

Initially I wrote this piece in the first week of September 2019, after The Mercury agreed to run it as an opinion piece.

I'd been worried in the lead up to that, that the media and in particular The Mercury had been running a biased campaign in favour of an AFL based team in Tasmania. It appears their reluctance to run this column since then confirms my suspicions.

Previously I've worked for Athletics Tasmania, The Mercury, Football Tasmania, Tasmanian Olympic Council, School Sport Tasmania, Tasmanian Christmas Carnivals and currently run my own Sports Marketing company, Epic Events and Marketing.

Sure the media outlets would benefit from having plenty of ongoing AFL content to write about, but allow me to point out a number of reasons why Tasmania should not have a team in the AFL competition.

The favouritism in favour of AFL in Tasmania is horrendous. For starters, why has the Tasmanian Government invested in this process of appointing a committee to consider the feasibility of an AFL team in Tasmania anyhow?

Was the same done when the Hobart Hurricane's entered the BBL, or when Tasmania entered the AHL? Did the Tasmanian Government support the Tasmanian A-League bid with a high powered team of business operators? Is the same being done now for the NBL campaign?

The data collected for the 'United We Stand' campaign is sensationally skewed. There is zero risk to anyone to put their name to it. Any passionate footy fan, no matter where they live, can take the 20seconds to put their signature to it. Doesn't mean they would buy a membership, watch a game, or even live in Tasmania. No skin in the game is required.

Since 2001 Tasmania has hosted AFL matches each year, with a peak annual crowd number of 17,529 in 2008. This year the average crowd was just 11,902 and crowd averages have dropped since North Melbourne began playing here in 2012.

That makes it difficult for the faithful to argue that more games will attract bigger crowds.

Sport Australia's most recent AusPlay survey ranked Australian Rules Football as the 12th most popular sport Australian's play. Yet in Tasmania at least, it receives by far the lion share of government funds.

\$1.07million was distributed by the Tasmanian Government in 2019 under their grants program to 36 state sporting organisations.

Sitting outside of this budget line, AFL Tasmania receives \$500,000.

In addition, AFL in Tasmania was recently reported to receive a further \$8million, through various Tasmanian Government funding waterfalls.

Under the state government 'Levelling the Playing Field' grants program, Australian football venues received \$4,098,077 for venue upgrades in the 2018/2019 year.

In addition, they received \$291,708 under the Sport and Recreation Major Grants program for 2018/2019 for various club and venue purposes.

Then there was \$200,000 towards the AFL business case, \$500,000 for the Kangaroos and a whopping \$3.8m for Hawthorn.

Last financial year, the AFL made over \$25million profit. It has equity of over \$210million. If they wanted to develop a team in Tasmania, they have all the resources and knowledge in house to deliver it. It's not like they have an international body to answer to.

With some 67% of Tasmanian's overweight or obese, we must have more investment into people doing sport, than watching sport. This is critical.

If the Tasmanian Government does end up forking out millions towards an AFL team, we will be lining the pockets of an existing wealthy organisation and people will continue to remain sedentary.

Talk of a new stadium has to be one of the most ridiculous suggestions mooted thus far. Tasmania is flush with AFL quality ovals. Just whip out google maps and look for yourself, nearly every town has luscious playing surface, with lights, changerooms and grandstands that are the envy of other sports around the state.

I did the deal for the last A-league game to be played in Tasmania back in 2014 and the best option was for Melbourne Victory and Sydney FC to play at North Hobart Oval. The game didn't need and didn't receive a cent from government. But apparently the venue still isn't good enough for the AFL, so alas, they received another \$250,000 last financial year for upgrades.

Overall my biggest concern is for other sports, who in addition to lack of government funding, battle for a piece of media coverage and sponsorship revenue. The limited pool of resources available in Tasmania would see that then become a drip of what it is now to other sports.

An already tight competition for sponsorship dollars will make it even tougher for smaller sports to compete, as businesses look to leverage their best return on sponsorship investment and no doubt boozy corporate tickets would become hot property.

The final obvious point is the allegiance towards existing teams. Countless Tasmania's are diehard fans of one team over another. From car bumper stickers, to large tattoos, people openly express their devotion to various teams all over the country. Obviously, geography is of no relevance here and will continue to not be the case.

Under the draft system, there is no certainty that a Tasmanian would even play in a Tasmanian based AFL team.

Surely a better use of investment would be re-establishing a thriving country footy culture. It would have a regional tourism impact every weekend in winter across the state.

Then if we as a state want our high level sporting fix, let's back the NBL concept, pack out our existing AHL and BBL matches. Then let's spend the rest on people playing, not watching.

Richard Welsh
Managing Director
Epic Events and Marketing