

## Boats against the current? The past, present and future of football in Australia

**Author:** Bonita Mersiades

**E-mail:** bonitamersiades@gmail.com

### Aim

To provide a case study of the context within which football operates in Australia; the issues the sport faces; traces the past, present and future of its governance; and poses the question of whether this global sport can ever be the sport of first choice in such an idiosyncratic environment.

### Practice description

This looks at football from an 'inside, outside' perspective as someone who has worked professionally in the game as well as been a lifelong fan, participant and observer.

### Context description, actors involved

Football in Australia operates in a fairly unique set of circumstances. A sport-loving nation, football is one of four football codes in the country.

Football has many factors in its favour:

- participation at junior levels has been high for almost two decades
- girls' and women's participation continue to grow
- the sport has gained new fans through greater prominence on the international stage over the past six years through participation in the two most recent World Cups and Asian Cups
- the national women's team has participated in all but one World Cup and are the current Asian champions
- the re-birth of the national domestic competition, the A-League, in 2005 has helped to attract increased sponsorship and commercial support for the game
- of the four football codes, it is the most culturally diverse and the one with arguably the best national footprint.

However, while there have been some hard won gains, the game continues to struggle on and off the field.

Despite increased revenues into the game since 2003, the governing body has run at a deficit for four out of the past eight financial years and was only able to survive at the end of 2011 due to additional 'special assistance' funding from the Federal Government. It received significant criticism for its failed bid for the 2022 World Cup which saw almost \$50 million of public money spent for just one vote. The A-League has some avid and loyal supporters but its growth has been modest since its introduction in 2005, with A-League clubs losing a combined \$25-\$40 million each season. Expansion of the A-League has been spectacularly unsuccessful, other than in one instance. The game's administrators are seen as slow, cumbersome and not necessarily in tune with, or acting in the best interests of, the game. And in the election for President and two other Board positions at the end of 2011, the incumbent was returned without an opponent – even though there was opposition.

### Implications and learning

Since 1993, the governing body and the sport have been subject to a Judicial inquiry, a Senate Inquiry and two government reviews – the most recent in December last year. In the 19 year period, the governing body has seen more financial support than ever before from government and approximately 8 different Presidents but the issues with which the game struggles, and about which there is discontent, have stayed much the same:

- the level of independence of the A-League
- the level of support for the A-League
- the lack of community engagement in the A-League
- transparency and governance of the sport overall
- lack of progress in key areas such as futsal, referees, volunteers
- an unequal relationship with FIFA, and
- lack of decision-making, lack of accountability and financial management.