

## WILL THE STRIKERS MAKE IT INTO THE NEW LEAGUE?

By John Wainwright

On Monday the Australian Soccer Association will announce the criteria which clubs will have to meet in order to be included in next season's national competition.

In this article, the BSSA Committee discusses the efforts made by the Strikers to meet some of the likely criteria, and the areas where they feel that more effort is needed.

The Brisbane Strikers has been financed by Dr. Clem Jones throughout its existence. Even when there has been a major sponsor, Dr. Jones bore the lion's share of the cost. Will the Task Force recommendations accept this type of financial backing for clubs in the new competition?

When they appointed Stuart McLaren coach, the Strikers announced two new clubs – at Perry Park and at Meakin Park, for the NSL Team and the Youth Team. Social Clubs are planned to support the Football Club financially, and there has been rumour of other arrangements across Queensland. Such ideas would extend the Strikers' parish wider across the State, enhancing the great relationship with regional Queensland which the Strikers have always had.

Dr. Jones has always given highest priority given to the youth development policy of the Strikers. Shane Stefanutto has worked tirelessly as youth development officer and the introduction of a Strikers youth team will further improve the youth development aspects of the club. This will surely be of great advantage to the club in its application to join the new league.

Dr. Jones also introduced director Robert Green, who is re-

sponsible for corporate marketing and promotion. This is another important aspect of the preparation for the new league. Most observers foresee significant changes to corporate Australia's involvement in soccer, and this must take place at all levels of the organisation, nationally, state-wide, and at club level.

Steve Wilson's appointment to administer the club and oversee the development of Perry Park for a three month period has just come to an end. It has been a great success, and hopefully will continue. If not, Steve would be one in a series of disappointing losses by the club of well performing staff members.

Another brilliant appointment was that of Luciano Trani as assistant coach to Stuart McLaren. What a steady hand on the tiller he is: knowledgeable, communicative, calm, compassionate and passionate, and wise! An impressive coaching team and performance by the Strikers can only help.

But the new league will welcome no shrinking violets, and the Strikers have always been the best kept secret in Brisbane. Since the announcement of the appointments, there have been no media releases; there have been no publicity photographs of the team or the individual players this season; there has been no season launch, little advertising. If you have checked out the official web site this season, you will probably have been disappointed.

And there have been some good opportunities this season too –

- the match against Da Nang could have been announced to the Vietnamese community through their media:

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- the match against Newcastle United was on the day before the England RU team played in Brisbane at the end of October, when the town was full of sports mad Poms: and

- the return of Fernando and Clint last weekend in the 'glamour team' of the competition was a good selling point too.

This is a real chink in the armour of the Strikers application – in the face of the successes of Perth Glory and Adelaide United, and the enthusiasm of the Queensland Lions, such omissions will be noticed.

The BSSA feels justified in making these observations because without the BSSA there would be no Free Kick or up-to-date web site informing the soccer community about the Strikers, there would be no Mascots program bringing up to 50 extra people to the ground each home game to watch the mascots and the Strikers, there would have been no season launch, no photos of the players.

The continuation of the Strikers in the national league is of ut-

most importance to the Supporters. So we appeal to the Strikers, get some promotion going. Communicate with your customers.

There is despondency among the BSSA. The fear is that reliance upon assurances of future publicity will not be enough, and the Strikers must demonstrate they are ready willing and able to raise the profile of the team, the competition and the game in this State.

We would not ask Dr. Jones to spend another penny, because his ongoing commitment has been redoubled this season to support all the improvements, but we do ask this:

Use us. Your supporters can do more than complain. Look at the Free Kick and our web site. Look at the mascots, and the (quickly aborted) attempt to provide entertainment with a drum band. Involve us, talk to us, and use our talent, freely given like that of so many Strikers volunteers over the years. We helped overcome a previous attempt to exclude the Strikers. If need be, we can do it again.

## Free FORTUNE FINALLY SMILES ON HIGGINS

Kick By Steve Pitman

The road to playing sport at the elite level can be strewn with hurdles, but Brisbane Strikers goalkeeper Scott Higgins has surely jumped more than his share.

Now 27, Higgins served a lengthy State League apprenticeship with Taringa Rovers, Brisbane City and Wynnum Wolves, including a spell in 1999 when he endured two reconstructions of his left knee.



Scott Higgins

Perhaps it all seemed worth it when, in the 2001 NSL off season, the Canberra Cosmos signed Higgins after inviting him for trials. But after signing with the Cosmos, Higgins returned home briefly to finish a State League finals campaign with Brisbane City - and it was then that he heard rumours that Soccer Australia was preparing to cut the Cosmos from the NSL for the second time.

Higgins played the State League grand final on a Sunday, then phoned the Cosmos' coach the next day and asked if the rumours were true. "He said 'there's no way we're going to get thrown out - come down'", Higgins recalled. "I flew down, and was there for about four days, and the coach got a call on his mobile phone at training, saying we had been kicked out of the league".

That was disappointing enough, but things were about to get worse. No sooner had his Cosmos dreams turned to dust, than former Strikers Chairman Tony Petty, who had acquired ownership of Welsh club Swansea City, invited Higgins to play for his new team. Having been assured that the established Swansea goalkeeper was leaving the club, Higgins jumped at the chance.

This time he flew into a seething cauldron of hate. Petty's brief tenure at Swansea had already turned ugly as the fans revolted against his plans for their club. "My first day there was a Saturday - game day", Higgins said. "I took my fiancé along to watch the game with me, and they (the fans) were singing 'You can stick your Aussie keeper up your arse!' I just kept my head down and thought 'Oh, no', and tried to explain it to my fiancé". I was obviously gutted about the Canberra thing, and then the Swansea thing was a bit of a nightmare".

The bewildered keeper soon returned to Brisbane to play State League football, fearing his chances of playing at a higher level had evaporated. "I just kind-of 'blanked' it (NSL football)", he said. "I wasn't pushing the issue much".

But this year new Strikers player-coach Stuart

McLaren invited Higgins to trial and eventually suggested he speak to Club Establishment Co-ordinator Steve Wilson about a contract. Higgins said he accepted with barely a second thought. "It was quite funny really. Steve Wilson said to come in and he'd make me an offer, and said 'you'll probably argue, you'll want a bit more' - but I signed on the spot!"

When regular Strikers custodian, Jason Kearton, injured his knee Higgins finally got his NSL debut against Sydney United three weeks ago - and was soon faced with the job of trying to save a penalty from Joe Vrkic. When asked to recall the moment, Higgins gave some insights into how he approaches this most lonely and unenviable of football tasks.

"I tried to watch his feet, his run-up, looked at his eyes - they usually take a glance at where they're aiming it. I had a good feeling he would hit it to the right". Higgins backed himself, hurled his long frame to the right and made a great stop at full stretch to distinguish himself on debut.

But despite playing well, Higgins emerged a 3-0 loser and had to wait until his third game - last weekend's thriller against Paramatta Power - to experience his first NSL win. He now rates this as his best football experience.

"It was great to get a win, and to play in front of the home fans", he said. "They were great. That bunch down in the corner, with the drumming and the singing - they're magic!"

After all the hard times, who could possibly begrudge Higgins a bit of home town support?

## TONIGHTS THE KNIGHTS

Every club has their "bogey team", and in recent seasons, the idea of playing the Melbourne Knights in Brisbane has been fraught with peril..... for the Strikers. The Knights have managed to consistently take points off

the Strikers, usually with an attacking display, and a shell-shocked audience looking on.

But if there is any team known for its ability to recruit or produce quality forwards, it's the Knights. Over the past decade, players such as Mori, Awaritefe, Viduka, Porter, and recently Pelikan have led the team forward.

However, this season represents a transition phase as the Knights hope to stake a claim to a spot in a revised League, after 21 years in the NSL. With such a strong history, and its foundations in the Melbourne suburb of Sunshine firmly established (as the Knights own their own stadium and a junior academy), the Knights would realise that they can stake a claim to a spot in the new League.

The famous phase of the Knights was their dominance of the NSL in the 90's when they achieved a record unmatched in any professional Australian sporting league team by reaching an amazing 5 Grand Finals in just 6 seasons !!! After 3 grand final defeats (all at home, including back-to-back penalty shootout losses), the Knights finally broke through for their first Championship title in 1994/95 when they defeated the team who had denied them the title twice before, by defeating Adelaide City 2-0 in Adelaide.

The following season (without star striker Mark Viduka, who'd left for his first steps into European football), coach Mirko Bazic was replaced mid-season by Ian Dobson who led them to a back-to-back Championship, by defeating Marconi Stallions 2-1 at Olympic Park. Dobson has returned to coach the Knights in this 2003/04 season after a six year absence from Knights Stadium, during which time, the team has gone through seven coaches !!!

Since that second Championship in 1995/96, the Knights have made the Top Six finals' series just three times in seven seasons, losing in the first round elimination legs twice.

Their golden era of course produced such international stars as Mark Viduka, Danny

By Adam Coleman

Tiatto and Joe Didulica, and the Knights could still produce more overseas stars.

The Knights enter Perry Park with the

### Strikers Vs Knights



	P	W	D	L
<b>Overall</b>	17	4	3	10
<b>Home</b>	8	2	2	4
	GF	GA	Pts	
<b>Overall</b>	21	30	15	
<b>Home</b>	12	15	8	

recent 5-0 home derby defeat by South Melbourne still ringing in their ears. To make matters worse, their striking ranks have been sorely depleted with Peter Buljian and Henry Fa'arodo both unavailable through injury and VPL recruit Nick Waite walking out of the club, leaving Serkan Oksuz as the team's lone forward. By the time you read this, former Strikers player and Socceroo Kris Trajanovski may have signed up for the Knights.

Tonight will also be special for Strikers' assistant coach Luciano Trani as he faces up to the club that relieved him of his duties last season, the same club that he led to an NSL Youth National Title in 2000/01. The Knights' loss has certainly been the Strikers' gain.

Looking to the future, it's very possible that tonight could be the last time we see the Knights in Brisbane. Despite a rich winning tradition for Melbourne football, including the two teams (Knights & South Melbourne) meeting in finals' series six times during the nineties, a restructured NSL may spell the end of the Knights. If so, then here's hoping the Strikers can spring one final surprise.

Will the Knights back up from their derby thrashing? Will the Strikers back up from last week's epic victory? The answer's just ninety minutes away.

## FITZY FINDS HIS FEET

By Amanda Atherton

Straight out of school. Steve Fitzsimmons left Queensland for Lancashire and headed for what would become one of his best moments in football. "I was trialling in England at 17," Fitzsimmons recalled, "Playing in the youth and reserves leagues for Marine, against some of the best young talent of Manchester United, Liverpool and Everton, including David Beckham"

After two seasons he returned to Queensland and a place with Rochedale Rovers, before moving to the Gold Coast. Finally, the NSL found Fitzsimmons and he spent two seasons at Parramatta.

He made his NSL debut for Parramatta against Northern Spirit in the 1999/2000 season. "That will always be one of the highlights of my career, as I am sure it is for every player, it is still the top competition in Australia". When he finally got his first full game, he scored his first NSL goal.

After his second season at Parramatta, Steve went to England again, this time to division 3 club, Leyton Orient. After trialling and spending the preseason in Portugal, he was offered a contract.

"By the time we got back from Portugal, the TV rights deal for the league had soured and the contract wasn't worth the paper it was written on." Fitzsimmons recalled.

He returned to Australia and managed to get a contract with Marconi for last season. The NSL and soccer in general had been going through some big changes during his time in football.

"The quality of the NSL hasn't changed since I've been playing in it. The standard is still there." Fitzsimmons said. "But it could be packaged a lot better. Its amazing what they've achieved in Adelaide"

During this winter he managed to secure a loan to Queensland Lions "to avoid having to get a real job!"

Just like at Parramatta and Marconi he was generally played up front or in an attacking midfield role.

Fitzsimmons has been playing a midfield role for Brisbane so far, almost across the length of the pitch. It would seem that his speed and agility have fitted in well with the team's new 3-5-2 formation.

"It's different to have to come back into the defence" said Fitzsimmons. "Playing in that wing back role, Steff and I have been working well together across the park."

"The opposition has been tough every week and we have fully deserved every point" stated Fitzsimmons. "One of the best games was the 1-0 win over South Melbourne."

So far the Strikers have played against both of Fitzsimmons former clubs. "I was happy to be able to beat them (Parramatta) on Saturday (22/11/03), after all the money they have spent on a team for this season" he said.

Moving to Queensland and specifically Brisbane, has been a change not only in the football but in the mental approach to playing.

"Relaxed isn't the right word" said Fitzsimmons "but is definitely calmer. There is a good feel about the place at training. We've been written off before the season and we're out to prove people wrong."

The goal for this season at the Strikers appears to be to build on the good start. "We've done well against the 'good sides' of Parra, Perth and South Melbourne, we have to roll on from there, and beat the sides we are supposed to beat" said Fitzsimmons.

In 1997 he was part of a huge crowd at Lang Park, watching a great team win a championship. Perhaps this year we will be watching him!



**Steve Fitzsimmons**



By Evan Askew

Strikers youth team central midfielder, Tim Hickey, is enthusiastic about his side's chances against top of the table side Canberra Deakin this Saturday at Perry Park. Coming off two consecutive losses, a positive attitude will be crucial if the youth team are to recapture the winning formula that has deserted them over the last couple of rounds. However, Hickey is unfazed by the current lapse in form and believes his side is capable of winning the game. "I haven't seen them but if we play better than we have I don't see why we can't smash them, even if we play half decent we could still beat them," he said.

Despite his optimistic appraisal of the situation, Hickey recognizes the gravity of the current situation. "At the moment, coming off two losses, we really need to win this week against Canberra Deakin," he said.

Despite their current slump, Hickey believes the team is in sufficient form to beat Deakin. Even though Brisbane lost 4-1 to Parramatta Power last week, he feels the game could have gone either way.

"I think we felt a little bit overawed because we were playing the champions, and playing against the champions there is always going to be that bit of nervousness, but overall we played pretty well and could've won it, but that's the way soccer goes," he said.

Originally from Rockhampton, Hickey learned his football at Frenchville where, up until this year, he had played all his life. Fresh from the Mid State League he has also represented Central Queensland and Queensland Country at every age group. Hickey lists as his personal highlights, a Mid State League title and captaining Queensland Country U15s.

Since moving to Brisbane in late September, his emphasis has

been on learning in both a football and day-to-day sense. Since his relocation he has had to find a new school and accommodation that he shares with three other teammates - Josh Evans, Brad Stevens and Brendan Donohue - who also hail from Rockhampton.

Hickey has found the jump to National Youth League difficult. "I think the Youth League is better than Mid State League back home, so it was a reasonably big step coming up to this competition," he said.

Youth team coach Peter Tokesi has said that his team has had difficulty in areas such as first touch and their speed of play, and this is a statement that Hickey seemed to agree with when asked about the difficulties of adapting to a higher standard of football.

"At the start there was speed of play as well as strength but I've been going to the gym a lot so that's improving," he said.

But experience at NSL youth level has helped him to improve in areas such as awareness and communication. This improvement as a player can be attributed to the guidance of coach Tokesi. According to Hickey "he is probably the best coach I've had so far because he is looking for improvement out of the team and ourselves as individuals, and I think it's good to see a coach that's doing that and not just telling you to do this and do that. So yes, he is a very good coach".

Hickey hopes to play youth league for the next three years and then play for the Strikers or another NSL club. However, his loyalty remains first and foremost with Queensland. "The Strikers are probably the way to go as I can't see myself leaving Brisbane unless it was overseas," he said.

## JUNIOR MASCOTS

This week's mascots are the North Pine Bandicoots. They are all very excited and it will be a day they will member for years to come.



The 2003 Bandicoots U10 have been premiers and champions for :

- 2001 under 8's,
- 2002 under 9's and
- 2003 under 10's 1st divisions team.

In three years they have lost only one game. They have also won the under 10's pre season Challenge cup.

Five of Bandicoots were selected for representation for the 2003 North Zone Christian state titles.

Although very competitive in each game they all enjoy soccer, have lots of fun and have made many life long friendships.

Most of the players are ready and keen for the new season to start to make it 4 in a row.

Players names : Trent Allen, Dillon Ball, Timmy Bulfoni, Isaac Dommett, Timmy Haight, Jarrod Ivory, Lachie Leah-Dillon, Hayden Nyman, Jacob Proberts, Mitchell Reid, Ben Richards, Ben Roberts, Danule Taylor, Joshua Thompson, Elliott Woods.

[www.go.to/bssa](http://www.go.to/bssa)



## BSSA COLLECTABLES

The BSSA is pleased to bring you collector cards of the players featured in the Free Kick.



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Mugs of the featured players are also available to order from \$25

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