

## State of Affairs – Getting a Feel for Football Down Under

Feature by Kenneth Steel

***Global Football Training's world tour has come to an end, and it is time to reflect on coaching and player development in Australasia and look at the region's progress in a challenging environment.***

Australia and New Zealand are considered the teams to beat in sports such as rugby and cricket and have a proud history at the Olympics. Nonetheless, both countries are unable to master the global game even though the Socceroos and All Whites featured at the last World Cup – and both teams are still in the hunt for a place at Brazil 2014.

“Australia and New Zealand cause the occasional upset and produce a Premier League star now and again, but both teams fail to mount a serious challenge. Thus, visiting clubs and academies in the region will provide valuable info as to what is needed to become a mainstay on the global stage,” says Kenn Schmidt, CEO of Global Football Training.

And one element seems to pose a challenge to producing talented footballers in the region as the overall skill level leaves a lot to be desired. Thus, up-and-coming footballers lack the technical and tactical abilities of their European and South American counterparts.

### Football playing catch-up to other sports

Football is growing in stature Down Under, but the game is still struggling to attract the same following as rugby, Aussie rules and cricket, and it is hurting the development of a talented player base. A majority of clubs and academies thus seem to be unable to bring through a constant flow of footballers who possess the technical and tactical abilities needed at the highest level.

“However, all is not lost. A new trend is gaining a foothold at leading clubs and academies in Australia and New Zealand. Hopefully, introducing a new mind-set will be a sign of things to come in the future,” states Kenn Schmidt.

### New approach leading the way in New Zealand

A majority of clubs in New Zealand favour a traditional British style of football, relying heavily on a physical and direct approach. However, Wynton Rufer and Auckland City FC have realised that such an approach will not produce a crop of world-beaters, and have chosen to implement a more modern style of play.

As a result, Wynton Rufer is a dominant force at youth level, whereas Auckland City FC is on route to claim the national title. Focus is on keeping possession and playing the ball along the ground, encouraging players to develop and use their technical abilities – and young players are given a chance to prove their worth.

“Auckland City FC is committed to producing talented youngsters, and four members of the first team squad are under the age of 19. Bringing through a steady stream of young players will benefit the club in the long run, but it will also serve as an example for other clubs to follow,” says Kenn Schmidt.

“Wynton Rufer has also created a unique setup with a good structure, philosophy and highly-skilled coaches. And the U15 team qualifies for Nike Cup in Manchester on a regular basis and ranks among the best youth teams in the region. More clubs and academies could definitely prosper from adopting this approach to developing young, gifted footballers,” explains Kenn Schmidt.

## **Australia – a sporting nation**

Australia has always had a reputation for creating talented athletes, and sports academies around the country provide the perfect opportunity for athletes to hone their skills – and football is part of the curriculum. Thus, the foundation is in place to increase the number of players to compete at the highest level.

“The Australian Football Federation has also created a talent structure with regional talent centres to increase the output of gifted players, and this could lead to success in the future. It is reminiscent of the system in Denmark where it is starting to pay off,” says Kenn Schmidt.

Global Football Training also met up with former Danish great Jesper Olsen at the Football Star Academy and was impressed with the coaching philosophy – as well as the focus on improving the technical skill level.

Looking at major sports in the country, it is also evident that Australia boasts a wealth of athletes with great physical attributes, and much can be learned from studying these sports. Global Football Training has thus picked up new ideas and inputs from the trip to Australia.

## **Melbourne Victory on the right track**

Following a change in management, Melbourne Victory introduced a new player development strategy a few years ago, and the club is starting to reap the benefits. Emphasis was placed on developing complete footballers with the ability to break into the first team, and the coaching philosophy started to focus on the process, and not just winning games.

The youth teams at the club lost a lot of games at the start, but now Melbourne Victory has become a force to be reckoned with at youth level. And clubs and academies in Australia and New Zealand could benefit from implementing such an approach.

“Bringing through gifted players takes precedence over winning games at youth level, and if football is to kick on in Australasia, this is the way to go,” states Kenn Schmidt and continues:

“Coming to this part of the world has been a bit disappointing in terms of coaching and player development as Australia and especially New Zealand are far behind most South American and European teams”.

Global Football Training did, however, experience signs of a new approach gaining momentum Down Under as some clubs and academies are committed to creating a talented player base, by focusing on developing young players with a unique range of skills. But more is needed if we are to see an increase in the number of talented players coming out of the region.

## **Next up: Asia**

Global Football Training went to Japan and China following the tour of Australasia and took a look at coaching and player development in Asia – and we will be back with more on that next time.