsorship money, and revenue from fans bypass the club treasury, only to be deposited directly into player pockets.

I have no problem with amounts be paid to performers, but it is high time that certain percentages are diverted into youth coffers for development, coaching incentives for staff, training referees, and establishing and maintaining clubrooms and facilities.

Take a look at your own club. If it appears run down and still has a sundial on the forecourt, you know you are being duped. The sooner this is sorted out, the faster the game will improve on many levels.

Not wanting to be accused of creating a document that is orderly and properly arranged, I revert back to the Kingz.

I welcomed the inclusion of a Sesame Street look-a-alike, with a teenage-mutant Ninja turtle name playing here - notably one Raffaele de Gregorio, but a muppet he certainly isn't.

He is very much the new breed, a player with overseas experience, and brings the code a certain charm and reverence. Like many of his team mates he is eloquent and readily approachable, ladies! Having players who make themselves accessible to their fans is a commendable attribute of both the individual and the club.

Auckland is fortunate enough to have two prominent specialist soccer shops, both excellent and well stocked - Soccer

Scene in Pt Chevalier and the Soccer Locker in Howick. A welcome addition to compliment the larger chain stores which cover sports in general.

But more than anything I am in awe of the explosion of choice apparent in our football community for players, a wide range of activity and competition:

Sub-soccer, mixed teams, senior leagues, indoor soccer contests, 7-a-side summer tournaments and the new and improved venues present at schools, gymnasiums and other sports centers.

Not forgetting the latest incarnation - underwater flamingo 4-a-side left-footed football, not.

In summary, 2002 delivered the World Cup - a huge, roller coaster of a contest, with the upsurge of new and emerging nations. But closer to home, we again suffered from virtually no tours by top foreign sides, certainly zero English ones and so no Premiership teams. Incredibly a number of clubs bother to travel to Australia, but seem oblivious of ourselves.

With exception to the recent Con Fed qualifiers, there is a definite lack of full All White internationals, especially home ties.

I suggest we follow cricket's example and tour the Caribbean. At least the players would enjoy themselves in the climate, and so would any travelling fans. And finally, I applaud the existence of our Kiwi exports, especially those with prominent clubs such as Ivan Vicelich at Holland's Roda JC, and the players in the MLS. The development of Kiwis abroad is extremely important, and though may be limited presently, is a good beginning that will hopefully turn from a trickle into a torrent.

**# Just in case anybody has read this far, Wombat is a founding Sitter! contributor from Auckland who looks like "The Dude" in "The Big Lebowski".**