

An own goal if we fail to make more use of all that overseas talent

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The Sydney Morning Herald

27 June 2006

P. 13

With the Socceroos' fighting performance in the World Cup, everyone realises Australian football has come of age. But the last few weeks are also a reminder that the Australian diaspora has come of age.

The Socceroos serve as a good metaphor for the large group of Australians who live abroad - a group estimated by the Department of Foreign Affairs and Trade to comprise almost 1 million people.

Almost all of our top footballers are based overseas. They play in the top foreign competitions, including the English Premier League, Italy's Serie A, Germany's Bundesliga, Holland's Eredivisie and Spain's La Liga. These are truly "footballers sans frontieres".

The who's who of the broader diaspora is similarly impressive. Australians occupy some of the biggest jobs in the world: in finance houses and multinational companies; in international organisations; in Hollywood; at the world's great newspapers and cultural institutions; even in the royal house of Denmark. Beneath this highly visible first tier sits a larger group of "gold collar workers", who are relatively young, well-educated, highly skilled and prosperous. They are in important sectors, often in regions of strategic importance.

Just as elite footballers move to Europe in order to play in the big leagues, other talented Australians are benefiting from growing labour mobility and pursuing international careers. We need to make sure the movement is not all in one direction. If the A-League continues to develop, Australian players may be able to build careers moving between Australian and foreign clubs - as Australian professionals are increasingly able to move between Australian and foreign firms.

Australian footballers benefit enormously from their overseas experience. They get to play with and compete against the best footballers in the world, under the most skilful coaches, before large and knowledgeable crowds. Some of them are even rumoured to make reasonable salaries. Australia has benefited along with the individual players, because their international experience has dramatically improved the skill and professionalism of the Socceroos.

A team composed entirely of domestic players would not have been able to beat the Japanese, match the Brazilians, prevail against the Croatians and win through to the knockout stage.

Similarly, our expats are able to work on bigger projects for higher stakes than they could in Australia. When they return home, as they usually do, they bring with them new skills, experience and networks.

The Australian media have sometimes had a prickly relationship with our foreign stars. Some commentators have taken the view that insufficient pride has been shown in the national jersey. But most fans are simply proud that we have produced world-class footballers. So it is with the wider expatriate community.

Lowy Institute polling has revealed that resident Australians are enthusiastic about the achievements of our overseas cousins. Ninety-one per cent of respondents agreed expats are "adventurous people prepared to try their luck and have a go overseas", while only 10 per cent believed they "have let us down by leaving Australia". There is no such thing, in other words, as a "foreign poppy syndrome".

No one could doubt the Socceroos' commitment to their country after their hard-won draw with Croatia. It is not only footballers who retain a strong sense of national loyalty. Most expats follow Australian news and sports; they read Australian newspapers online and care about Australian issues. At kick-off time in Stuttgart there were Australians in every corner of the world glued to their televisions.

Finally, even though most of our best footballers earn their living overseas, they come together from time to time, as the Socceroos, to serve the national interest - in the World Cup and the Asian Cup.

In Germany, the Socceroos have been powerful instruments of Australia's soft power, entrenching our image as "the plucky country" playing above its ranking. The wider diaspora can also advance the national cause, stimulating trade and investment flows and altering international perceptions of its homeland.

Such benefits are particularly valuable for Australia, because we face the twin disadvantages of a small population and great physical distance from the rest of the world. It is time for the Federal Government to take a co-ordinated approach to engaging with expatriates in order to capture more of these benefits and create a global community of Australians.

Maybe we need someone to help us capitalise on the talent and goodwill of the Australian diaspora. Fancy a career change, Guus?

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