

Why soccer is falling behind footy and rugby in Australia

Written by Steve Georgakis, Senior Lecturer of Pedagogy and Sports Studies, University of Sydney

This article is latest in our World Cup series exploring the politics, economics, science and social issues behind the world's most popular sports event.

While soccer has a [long history in the Australian sporting landscape](#), most fans readily admit it has never rivalled Rugby League and Australian Rules Football in popularity.

But there was a brief period when this wasn't the case. From late 2005, [when Australia dramatically beat Uruguay to qualify](#) for the following year's World Cup, until early 2015, [when Australia hosted \(and then won\) the Asian Cup](#), the sport managed to win the hearts and minds of most Australians.

Gone were the days of soccer [struggling for mainstream legitimacy](#), branded as a game of ["sheilas, wogs and poofters"](#).

During this halcyon 10-year period, the Socceroos moved from the tiny Oceania Football Confederation to the lucrative Asian Football Federation, and enjoyed three consecutive appearances in the World Cup (2006, 2010, 2014).

The A-League was also established and quickly became successful, with steady increases in sponsorship money, TV viewership and match attendance over the first few seasons. More importantly, the league gained acceptance as a truly national and inclusive Australian competition.

But that was then, and this is now. The last three years have been trying for Australian soccer. The [recent VAR error in the A-League grand final](#) between Newcastle and the Melbourne Victory is symptomatic of the myriad problems confronting the sport.

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While soccer still has very high grassroots participation and the women's game has seen a boom in popularity, the growth of the men's game at the elite level has ground to a halt. Australia [barely qualified for this year's World Cup](#), and the way things are going, it could be eliminated from the group stage without a win.

Poor performance of the Socceroos

For the Australian sporting public, the Socceroos have embodied what it means to be Australian – they've been seen as classic underdogs, with their backs to the wall, winning against all odds. Successful campaigns in World Cup qualifying or the Asian Cup coincided in a sharp interest in the code and always resulted in media bonanzas. When the Socceroos were doing well, the sport was doing well.

Read more: [Qualifying is never easy: Australia's World Cup history](#)

But the [drawn-out qualification campaign for this year's World Cup](#) felt different. The team faced must-win matches against minnows like Syria, Thailand and Honduras, then [lost Australian-born coach Ange Postecoglou](#) after eking its way into the tournament, creating considerable negative publicity. The longer the qualification campaign went, the more supporters switched off.

There is [clearly no real fanfare](#) heading into Australia's opening World Cup match against France on Saturday.

Former manager Guus Hiddink went into the 2006 World Cup with star players Harry Kewell, Mark Viduka and Mark Schwarzer. Current coach Bert van Marwijk has at his disposal a less-accomplished squad featuring the likes of Jamie Maclaren, Josh Risdon and 38-year-old Tim Cahill. Expectations for the team in Russia are [decidedly low](#).

The declining state of the A-League

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When the A-League competition was launched in 2005, it heralded a new era in Australian soccer, with a de-ethnicised national competition comprised of professional players and international marquee superstars.

Following the success of the Socceroos' 2006 World Cup campaign and the arrival of genuine stars like Alessandro Del Piero and Emile Heskey, the league thrived and attracted new supporters to the sport.

However, in recent years, [interest has begun to waver](#) as the league failed to evolve and replace retiring and departing stars with new talent.

Attendance at A-League matches was never able to keep pace with either the AFL or NRL, and during the just-completed 2017-18 season, [it dipped to 1.53 million total fans, or an average of 10,926 per match](#), the lowest numbers since 2011. Most worrying has been stagnation and, in some cases, significant declines in attendance for derbies (the Big Blue and Sydney derbies, for example) and certain struggling clubs like [Wellington Phoenix](#).

TV ratings have been on the decline, as well. Free-to-air ventures with SBS and Channel 10 have yielded low ratings, while Fox Sports pay-per-view ratings have dropped off significantly, especially since the arrival of the free-to-air cricket Big Bash in 2011-12.

The failure to get more than one A-League match on free-to-air TV per week is a major issue for the sport, especially since less than 30% of households have Fox Sports. Lack of a televised presence clearly impacts on interest.

Lack of player development

While it's difficult to get soccer supporters to agree on anything, there is unanimity in the belief

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that the Australian talent production line is broken and the country no longer produces top-quality players.

Very few Australians play in the top-flight European leagues. And the junior Australian national squads (Under-17s and -20s) struggle to qualify for World Cups, let alone win them.

There are no studies or reviews as yet to better understand what has gone wrong, but clearly the high cost of entry into the junior development system has to be a prime suspect. Soccer club registration fees are easily the most expensive of the four major football codes (including rugby union), with some clubs in Melbourne and Sydney [charging more than \\$2,000 per year](#) .

Read more: [**Soccer in Australia: Is history repeating itself?**](#)

More worrying has been the exponential growth of private soccer academies, where players are often hit with steep, extra fees. The FFA charter stipulates that A-League clubs also have their own youth academies, but these, too, are prohibitively expensive and have yet to produce top-quality players.

Responsibility for these failings falls squarely on the FFA. When the governing body was reborn under its current name in 2005, it inherited a golden generation of players who had learnt their trade from the old ethnic-supported soccer clubs of the National Soccer League. Player development was central to the mission of these clubs, but when they were annexed by the A-League in 2005-06, [they stopped being incubators for Australian football](#) .

The FFA has also provided very little vision, leadership and transparency when it has come to growing the A-League in recent years. The FFA ignored calls to expand the league to more teams, institute a promotion/relegation system that could generate more fan interest and [increase the revenue](#) received by clubs in the recent lucrative pay-TV deal.

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Such steps wouldn't "fix" Australian soccer alone, but bolder thinking is clearly needed to help the sport keep pace internationally and at home.

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