

The A-League's stocks are falling in Asia , no technique or style , writes Goal.com's Chris Paraskevas.

By Chris Paraskevas

Jan 28, 2010 1:11:00 AM

Goal.com Asia editor John Duerden [penned an outstanding recent piece](#) bemoaning the lack of technical quality in the A-League, which is so conspicuous at the moment that the vast majority of the confederation's leagues are heading toward not bothering with bringing over Australian talent any more.

Many will argue that the departures of the likes of Joel Griffiths, Jade North, Danny Allsopp and Mark Milligan reflect the growing reputation of the competition within the Asian neighbourhood but the truth is that these individuals appear to be the exception to the general rule that A-League players aren't technically sound enough to survive in countries like Japan and Korea.

“The A-League has this reputation of being one in which technique comes a fairly distant second to power,” Duerden wrote.

“Last year, a team newly-promoted to the J-League scoured Australian football but failed to find a player that it felt was as good technically than any of its squad which had just finished a J2 season. Korean teams get around this by focusing on Australian defenders to their backlines where, it is felt, that a lack of technique is outweighed by physical strength and power.”

I'm not one to subscribe to the ancient notion that all of Australia's football fraternity values physicality above all other qualities on the football pitch. The much-flaunted argument that a British school of football dominates the development of Australian players is flawed, offensive and misplaced, not least because the spin put on 'British' football in this sense is particularly misleading. After all, this is a nation that produced the likes of Viduka, Kewell, Culina and Zelic, all ball-players of a continental mould.

Instead, Australian players continue to suffer in their post-teenage stages, where they are exposed to a competitive environment that does not encourage style or artistry as far as technique goes. This has nothing to do with a cultural interpretation of the game but of a continued emphasis on results as opposed to the manner of results.

It isn't necessarily a conscious movement; the reality is that clubs in Australia are limited in the way they operate if they seek any sort of success. The A-League embodies this trend with the continuing presence of a finals series that now in particular encourages the grinding out of results, thus lowering the standard and aesthetics of the football on offer.

Where a straight league format would force teams to focus on technique and tactical sophistication – it is the formula that delivers titles more often than not all over the

world, particularly in Europe – a finals necessitates that sides are able to play badly but scrap for the occasional result to keep themselves alive.

Clubs with a relative lack of resources simply don't bother with experimental recruitment or promoting more technically gifted players, as these strategies are long-term and very rarely deliver any sort of immediate success. This usually leads to the departure of managers, a trend that is worryingly prevalent in the A-League and was typified by the premature sacking of Branko Culina from Sydney not so long ago.

The only exception to this rule is Ernie Merrick's Melbourne Victory, the Scottish manager having endured a rather disastrous first season with the club (they finished second last) before going on to deliver two A-League titles by virtue of an adventurous scouting network that brought two of the competition's best ever players in Brazilian Fred and Costa Rican Carlos Hernandez.

The Central Coast Mariners similarly have kept faith in Lawrie McKinna and as a result, the Scottish manager has been able to take the modest club to two A-League Grand Finals, both of which they were rather unfortunate to lose. He remains the only A-League manager apart from Merrick to have been with his club since the inauguration of the competition.

Even the Mariners were forced to regress to a particularly un-savoury brand of football recently though, one that they have been unfairly accused of in the past but which was un-defendable as they looked to kick Gold Coast United off the park in a recent match. In the knowledge that they were still in with a chance of winning the A-League title despite have only won six games this season, is it any surprise that such tactics were utilized?

Why would teams like the Central Coast and North Queensland Fury bother trying to emulate the Melbourne Victory when they can just as easily employ simplistic formulas in the way of player recruitment and tactics and still be in with a chance of being crowned the best team in Australia. The European equivalent would be a team like Stoke City qualifying for a 'Top 12' in the English Premier League and going on to knockout both Manchester United and Chelsea on the way to a Grand Final – romance aside and one realizes it is a particularly unfair system.

Is it any wonder then that Song Jin-Hyung, the Newcastle Jets' resident Korean, has reportedly regressed technically during his two seasons with the Jets?

“Another is that the move doesn't seem to have helped Song as a player,” Duerden wrote. “When the midfielder returned to his homeland last year to participate in the Asian Champions League with the Jets, coaching staff from his former club went along to take a look. [FC] Seoul were shocked by what they saw as a complete lack of technical development in the player since he had left Korea.

“So surprised were the staff that FC Seoul, a club known for helping young players develop, no longer recommends the A-League as a possible destination to any footballer that leaves the club.”

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