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THE BALL A

John O'Neill made millions for rugby union before he quit. Now he faces the t



AT HIS FEET

the toughest task in Australian sport – making soccer a winner. *Mike Safe* reports.



On November 21, 2003, the day before the Rugby World Cup final, John O'Neill, banker turned boss of the Australian Rugby Union (ARU), found himself at the centre of a powerplay. As the force behind the tournament that had poured \$45 million into the coffers of a once amateur game, O'Neill was more used to applying pressure than enduring it. But here he was being made an offer too good to refuse.

As yachts bobbed on a sunlit Sydney Harbour, O'Neill lunched in the dining room of the Royal Sydney Yacht Squadron, just down the road from the prime minister's Kirribilli House and the governor general's Admiralty House. His dining companions included the International Olympic Committee president, Jacques Rogge, as well as Australia's second-richest man, Westfield boss Frank Lowy.

O'Neill, who enjoys nothing better than retelling a good story, recalls the moment: "There were only about eight of us there and, lo and behold, Frank Lowy was seated next to me." Lowy was a man on a mission – and O'Neill still wonders if that day's seating arrangements might have been part of his planning.

Seven months earlier, in April 2003, Lowy, a lifelong soccer tragic, had been persuaded by Prime Minister John Howard to take the most poisonous job in local sports administration – chairmanship of the round ball game in Australia. This coincided with the release of the government-sponsored Independent Soccer Review calling for a broom to be put through the crisis-ridden sport following decades of incompetent management.

In July that year, O'Neill was deep in preparation for rugby union's showcase event, the World Cup, when he received a phone call from Lowy's son, David. "He said, 'Dad wants to have a cup of coffee with you,'" recalls O'Neill. "Well, you don't say no to coffee with Frank Lowy. So I went to see him and he said, 'I've taken over the chairmanship of soccer and want you to run it for me.' I said, 'I'm very flattered, but I can't.' He said 'why not?', and I said 'well, there's something on – I'm running the Rugby World Cup'. He said, 'what's that?' He didn't know it was coming to town."

O'Neill remembers having had his heart and soul, "my whole being", in the event that was to be staged in October-November. "The preparations for it had been the toughest two years of my professional life. I was out on a limb, like a highwire act. In sport, you never know if you've got your board behind you. You turn around – and you're not sure if they're going to be there. But I was determined to deliver a great event.

"Frank said, 'I can't wait until November' and I said, 'well, that's unfortunate, but I can't help you'. So he said, 'do you

mind if I stay in touch, just use you as a sounding board?' and I said, 'no, not at all'. So during the following months I'd get the occasional phone call from him somewhere around the world to ask my opinion about various matters."

Then came the fateful Kirribilli lunch and their side-by-side seats. O'Neill continues: "At the end of it Frank said, 'I haven't filled that position yet – I'm still waiting for you to give me an answer'. I said, 'well, it's the World Cup final tomorrow night'. He said, 'I know that, where do you stand?' I said, 'can I get the final out of the way, but I suspect my answer is going to be yes because the ground is shifting.'"

Indeed it was, with an almost earthquake-like shudder – and O'Neill had felt it. Not all of the crash tackles in the various football codes take place out on the field. O'Neill was being taken out by his own sport, even after delivering it tens of millions of dollars in funding.



ADVANCE 18 MONTHS TO A SUNNY Saturday morning in April, and there's a strong whiff of irony in the air as a dapper O'Neill strides across the manicured turf at The King's School in Sydney's west. Founded in 1831 and Australia's oldest independent school, King's has a robust sports tradition, taking on other well-heeled institutions in the city's Greater Public Schools competition. Rugby union is the game of choice here. Participation in the GPS First 15 can be an entry point to the "old school tie" network of business and commerce. Hence the irony as O'Neill arrives at King's to open its new ... soccer pitches.

A crowd of about 300, parents and boys, gathers on the edge of the main field as the new chief executive of the revamped Football Federation Australia (FFA) talks up the game: the biggest participation rate of any team sport in the country, a new national league and entry into Asian competition. Yes, Frank Lowy

did finally get his man. Enthuses O'Neill: "There's a smorgasbord of opportunities for the game if we get this right."

Earlier, talking in his office overlooking central Sydney's Hyde Park, O'Neill admits that to get the game right, he and Lowy face a huge mountain – and there may be a few, associated with its old guard principally through its state league teams, who will be happy to see them run out of oxygen before they reach the top. "They see the Frank Lowy-John O'Neill regime as a dose of medicine they have to take, a bit like castor oil, but they'll feel better later and Lowy and O'Neill will disappear. Then they'll walk back in and pick up all the good stuff."

He believes there are some who want Lowy and him to do well, but not too well. "They want a good national governing body, but they don't want it to become so good that it ends up dominating the landscape," he adds with characteristic candour. "It's no

game in South America in six months.

He points out that the first two aims can be controlled – but the third can only be decided out on the field. "People ask what if we don't get all three, if we only get the first two. It's a good question, but inevitably, like all sporting contests, sometimes you lose games you should have won, or vice versa. To have your horse riding on that game in November ... well, people might walk away saying 'it's over, Lowy and O'Neill have failed'. We don't think we will fail but, equally, if we don't qualify, the A-League and the planned integration with Asia remain fundamental planks for our prosperity."

ACANNY OPERATOR, O'NEILL knows he's close to being offside when as an outsider he passes judgement on a game that has kicked more than its share of own goals, but is still loved passionately by the soccer diehards – hundreds of thousands

"There's a smorgasbord of opportunities for the game if we get it right," says O'Neill (from above left): opening The King's School soccer pitches; with Frank Lowy; with Wallabies coach Eddie Jones.

of them. But, as is his way, he willingly speaks his mind, lobbing a few verbal hand grenades in the process. That was how he did it in rugby where he criticised players and officials and it will be his way now.

"I think culturally they regard me with suspicion because I'm a blow-in and not really a football person," O'Neill readily admits of the diehards. "But I also think that's largely irrelevant. I'm scarcely an aficionado, but I've watched enough and spoken to enough people who know enough.

"It's imperative that those down the line embrace change the same way this administration has, and that they understand this is the last roll of the dice. If they don't change and strive for best practice, then we're not going to

realise the change that is necessary.”

One of his early hardline decisions has been to order national coach Frank Farina into anger management counselling after verbal and physical fisticuffs with television commentator Andrew Orsatti following the Socceroos’ less than stellar showing against Iraq eight weeks ago. Farina was said to be far from pleased with such direction from his new boss, but remained circumspect, saying his focus was on getting the Socceroos to the World Cup finals.

With the issue given banner headlines by a Sydney newspaper, O’Neill, as is his feisty way, said FFA had to act on what had been a public altercation investigated by police. Any employer who didn’t would be open to “the most strident criticism”.

O’Neill makes no apologies for his desire to rein in what he regards as any behaviour, on or off the field, which might be a threat to the game.



“Everyone has to be on the same train leaving the station,” he says. And if they’re not? “They run the risk of being disenfranchised. It’s a high-stake game, but the reform process Frank Lowy and I are leading is worth the effort. We’re basically beseeching these people to put all the old turf wars, faction fighting and who did what to whom behind them.”

This, of course, raises that highly charged word – ethnicity. As a spate of violent crowd incidents during recent state league games in Sydney and Melbourne have shown, centuries-old cultural and political feuds from the other side of the world still blight soccer here. Such problems are supposed to be resolved by the various state leagues – something they seem incapable of doing – but FFA continues to lobby hard behind the scenes and seems determined nothing will tarnish its squeaky-clean A-League launch.

O’Neill knows soccer’s ethnicity is a two-edged sword – it can help or

hinder. For the moment, he’s content to emphasise its positives, but there is growing sentiment at the game’s higher levels that if troublemakers persist they will be shown the door – not for a few games, but for good.

“It’s the only sport in Australia that gets the word ‘ethnic’ attached to it,” O’Neill muses. “I’m not ignoring the word, but I’m saying cultural diversity is a softer term and, funnily enough, as a community we celebrate that.”

“We constantly promote multiculturalism as a great aspect of Australian life, but when you talk football people say, hmm, ethnicity. What has happened over time is that ... the best analogy I can think of is a lot of feudal barons, personally and corporately, have decided they can get by without a strong national body – and that now stands in the way of unification.”

O’Neill quotes advertising millionaire and sports nut John Singleton, a member of FFA’s board. “While we all accept it’s now a broader-based game, he drummed into me when I started here – ‘Mate, it will never work until it’s accepted as an Australian sport, instead of it being looked at as something that’s come from another place.’”

For O’Neill, soccer’s other frustration is that despite its broadening appeal and massive junior base – 1.2 million kids, many encouraged by parents who do not want to see them biffed and barged in the other, more physically aggressive football codes – there has been no structure to keep them once they finish school.

“Of the huge player base we have, 74 per cent are under 17 and 58 per cent under 12. I don’t like to be the bearer of confrontational news but, if you look at this as a traditional consumer business, our retention rate is terrible. Our customers are walking out the door. And that’s because there hasn’t been an end-to-end structure.”

So far, the public face of soccer in Australia, SBS Television’s Les Murray, is satisfied with what he’s hearing from O’Neill. “He’s a thorough professional and high-ranking sporting administrator, which is something football’s never had in this country, and he’s going about his business accordingly.”

Murray agrees the task is enormous. The jury is still out on how the A-League will shape up, but getting Australia into Asia was “clever politicking” that no-one else had been able to achieve in 35 years of trying. “The football community has been crying out for a regime such as this to run the game. In other words, people who don’t actually want the positions – by that I mean Frank Lowy, who had to be coaxed into it by the prime minister, and O’Neill, who had to be coaxed into it by Lowy. These are not ego-tripping people who need to feed their own vanity by holding these jobs.”

Those outside soccer, adds Murray, ▶

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have no idea how much the local game was "on the nose" before the revamp. "Overall, this league needs to show it's different from anything in the past. That's what's held the game back here - the image was so rotten that new fans didn't want to come.

"People would get interested because of overseas football - the World Cup was drawing record television audiences and the English Premier League was going the same way, but no-one was going to the NSL [the old National Soccer League]. That was because it was on the nose, the administration was on the nose. There can't be any baggage from the past."

Asked if he and O'Neill are toting any political baggage in this venture, Frank Lowy - who was involved in the game in the '70s until becoming disillusioned - laughs: "If we had any, we've lost it along the way."

He says there is wide consensus - from government and business, the Olympic movement and even among other sporting codes - that they have to make this work. There will be "holes to fill" along the way, but the A-League is "fundamental" to the plan, while the move into Asia is "transforming", not only for the game but for Australia socially and economically, because no other sport can connect in such a way.



In March, Sydney soccer fans clash at a match between Bonnyrigg and Sydney United.

O'NEILL WAS ALWAYS LOWY'S FIRST choice for the frontline CEO job, but he had to want it. "There was no way he was going to jeopardise the [Rugby] World Cup and he wasn't going to move until that happened and happened successfully. That was the right thing to do as far as I was concerned. I thought that when you do the right thing by your previous employer, you'll do the right thing by your new one. I respected that in him."

The "right thing" philosophy that Lowy admires was learnt at the knee of O'Neill's father, John "Pud" O'Neill, an old-fashioned Irish Catholic GP who still made house calls 24 hours a day, seven days week. John Junior, who remembers his dad as a "larger-than-life character", would sometimes accompany him on these visits and it instilled a sense of community and family.

The fourth of ten children - two boys and eight girls - he grew up in a boisterous

household in Sydney's eastern suburbs. His mother, Maisie, died suddenly when he was nine and O'Neill and his older brother, Terry, were dispatched to board at Saint Joseph's College, another GPS school, better known as Joey's. There his twin loves, rugby and cricket, were encouraged, something he has fostered in his own three sons, although they were sent to Riverview - yes, another GPS school and great rivals of Joey's and King's.

He studied law at Sydney University, in between having what he describes as "a good time", where he also coached lower grade rugby. From there he went into banking, rising through the ranks at the Rural Bank, later the State Bank of NSW, where he came under the patronage of Nick Whitlam, who would become its managing director.

With the '80s deregulation of banking, O'Neill was the right man at the right time - something he admits has been a feature of his ongoing career. "I wasn't a shrinking violet," he says. "I was pretty good on my feet and I was tenacious."

In 1987, Whitlam left and O'Neill, at 35, became the youngest ever CEO of a major Australian bank. Again, in the mid-'90s as rugby, his great love, went professional, it was right place, right time and he became the game's Australian CEO in September 1995.

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THREE WEEKS AFTER STAGING THE most successful Rugby World Cup in history, O'Neill quit with 12 months to run on his \$750,000-a-year contract. It shocked the sporting world, especially as he had survived – and usually triumphed – over eight years of spats with media critics, administrators, recalcitrant coaches and players, uppity Poms and, most infamously, rightly-suspicious Kiwis after he cut them out of the World Cup by having the entire event staged in Australia.

But behind the scenes, the seeds for his departure had been sown for over a year. Quite simply, many of the “blazer brigade”, the behind-the-scenes types, particularly within NSW and a growing bunch within the national administration, thought O'Neill had grown too big for his boots and was hogging too much of the World Cup's considerable limelight.

O'Neill can now afford to smile about this. He sees sport as the ultimate people business, politics in the raw. “It's not a widge production line,” he says. “People say to me, ‘oh, they knifed you in the back at rugby’, but I say ‘no, they were going to, but you build antennae’. In sport, people can't help themselves – they gossip and it's rare that you're totally surprised. You usually know it's coming and you may not approve of it and you might regard the behaviour as despicable, but it's not too hard to see.”

There were two very public moments in this festering resentment. The first was a talk O'Neill delivered to the NSW Rugby Union that became infamous as the “new broom speech”. In it, he criticised NSW, which three years before had been bailed out to the tune of \$5 million by the national body. “I very sadly had to retrench 25 or 26 people, but not one director sitting around the boardroom table when NSW went belly up lost their job. They'd essentially been in receivership and I said in a corporate environment in the clinical sense it would be much better if we started again with a whole new broom.” He pauses for effect. “That went over like a lead balloon.”

The second incident was a public rev-up he delivered to the Australian team, the Wallabies, while they were winning but hardly inspiring confidence in the lead-up games to the World Cup final, where they duly lost to England by a last-gasp field goal. “If I had my time again I'd use different language to get the message across,” O'Neill says. “I used bank-speak – terms like ‘return on investment’ for the resources that had been put into the team. It would have been better to use something more sporting. But the thrust of what I was saying, no, there's no regrets.”

Former Wallaby and 1991 World Cup-winning captain Nick Farr-Jones, one of the game's more dispassionate observers, agrees O'Neill can be abrasive but says his legacy is that he left

Australian union the best managed of any national rugby body following the move to professionalism. “John was very focused and set in his ways,” says Farr-Jones. “Generally, the game's managers had been told what to do by influential directors and suddenly John was there and he wasn't going to cop that. He had his vision, his way and he stuck to it.”

“From what I hear, what peeved some directors was that during the World Cup, which was a wonderful success, they believed he wanted to take all the credit. I don't know, but I imagine some people would get their noses out of joint about that. But at the same time I suspect he deserved a lot of the credit.”

Farr-Jones suggests soccer presents a different challenge for O'Neill, a man used to getting his way. “One of the struggles for John, and he's probably realised it already, is that the ARU was a major union in world rugby and he was a powerful individual within the overall concept of the game, whereas from a distance Australian soccer is only a small drop in a very big ocean. His particular views, well, it's going to be difficult to articulate them to FIFA (Federation Internationale de Football Association, soccer's Swiss-based governing body) and I also suspect to our top players who are based a long way away in Europe.”

O'Neill admits there were those in rugby who regarded him as a “human headline”, even if he rejects that. “I had a responsibility to promote the game, particularly when we were battling for column inches against AFL and rugby league, two codes that have the backing of considerable media clout. So I had to be on the front foot. People say ‘oh, you were promoting yourself’ but that's nonsense – I was promoting the game.”

“There's always a risk in these jobs that you can get hoisted on your own petard. But at the age of 53, I'm somewhat wiser, hopefully. I pride myself on being honest and behaving with integrity. It's nice to be popular, but it's not necessarily the measure of success. Sometimes in sport it's the unpopular decisions that make a difference.”

“You also need a big vision and to enunciate it, be consistent about it or you won't get people to gather under the same banner. Don't let self-interest get in the way, always back the sport.”

So, talking of big visions, can soccer become the number one football code in Australia? “I don't think there's any reason to think that one day it couldn't be ... that's a long-term view and I'll be long gone by then, but when you look at the ingredients and think what sort of cake we could bake with them, well, it's got to be substantial.” O'Neill laughs before adding: “But everyone's got to behave themselves.”

Staff writer Mike Safe's last story was “The enemy within” (April 30-May 1), about the murder of South Australian mental health professional Margaret Tobin.

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