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“In Support of Progress”

Newsletter

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Football

Football

The Mercury newspaper is to be congratulated for the campaign it is running to have Tasmania recognized by the AFL as a legitimate football state. The very fact that it needs to do so speaks volumes for the failure of the AFL's approach to Tasmania over the last few years. It has been one of ignore and neglect, and now the chickens are really coming home to roost.

The approach by the AFL to football in Tasmania has been nothing short of bizarre. It has combined its desire of seeking talent through a very narrow lens with an extraordinary choice of Chief Executives over the past few years.

Let's start with the premise that the AFL's primary motive is to seek talent to feed into their premium AFL league. In order to do so it needs to foster a pool of dedicated talent from which they can choose the best. Yet they have not come up with any real formula to do so.

It is stating the bleeding obvious to suggest that the easiest path for them is to have a premium league operating in Tasmania from which they can draw upon. And that premium league is the TSL. No other league provides the coaching talent or the training regime that can foster skill improvement.

From what league would you find the better game – the TSL or a regional league? Clarence vs Kingborough or Sorell vs Pt Cygnet?. I do not wish to denigrate the Southern League, but it just happens to be the fact that talent will gravitate to the premium league.

So what does the AFL do? It starves the TSL clubs of funds and threatens their survival if it does not meet certain criteria. It has been the case for many years now that the AFLTas Executive sits in judgement of the TSL clubs, full of criticism and low on encouragement, inducement and support.

At one time, the AFLTas CEO advised clubs that he did not support and would not support clubs having a reserves side. Clubs were to be senior team-centric and that alone. In the end he relented, but only on the condition that the Reserves side became a development side. It was obviously the result of a direction from the AFL that they were only interested in talent. And only young talent at that.

How stupid, how narrow-minded and how self-defeating. Because the clubs put more than a Seniors and a Development league on the park, week after week.

Clubs have been criticised for being “community-based” sports clubs, as distinct from - well it isn't stated actually - but I simply make the point that Geelong and the Western Bulldogs and Essendon and Collingwood etc etc. are all community-based.

The present round of farcical behaviour concerns the former head of AFL Tasmania, now back in Victoria from whence he came. His signal failure was his lack of capacity or desire to sit with and meet with the TSL clubs one on one and talk through the issue of concern to both parties. He had no understanding of the difficulties mounting a state-wide competition, mainly because he did not understand Tasmanian culture, and under his watch the two north west teams pulled out of the TSL.

His attitude bordered on belligerence, fuelled by arrogance, and that attitude has followed through to this present day. He was unable to achieve a result with the TSL when he was AFLTas CEO, and so now, basically steering the Board of Inquiry into the future of footy in Tasmania, he has taken the view that the TSL is a lost cause.

Just because he failed does not mean that the TSL is a failure. Far from it. But let us assume for just a moment that he is right, and I dispute that most vigorously, what is his alternative for a talent pathway? A team of youngsters without a club base? In football that just doesn't work.

The present Board of Inquiry has sent out a list of KPI's for the TSL clubs to consider, with the understanding that if any one club fails to meet them, then it will be seen that all clubs will have failed to meet them and the TSL will be closed down. It's nothing short of bully boy tactics, and must be called out for what it is.

It is also a total arse-about-face to be determining a set of KPI's before determining either an objective or a strategy to meet that objective. And that simply shows up the AFL as being incompetent managers. Because KPI's are all about measuring the success of strategy.

In order that clubs can provide a premium product in a professional environment requires the appropriate resources to do so. There has no suggestion that clubs will receive any additional support – in cash or in kind - in actual fact the threat is that they will receive less support, which can only hasten their demise. So the wish then becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. "I told you they were no good, and by starving them I've proved it".

The new CEO of AFLTas has provided little in the way of leadership, and has shown herself to be very much under the influence of the bully boys in the AFL. What credibility she may have brought to the position is now gone, and no club has shown any lingering faith in her ability to recognise the value of the TSL to be the appropriate talent pathway or to fight for the continuance of the TSL.

The real issue confronting the AFL is actually not talent but engagement. Getting kids to kick a footy and to join a club with their mates is very much at the heart of the game. Talent will rise and be recognised, but those who don't display greatness will still get great joy out of playing the game, being in a team, gain from being in a club atmosphere, and be a valuable contributor to the code..

Without engagement, little else matters. And the game will wither on the vine.

The TSL clubs are in an enviable position to deliver for the AFL, but they need encouragement, and not have the sword of Damocles hanging over their heads. Carrots work far better than sticks. And it is beyond time that the AFL woke up to that fact.