

## WHAT CHANGED THE MINDS OF AUSTRALIA'S FOOTBALL SUPPORTERS?

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### INTRODUCTION

Attendance figures for Australia's new marquee domestic football (soccer) competition, the A-League demonstrate a growth in supporter numbers since the much maligned National Soccer League (NSL) was restructured (Kemeny, 2003; www.a-league.com.au, 2007). Historically, football culture in Australia was linked with ethnicity and clubs developed as vehicles for nationalistic expressionism, which largely alienated the game's mainstream following (Hughson, 1992; Mosely, 1995). Consequently, the NSL was typecast as 'ethnically exclusive', despite attempts to downplay ethnicity and engage Australia's broader population (Mosely, Cashman, O'Hara, & Weatherburn, 1997). Dwindling fan numbers, a total lack of media exposure and financial insolvency led to a Federal Government inquiry into the structure and function of Soccer Australia (Crawford, 2003). Following changes to the constitution, personnel and name of Australia's football governance The Report of the NSL-Task Force was commissioned to recommend a structure for a new national soccer league (Kemeny, 2003) and provide a platform to engage football's huge participant base (ABS, 2007) which were not connected to the game at the professional level. The NSL was disbanded in 2004 and after an 18-month hiatus the A-League was launched in 2005. The A-League was based on a one-team-per-city structure designed to engage 'broader areas and regions' instead of specific ethnic groups (Bradley, 1990).

The changes to the structure of Australia's domestic football league led to a notable increase in fan numbers. In season one of the A-League crowds averaged 10,995, with over one million fans watching games live (www.a-league.com.au, 2007). However, a deeper understanding of why crowds have risen from the old days of the NSL (which never averaged more than 6,000 supporters per game for a season) is lacking. Research has demonstrated that a large contingent of 'new fans' (non-supporters of the NSL) support the A-League (Lock, Taylor, & Darcy, 2007). In this paper, fans perspectives on changes to the support environment have been gathered to delve into reasons for the rise in supporter numbers since the inception of the A-League.

### METHODS

An exploratory case study approach was implemented using members of A-League foundation club Sydney FC. As Yin (1994) asserts, case studies are a useful tool to answer how and why questions. We look at how changes to league structure have facilitated a more 'fan friendly' environment. Sydney FC was chosen due to its geographical proximity to the research team and its status as A-League champions in season one of the A-League. Sydney maintained the highest average crowd of any A-League club 16,668, which made it a viable research target.

A total of 20 Sydney FC members were interviewed to obtain indicative results about Australia's domestic league's new structure and focus. In-depth interviews were conducted after season one of the A-League. Prior to the interview each subject was asked to complete a brief questionnaire to identify demographic and support characteristics. Interviews were analysed using the QSR NVIVO 7 program.

### RESULTS

Interview respondents were predominantly male (81%), which was reflective of previous survey work with this sample group (Lock, Taylor, & Darcy, 2006). Subjects were purposely selected from all membership categories, which provided perspectives from across the home ground setting. Interview subjects included a mixture of 'old' NSL fans (13) and new fans of Australian domestic football (7). All had been fervent supporters of the Socceroos

(Australia's national football team) regardless of previous support patterns. Results indicate that support environments between the NSL and A-League have changed to some extent. Sydney FC members concurred that changes to governance were imperative to increase football's popularity in Australia. Subjects expounded the view that the NSL was; 'ethnic, at times intimidating, violent, unstable, blokey and culturally based'. Conversely, emergent themes of Sydney FC were captured by terms such as; 'culturally inclusive, professional, a club for Sydney, family friendly, welcoming and representative of something bigger'. A number of respondents drawn from 'Australian' backgrounds felt that they had not been able to identify with NSL clubs due to the ethnic dimension of many supporter bases. Respondents articulated a perspective that the A-League environment was more 'fan-friendly'.

## **DISCUSSION**

Results indicate that changes to the structure of Australia's football competition have been successful in developing the game's consumer base. Creating a one-team-per-city structure has allowed Sydney FC to draw from a large and culturally diverse market. Furthermore, the clear theme of support for the Socceroos highlighted the issues that the NSL had faced prior to its demise. Specifically, the NSL did not cater for the broader football market in Australia. Findings in this study indicate that the A-League has been more successful in engaging supporters of football, regardless of cultural heritage or previous involvement. Conceptually, respondents identified a noticeable change from the NSL. Instead of a culture whereby individuals identified with clubs based upon ethnicity, the A-League represents a potential shift towards mainstream culture. Fans of Sydney FC that previously supported the NSL were drawn to support the A-League as it represented a better standard of play, with bigger crowds. New fans of Australian domestic football were able to identify with the A-League as it didn't maintain the cultural biases reported in the NSL. Therefore, the A-League provided fans with an avenue to support football, as a result of marked changes to league structure and an improved product. Fans supported Sydney FC based on an affinity and identification with the sport of football and Australia's national team, the Socceroos.

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