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A Victory for the fans? Melbourne's new football club in recent historical perspective.¹

Roy Hay and Heath McDonald ©

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In 2005 a completely new football (soccer) team, the Melbourne Victory, was created in Victoria, Australia to play in a new national league, the A-League.² Within a year it was drawing more than 50 000 fans to a regular season home game against Sydney FC in a league whose eight participants stretch from Perth, Western Australia to Auckland in New Zealand.³ This was the third time in less than a decade that a new soccer team had been launched in a city which is best known for its devotion to Australian Rules football, cricket and horse racing.⁴ The other two, Collingwood Warriors and Carlton, lasted one season and three seasons and eight games respectively before collapsing in acrimony and debt. Collingwood and Carlton began with on-field success. Collingwood won the National Soccer League (NSL) cup in 1996–67, while Carlton lost narrowly by two goals to one in the NSL Grand Final in its first season in 1997–98.⁵ Collingwood drew a 15 000 crowd for its first game, which if sustained, would have underpinned financial survival, but neither it nor Carlton was able to hold the fans in anything like adequate numbers.⁶ Collingwood and Carlton were associated with the Australian Rules football clubs of the same name, played their home games on the football ovals and sought to benefit from what were seen to be the superior administrative capacities of the clubs in the dominant code.⁷ Yet both failed spectacularly. Is there any likelihood that the Victory will go the same way or is this a victory for the fans?

The Collingwood and Carlton experiments.

The introduction of Collingwood and Carlton was predicated on clear synergies in trying to combine Australian Rules and football in the new clubs. Soccer had switched to a summer season in 1989, largely to avoid competition for media coverage and sponsorship with Australian Rules and rugby league. Also the revenue from the pools companies in

England for the use of Australian fixtures during the northern hemisphere summer break which had been a small but steady source of income had now declined in relative terms. Some of the suburban Australian Football League (AFL) clubs in Melbourne were under increasing pressure as the AFL seemed to be intent on reducing the number of Melbourne clubs and promoting teams in other states. Football clubs faced high costs associated with running suburban home grounds as more and more games were switched to the Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG) or interstate. So attracting soccer clubs to play at their venues in the off-season seemed to outweigh the risk of boosting a rival code. From the soccer viewpoint links to football could be seen as fitting into attempts by its then leadership under David Hill to 'mainstream' the game. Teams associated with football clubs could not be described as ethnic, unlike Melbourne Croatia or South Melbourne Hellas. This foreign or ethnic image had become counterproductive in the eyes of Hill and his administration. Individual entrepreneurs and business groups noted the rising popularity of soccer as qualification for the 1998 World Cup gathered momentum and public attention.⁸ The growth in junior participation in soccer relative to Australian Rules raised the issue of future markets for the codes and the possibilities of co-operation rather than conflict.

However the Collingwood and Carlton ventures were flawed in conception and execution. The historical antipathy between the codes did not help.⁹ Collingwood was really the former NSL participant, Heidelberg Alexander Soccer Club, in disguise and when footie fans found out they stayed away in droves.¹⁰ Collingwood threatened to withdraw from the league before the season was completed and players were not paid, but under pressure from Soccer Australia, Heidelberg patron Jack Dardaris helped the club to complete its on-field obligations.¹¹ Carlton was more inclusive and did extremely well on the field but could not attract enough support to succeed. The soccer fans did not socialise or spend as much in the club during or after games as their Australian Rules peers. The backers of the club had somewhat divided aims. Instead of concentrating solely on domestic success, they were hoping to develop young Australian players and then sell them to top European clubs, as Melbourne Knights did with Mark Viduka. A serious

injury to the first of these youngsters, Simon Colosimo, knocked that plan on the head and changes to the transfer compensation system in Europe compounded the problems.¹²

New clubs in other states.

New soccer clubs have been created in other states. Perth Glory was started as an NSL club in 1996. Perth innovator, businessman and club owner Nick Tana and his colleagues set out to establish a single team to represent the city, explicitly appealing to all football supporters of whatever heritage to join the new entity.¹³ Initially it was very successful on and off the field, drawing crowds in excess of 15 000 to Perth Oval, where temporary movable stands were used to form an oblong stadium, with just one circular terrace area at one end which was quickly colonised by fans brought up on a diet of English Premier League football. In a series of articles Tara Brabazon has recounted the rediscovery of a form of Englishness at Perth Glory.¹⁴ In practical terms this gave the club a strong spectator base for home games, but Tana complained that the Australian Soccer Federation (ASF) did not fulfil its promises to him to market the code and set up similar teams and clubs in other states. When the ASF was finally replaced by a new regime under Frank Lowy in 2004 following government intervention and the Crawford Report the way was cleared for a more rational organisation of the game at national level.¹⁵ By that time Perth had lost momentum and the resources which Tana had poured into promotion in Perth and he withdrew his support. At time of writing the club's ownership had passed to the FFA, which remained unable to find a buyer for it.¹⁶

Northern Spirit and Parramatta Power were introduced as new entities in Sydney in 1998 and 1999 respectively. Both just managed to survive into the final season of the NSL in 2003–04 after relatively undistinguished playing performances and poor crowds after promising starts.¹⁷ Spirit reached the top six play-offs in its first and fourth seasons going out in the first elimination final on the first occasion. In 2003–04 both the Spirit and the Power took part in the top six home and away series.¹⁸ Despite some investment by former Australian international players and a cadre of capable and enthusiastic volunteers, the Spirit had effectively gone before the NSL was terminated, while the

Leagues club behind the Power had announced that it would not continue to support the team before the demise of the league.

In Adelaide two clubs, Adelaide City Juventus, drawing on Italian-Australian support and West Adelaide Hellas, with Greek-Australian backing had performed creditably in the NSL. Hellas won the NSL championship in 1978 and Adelaide City was champion in 1986, 1991–92, and 1993–94 but the club collapsed in 2003 just as what was to be the final NSL season was about to commence. In a hurried rescue effort the South Australian Soccer Federation and a commercial partner formed a new club, Adelaide United, again appealing to all local soccer fans to support the new entity. So far the club has survived with reasonable crowds and was the leading team at the end of the home and away matches in the inaugural A-League season 2005–06, losing narrowly to Central Coast Mariners in the Preliminary Final. In both Adelaide and Perth it could be argued that a one club-one city policy was appropriate and effective, but for a larger metropolitan centre like Melbourne and Sydney, which historically had at least two, and sometimes several more, national league clubs, the concept of a single club to represent the city was untried and risky.

So the precedents for the Melbourne Victory were not encouraging. Though it is unusual in Australia to set up a completely new league and several clubs it is not unprecedented, as Australian Rules and rugby league have gone through major transformations including the foundation of new clubs since the 1980s.¹⁹ Overseas, complete new leagues and the clubs to take part in them have been created in the United States (Major League Soccer), Japan (J-League) and South Korea (K-League). In Australia it had become clear to nearly everyone inside and outside the game that the current structure and governance of the game had become dysfunctional by the early years of the new millennium.²⁰ Repeated failure to qualify for the World Cup, especially that in Japan and Korea in 2002, the effective bankruptcy of the governing body, Soccer Australia, its National Soccer League and many of the leading clubs, and the political infighting at the highest levels in game had brought the code into disrepute.²¹ Approached by the Chair of Soccer Australia, Ian Knop, in 2002, the Federal Minister for Sport, Rod Kemp, with the backing of the Prime

Minister, John Howard, set up an inquiry into the governance of the game which led to recommendations for wholesale change and the appointment of a new interim board with Frank Lowy, of the Westfield Group as Chair.²²

After a hiatus during which the main focus was on putting a new structure in place, recruiting high quality administrative personnel, planning for qualification for the World Cup in Germany in 2006 and achieving a switch from the Oceania Confederation of FIFA to the Asian one, attention turned to forming a new national soccer league. The model developed was for a smaller number of teams, initially ten, but later eight as against eleven in the final year of the NSL, one club per city and one per state, with the exception of New South Wales, which eventually had three, Sydney FC, Central Coast Mariners based in Gosford and Newcastle Jets.²³ Reasons for the small number of teams included the desire to concentrate the available talent to raise standards; to return to clear geographic locations rather than ethnicity as the basis for support: and to have a short domestic season so that leading teams could take part in international competitions, such as the Asian Champions League and the World Club Championship. Partly as a consequence there was no national competition in 2004–05 and the new A-League only began late August 2005.

Melbourne Victory: Creating and holding a new fan base

Melbourne Victory emerged as the winner in a struggle to represent the city against another consortium fronted by former Socceroo, Steve Horvat. Neither group was able to raise the full \$5 million dollars initial capital demanded by the Football Federation of Australia (FFA), the new governing body.²⁴ In the end however the Victory bid was successful in obtaining the five-year franchise to participate in the A-League, with the former chair of the Hawthorn Football Club (an AFL team), Geoff Lord, the founder of the Belgravia Group as chair. Belgravia Soccer Management owned 50 or 100 per cent of the shares in the Melbourne Victory Limited, an unlisted company which gained the FFA Licence.²⁵ The Football Federation of Australia also took a shareholding in the

Melbourne Victory.²⁶ By 2007 the shareholding had been diversified and there were approximately 50 shareholders with interests ranging from \$500,000 to \$10,000.²⁷

So Melbourne Victory, as the new franchised team taking part in the Australian A-league football (soccer) competition in 2005 had to create an instant fan base for a single team to represent Melbourne and Victoria in a national competition.²⁸ This is something rugby league had to do with the Melbourne Storm and which the Australian Football League faced when it expanded nationally at last (in the 1980s, a decade after soccer established the first national league of any of the football codes in 1977). The Storm began in a blaze of publicity and drew excellent crowds, though these have fallen away since despite excellent on-field performances.²⁹

What made the Melbourne Victory task particularly difficult was not just the competition from the other codes of football, particularly Australian Rules, but the recent history of the round ball game. Successive administrations, most notoriously that under David Hill, made strenuous attempts to undermine the ethnic basis of support for many of the successful clubs in the previous National League.³⁰ Making the game 'mainstream' was the aim, but the methods flew in the face of Australia's professed commitment to multiculturalism and showed a total lack of awareness of the role of soccer clubs in helping successive generations of migrants to this country to become Australians.³¹ As the A-League kicked off Frank Lowy, the President of the Football Federation of Australia, appealed to the 'old' fans to come along to support the new team. Yet in the end a new demographic has emerged in support of the Victory.

Deprived of national league football for the best part of two years, following the Crawford Report into the organisation of Association Football in this country, the fans returned in numbers to support the various State League competitions. In Victoria, the Premier League attracted more than a quarter of a million people to games in 2005, even before its final series started. Many of these teams are still strongly based in local ethnic communities, even though they have given up the previous ethnic identifiers.³²

Nevertheless, as the Crawford Report insisted, there was 'passionate latent public support' for the game in Australia.³³

Four thousand or more fans turned up for the Victory's matches in the pre-season Cup competition in August 2005, despite an almost complete lack of advertising. The club needed to triple that number to be financial viable in the new and expensive A-League. Worries remain about the club's financial backing. Sponsorship at national level is good, including Korean car making giant Hyundai, and until 2006 Victory struggled to win high-profile local corporate backing, though it did snare the consumer electric giant Samsung as major sponsor in November 2005.³⁴ Financial stability, clear and transparent financial dealings, and better treatment of sponsors remain absolutely necessary to maintain these and attract future corporate support.

Soccer has several advantages as it tries to re-establish its national league. Participation rates for boys and girls are higher than for any of the other football codes, though there is a sharp drop off in adulthood. There have been huge attendances for World Cup qualifiers and similar competitive games against top-class foreign opposition. However, even though Melbourne is still regarded as the sporting capital of Australia, translating that support into tribal loyalty for a single Melbourne team is not guaranteed. These high participation rates were not translated into high attendance rates as spectators in the past.

The long-term goal for Melbourne Victory is to create a new fan base among the youngsters who have grown up on a diet of superstar European players, some of whom are Australians like Harry Kewell, Tim Cahill and Lucas Neill. The A-League clubs have been allowed to sign marquee players, European, South American or Asian stars who are reaching the end of their career in the hope that they will attract supporters who remember their exploits and also pass on their knowledge and example to the next generation of local heroes. So Adrian Leijer, at 19, found himself in direct opposition to his childhood hero, Dwight Yorke when Victory played Sydney in the first round of the A-League in the harbour city. Yorke played for Manchester United when it won the European Champions League, the English Premier League and the FA Cup in 1999.

Reactions

Following the first Melbourne Victory home game in the A-League in 2005 it was clear that some of the goals had been met, though there were some flaws in the presentation of the game. There was a great crowd and atmosphere and finale to the match. The pre-match activities were generally good. Some fathers and their children were involved in a half-time penalty kick exhibition. Former Socceroos and the Joeys, the Australian Under-17 national squad, were introduced before the game.

It is important to remember the history of football in Melbourne in recent years. There is no problem drawing a crowd for the opening game, but then a sharp decline often occurs as people find they are not getting what they wanted. The Victory is certainly making an effort. There was a great deal of work done by players and officials prior to the game, as they to clubs and organisations and tried to establish credibility with fans and potential fans. Tickets were given away or supplied to numerous junior football clubs, for example.

Preliminary evidence

In season 2005–06 Melbourne Victory claimed 6 000 members, though by the start of the 2006–07 season this had been apparently reduced to 5 000. Within a few weeks of the start of the 2006–07 season however the Victory was boasting that it had signed its 10 000th member.³⁵ Even the earlier figure was much higher than for other A-League clubs according to David Friend, who was charged with promoting membership of the new club. He pointed out that Victorians are habituated to the concept of membership of a football club since all the AFL clubs are still membership based. They are prepared to pay a relatively high fee which guarantees entry to games and other privileges.

In New South Wales, however, people tend to regard their small fee for joining a social and gaming club as their contribution to a sporting organisation. The Leagues Clubs finance the sporting teams and their clubs through their gaming revenue rather than

memberships as such. So a new habit has to be inculcated in the northern states if the soccer clubs are to attract large memberships.

In 2005 Melbourne Victory attracted an attendance at pre-season games of around 4,500 and 17960 for first league game, effectively the full capacity of its Olympic Park stadium. Another 13,831 turned up for the second game against Newcastle Jets. They made plenty of noise but caused absolutely no trouble.³⁶ Fan groups were beginning to emerge already, judging by websites and distribution on the ground. Atmosphere was building and it was coming from the fans themselves.³⁷ The Union Rebels were founded by Peter Cass who modelled his group on the Leeds United Ultras. This group is completely independent of the Melbourne Victory club but provides away game travel, social activities and country supporters links.



Photo 1. Melbourne Victory fans at Olympic Park in 2005. Source: Melbourne Victory website.

The author spent much of the period before the second home game against Newcastle Jets talking to the fans in the outer including members of the Blue and White Brigade, one self-started group of fans who lead the chants from the North-East corner of the ground under the pylon. The Union Rebels inhabit the same area. The former group are 40 strong already, have sold 60-odd professionally-designed tee-shirts and were handing out song and chant sheets to newcomers. A group from Epping on the northern outskirts of Melbourne represent the ethnic groups whom David Hill and others were trying to weed A Victory for the fans?

out. Despite this they were determined to come and support the Victory. They said they just wanted to see good standard football and would welcome visits by top class European teams to show comparisons. Another group were from Frankston and Carrum in the South East, who said they were footy, not soccer, fans but had come along and had enjoyed the atmosphere and had returned in greater numbers this time. A girl from Geelong thought the prices and the space to watch were better than for AFL, while an Indonesian lad had taken out a Victory membership. He had previously only been to an Oakleigh Cannons match in the Victorian Premier League. So the new fans are a mixture of old and new and they are in the process of creating their own culture, not simply being manipulated by the media and the club. It is to be hoped that they find reasons to stick it out and provide a long-term backing for this new entity. At national level, the FFA head of operations, Matt Carroll claimed crowd numbers already exceeded expectations with average crowds of 11,500 above the aim of 10,000 and people in their twenties driving the growth.³⁸

Heath McDonald membership survey

As part of its attempt to understand its supporters the Melbourne Victory commissioned a survey of its membership by Dr Heath McDonald of Deakin University. The survey covered members of the Melbourne Victory who had given email addresses to the club and had agreed to be contacted by it. McDonald's report outlined the findings of an embedded email survey conducted with Victory football club members during May 2006. In total, 1 142 members completed the questionnaire within the two-week timeframe, or 41 per cent of those contacted and roughly 19 per cent of the total claimed membership for the 2005–06 season. The questionnaire aimed to identify the level of member satisfaction with membership services, and give guidance to the club on how that satisfaction level could be managed.³⁹ The demographic profile of Victory members which emerged is one of young, professional males. 'The membership is significantly younger than most AFL clubs, which augurs well for the club's future. However, female membership seems low, and this represents a strong opportunity for the club, given the reported "family friendliness" of both the venue and the club itself.' For reasons which

are discussed below it is not clear that the fan or supporter base of the club precisely mirrors this demographic profile. It could be argued that the members who supplied email contact details would be more likely to be young adult males in white-collar employment than any other demographic group. The total membership for 2005–06 was around one-third of the capacity of the club's stadium, or 42 per cent of average attendance at home games.

Outgrowing its home stadium

Well as a second year Melbourne Victory member, I have to say the only thing the club has been lacking is a stadium to match the awesome atmosphere and excitement of the games. Bring it on! It's surely a sign of things to come for the fast maturing A-league.⁴⁰

By the start of the second, 2006–07, season of the A-League it was becoming clear that Melbourne Victory had reached the capacity of Olympic Park. The stadium, originally completed for the Olympic Games of 1956 and partially refurbished to accommodate rugby league's Melbourne Storm, still has a running track around the playing area and standing terraces at both ends of the ground. The corporate areas of the ground are well below modern standards, despite some investment by Rupert Murdoch's News Limited in support of the Melbourne Storm. Olympic Park is within walking distance of the Central Business District. Parking is limited close to the stadium and there are major problems if another event is taking place at the Melbourne Cricket Ground, or the Rod Laver or Vodaphone arenas which are close-by on the other side of Swan Street. Though it has an excellent playing surface, unless cut up by a rugby league match immediately prior to a football game, and is liked by the players and many fans, Olympic Park is reaching the end of its useful life without major investment.⁴¹ The State government plans to replace it with a 25,000 capacity oblong stadium in 2009.⁴²



Photo 2. Artist's impression of the new stadium planned for the Melbourne Sports Precinct. Source: Melbourne Victory website.

The size is set not by the expressed demands of the football, rugby league and rugby union codes who may be its major tenants, but by an agreement when the Docklands stadium, Telstra Dome, was completed that no stadium larger than 25,000 would be built in the central area for ten years.⁴³

After a number of fans and members were turned away from early season matches in 2006, an agreement was reached with the operators of Telstra Dome for the match between the Victory and Sydney FC to be switched to that venue in September. A record attendance for a non-finals match between Australian football teams was set when 39 730 people passed through the turnstiles, significantly higher than the organisers had predicted. Subsequently two more matches were switched to the Telstra Dome drawing 25 921 and 32 368 spectators and in the light of this spectacular growth the rest of the Victory's home games were to be played there with the exception of that against the New Zealand Knights in December. Since the Knights remained tailed off on the A-League ladder this would not be expected to be a high drawing attraction, but it was claimed that Telstra Dome was unavailable on 17 December because of another booking.

While it is too soon to be certain that this is not a flash-in-the-pan, there is no doubt that it is a huge increase in match attendances taking the Victory into comparison with the English Premier League and the top competitions in Germany, Spain and Italy (See Table 2).⁴⁴ After seven rounds of Serie A in Italy in 2006 average attendance was 19 511.⁴⁵ In the English Premiership the average was 34 084. The Victory average was 26 589 for its first six home A-League games, two of which were played at the limited capacity Olympic Park.⁴⁶ The demographic of the attendance remains to be closely studied, but it is clear that it is quite different from that indicated by the first membership survey reported above. Families, theatre-goers, fans of Victorian football clubs and Australian Rules teams have joined the ranks who have flocked to the 52,000 capacity dome with its retractable roof, which has been closed for part or all of these matches.

Originally designed as part of Melbourne's bid to host football matches during the Sydney Olympics in 2000, when the premier of Victoria, Jeff Kennett was developing a major events strategy and was Honorary Executive President of the Victorian Soccer Federation, the stadium was planned to accommodate the rectangular codes.⁴⁷ It has retractable seating which enables a conventional football shape to be created, though these have not been brought into use so far for Victory games. It is located adjacent to the CBD, next to the major railway station, formerly Spencer Street, now Southern Cross, and the bus terminal. It has ample parking, much of it under the stadium. The stadium itself is designed for very effective television viewing and has all the modern amenities expected by fans. They have responded to the availability of the comfort and space available which allows for effective concentration of young adult males in chanting bays behind the goals while other family groups can spread around the almost circular viewing area on three levels. The higher levels are quite steeply raked keeping fans relatively close to the action, given that there is significant unused space around the perimeter of the football pitch. There is little doubt that the availability of this venue, well known as it is to Australian Rules spectators, has contributed significantly to the increase in attendances at Victory home games.

This growth in the popularity of the game in Melbourne is partly a result of changes in the administration of the game and the success of the national team, the Socceroos, in qualifying for the FIFA World Cup in Germany in 2006 and performing well in the finals. The A-League has seen a concentration of talent and a rise in the standard of matches, and the Victory has been very competitive in the first half of the 2005–06 season and in 2006–07. Media coverage of the games has increased significantly, with, for example, the Fairfax owned Melbourne newspaper, *The Age*, becoming a sponsor of the Victory. A pay per view television channel, Foxtel, has contracted to broadcast all the A-League matches in return for a substantial cash injection into the code. Though there have been complaints that the absence of the national competition from free to air viewing is disappointing, the short-term financial boost for the clubs has been essential. Several of the eight clubs in the A-League had to have major financial and ownership reconstructions after substantial losses in 2005–06. At time of writing, Perth Glory remained under the ownership of the league, the New Zealand Knights, was tailed off in last place in both seasons, and drawing derisory crowds and Sydney FC was in breach of salary cap rules in winning the inaugural championship.

The switch from the uncompetitive Oceania Confederation to the much more attractive Asian Confederation with its huge audiences for football has been very important in underpinning the potential for the game in the next generation. What also differentiates this growth in popularity from all previous cases is that it is not driven by, or at least closely associated with, a wave of inward migration of people from football playing countries. This is the first domestic-inspired football boom in Australian soccer history. It is also based on a much wider demographic than the largely ethnic-group-related teams which dominated the National Soccer League for most of its existence from 1977 to 2004.

The fans in 2006

The fan groups are growing and becoming differentiated in 2006–07. The Blue and White Brigade (BWB) seems to have become the largest and most organised supporters' group,

at least in its own estimation. Its website indicates that it is run by a former university student, now journalist, Adam Tennenini. He is also a player with Brimbank in the Victorian Provisional League.



Photo 3. Banner from the Blue and White Brigade website.

The different groups reflect a range of styles of support. The BWB congregates at the north-eastern end of the terrace at Olympic Park and the southern or Coventry end of Telstra Dome. It usually organises a collective march from the ground to the CBD after a home game. It claims to espouse a European style of support in contrast to the Union and some other groups who are seen to favour an English and Welsh style as many members of the latter group support teams in the English Premier League and the Football League. Some of the self-attributed names M7C (May 7 Crew) and SDC (Southern Death Crew) may simply be a post-fan parody of the more nefarious types of hooligan gangs which frequented the terraces of English football grounds before the Taylor Report, but it would be worrying if some members began to take them seriously. For the game against Adelaide United on 15 October 2006, for the first time, a significant number of vociferous away fans appeared at the Telstra Dome. While this created a lively atmosphere during the game and some inventive chanting, it also produced some very foul mouthed and apparently aggressive behaviour from the Victory end, which was not assuaged when the captain of the Melbourne Victory, Kevin Muscat, clashed with the Adelaide United coach, John Kosmina, towards the end of the game.

The Victory was facing its first defeat of the season, being a goal down with a few minutes left to play. Muscat went to retrieve a ball which had gone out of play at the technical area of the visiting team. In his haste to pick it up, he slipped and collided with Kosmina, who was sitting down and whose chair was upended as a result. The coach

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sprang to his feet and seized Muscat briefly by the throat, before being disengaged by his assistant, former Socceroo Aurelio Vidmar. After the match, all the participants tried to make light of the incident but the authorities took a much dimmer view. Kosmina was banned from coaching from the technical area for six matches and an undisclosed fine was imposed. The last two games and the fine were suspended for the rest of the season.⁴⁸ His club also sanctioned him and required that he attend counselling sessions. Given the ease with which Australian soccer can be associated with violence in the media and by its critics, and by other codes of football, this was a salutary warning.⁴⁹ The number of column centimetres devoted to the Muscat-Kosmina incident in the next few days far exceeded those devoted to the game, for example. It is quite clear that family fans do not want to be involved in an unsafe environment so it is incumbent on the Melbourne club to follow the example of the League and crack down on any incidents involving its own players or spectators.⁵⁰

This seemed to happen at the following home game when the public address system broadcast several polite warnings to fans to moderate their language and there was a low key but visible police presence in the young crowd behind the goals. In the match itself Victory had two players sent off and was 2–3 down at half-time, but the fans helped lift the team with its constant support and the nine men scored a dramatic late equaliser. In the virtually complete absence of away team supporters, the opposition was from the central coast of New South Wales, fans at either end of the stadium engaged in co-ordinated chanting and singing throughout the second half.⁵¹



Photo 4. Victory fans in full voice. Source: Blue and White Brigade website.

During the second Sydney game on 8 December 2006 the BWB flew a banner critical of the Sydney FC 'Cove' accusing them of selling out since 2005. This reflected the Melbourne supporters' group view that they were independent of the club, while their Sydney counterparts had accepted assistance from the football club. Sydney fans replied with 'Your dreams of Asia = our reality'.⁵² After the game, there was an incident in the lower levels of the stadium when a group of Melbourne fans gathered to jeer and confront the contingent of Sydney supporters who had travelled down for the match. The police were forced to intervene and there was potential for the events to escalate. Some rough footage of the incident was obtained and broadcast by Channel 9 television.⁵³ Radio 3AW and the *Herald-Sun* newspaper splashed it in the following days.⁵⁴ Police reinforcements were drawn to the event, a few arrests were made, some capsicum spray was used and the Sydney fans were taken out under escort by a different exit. Though it was a nasty and volatile episode, objectively there was less trouble than at similar events

in other sports but the media discussion went on for most of the following week. It has to be said that the bulk of the *Herald-Sun* coverage was very responsible, giving space to a thoughtful response by Ange Postecoglou, coach of the Australian Youth teams, letters from the fans decrying the sensationalist material and reporting the more considered responses from the football authorities.⁵⁵ In response the Blue and White Brigade core mounted an innovative and entirely peaceful protest at the following home game against the New Zealand Knights at Olympic Park on 17 December.

The BWB planned to display two banners in front of the north-east terrace and all the fans turned their backs on the media area in silence for two minutes.⁵⁶ The banners read, 'DAVID LEWIS, SCOTT GULLEN (H/S), SEAN SOWERBY (3AW), CHANNEL 9: ENEMIES OF FOOTBALL!' and 'HERALD SUN! PUT THIS ON YOUR BACK PAGE'. After the protest the fans resumed their normal vociferous support and the website made it clear that this was not in any way disrespect to the players.⁵⁷

Criticisms aside the support of the fans so far has been very impressive. Up to 400 Victory fans have travelled to away games. Given that the A-League has teams from Perth in the west, 3000 kilometres from Melbourne and Auckland in New Zealand, three hours flying time away, it is interesting to see this modest disclaimer on the BWB website. 'Due the distances involved large numbers of fans tend only to travel to cities close to Melbourne like Sydney and Adelaide'.⁵⁸

In 2006 the A-League remained precarious, despite exceeding its targets for crowds and obtaining significant sponsorship. The New Zealand Knights from Auckland, the New Zealand franchise was in dire straits. It was tailed off at the bottom of the league for the second season, having been unable to attract more than an average of 2 000 supporters to home games and was at loggerheads with the New Zealand football authorities. Eventually the FFA had to step in and revoke the licence of the Knights. After some negotiations the FFA guaranteed the players' wages until the end of the season so that the club could fulfil its commitments. Ricky Herbert, coach of the New Zealand national

team, the All Whites took over as coach for that period and relations with the national body improved.

The Perth club at time of writing is wholly owned by League which cannot so far find a buyer. Sydney FC and Melbourne Victory have substantial investment by Lowy family interests. Victory did not meet the FFA financial criteria at time of launch. All clubs lost money in first season. It is not clear whether any, even the Victory with its staggering crowds, are breaking even in second year. Without the short-term injection of funds from the pay-per-view broadcaster Foxtel it is doubtful whether the competition could have survived in its current format. In England, Rupert Murdoch's BSkyB used Premier League football as the means to establish the market penetration and profitability of pay-per-view television. It is unlikely that in a country where Association football remains the second code in all states that the same dynamics will be successful in Australia.

Conclusion

In most parts of the football world, the stability and longevity of clubs in the major leagues since the early twentieth century is very impressive. There have been relatively few new foundations in England and new entrants to major leagues have to fight their way up through the promotion and relegation system usually over a period of decades. In recent times the Wimbledon club moved to Milton Keynes and renamed itself as the Milton Keynes Dons. The vacuum in Wimbledon was filled by a team which claimed the original name. When Manchester United was taken over by an American tycoon, a group of fans formed a new club, FC United, to retain what they considered to be the essence of the original spirit.⁵⁹ In Italy there has been much more volatility, though even there clubs survive financial and other scandals and resultant relegations, fines and bans to reappear in the top divisions.⁶⁰

So to appear in a national league and go from zero to c. 50,000 supporters in little more than a season is very rare, though not unique since large initial crowds marked the foundation of some of the clubs in Major League Soccer and the J-League in Japan.

There have also been big one-off crowds for soccer finals in Perth and Brisbane, but these were not repeated in subsequent seasons. There is a risk that this might happen to the Melbourne Victory. The other football codes are in a very strong relative position and likely to fight back. The AFL media contract with the Channel Seven television network dwarfs that made between Foxtel and the FFA. However, the basis for growth and stability is being laid in Melbourne. The fan base is certainly there. The 11 000 members provide a very good springboard for the club. Word of mouth is spreading around the city and further afield, with many fans travelling hundreds of kilometres to attend home games. As has been noted above this boom in the game is driven by the domestic population, not inward migration. The organisation of the game has been significantly improved. Entry into Asian competitions and qualification for the World Cup have improved the profile and public awareness of the sport. So the Victory can build on these changes in the football environment to maintain and even increase its current spectacular level of support.

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Notes

¹ This article draws on a paper to the Footy Fever Conference in Melbourne in 2005 and its subsequent published version, Roy Hay, 'Fan culture'. I am indebted to Bill Murray for helpful critical comments. Date of submission to *Soccer and Society*, 5 November 2006.

² For an interesting discussion of the differences between the A-League and its predecessor the National Soccer League, see Ross Booth, 'The A-League: A New League for Australia, from Old Soccer to New Football,' paper to the Football Fever: Identities and Allegiances Conference, Victoria University, 25 September 2006. An abstract appears in *Bulletin of Sport and Culture*, 26 (September 2006): 17. The background to the formation of the National Soccer League and its chequered history are covered in Murray and Hay, *The World Game Downunder*, 113–131, and Thompson, *One Fantastic Goal*, 90, 92–3, 106–110.

³ Also from Melbourne in the south to Brisbane in the north. In European terms this is the equivalent of Portugal to the Ural mountains and Iceland to Athens or more than the whole of continental United States of America.

⁴ See Table 1 for Melbourne Victory attendances, 2005–07. Australian Rules football crowds average just over 35 000, with over 90 000 for grand finals, cricket tests at the MCG can draw 50–80 000 spectators and the spring racing carnival at Flemington has set a record of 129 000 on Derby day in 2006.

⁵ Andrew Howe, *National Soccer League, Official Season Guide 2003–04*, 182–84 has the playing records of both clubs.

⁶ Carlton only succeeded in attracting around 5 000 for its first game against Perth Glory and seldom exceeded that number thereafter apart from finals matches and Melbourne derbies against South Melbourne and the Melbourne Knights.

⁷ Thompson, *One Fantastic Goal*, 132–33.

⁸ Lou Sticca, a corporate member of the Carlton Football Club and a long-time soccer fan was the driving force behind the Carlton team. Ross Solly, *Shoot Out*, 101.

⁹ Roy Hay, “Our wicked foreign game”; Murray and Hay *The World Game Downunder*. See also Melissa Walsh, ‘Understanding the Spectator: The First 50 Years of the *Football Record*,’ paper to the Football Fever: Identities and Allegiances Conference, Victoria University, 25 September 2006. An abstract appears in *Bulletin of Sport and Culture*, 26 (September 2006): 25.

¹⁰ Heidelberg Alexander was backed by the Greek community of the northern suburbs of Melbourne around its home ground at the Olympic Village of 1956. It played in yellow and black stripes, whereas Collingwood wore black and white stripes. Trying to combine the strips with yellow, black and white proved unsatisfactory to both sets of fans. Relations between Greek-speaking and English-speaking groups remained tense if not hostile.

¹¹ Thompson, *One Fantastic Goal*, 133.

¹² Ross Solly, *Shoot Out*, 101–102.

¹³ Tana initially linked with another businessman with political connections in Perth, Paul Afkos, but the two eventually split very acrimoniously. Ross Solly, *Shoot Out*, 99–100.

¹⁴ Brabazon, Tara, ‘What’s the Story Morning Glory? Perth Glory and the Imagining of Englishness’, *Sporting Traditions* 14, no. 2 (May 1998): 53–66.

¹⁵ Hay, ‘Our wicked foreign game,’ 182, Notes 53 & 63; (‘Sports Factor’, ABC Radio National, 11 March 2005).

¹⁶ Simon Hill, ‘Perth Glory’s tenth anniversary deserves to be applauded by anyone who respects the game’s history,’ *Australian FourFourTwo* (December 2006): 26.

¹⁷ The Spirit often drew around 15 000 fans to North Sydney Oval, but the players had been signed on highly unrealistic contracts which meant that even that number did not cover costs. Ross Solly, *Shoot Out*, 103; Thompson, *One Fantastic Goal*, 139.

¹⁸ Howe, *NSL Guide*, 2003–04, pp. 183–85.

¹⁹ Hay, ‘Fan culture’, 92.

²⁰ FIFA used this excuse to reverse an earlier decision to award the Oceania Confederation a direct entry for one team to the World Cup in 2006. The excuse hardly covered up the political pressure from CONMEBOL, the South American Confederation, which would have surrendered half a place as a result.

²¹ David Crawford, Report of the Independent Soccer Review Committee into the Structure, Governance and Management of Soccer in Australia, Australian Sports Commission, Canberra, 2003, 1–5. Hereafter, Crawford Report.

²² The processes, analysis and the proposals can be found in the Crawford Report. The politics is discussed in Solly, *Shoot Out*, 217–32. Lowy’s career is recounted in Margo, *Frank Lowy*.

²³ Thompson, *One Fantastic Goal*, 150–51.

²⁴ Though it was never explicitly stated, the fact that Horvat had been a key player at the Melbourne Knights, a Croatian-backed club, might have counted against the other bid.

²⁵ The Belgravia Group, founded in 1990, employs over 3000 people in a wide variety of operations, and is one of the largest operators of golf courses and fitness centres in Australia. Wikipedia, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Geoff_Lord, accessed 25 October 2006. See also Michael Lynch, 'Lord among masters of Victory bid,' *Age*, 22 October 2004, accessed from Age website, <http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2004/10/21/1098316786754.html?from=storylhs>, on 22 January 2007.

²⁶ According to Geoff Miles, CEO of Melbourne Victory, my original statement that it was one of Frank Lowy's family companies which invested in the Victory was incorrect. It is the Football Federation of Australia which has taken the interest which amounts to \$0.5 million.

²⁷ Geoff Miles, 'Melbourne Victory Ltd is a public company with a diverse shareholding and is not owned by Belgravia Sports Management – there are 50 shareholders with varying shareholdings,' email 22 January 2007.

²⁸ Roy Hay, 'Melbourne Victory needs instant fans,' *Geelong Advertiser* (3 September 2005): 33.

²⁹ The Melbourne Storm was minor premier and grand finalist in 2006, only losing to Brisbane in the grand final.

³⁰ Hay, 'Our wicked foreign game', 173–79.

³¹ Despite the deliberate marginalisation of ethnic supporters Simon Colosimo's brother has been a regular attendee in the outer at the Victory games in Melbourne.

³² South Melbourne has dropped the Hellas name which the fans still shout. Melbourne Knights are still greeted by chants of Croatia.

³³ Crawford Report, 2.

³⁴ Melbourne Victory chair Geoff Lord claimed on 24 November 2005 that the club had attracted investment of \$750,000 in the last two weeks and now had between \$4.25 million and \$4.5 million in total, still short of the \$5 million required by the FFA which itself had taken a stake of \$1.25 million in the club. Michael Lynch, 'Goals dry up but cash is pouring in for Victory,' *Age*, 25 November 2005.

³⁵ By the beginning of November 2006 the claimed membership had reached 11 000. Tony Ising, '11 000 reasons to celebrate Victory,' Melbourne Victory Media Release, 2 November 2006.

³⁶ A few toilet rolls but no flares were thrown towards the end of the match against the Queensland Roar on 4 November when 13, 239 supporters turned up.

³⁷ James Willoughby, 'Victory's Twentieth Player,' *Australian and British Soccer Weekly*, (1 November 2005): 19.

³⁸ Julia Medew, 'Full strength beer and cheap tickets make for an A-League night out,' *Age, News*, 23 November 2005, 5.

³⁹ McDonald, Melbourne Victory Report. Kindly supplied to Roy Hay by Dr McDonald.

⁴⁰ Posted by: Glen at September 1, 2006 02:38 PM, Balls Up, *The Age Blog*, http://blogs.theage.com.au/ballsup/archives/2006/09/under_the_dome.html, accessed 29 October 2006.

⁴¹ Olympic Park rated over 7 out of 10 for its feeling of being a home ground, for being family friendly and for the ease of getting to the ground, in the McDonald

membership survey. The standard of facilities, quality of entertainment and especially value for money food and beverages supplied rated much lower.

⁴² The new stadium will be close to Olympic Park on Swan Street and hence part of the major sporting precinct which includes the Melbourne Cricket Ground and the Tennis Centre at Flinders Park. It thus maintains an Australian pattern of grouping sporting facilities in close proximity. See Haig-Muir, Mewett and Hay, *Sporting Facilities in Victoria*; Hay, Lazenby, Haig-Muir and Mewett, 'Whither Sporting Heritage': 367-370.

⁴³ The stadium was originally named Docklands after the former dockyards site on the west of the CBD where it was being developed. Telstra, the telecommunication company, then became its naming rights sponsor. The Football Federation of Victoria is concerned that the costs of accessing the new stadium as an administrative headquarters is too high. Personal information from Michael Zappone, Head of Commercial Operations, of the FFV, 20 December 2006.

⁴⁴ Paolo Bandini, 'Why are Serie A attendances on the slide?' *Guardian Unlimited Football*, 28 October 2006,

http://blogs.guardian.co.uk/sport/2006/10/25/why_are_serie_a_attendances_on.html

⁴⁵ Attendances in Italy were affected by the match fixing scandal which resulted in the demotion or penalising of a number of leading clubs, including Juventus, AC Milan and Fiorentina and Lazio. Frank Dunne, 'Hearts of Darkness,' *FourFourTwo*, 146, October 2006, 70-76.

⁴⁶ Table 1, based on official FFA figures.

⁴⁷ Bert van Bedaf, 'Victorian Soccer's dry dock,' *Soccer Australia*, 31 January 1998, 70-73.

⁴⁸ Michael Cockerill, 'Kosmina given six-game ban,' *Age, Sport*, 19 October 2006, 9.

⁴⁹ Hay, 'A new look at soccer violence': 41-62.

⁵⁰ The coach and the Chief Executive Officer are aware of the problems and share the concern expressed here. 'The CEO is liaising with the support groups regarding their language and behaviour.' Personal communication by email from Ernie Merrick, coach of Melbourne Victory, 3 November 2006.

⁵¹ Roy Hay, 'It didn't end in the victory, but it was a hell of a game,' *Geelong Advertiser*, 4 November 2006, p. 103. The author was not responsible for the headline.

⁵² Sydney and Adelaide United had been chosen to represent Australia in the Asian Champions League in 2007 on the basis of their performance in the 2005-06 season rather than the Victory. Grantley Bernard, 'Fans split as last resort,' *Herald-Sun*, 14 December 2006, p. 115. another banner read, 'Give us your address so we can send you a postcard from Asia.' Gweeds, Northcote, letter or text message published in the *Herald-Sun* on the same page.

⁵³ Channel 9 News, 9 December 2006.

⁵⁴ David Lewis, 'The great divide: Melbourne Victory ordered to segregate fans,' *Herald-Sun*, 12 December 2006, p. 80.

⁵⁵ Ange Postecoglou, 'Troublemakers will not stop us this time,' *Herald-Sun*, 14 December 2006, p. 115; 'With only one team in town old ethnic tensions have disappeared, while the visually alarming use of flares has also become passé. Despite the stadium being packed on Friday night there were no obvious signs of trouble during the

match though a fracas broke out after the final whistle and was brought under control before any real damage was done,' Ron Reed, 'Next big clash against cricket at 'G,' *Herald-Sun*, 11 December 2006, p. 73; Ron Reed, 'No need to read the riot act our soccer is safe,' *Herald-Sun*, 13 December 2006, p. 126.

⁵⁶ Banners were barred from entry by venue security, but following intervention by the Melbourne Victory Media manager, another banner which thanked the fire fighting volunteers for their efforts during the Victorian bush fires was allowed through. This suggests a good level of communication between the BWB and the club over such issues and sensible exercise of discretion. Personal observation by Roy Hay in the press box at Olympic Park, 17 December 2006.

⁵⁷ Blue and White Brigade website, <http://www.bluewhitebrigade.tk/>, accessed 6 January 2007.

⁵⁸ Blue and White Brigade website, <http://www.bluewhitebrigade.tk/>, accessed 28 October 2006. Sydney is approximately 1 000 kilometres away and Adelaide over 700 km, but this is Australia not Europe.

⁵⁹ Football Club United of Manchester, www.fc-utd.co.uk. The club runs on a membership basis and is progressing through the lower leagues.

⁶⁰ Foot, *Calcio*, 489–500.