

# Terry O'Donnell



A football administrator of rare vision, or simply the Walter Mitty of Waikato soccer?

Five years after leaving Hamilton, the jury is still out on Terry O'Donnell's exact place in Waikato soccer history, but one thing is for certain – he's unlikely to ever be forgotten.

When O'Donnell briefly returned in July in his new guise as coach of the Vanuatu national soccer team, he not only provided a fresh retrospective on developments in Waikato soccer, but also stirred up a viper's nest of memories and passions from the past.

One of the most controversial figures of Waikato soccer, O'Donnell resided over the Hamilton club for three turbulent years, from 1984-86.

When that club won the northern league and its board subsequently voted against entering the national league in 1985, O'Donnell atuned his mind to alternate means of bringing top soccer back to the province.

Eventually in 1987, amid much rancour, he parted company with Hamilton to launch Waikato FC, a radically designed limited liability company which in theory was to link every soccer club in the region.

Based on the feeder club format, and controlled by a cabal of businessmen with O'Donnell as executive director, it was the most revolutionary concept New Zealand soccer has seen.

It proved a one-season wonder, whose merits are still fiercely debated today. Claudelands Rovers Swiss Maid league spot was leased, top players were signed, and the region's re-inclusion at national league level was justified when Waikato FC (The Thoroughbreds) comfortably won the northern league.

But with the hard work done, the bitter in-fighting between warring factions in the Waikato saw its bid for national league status scuttled. Instead a rival application from Rovers and Hamilton got the nod, eventually evolving into today's Waikato United.

O'Donnell's Waikato FC dream was bankrupted with debts of \$60,000. The full story behind those events won't be told for many years yet, but when O'Donnell returned, any bitter memories were easily glossed over.

"It gives me a great deal of pleasure to come back and find Waikato United top of the national league," he said at Mt Smart Stadium. "I like to think some of that is me."

That's typical of O'Donnell, a man who views himself as one of the trailblazers of Waikato soccer, and is relaxed about scrutiny of his track record.

"People used to laugh when I said I would have players coming out from Everton to play for Hamilton, but remember, I actually made it happen."

He insisted he never harmed Waikato soccer with any of his grand schemes, and staunchly denied having ulterior motives – one of the commonest accusations levelled against the grade three Oceania coach.

"Talk to anyone who was close to me at the time. I was always just trying to do the best things for football.

"People saw the changes that I was trying to make as 'anti-Hamilton' but nothing I did was ever negative.

"I get emotional just talking about it. There's no way I had any sort of personal gain to make or wanted in any way to rip anybody off. I could just see the way we were going was the wrong direction."

O'Donnell gets backing from another former Hamilton president, Bruce Scobie, who was among those to welcome him on his brief return to New Zealand.

"Terry was the catalyst for most of the positive things we can see in Waikato soccer today," he said. "People decry his ideas, and I certainly didn't agree with a lot of his concepts, but let's give him credit for the positive things. He had a vision for soccer and made people think about the game, and what needed to be done.

"If mistakes were made, let's forget them. Terry worked hard for Waikato soccer, possibly to the detriment of his job. Administratively, I would say only John Walker has done as much in the modern era.

"It's amazing the way Waikato soccer has actually developed according to his blue-

print." Love him or hate him, nobody could describe O'Donnell as being run of the mill.

In the mid-70s the young Liverpoolian wrote to the Hamilton club saying he was the best of a crop of imports on their way to New Zealand, and was paying his own airfare. When he arrived Hamilton discovered he was more of a second XI player, but quickly found him a niche as club secretary, from where he emerged as the leading "ideas man" of Muir Park.

Many of these ideas, from selling Muir Park to property development to erecting squash courts on site, upset other club members, and even today there is a prominent faction which would like to see him permanently banned from Muir Park.

Nevertheless, O'Donnell misses the Waikato and would eventually like to return. "I don't know if I'll be accepted in football down there again. Maybe I was a bit before my time, but I think there was a batch in the Waikato that couldn't cope with change."

O'Donnell emigrated to Vanuatu just weeks before his Waikato FC won the Swiss Maid League. Initially he went as a merchant banker, but more latterly has been seconded to the Vanuatu government as a financial consultant, and coaches soccer six days a week.

He's regarded as a local hero ever since leading the Vanuatians to the Melanesian Cup in 1990, its first soccer honour. Even though his team was beaten 8-0 by New Zealand he said there was 'no chance' of being sacked as coach.

Ironically, though he put so much effort into bringing national league soccer back to the Waikato, he's among those firmly in favour of next season's Superclub Championship.

"Regionalisation will be good for New Zealand football. People say to me the standard is going to drop, but I don't think it will. The only problem I can see is that instead of raising \$100,000 to support a team, people may settle for 50.

"The full amount must still be raised, with the extra put into developing grounds and coaching skills for the youngsters, and attracting more people into the game. If people set their goals low, you've lost. If the ideas come back to small-time everyone has lost."

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