

Why there should be a Tasmanian team in the Australian Football League

(Op-ed article by Saul Eslake published in the Launceston Examiner on Saturday 11th October).

The case for a Tasmanian team in the AFL can be summarized in two propositions. First, that a Tasmanian team can be competitive on the field and viable off it. And second, that if the AFL is ever to be a 'truly national competition', it must include a team from every State.

As almost every Tasmanian over the age of four knows, this State has a long and proud football history. It has over many years produced, and continues to produce, players capable of mixing it with the best from Victoria and other parts of Australia – including, most recently, Hawthorn premiership player Grant Birchall, originally from Devonport.

A Tasmanian team could be assembled without the need to corrupt the AFL draft for five years, as appears to be necessary to field teams from the Gold Coast or Western Sydney, areas without the rich football heritage on which Tasmania can draw, and without the need to put millions of supporters' dollars into 'audience development'.

And although it might be optimistic to expect a Tasmanian AFL team to make the finals in its first three years, there's every reason to be confident that it would do better in its first three years than, say, Fremantle or Port Adelaide did in theirs.

The 'business case' which is being assembled for presentation to the AFL Commission later this month will demonstrate that a Tasmanian AFL club would be financially viable. It will demonstrate that the assertions which have routinely made as to why Tasmania could not support an AFL club are palpably false.

Tasmania's population is as capable of supporting one AFL team as Victoria's is of supporting ten – and that's without counting any of the thousands of expatriate Tasmanians living in Victoria (like me) and elsewhere towards the potential Tasmanian supporter base.

And although it's true (as opponents of Tasmanian participation in the AFL are always quick to point out) that Tasmania does not have any large companies headquartered in the State who could be lined up as major sponsors, many of the major sponsors of existing AFL teams have little if any connection with the areas from which the teams they sponsor come: for example, Emirates, which is based in Dubai yet sponsors Collingwood; or Toyota, which is based in Nagoya, Japan, whose Australian headquarters are in Sydney and whose manufacturing plants are in Melbourne yet sponsors the Adelaide Crows.

Tasmania has continued that trend by securing a major sponsor, Mars, as well as a number of second-tier sponsors, something which neither Western Sydney nor the Gold Coast have yet been able to do. A Tasmanian AFL side is also likely to enjoy continued financial support from the Tasmanian Government, based on the perceived return to its current support for Hawthorn.

If it's worth paying what it currently does to attract four AFL games to Launceston each year – even though they're typically between Hawthorn and teams which have almost zero following in Tasmania, such as Port Adelaide or Fremantle – then the State Government will surely see an even stronger case for securing eleven games a year at Aurora Stadium, between a truly Tasmanian side and teams such as Collingwood, Carlton and Essendon.

The financial viability of a Tasmanian AFL side would also be enhanced by a 'clean' stadium deal, such as those enjoyed by Geelong or the West Coast Eagles, and in contrast to some of the weaker Melbourne-based sides.

The AFL likes to style itself a 'truly national competition'. But until it includes a team from every State, it has no right to do so.

In contrast to football, cricket has been a 'truly national competition' for the last three decades. Tasmania has won each of two major variants of it in the past two seasons, as well as contributing 'above its weight' off the field in administration, selection and coaching.

Unlike Cricket Australia, the AFL has for too long treated Tasmania with contempt – burying it with NSW, Queensland and the Northern Territory as 'the Allies' in interstate competition, scheduling games in Launceston between Hawthorn and teams in which Tasmanians have no interest, and denying this State its rightful place in its vision for the game's future. It's time that attitude changed.

None of which is to denigrate Hawthorn's contribution to Tasmania. They have honoured the spirit, as well as the letter, of their sponsorship agreement with the Tasmanian government. But Tasmanians want a team, not a logo.

Tasmania can afford to support a team in the AFL; and if the AFL wants to be a 'truly national competition', it can't afford not to have a Tasmanian team.

- Saul Eslake
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(Note: Saul Eslake is a member of the Steering Committee established by the Tasmanian Government to oversee the preparation of a business case for the entry of a Tasmanian team into the AFL competition).