

# End of the Barassi Line

Code breaking is happening throughout football and in the University, reports **Shari Wakefield**

and Carlton, and a premiership-winning coach with Carlton and North Melbourne. He believed in spreading Australian Rules around the nation with an evangelical zeal. He foresaw a time when Australian Rules football clubs around Australia, including up to four from NSW and Queensland, would play in a national league with only a handful of clubs based in Melbourne. At that time the VFL consisted of 11 clubs in Melbourne and one in regional Victoria, and Barassi was largely ridiculed. He went on to become a major supporter of the relocated Sydney Swans and in 1993 became their coach.

Recently AFL has increasingly focused on regions behind the Barassi Line, particularly in metropolitan areas (its “developing markets”) where the league has traditionally struggled. The league has granted concessions to teams based in these regions, investing large amounts of development funding. As a result, participation is increasing in NSW and has almost doubled from 2005 (60,862) to 2008 (113,348). And a gradually increasing number of national league players have been produced from formerly unpromising territory, mostly due to interstate migration trends and developing grassroots participation, especially Cairns, Brisbane and the Gold Coast.

Many Victorian AFL clubs are now aligning themselves with NSW-based clubs in an effort to strengthen the pool of young players from NSW entering the AFL Draft. “These development squads are definitely improving the standard of the Sydney AFL. Well-run squads with quality coaching are very important in an environment which suffers from a lack of quality coaches and resources as well as a relative lack of competition,” said Jason McLennon, President of Sydney University Australian National Football Club (SUANFC).

Sydney University Australian National Football Club’s inaugural Under-18 program, the “Colts” was unveiled this year – supported by a new relationship with Collingwood Football Club. A step towards long term plans for success, this alignment will enhance SUANFC’s high performance pathway in developing elite youth talent.

Other Victorian AFL clubs that have aligned themselves with Sydney clubs include Melbourne with Pennant Hills, Essendon with North Shore and Hawthorn with the Baulkham Hills Junior Club. Two Western Australian clubs are also formally aligned with Sydney clubs – Fremantle with Balmain and West Coast Eagles with East Coast Eagles. Meanwhile the Sydney Swans have made the understandable decision to remain unaligned and “open to all” developing players in NSW.

“The NSW talent pool is being strengthened through more kids in Sydney having exposure to AFL clubs such as the Swans and Collingwood and having their



sport

There has always been a great divide in Australia between those who love rugby (either union or league) and those who love AFL (Australian Football League). New South Wales’s passion has typically been for rugby but, in recent years, this dominance has begun to wane and AFL participation and attendance has grown significantly. In Sydney we already have the Swans. Could the introduction of a second AFL team in NSW mark the end of the Barassi Line?

Professor Ian Turner, in his 1978 Ron Barassi Memorial Lecture, first suggested the concept of the Barassi Line. It referred to a dividing line running from Arnhem Land in the Northern Territory, south through Birdsville, Queensland, through southern NSW north of the Riverina, bisecting Canberra and on to the Pacific Ocean at Cape Howe on the border of NSW and Victoria.

The imaginary line represents a dichotomy in our sporting culture: Australian Rules football being the most popular football code to the west and south of the line, with the rugby football varieties (league and union) the most popular codes on the other side. At the time it was first used, there were no professional teams or leagues located on each code’s opposite side of the line.

The Barassi Line was named after Ron Barassi, Jnr. His father played 58 games for Melbourne in the Victorian Football League (VFL) from 1936 to 1940 when he enlisted to fight in World War II and was killed at Tobruk in 1941. His son became a star player for Melbourne

*AFL is now the most attended sporting league in Australia.*

development fast tracked – in an attempt to catch up with the advanced development of similar-aged talent in Victoria and WA,” said McLennon.

Derek Hine, recruitment manager for Collingwood said, “There are some very talented players in NSW, but we feel they are often two or three years behind players of similar age in Victoria. It is not as competitive here. Coaching from a young age is not necessarily available and we think we need to access these players on a regular basis with critical coaching, feedback and analysis if they are to be successful in being drafted and having an AFL career.

“It’s a fantastic opportunity for us to take our program and the club’s to another level and hopefully work with some of the University’s sports science/medicine faculty, as well as the various other high quality sports programs run by Sydney University Sport and Fitness. We drafted our first scholarship boy last year in Scott Reed of Pennant Hills and are hopeful of more to come. We certainly believe the relationship is sustainable and of tremendous benefit to both organisations.”

According to *The Age*, AFL is now the most attended sporting league in Australia; it is also the nation’s most popular sport competition in terms of TV ratings. The AFL is currently the fourth most attended professional sports league in the world with an average attendance per match of more than 38,000.

The Sydney Swans recorded an average of 51,000+ at ANZ Stadium and near sellout crowds at the SCG between 2003-2006. Although attendance to Swans’ home games have dropped in 2008 and 2009 along with the team’s on-field performance, they are still recording home crowds of between 24,000 and 41,000.

The AFL has brought forward plans for a second Sydney team in 2012. The objective, they say, is not to displace other codes as the most popular in NSW, but to carve a niche that allows high quality competition and local participation pathways and supports appropriate membership and following for professional AFL clubs in Australia’s biggest city.

AFL is booming, but can NSW support participation, development of and attendance at multiple football codes? Will western Sydney support a second AFL team? Will this prompt the NRL or the Australian Rugby Union (ARU) to push for more teams in Victoria or WA?

Then on the other hand, A-League soccer commentator Robbie Slater says, “This is not taking a pop at the other codes but I think they are going to struggle to find players in 10 years time because every kid in Australia will be playing soccer.” **SAM**

**AFL** Sydney University Australian National Football Club is the oldest Australian Rules Club in NSW and the fourth oldest in Australia (est 1863). Over the past 25 years the club has won seven Senior first grade flags (1981, 1986, 1987, 1992 (SFL), 1997, 2003 and 2005; and have been runners up five times (1998, 1999, 2000, 2002, 2004, 2006). In 2009 they field four open age teams, and one Under-18s team, competing in their inaugural season.

**SOCCER** Sydney University Soccer Football Club offers elite and social football to both Sydney University students and the general community. With more 25 teams playing in a number of different competitions it is the largest of the sporting clubs at Sydney University. SUSFC fields two teams in the Men’s Super League, the second highest division in NSW; and five teams in the Women’s Premier league, the top tier of women’s football in NSW.



## New Flames

By Shari Wakefield

With the recent departure of captain, Alicia Poto, for the European Basketball League, some foresaw the ACUVUE Sydney Uni Flames struggling to make the final series. But after the recent signing some significant talent, the Flames look set to make quite an impact in 2009-2010.

“Our first goal is to make the finals,” said Karen Dalton, Head Coach. “Once we are there anything can happen. Last season was a rebuilding year for us, but it gave us opportunities for younger players to gain experience with valuable court time; and we are hoping to see their continued development this season.”

Of the returning players, **Eva Afeaki** (pictured) will play a pivotal role. Afeaki has not only proved her ability on court for the Flames, but also represented Australia in the Opals tour of China and Europe in May. She is keen to make the 2012 London Olympic team. After solidly improving her perimeter game, Afeaki combines her outstanding athletic physique with excellent three-point accuracy, making her the opposition’s nightmare to mark.

Newcomers include Perth Lynx MVP (Most Valuable Player) and WNBL All Star 5 member Deanna Smith, WNBL Point Guard veteran Deanne Butler and rebounder Ellie Manou.

Welcomed back is former Flame and 07/08 WNBL MVP Natalie Porter, who returns after playing for Lavezzini Parma in the Italian League and the Eurocup.

After a season in which the Flames often failed to score vital points in tight matches, the team is now heavily stacked with players who can make every basket count. Dalton said, “We have some great scorers in Deanna Smith, Eva Afeaki and Natalie Porter. They are all good leaders and we have an experienced point guard in Deanne Butler.”

With the possibility of four of the starting five being new recruits, let’s hope the stars align and this special group of players gets quickly.