RUNNING HEAD: Australia Soccer's Marginalisation

Coming in From the Margins: Ethnicity, Community Support, and the Rebranding

of Australian Soccer

James Skinner, PhD, Dwight H. Zakus, PhD, and Allan Edwards, PhD

Griffith University, Gold Coast Campus

Queensland, Australia

Contact:
James Skinner, PhD
School of Education and Professional Studies
Faculty of Education, Arts, and Law
Griffith University Gold Coast campus
PMB50 Gold Coast Mail Centre
Bundall, QLD, Australia 9726
Telephone: 617 5552 8645
Email: j.skinner@griffith.edu.au

Abstract

Soccer in Australia exists at the margin of the professional sport landscape, although it enjoys popularity at the development levels. This historic position is the result of many social and political forces. With four football codes operating in Australia, amongst other elite and professional sport teams and leagues, soccer occupied a troubled position. The sustenance and growth of the sport emanates from a strong ethnic, immigrant basis of soccer, but this base also resulted in further marginalisation of the code. Add to these difficulties with organisational and governance issues, soccer was a management 'basket-case' for some time. Marginalisation in the Oceania federation and questionable qualifying processes for the World Cup exacerbated the problems in Australian soccer. This paper traces the various changes to soccer in Australia as it seeks to move into the mainstream of national and international sport. A reorganised national sport governing body, the Football Federation of Australia, a new national professional competition in the A-League, new television revenues, and membership in the Asian Football Confederation point to the changes that will lead Australian soccer into the mainstream of the 'world game'.

Introduction

Australia is one of the few countries in the world that has four football codes operating full professional leagues and development systems. Of these codes Australian Rules football, an indigenously developed hybrid of other sport and football codes, is the most widely supported and revenue rich league. The other codes are imports from Britain due to Australia's colonial past--rugby and soccer. Of these, and in terms of media, audience, and revenue attraction, rugby league and rugby occupy the second and third places in terms of fan and media support. The development of these codes paralleled their historical evolution in the Britain around the "football split" between the professional and amateur based codes of rugby. The fourth football code, association football (hereafter soccer) occupies the most troubled and lowest fan, media, and revenue support of all football codes.

For a country with a small population, the existence of four football codes, each with a national professional league, local semi-professional competitions, and with development systems and concomitant organisations locally, nationally, and internationally represents a major accomplishment. Underlying this however is a fear by the top three codes that soccer might rise to challenge their positions and take players, fans, media attention, and revenues away.

Soccer in Australia, however, occupies a paradoxical position in that is has the highest overall participant rates, yet is ranked fourth of the four codes in popularity and resources. That is, it is seen as a marginal code in respect to the media attention, professional leagues and salaries, opportunities for players in Australia, its sponsorship and revenue generation opportunities, and its position in global football successes. This marginalisation, until very recently, resulted from government policy (and the contradictions it set in train), attitudes in media reporting, reactions by other sport leaders, and xenophobic discourse. To understand this position and the future of soccer in Australia, one needs to understand its history and its fundamental connection to ethnic communities and populations (Skinner, Zakus, & Edwards, 2005).

This paper looks at that history and soccer's direct relationship to various ethnic communities and populations. This discussion provides the basis for examining the position and development of the sport over time, with particular emphasis on the evolution of the National Soccer League (NSL), and how recent structural changes to the sport seek to bring it in from the margins.

The Historical Position of Soccer in Australia

As with most western sports in Australia, their arrival was due to British colonising of greater parts of the world, especially during the 19th century. The sports of the military, government, free settlers, and of upper classes colonisers were brought from the mother country. The English and in particular the Scots, fomented the early game of 'football'. Although the first recorded match of soccer was not until the late 1880s (Mosely & Murray, 1994), a number of communities across Australia formed clubs and regularly played the sport by this time. The early development of soccer in Australia and the ongoing Anglo-Australian position of the code were due to this group. It also set up the first differentiation of soccer to rugby and Australian rules, where soccer was marginalised as a 'pommie' game.

Soccer did attract a playing and spectating following. Records of overseas clubs and national teams show strong support for the games played in Australia. In the early 20th century, and indicative of a colonial country, immigration was (and continues to be) necessary for the growth of the nation. When Australia formed in 1901 one of the first national policies was the *Immigration Restriction Act* that set out a *'White Australia'* position for future settlement; that is, immigrants from English speaking countries were preferred and sought. As is also known with hindsight, the pool of potential immigrants cannot be so restricted. Some would suggest Australia's current government continues an unofficial *'White Australia'* policy against the tide of refugees from Asia, Africa, the Middle East, and other non-English speaking milieux despite a 'multi-culturalism' policy set in the 1970s. Non-Anglo-Australians therefore became the 'other' that set up relative positions for exacerbating xenophobic attitudes and behaviours. It is in this broader ethnocentric position that immigrants enter the picture in their masses.

While there were influxes of immigrants in the pre-confederation period around the 1880s, between 1910-1914, and then the 1920s, it was following the Second World War that significant numbers arrived from outside of English speaking settings. Further, many of these people suffered through horrors of war, genocide, and displacement. These horrors were not alleviated upon arrival in Australia as many immigrants worked in isolated rural areas, for low pay, and received further prejudicial treatment. Their position as 'other' abetted the distinction of their culture, language, and life as different and as a point to attack (or at least to be treated as lesser). Concentration of new immigrants, mostly males in the first instance, forced the new peoples to seek their fellow compatriots for survival.

Ethnic enclaves grew, in both rural and urban landscapes, as immigrants sought solace in those with the same cultural identity. The activities and associations formed often included

sport activities, clubs, and competitions as a feature of these groupings. With most of these post-WWII arrivals being from Eastern Europe soccer was their sport of choice. Thus started an expansion of the code in Australia and the mainstay of its success, on the one hand, however, on the other hand led to soccer's further marginalisation.

The late Australian soccer identity Johnny Warren's biography provided an 'insiders' view of the code under Australian circumstances. The title of the book is *Sheilas, Wogs, and Poofters* (Warren, Harper, & Whittington, 2002) set to outline the marginalisation of the code and the Anglo-Australian anti-ethnic position on the code. One emphasis for this paper is the labelling of soccer as 'wogball', a complete ethnicisation of the code and its basis. This was the second label that marginalised soccer in Australia.

This biography, however, is not the only source outlining the marginalisation of soccer with the "mass arrival six million immigrants between 1945 and 1990" (Mosely & Murray, 1994, p. 222). Of these, the number from Europe was greater than those from the United Kingdom, Ireland, and New Zealand. Of the Europeans the major ethnic groups were: Italians, Greeks, Yugoslavs (Croatians and Serbs), Poles, Dutch, Germans, and Maltese. As noted above, ethnic communities formed that helped these people adapt to life in Australia. Their common cultural base became part of the way their sporting and sport club formations operated and developed. Again, for many of these immigrants soccer became a defining cultural characteristic in their new country.

Conflict with existing ethnic groups in Australia (e.g., the Anglo-Australians not the indigenous racial peoples) fomented on several fronts. The first was in terms of the federal government's ill attempts at multi-cultural policy. Australia continues to exhibit a xenophobic attitude and way of dealing with non-Australians in or seeking to come to the country. Though this new policy sought to ameliorate and integrate different racial and cultural (ethnic) groups, the entrenched attitudes and behaviours of the 'white Australia policy' failed to go away. This became evident in terms of soccer as government pressure to reduce its organisational and governance issues led to direct federal government intervention into the sport (see below).

The second conflict or paradox resulted from the incoherent structure and the operations of governing bodies for soccer at state and national levels in Australia. From its early days soccer witnessed several new governing bodies for the sport. Basically they split on ethnic lines. Also, the conflict surrounded ethnic soccer clubs wanting to compete as clubs with particular identities (and with a European style of play) versus the Anglo-Australian district level structure of competitions (and a UK style of play). This split also had to do with

money, as the ethnic clubs were well funded and wealthy, while other clubs struggled. Ethnic clubs also were able to import talent from overseas further strengthening their success (although it did lead to a FIFA ban on Australian soccer). Finally, the attempted de-ethnicisation of soccer in the 1960s and 1970s further marginalised ethnic clubs and split the code. The struggles were not merely around the violence and ground disturbances of old ethnic rivalries; it was about the 'whiteness' (Farquaharson & Marjoribanks, 2006), power, and future development of the sport on Australian lines.

A third paradox surrounds the marginalisation of ethnic supporters who have sustained the sport in Australia; as well as producing many of the 400 ex-pat players around the world. From a marketing perspective, ignoring a strong market segment does not seem a wise move. Likewise, moving the television contract from the Special Broadcast Services (SBS) network, or 'Soccer Bloody Soccer' as it is popularly known in Australia, to the cable only Foxsports network, downplays the historic sustenance of the sport in Australia. How much the recently formed Football Federation of Australia (FFA) moves soccer from its ethnic roots and supporting media in the direction of exclusion and toward a major place in the sport and football marketplace in Australia is part of the future.

Developing new soccer futures has not been a smooth or steady progress. The following sections point to the wider societal pressures on soccer. As is evident, these pressures have not always resulted in positive results; in fact, they often resulted in the further marginalisation of the sport and to retardation of code's success nationally and internationally. That story with its permeations and uncertainties follows.

Repositioning and Rebranding the Elite Game

Established in 1977 the National Soccer League (NSL) was the first truly national premiership competition of any sporting code in Australia. Since its inception however, the NSL was a highly volatile league plagued by problems and controversies. Several issues have combined to make soccer such a difficult product to develop at the elite level in Australia. Factors such as the failure to retain or attract high quality players, tension between clubs and supporters stemming from 'traditional' European political, racial, and cultural conflicts, financial instability, and poor senior-level management that were all prominently reported in the sporting and business sections of the Australian media over numerous years (Macdonald & Skinner, 2001)..

Initially, the Australian Soccer Federation (ASF) banned clubs unwilling to forego their ethnic names and symbols. As a consequence, the Victorian Greek Soccer club, South

Melbourne Hellas adopted the shortened title South Melbourne (Radnege, 2001). However, in 1983 the ASF retreated from this position because it could not attract enough clubs or sponsorship. Between 1977 and 1982 crowd numbers stagnated as the public failed to embrace the code. Ethnicity therefore reattached itself to the national league (Mosley, 1995).

In an attempt to attract greater interest in the code and attendance at matches the NSL switched to the summer months in 1989-90. In the winter, the airwaves were, and still are, dominated by the Australian Football League and the National Rugby League on free-to-air television and the radio (plus Rugby Union on the FoxSports cable network). The shift was seen as a way of not directly competing with these codes while at the same time aligning the league with the European season. The problem was the code now had to compete with the increasingly popular international summer sports of cricket, tennis, and basketball (which had also moved to the summer season).

By 1990 however it became apparent that soccer in Australia was not being embraced by mainstream society and its ethnic associations were marginalising its support. As a consequence, in 1990 Dr Graham Bradley was appointed by the ASF to report on the state and future of the sport. Bradley's report suggested that Australian soccer was seen as a game for ethnics (Westerbeek, Smith, & Deane, 2005). Bradley recommended a re-adjustment of the management structure of the ASF and emphasized the need for the development of a highly successful national team, a prestigious National Soccer League, and an active junior base in all states (Shilbury & Deane, 1995).

As a consequence of the Bradley report in 1991 an operational review of Australian soccer was undertaken. In 1991 14 teams composed the NSL, seven from Sydney, four from Melbourne, two from Adelaide, and one from Wollongong (country New South Wales city). The composition of the league was changed to reflect a greater national presence. The revamped league consisted of six teams from NSW, four from Victoria, three from South Australia, and one from Queensland (Shilbury & Deane, 1995). It was hoped that this strategy would assist in de-ethicising the code. The change however, had limited impact in removing the ethnic association the general public attached to soccer (Hughson, 1997). Consequently, in 1992 the ASF banned ethnic names at all level of competition. A formal ruling compelled all teams playing in the NSL to abandon their ethnic names (Hughson, 1998).

Attempting to reposition the NSL to the mainstream Australian community was a difficult task, made even more challenging as other issues continued to plague the code. During 1993 and 1994 Australian soccer was the subject of a series of rumours concerning the administration of the player transfer system. It was suggested that large amounts of money

from overseas clubs were being transferred to unknown parties. In order to counter the increasingly suspicious public perception about the transfer system the ASF, in June 1994, appointed Donald Gerald Stewart, a former judge of the Supreme Court of New South Wales, and a former head of the National Crime Authority, to conduct a formal inquiry into Australian Soccer. Justice Stewart's report was never published by the ASF as it was suggested it had the potential to destroy the reputations of various persons within the ASF. The report however was published by the Senate (Australia's Upper House in the Federal Government), which severely criticised the transfer system and noted that Australian players were being exploited by NSL clubs (Dabscheck, 2002).

In 1996 a new strategy was devised to garnish mainstream support. In advance of the 1996 season the ASF became Soccer Australia (SA) and David Hill appointed as the new chairman. The renaming was employed to signal a new era in the code, a name that was not associated with the problems and controversies of the past. One of Hill's first directions was to instruct the clubs to remove symbols of European nationalism from their clubs' logos, including team uniforms, club flags, stadium names, and letterheads. The Italian club Marconi Fairfield was ejected from the league in August 1996 after refusing to remove the Italian flag colours from its boomerang logo. Sydney and Melbourne Croatia were also expelled for failure to remove their national symbol. This measure provoked indignation from other clubs and the entire soccer community (Westerbeek et al., 2005).

To avoid conflict between these ethnic communities and SA David Hill brokered a compromise. Hill realized that such powerful clubs could not be expelled from the league without significant negative public relations fallout. If the clubs agreed to modernize their logo designs and reconfigure their traditional colours, SA would retreat from its position to expel Marconi, Sydney, and Melbourne from the 1996 season (Westerbeek et al., 2005). Unfortunately, the position taken by David Hill did not stop the rivalries between ethnic communities. The Bad Blue boys, a group of Croatian supporters from Sydney United (Sydney Croatia changed it name to Sydney United) defied the directives of SA and continued to bring their national flags and chant C-R-O-A-T-I-A at games, causing tensions between supporters and the security guards. Similarly during a match between Parramatta and Sydney in 1997, confrontation between Parramatta (Greek) fans and Sydney (Croatian) fans erupted (Hughson, 2000). Despite Hill's efforts it was clear that the majority of support still continued to come from the ethnic community (Giulianotti, 1999).

Hill's tenure at the helm of SA was short-lived. His template for change was met with high levels of resistance and he created many enemies within the organisation and the soccer

community generally. Despite Hill stepping down as chairman the problem of racially motivated tension was still to be resolved. The Bobby Despotovski incident highlighted the latent ethnic tensions despite Hill's attempts to 'de-ethnicise' the NSL in the 1990s. Perth Glory striker Despotovski was accused of making gestures towards the crowd that was derogatory and provocative to elements of the Melbourne Knights crowd. The violence following this incident ultimately resulted in Despotovski and his Perth Glory coach Bernd Stange being physically assaulted as they attempted to board the team bus. The financial woes of the Carlton Soccer Club and Eastern Pride further smeared the NSL's reputation (Macdonald & Skinner, 2001).

After questionable business planning reliant upon revenue from international player transfers, Carlton went into receivership and removed from the NSL competition. The Eastern Pride, based in the financially marginal Gippsland region in Victoria, temporarily had all their competitions points deducted by SA for failing to pay its $50,000 NSL affiliation fee. These points were later reinstated after new SA Chairman Tony Labbozzetta brokered a peace deal. Further difficulties relating to the payment of player wages also fuelled speculation that the Australian Professional Footballers' Association (PFA) was planning a rebel league. Although the PFA's CEO Brendan Schwab registered the trademark 'Australian Premier League', the collective bargaining negotiations between SA and the PFA was resolved. These agreements covered both the NSL and international representative teams. Unfortunately senior ex-patriot players such as Harry Kewell, often under pressure from their overseas clubs, were still reluctant to represent Australia in 'minor' international competitions (Macdonald & Skinner, 2001).

This is a symptom of the critical underlying problem for Australian soccer. The international labour market for soccer players is a classic example of the skill stratification that emerges when leagues are in competition for playing talent. The tradition and history of soccer is in Europe and the UK, along with the social and financial forces make European and UK clubs a central destination for mass player migration from across the world (Maguire & Stead, 1999). This represents a major problem as Australian soccer talent gravitates towards these leagues. In April 2006 there were 117 Australian players plying their trade with overseas clubs (Football Federation of Australia Website). This talent drain must be understood in conjunction with the effect of ready consumer access to the UEFA tournaments and major domestic competitions via pay television. Australian soccer fans face a relatively small cost differential when choosing to 'upgrade' their consumption choice to a higher

quality sports-entertainment product (Macdonald & Skinner, 2001). In effect, this marginalises the code due to its perceived inferior quality.

The corporate or consumer attractiveness of the NSL aided by continual changes to the composition of the league has suffered. After going through the process of developing criteria for the selection of only 12 clubs for the 2001-02 NSL season, SA reversed their initial decision to cut the Brisbane Strikers and Canberra Cosmos from the league. Under fear of an internal revolt from state federations and board members, SA chairman Tony Labbozzetta oversaw the readmission of these clubs, resulting in a 14-team competition for the 2001-02 season (Macdonald & Skinner, 2001). This coupled with Australia's inability to qualify for the World Cup meant, SA and the NSL continued to face major challenges to sustain elite level soccer in Australia. Consequently in *Australian Soccer's Long Road to the Top,* Michael Cockerill (1998) commented that "Australia's place in this increasingly complex football world remained uncertain" (p. 166) and was subsequently becoming further marginalised within FIFA.

Continued and extensive media publicity surrounding alleged mismanagement and corruption in SA eventually resulted in the Australian Sports Commission in 2003 establishing an Independent Soccer Review Committee. The committee published a report on the governance of Association Football in Australia, named the Crawford Report. Chaired by David Crawford, who in 1993 conducted an independent review of the management and governance issues confronting the Australian Football League, the committee undertook a program of national consultation including over 230 written submissions, 32 meetings with stakeholders; 42 meetings with members of the public; and a number of meetings involving consultants Ernst & Young and international experts. Following the consultation process the committee identified the following major challenges: (1) ensuring the governing bodies are independent and capable of acting in the best interests of the sport as a whole; (2) separating governance from day to day management by implementing an effective governance and management structure; (3) ensuring that all stakeholders have the opportunity to be heard, that is, changing memberships and voting structures at national and state levels; and (4) restructuring the relationship between SA and the NSL (Crawford Report, 2003; Skinner & Carroll, 2003).

In Crawford's (2003) examination of appropriate membership and voting structures he made two key suggestions. First, when addressing the structure of soccer the report suggested that it was essential to "ensure equitable representation of members and interest groups in voting for the people charged with the responsibility of running the game" (p. 14).

Furthermore, it was deemed that "appropriate representational structure for membership of SA is a mixture of state bodies and special interest groups" (p. 15). This approach would cause some significant changes to what existed. This included state voting rights being linked to registration numbers and that state affiliates would receive extra votes based on membership, the NSL voting rights reduced to one vote, and a wider range of interests represented under the umbrella of 'special interest groups' receive votes. This approach would reduce the overall voting numbers from the 61 to approximately 22 and streamline the decision making process and reduce internal politicking (Skinner & Carroll, 2003).

The debate of how responsibility for the governance of the code should be shared between the national body and its affiliates provided the basis of the next challenge. A brief overview of the roles of each body suggested that the national body would have dual responsibilities. This would include the development of the elite component of the code as well as its grassroots development. State affiliates of the national body would primarily take responsibility for the development of the grassroots elements of the code. The Committee, in reviewing other sports, noted that some sports had established agreements between the national body and state bodies that outline their common and separate responsibilities within their sport. These types of agreements were considered by the Committee as being the basis for each body understanding its responsibilities and expectations within the national structure. The Committee believed soccer would also benefit from adopting this approach. These agreements would cover such aspects as: membership registration and servicing; development programs; high performance programs; marketing and sponsorship; competition scheduling; and other areas of mutual interest (Skinner & Carroll, 2003). One of the major roles for state affiliates, according to Crawford (2003), would be the provision of grassroots member services. This clear delineation of roles would therefore reduce duplication of services and simplify the governance structure.

Through the findings of the report it became clear that the key to the future success of soccer in Australia was the governance of the professional aspects of a sport. The revenue streams that could be derived from this component had the potential to far exceed any other component of SA. Crawford (2003) believed that

> the NSL has a better chance of success if it is allowed to operate as a stand-alone body… however, because Soccer Australia has responsibility for the wellbeing and development of the game at national and international levels, there is potential for overlap between the objectives of Soccer Australia and a stand-alone NSL. (p. 28)

To overcome this it was recommended that SA establish the NSL as a separate entity operating under a license. It was argued that this would be the most appropriate way to govern the professional aspects of the code for three reasons. First, a separate board would be more responsive to the needs of the professional game; second, the professional side of the sport required board members with a different skill set, and finally, SA would be shielded from any potential NSL shortfalls (Skinner & Carroll, 2003). Crawford (2003) recommended a professional governance structure that would be based on an SA and NSL licensing agreement. The agreement would clearly articulate the requirements and responsibilities that each entity would have.

The majority of reforms and recommendations have been implemented by the National and State Football Associations. Restructuring of the governance of the associations and the voting rights given to groups not previously represented (e.g., referees, women's players, etc) led to a more democratic approach. Following the recommendations of Crawford (2003) further change occurred in 2004 when the governing body SA changed its name to the Football Federation of Australia (FFA). This led to the somewhat forced resignation of the entire SA board and the formation of a new board Chaired by Frank Lowy – Australia's second wealthest man with a sharp business accumen and an unbridled passion and enthusiasm for the code (and, interestingly, a long standing association with Jewish soccer clubs). Under the guidance of Lowy and newly appointed Chief Executive Officer John O'Neill (the former CEO of the Australian Rugby Union), FFA achieved financial stability. The former NSL was also renamed the A-League and the FFA announced a new eight-team competition to revitalize soccer in Australia. Lisences to compete in the League were opened to a competitive tender process and only provided under strict guidelines. At the conclusion of the process seven teams from across Australia and one from New Zealand were selected. These were: Adelaide United FC; Central Coast Mariners FC; Melbourne Victory FC; Newcastle Jets FC; Perth Glory FC; Queensland Roar FC; Sydney FC; and the New Zealand Knights FC based in Auckland. The A-League attracted corporate support with Hyundai as major sponsor and games are televised on the FoxSports cable network. Additionally, a AUD$3 million dollar television advertising campaign was also launched, with the theme for the campaign being "Football, but not as you know it", a strategy clearly aimed at reducing the historical ethnic associations attached to soccer.

The success of these initiatives will be further enhanced by Australia's successful qualification for the 2006 World Cup in Germany. A point that cannot be understated. Since the 1974 appearance of the Socceroos (the Australian national soccer team's promotional

name) in the World Cup Finals in Germany there has been a four-yearly cycle of public anticipation and excitement followed by disappointment and disinterest due to the Socceroos inability to qualify. Many commentators suggested the World Cup qualifying system that Australia must navigate has further marginalised Australian soccer. The potential for qualification was made particularly difficult in 2002 as FIFA's reversed its initial directive of allowing the first placed Oceania team (the region in which Australia sits within FIFA's structure) direct access to the finals rather than having to play-off against the fifth placed South American team.

Australia's World Cup marginalisation in part stems from the influence the Oceania regions holds in the FIFA Executive. Limited voting power and the apparent lack of allies in the FIFA executive has meant the only way for Oceania to achieve anything for itself is to continually 'lobby' the other confederations. Even then, as history shows, decisions are not binding and can be overturned at the whim of the executive. The ease in which Australia dealt with the Oceania qualification games for Germany 2006 clearly indicated that Australia was too strong for Oceania and Oceania could never hope to meet the needs of Australia. By defeating Uruguay on penalties to advance to the finals, it became more apparent that Australia's national team should no longer be marginalised from the world stage and the future qualifying path for Australian soccer should reflect a 'coming in from the margins'.

Although the Asian Football Confederation (AFC) historically rejected all advances from Australia to join (Oceania was founded for such reasons when the four founding teams of Oceania had no where else to go), at their executive meeting in Kuala Lumpur in March 2005 the AFC unanimously endorsed the proposal for Australia to join. The AFC was convinced that Australia's inclusion in Asia would not just be a commercial success it would make the region stronger and provide the AFC with greater political influence within FIFA.

The combined success of the inaugural A-League season, World Cup qualification, and the shift from Oceania to the AFC has also created greater commercial interest. This is evidenced through the FFA recently securing an AUD$120 million television deal. A seven year-deal with FoxSports will provide greater media exposure and cash flow for all A-League clubs until 2013. The deal is approximately 20 times greater that the initial one-year deal for the 2006 A-League season. FoxSports holds the rights to 90 A-League fixtures every season and six Socceroos matches (World Cup final matches are excluded as the right to this event are held by SBS), and 98 games across the Asian region at both club and international level. It is argued that such a deal positions the sport "firmly into the mainstream of Australia's

sporting consciousness both in terms of income and exposure of the home-grown product" (Smithies, 2006, p. 73).

Concluding Comments

While still in its launch phase, early measures suggest that the A-League is playing its role in providing a link between the game's huge participant community and the new-found success of the Australian representative team, and in doing so the FFA is driving the repositioning of soccer into Australian sport's mainstream. Spectator, television, and online audiences suggest that the on and off-field quality of the A-League resonates and engages a significant section of the Australian sporting community outside of its marginalised ethnic origins.

Total crowd attendance for the first season of the league exceeded one million with approximate average attendances in the order of 11,000-12,000. Although by European and South American comparisons these attendances may seem small, within the Australian context it positions the A-League as a serious competitor against the other football codes. FoxSports also report solid broadcast audiences with averages comparable with Rugby Super 14, despite the Rugby competition's relatively long history. The A-League's web traffic is placing it in comparable space with the other football codes. In October 2005 the A-League family of websites received more than 850,000 hits, which compares favourably with the AFL number of 961,000 in September – the peak month of the AFL season (Football Federation of Australia Website).

Membership of AFC and playing in AFC competitions will transform and change soccer in Australia. This will allow the newly formed FFA to complete the pyramid of the Australian game. That pyramid, whose base is made up of the 1.5million plus players and volunteers will be made whole by the immediate introduction of a raft of strong, regular, meaningful matches and competitions for the mainstream Australian community to support. This final section of the pyramid has not existed since the national team's qualification for the 1974 world cup. The Australian sporting community was forced to survive on a meagre diet of irregular, 'friendly' international matches for the Socceroos, some equally irregular and often one-sided qualifying matches in Oceania, and one truly meaningful sudden death qualifier in Australia just once every four years. The Socceroos will now play six Asian Cup qualifying matches in 2006, and if successful, the Asian Cup itself in 2007. Half of these qualifying matches would be in Australia, and they would fall on FIFA reserved dates making

it much easier for Australian overseas players to be available (Football Federation of Australia Website).

This program of regular, scheduled, high quality, meaningful qualifying and competition matches against strong Asian opposition (as well as the opportunity for the top A-League Clubs to play in the Asian Champions League - just as European Clubs qualify for the European Champions League) makes much more compelling soccer for commercial partners. This creates the potential for more dollars to be driven into the top end of Game, in turn, providing greater revenue to be invested into the grass roots development of soccer. At a time when Australia as a nation is attempting to forge greater economic and cultural ties with Asia the alignment of the FFA with the AFC has the potential to enhance this involvement and integration.

It should be noted that the FFA still has a great deal to overcome in order for soccer to secure the long-term support of the mainstream Australian sporting community. There are many ideas that can be taken, thought about, and implemented to develop this support. It is necessary for the FFA to continue to nurture the historical relationship between soccer and its ethnic origins, but not to the detriment of mainstream community support. To engage mainstream community support the FFA must continue to move away from distinctions that fracture football communities such ethnicity. There is a need to develop a sense of 'communitas' by developing a family of fans (Skinner et al., 2005). By moving in this direction the FFA will continue to widen community access and provide the opportunities for clubs to promote social integration as Australian soccer attempts to 'come in from the margins'.

References

Crawford, D. (2003). *Report of the Independent Soccer Review Committee into the Structure, Governance and Management of Soccer in Australia*. Canberra: Australian Sports Commission Publication.

Dabscheck, B. (2002). The Socceroos strike a deal. *International review for the sociology of sport, 37*(1), 79-95.

Cockerill, M. (1998). *Australia Soccer's Long Road to the Top*. Port Melbourne: Lothian Books.

Farquaharson, K., & Marjoribanks, T. (2006). Representing Australia: Race, the media and cricket. *Journal of Sociology, 42*(1), 25-41.

Football Federation of Australia (2006). Internet: Retrieved April 25 from http://www.footballaustralia.com.au

Giulianotti, R. (1999). *Football: A Sociology of the Global Game*. Malden, USA: Blackwell Publishers.

Hughson, J (1997). Football, Folk dancing and Fascism: Diversity and difference in Multicultural Australia. *Australia and New Zealand Journal of Sociology, 33*(2), 167-186.

Hughson, J. (1998). Soccer support and Social identity: finding the third place). *International review for the sociology of Sport, 33*(4), 403-409.

Macdonald, R., & Skinner, J. (2001). The Long and Winding Road. *The Sport Management Association of Australia and New Zealand Newsletter*. 2(2) 21-2.

Maguire, J., & Stead, D. (1998). Border crossings: Soccer labour migration and the European Union. *International Review for the Sociology of Sport*, 33(1), 59-73.

Mosely, P. (1995). *Ethnic Involvement in Australian Soccer: A History 1950-1990*. National Sports Research Centre (NSRC): Canberra, Australia.

Mosely, P. & Murray, B. (1994). Soccer. In W Vamplew & B. Stoddart (Eds). *Sport In Australia: A Social History* (pp. 213-230). Melbourne: Cambridge University Press.

Shilbury, D., & Deane, J. (1995). *Sport Management in Australia: An organisational overview*. Melbourne: Deakin University.

Skinner, J., & Carroll, J. (2003). *The Crawford Report The Sport Management Association of Australia and New Zealand Newsletter*. 7(2) 1-2.

Skinner, J., Zakus, D. H., & Edwards, A. (2005). *Football Communities Research Report.* A report commissioned by the Football Federation of Australia. Gold Coast, Australia: Griffith University.

Smithies, T. (2006, April 21). Code Kicks $120million Goal with TV Deal. *The Courier Mail*, p.73.

Warren, J., Harper, A., & Whittington, J. (2002). *Sheilas, Wogs, and Poofters: An Incomplete Biography of Johnny Warren and Soccer in Australia*. Sydney: Random House.

Westerbeek H., Smith, A., & Deane, J. (2005). De-ethnicization and Australian Soccer: The Strategic Management Dilemma. *International Journal of Sport Management*, *6*(3), 270-288.