

Barrackers Corner

Sydney - The Australian Football League's Swansong?

At the start of each season the supporters of football clubs are full of high expectations for their football team. The Sydney Swans had obtained numerous new players through the draft, and it was hoped that they would be able to improve from the wooden spoon they achieved in 1992. Within a few rounds it was clear that 1993 would be worse than 1992!, and the club sacked coach Gary Buckenara, replacing him with footballing legend Ron Barassi. It is to be hoped that Ron Barassi can turn the fortunes of the club around; that he can achieve the success that Gary Buckenara, and before him Col Kinnear, found so difficult to achieve.

Why is it that the Sydney Swans have performed so poorly on the field? It should be remembered that in 1986 and 1987 the Swans qualified for the finals. In an editorial in the *Sydney Morning Herald* (8 May 1993) it has been suggested that the major reason for the Swans' failure is because they have not identified with Sydney and New South Wales, and promoted 'true blue' players. Presumably, if suitably skilled players were available the Swans would have played them. Other clubs do not seem to have recruited New South Wales players in droves, or in a marginal manner. New South Wales is a rugby (league and union), not to mention soccer, playing state.

This article will suggest that the major reason for the demise of the Sydney Swans can be sheeted home to the Australian Football League's various labour market or employment rules. These rules are the draft—both external (for new) and internal (for existing players who have not negotiated a new contract with their previous club) – the standard playing contract and salary cap. The Australian Football League, and its precursor the Victorian Football League, have consistently maintained that such labour market controls/rules are necessary to achieve sporting equality. Sporting equality is presumably defined in terms of teams performing equally well on the football field—overtime all clubs should win an approximately equal number of games.

The seemingly intractable poor performance of the Sydney Swans provides evidence of the failure of the Australian Football League's employment rules. The Brisbane Bears, since entering the competition in 1987, have also struggled for success on the football field, regularly finishing in the lower reaches of the league ladder. In addition, clubs like Footscray, Fitzroy and Richmond have been on the point of extinction, whose survival has been dependent on the good will of creditors, or supporters who have donated monies ranging in the millions of dollars to secure the survival of their respective clubs.

Under the Australian Football League's employment rules players are unable to choose the club they can play with. While the internal draft enables a player to move from his existing club to another club, he is precluded from indicating the club of his choice. Such a player simply puts himself into a process whereby a club will select, or draft, him as a member of their senior training list. The draft operates with the bottom club having first choice, the second bottom club second choice, and so on with the premiers having last choice. This system is rationalised on the basis of helping achieve sporting equality. In short, this club dominated system denies players the normal rights and freedom of being able to obtain work with the employer of their choice. Mr Justice Wilcox, of the Federal Court of Australia, in a decision which found the New South Wales Rugby League's internal draft (which was based on that of the Australian Football League) to be an unreasonable restraint of trade, compared such employment rules to serfdom.

There are two senses in which club dominated rules have harmed the Sydney Swans (Australian Football League! and players). First, because the employment of players is in the hands of their existing club it is very difficult for clubs to attract players from other clubs to improve their stock of players. Australian Football League rules preclude clubs from entering into negotiations with the players of other clubs who are near the end of their contracts (though clubs are able to trade players for draft choices). It is difficult to identify a player and secure his employment,

as he can always be drafted by other clubs with earlier draft choices. There is little incentive for clubs to search for new talent, because the draft makes it very difficult to obtain the services of such a player.

Moreover, while the draft may have the appearance of promoting sporting equality – bottom club having first choice, premiers last choice – it is most unlikely that it will have any real impact in enhancing a more equal distribution of player talent. With respect to the internal draft the players who are available for selection are those who have not negotiated contracts with current clubs. Such players are unlikely to be the best or most able players in the league.

In addition, if we compare the draft choices of the bottom and top clubs it can be easily demonstrated that the draft's potential for promoting sporting equality is minimal. Under the draft the bottom club, assuming a draft of five rounds, would choose players 1, 16, 31, 46, and 61. The premiers would choose players 15, 30, 45, 60 and 75. If we can make the reasonable assumption that there is little difference between players 15 and 16, and players 30 and 31, and players 45 and 46, and players 60 and 61 the draft then only provides the bottom club with an advantage of one player-player 1 is superior to player 75. With a senior training list of 52 players this translates into a small to marginal benefit—and what happens if he suffers a major injury early in the season?

Second, because the Australian Football League's rules are weighted against players this has the potential to produce a style of football management which provides players with an incentive to look for new clubs. Melbourne-based players who fall out with their clubs may be told that they can always go into the draft and finish their careers playing with the Sydney Swans or Brisbane Bears. For a Swans' player there is always the prospect of playing with a Melbourne club.

Since the heady days of 1986 and 1987, the Sydney Swans have lost a steady stream of quality players to other clubs. Such movement seems to have resulted from the way in which the club has treated its players.

‘For some time, the role played by ‘colour’ was ignored, but McGrath ... has shown that Aborigines’ life experience could differ according to racial background as a result of both Aboriginal and European perceptions of it.’

Attwood, 1989, p. 139

Add quotes from Evans

In a bid to save financial resources players have had their contracts terminated mid-season, there have been several across the board wage or salary cuts, and renegotiations or attempts to renegotiate players' contracts. The Swans decided not to play Rod Carter, and denied him the chance of being a 300 game veteran, in a policy ostensibly designed to promote younger players. Youth policies may save funds, while simultaneously reducing revenue! In short, the management policies pursued by the Swans are such that star players have moved on to other clubs (David Rhys-Jones, Greg Williams, Bernard Toohey and Barry Mitchell), or for players of other clubs to only join up because of their inability to obtain a regular game elsewhere.

If the Sydney Swans are to experience success on the field, it is imperative that the Australian Football League substantially alter its employment rules and provide players with the economic freedom enjoyed by the rest of the workforce. By doing so this will enable the Swans to search for new talent and simultaneously force them to adopt a management style more sympathetic to the needs of players, and provide an incentive for good players to play with the Swans.

It is interesting to note that the New South Wales Rugby League seems to have handled the transition from a city to a broader/national based competition more ably than the Australian Football League. In 1991 the Federal Court of Australia ruled that Rugby League's internal draft, which was modelled on that developed by the Australian Football League, to be an unreasonable restraint of trade following a court action by the Association of Rugby League Professionals, under the leadership of Kevin Ryan. If nothing else the saga of the Sydney Swans demonstrates the debt the New South Wales Rugby League owes the players' association for blocking its attempt to emulate employment rules developed by the Australian Football League.

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