

LONG DISTANCE COACH TRIPS



HAVE CLIPBOARD WILL TRAVEL: THE OVERSEAS ODYSSEYS OF AUSSIE AND KIWI COACHES

From armed guards at training and presidents on the pitch, to unbeaten runs in Uzbekistan and leading the European champions – FourFourTwo tracked down the Australians (and a few Kiwis) making their mark overseas, wherever they can.

Words Robert Kidd



“There were no players, no team, no money and no league...”

Matt Ross

1. FFC Frankfurt HEAD COACH

In five years, Matt Ross went from training a Darwin under-14 boys' team to head coach of European champions.

The Newcastle native coaches German side 1. FFC Frankfurt, one of the strongest women's teams in Europe.

A teacher by trade, Ross's football career began as an assistant referee in the NSL but after failing to make it as a referee, Ross returned to playing. During time in the British Virgin Islands, he got his first taste of coaching, with the Women's Under 20 Olympic side.

“There were no players, no team, no money and no league,” he reveals though. “I coached a total of zero sessions, and on a deal where I was being paid by the session, left the country after four months.”

He returned to Australia and spent five years coaching Northern Territory youth teams. Before he and his wife quit their jobs in 2012 to try Europe.

“My first job in Germany was driving a school bus while completing my UEFA B Licence in Ireland, flying over for three-day modules every month, and leaving resumes at every club within 100 kilometres of Frankfurt,” Ross says.

“On weekends, I videoed live matches and sent an analysis to clubs. The only response I ever received was from 1. FFC Frankfurt.”

He was video analyst when they won the Champions League in 2015 against PSG.

“The nights preceding the game, I didn't sleep to produce DVDs of PSG for our players to study. It was only the smallest of contributions as part of the backroom staff, but to be part of something so amazing is unforgettable,” Ross says.

“My winners' medal is on the wall at home, and it drives me every day to work towards winning a second one.”

At the end of last season, Ross was appointed temporary head coach, before a series of good results secured him the job permanently.

“Coaching in the Champions League was an experience I'd never thought would happen,” he says.



“Training sessions are supervised by security and armed police”

But in a developing country where football competes with cricket and national sport kabaddi for attention, the job is not without challenges.

“The life of a foreign football coach in Bangladesh is not glitz and glamour,” Sandford says.

“We travel to training with a driver and sessions are supervised by security and armed police, which is all part of daily life for me now. Access to players is also difficult due to location and infrastructure.

“I'm staying in a hotel and spend a lot of time on FaceTime to my wife and family or reviewing my goalkeeper coaching sessions.”

On the pitch, Sandford has been pleasantly surprised.

“We have some natural athletes with the physical attributes to be a successful international goalkeeper in this part of the world,” he says.

“I have to remember many of these players are raw and have not had the intensive, specialist coaching of players in other countries I have worked in.

“But there is a willingness and desire to learn and become better. The players want to soak up every piece of information and instruction, which makes me extremely motivated.”

Ryan Sandford

Bangladesh Football Association HEAD OF GOALKEEPING

The SOS phone call came in the middle of the night. Fifteen hours later, Ryan Sandford was on his way to Bangladesh.

The Wellington-born former goalkeeper was contacted in August by Brit Paul Smalley, the Bangladesh Football Federation technical and strategic director. Smalley, who knew Sandford from a stint in New Zealand, was in urgent need of a goalkeeper coach for the men's national team.

“The previous coach pulled out at the 11th hour so I gladly jumped on a flight from New Zealand,” Sandford says.

“The opportunity to learn and embrace a different culture and see a part of the world I had never been to was the chance of a lifetime, and too good to turn down.”

His role with Bengal Tigers is the latest in a globe-trotting coaching career that has taken him to places like the Cook Islands, Singapore and Texas in the United States.

After being promoted to head of goalkeeper development, Sandford now oversees all of Bangladesh's national goalkeepers, from the girls' Under 16 team to the senior men.



Photograph by FFC Frankfurt

“The referee had made a horrendous decision and the match had to be replayed”

Mirko Jelicic Lokomotiv Tashkent HEAD COACH

There are few similarities between beachside Perth and Uzbekistan, one of only two double-landlocked countries (nations surrounded by landlocked countries) in the world, but Perth product Mirko Jeličić doesn't need a coastline to thrive in the Central Asian former-Soviet stronghold.

Last season, his first as head coach, he led Lokomotiv, the capital's third club, to an unlikely league and cup double and the quarter-finals of the AFC Champions League.

“It was a matter of bringing in proper training sessions that had some direction,” Jeličić, now in his third spell in Uzbekistan, says. “We became a pressing team, a team that was

proactive about what we do.”

Jeličić was a PE teacher before studying rehabilitation and exercise physiology. His first job in football was under Bernd Stange at Perth Glory, focusing on fitness and rehabilitation.

After roles in New Zealand, China, Thailand, Malaysia and the WA state league with Cockburn City, an out-of-the-blue offer first brought him to Uzbekistan in 2005 to help prepare the national team for crucial World Cup qualifiers.

“We beat Bahrain



Photograph by PFC Lokomotiv

at home 1-0 and travelled there for the return leg but they made us come back to Uzbekistan because the referee had made a horrendous decision and the match had to be replayed,” Jeličić, who speaks Russian, says.

The replayed match finished 1-1 and Uzbekistan missed the chance to play Trinidad and Tobago in the play-off to reach the finals.

Jeličić admits life is difficult in a country where football is not at the top of most people's agendas, military police outnumber fans at matches and owner expectations must be managed.

“We won the league and cup and went 47 games undefeated in all competitions last year and then

after the first game we lost, I was pulled in to the boss's office and asked ‘what's going on?’,” he says.

Though he sees hope for the country's footballing future, with a technical level “probably better than Australia”, success on the field is no substitute for being separated from his Perth-based wife and sons.

“If you're a Mourinho, they can probably understand more because you're bringing in millions but if you're putting in the same amount of commitment and time and not getting that financial reward, there's pressure on your family situation,” Jeličić says.

“I've spent two years without my family and that is difficult... I've made a lot of sacrifices for football, and it's pretty much at a point now where I need to reverse that decision.”

Nicola Williams

Trinidad and Tobago Women's assistant coach, U20 Women's HEAD COACH

Best-known as the birthplace of cricket legend Brian Lara, Trinidad & Tobago's finest football hour

was qualifying for the 2006 World Cup, the smallest nation ever to do so. Now Nicola Williams hopes to put their women's football on the map too as head coach of the U20s side.

“When we're out getting groceries, people know us... They tend to laugh and say ‘good luck!’ but the whole country is passionate about football and for the women's team. I think the whole country is behind them.”

UK-born Williams, who emigrated to Perth and holds dual nationality, played in the WA state league before coaching Australia's women's youth teams. She runs a Perth-based female football academy with Italian coach Carolina Morace, who has coached

Italy and Canada. When Morace was appointed T&T head coach, she wanted Williams as assistant.

“The difficulty is leaving your home and your family but there was no hesitation professionally,” Williams says. “The history in the country is to go to the US or England to study and build your life away from Trinidad so that's made it difficult for some players who have left.

“I'm working with the association to build a package for them to come back, give them work, a scholarship, and the chance to be part of the national team.” T&T FA president

David John-Williams is visibly behind the team.

“The president is very active and very much involved in the football.

“He's sometimes on the field, which logistically maybe other presidents can't be, but he's down there, he's at the forefront,” Williams says.

“The players are also committed - they are fighters and have had some difficult times in the past.

“There is a lot of potential so as a coach you want to give your best to see how far they can go.”



Photograph by Trinidad and Tobago Football Association

THE FIVE BEST AUSSIE EXPORTS

Mark Viduka

The barrel-chested centre-forward combined a hulk-like strength with incredible technique that made him unplayable on his day. Had his best years in the English Premier League with Leeds United, including four goals in the Champions League. Captained the Socceroos to the last 16 of the 2006 World Cup.

Harry Kewell

Viduka's attacking partner at Leeds had a wand of a left foot and the ability to glide past opponents like they weren't there. Picked up a Champions League winner's medal with Liverpool (only the second Australian to win one) and was coaching Watford Under 21s in England until he exited the club in April.

Tim Cahill

The Socceroos' all-time leading goal scorer (48 goals) has been a great servant to club and country, racking up more than 200 appearances at Everton. The only one of our five still playing, with Melbourne City, Cahill was one of the best attacking headers of the ball in the world in his prime.

Mark Bosnich

Bozza edges out Australia's most capped player, Mark Schwarzer, after playing for two of English football's biggest clubs. Bosnich made his name as one of the Premier League's best shot-stoppers at Aston Villa, where he twice won the League Cup, before his title-winning move to Manchester United and later Chelsea.

Mark Bresciano

At the height of his career, attacking midfielder Bresciano played with and against some of the finest players on the planet in Italy's Serie A. He appeared 84 times for the Socceroos, including in three World Cups, and will forever be known for the wonderfully composed Spartacus pose goal celebration.

“Every day our focus is purely aimed at ensuring survival...”

Arthur Papas

Al-Ettifaq, ASSISTANT COACH

Football coaches often lead nomadic lives, but Arthur Papas draws inspiration from home.

“I had the best role model in my mother, who worked seven days a week for years, never complained and always made sure we never went without,” the Melbourne-born coach says.

“I have taken this approach to my career and only the closest to me know the sacrifices I have made along the journey to pursue my passion.”

In February, Papas was appointed assistant to Dutch coach Eelco Schattorie at Al Ettifaq, becoming the first Australian to coach in the Saudi Arabia Pro League. Considered one of the best leagues in Asia, the duo is tasked with keeping struggling Al Ettifaq in it.

“I have come here with a very clear short term focus. Beyond this season is too far away especially in the football climate in this part of the world... every day our focus is purely aimed at ensuring survival,” Papas says.

A keen student of the game, Papas completed his first coaching course at 16. He became head coach of Victorian Premier League club Oakleigh Cannons aged 30 before joining Newcastle Jets.

His first overseas adventure was in India, where he enhanced his burgeoning reputation while coaching the Under 23 national team before two head coach roles in the I-League and a stint as assistant to Brazil legend Zico.

After an impressive season with Green Gully SC back in Australia, including a memorable FFA Cup defeat of Central Coast Mariners, Papas was offered a new challenge in an unfamiliar place.

“Every country has its customs and culture and I already know from travelling in the past that it is the foreigner’s job to adapt and not vice versa,” he says.

“I am very open-minded as a human and this has allowed me to adapt, respect the people and country I am working within and also focus on the primary reason for being here.

“I am very happy I had the courage to place myself in what many would consider a challenging environment, and whatever the outcome, I am certain I am better for it.”



Photograph by Al Ettifaq



“There were people up in the trees and on top of the grandstand”

Darren Stewart

Maldives HEAD COACH

Stunning white beaches, crystal clear water and jaw-dropping resorts make Asia’s smallest nation the ultimate honeymoon destination. But Darren Stewart knew it could be a very short marriage when he signed up to coach the Maldives.

The past Socceroo, capped three times and named Australian Player of the Year in 1993, was tasked with guiding the island nation through the play-offs to reach the preliminary stage of the 2019 Asian Cup.

With 10 days to prepare, the former defender masterminded an emphatic 5-1 aggregate victory, set up with a 4-0 victory in the home leg.

“For the first game in the Maldives it was a full house, there were people up in the trees and on top of the grandstand,” Stewart says.

“I think my strength is the players play for me. My way of training and working with players seemed to work with them and they gave everything they had.”

Now in his 24th year in Asia, Stewart has enjoyed success as a player and coach in Malaysia and Singapore but the offer to lead the team ranked 140th

in the world came as a surprise.

“I was recommended by an old coach and was playing golf when I got a phone call from someone from the Maldives FA. Within a week, I was in the Maldives,” he says.

While he has experienced the country’s famed resorts (“you talk about five stars, they’re 10 stars”), Stewart is firmly focused on qualifying for Asia’s premier competition for the first time in Maldives’ history.

“We’ve got a pretty tough group with Oman, Palestine and Bhutan. Oman will probably top the group... but we’ll surprise a few people I hope,” he says.

With a similar population to his hometown, Newcastle, the player pool is limited but Stewart has been impressed with what he’s seen.

“The talent is incredible. There are a couple of players who could play in the A-League without any problem at all,” he says.

And if they pull off a surprise, the coach may have the chance to test himself against his home nation.

“It’s something I’ve dreamt of,” Stewart says. “First of all, I probably wouldn’t believe I was the coach of a team in the Asian Cup because this all came out of the blue.

“But to get drawn with say Australia and Japan, it would be absolutely wonderful – but it could also end up being horrendous!”



“Breaking my leg, as horrific as it was, was one of the best things to happen to me...”

Cameron Knowles

Portland Timbers, ASSISTANT COACH

Cameron Knowles says the leg break that effectively ended his playing career was “one of the best things to happen” to him.

The Kiwi centre-back had seven operations and played no football for two years. After a last-ditch trial in Japan, he decided to hang up his boots in 2012 and return home to Portland, Oregon, USA.

“Portland Timbers were looking for an assistant coach and about to start pre-season. They brought me in as a part-

time solution but it turned full-time.”

Knowles grew up in Auckland but spent his playing career in the US and Canada. A broken leg cost him his New Zealand spot at the Under 17 World Cup and he moved to Ohio on a university scholarship.

After impressing in the US college system, he played in the MLS for Real Salt Lake and had a successful spell at Portland Timbers and (briefly) Montreal Impact before transitioning to coaching.

“Breaking my leg allowed me to get into coaching – had I played for another five years, I might not have,” Knowles says.

Now in his sixth year on the coaching staff, Knowles says the Timbers’ 2015 MLS Cup win is a highlight.

“The fan support is incredible here – we’ve sold out every MLS game we’ve ever had,” he says.

“We won the MLS Cup in Columbus (Ohio). Then we got on the plane the next day thinking there would be a bit of a buzz about it in Portland – but not really knowing what that would look like.

“When we arrived the supporters basically shut down Portland airport, there were people everywhere.”

“The head coach had put in some interesting rules, like ‘No studying in the locker room...’”



Olli Harder

Klepp IL HEAD COACH

From pulling pints in rural England to coaching some of the smartest players on the planet, football has taken Olli Harder to some interesting places.

The head coach of Klepp IL, a women’s team in Norway’s top level Toppserien league, began coaching at 15, at his old primary school in Russell, a tiny town in New Zealand’s Bay of Islands, “You do it and you think ‘this is what I want to do for my life,’” Harder says.

As well as a year working with youth players in China, Harder spent four years coaching in New Jersey. One year from a prized US green card, he moved to England “on a whim” and worked in a pub while coaching on the side.

Through a contact, Harder learned there was an assistant job going at Yale University.

“When I arrived there were some interesting rules the head coach had put in, like no studying in the locker room,” he says.

“With football players you think ‘of course they’re not going to bring their books’ but if you’re at Yale, you do.” Harder had been there a year when the head coach retired and a new team was brought in. Unable to work legally in the US, he learned of an assistant position at Amazon Grimstad FK, a women’s team in Norway.

“I got a phone call from the main man on the board on December 28 saying ‘is it possible for you to be here by January 2?’ I packed my case, got on the plane and ended up in southern Norway in the snow,” Harder says.

After a year with Grimstad, he was made assistant at Klepp IL before getting the top job for this season.

“Coaching is 10 per cent of my day. The rest is helping out. I’m the chef, I can be the chauffeur, I can be the guy who fixes the changing room, things you don’t think about as a professional coach in a men’s side,” Harder says. “But it is what I love to do... I wake up every morning excited to go to work. How many people can say that?”

“I’ve worked on football fields in the foothills of the Himalayas and crazy-hot deserts...”

Andrew Oakley

Former Chennai City ASSISTANT COACH

Andrew Oakley’s passport is running out of pages. Based in Thailand but originally from Sydney, Oakley was appointed assistant coach at Indian side Chennai City at the end of December, but was gone by mid-February.

As well as coaching academy teams at Chiangmai FC in Thailand, Oakley has held short term roles in a dozen countries, mainly in South-East Asia.

“I’ve worked on football fields in the foothills of the Himalayas, crazy-hot deserts, and surrounded by jungles, slums or rice paddies,” says Oakley.

“The opportunity with Chennai City was really unexpected... an Indian coach I knew called to ask if I was interested in coming to help him there.

“His club had just been promoted from the local league to the I-League.”

After turning down head coach roles at lower league clubs, Oakley joined Chennai – and found the club in chaos.

“The experience was unlike anything I’ve been involved with in football before and I could try to explain for hours how crazy it was working there,” he says.

Oakley was faced with a lack of basic equipment (“I led a televised warm up for the club’s first ever national level game with just three balls”) and a kitman more interested in dispensing transfer advice than providing training bibs. But he says the biggest challenge was the dramatic overhaul of the team.

“I started with the squad two weeks before the first game... of all the

players there on that first day only one, the captain, was still in the 18-man game day squad by the time the season started,” Oakley says.

“In the end, paperwork and disagreement between the club and the head coach, I spent as much time getting there as I did coaching.”

Oakley, who works as director of football for NGO Siam Impact

Foundation, moved to Bangkok with his family in 2011 and it is home, for now.

“Between my current role and chasing opportunities

I’ve spent so much time running around, I’m running out of passport pages,” he says.

“I’ve grown cynical about making long term plans. I love coaching and am happy to be wherever I need to be to have an opportunity to do that.”



SIX EXPORTS TO WATCH OUT FOR...



Panos Armenakas

California-born but raised in Sydney, Armenakas, 18, is a silky-skilled playmaker tipped for the top. Currently in Udinese’s first team squad, the former Sydney Olympic and Watford youth player has attracted attention from some of Europe’s biggest clubs.



Callum Elder

Signed to Leicester and on loan to Barnsley, Elder is an athletic left-back with overlapping instincts. Played for Manly United before joining the Foxes at 16. At Barnsley, Elder plays alongside fellow Aussie Ryan Williams in English football’s second tier.



Anthony Kalik

Attacking midfielder Kalik last year penned a four-year deal with iconic Croatian club Hajduk Split after impressing on loan. Came through the Australian Institute of Sport before joining Central Coast Mariners at 15 as the youngest player with a senior contract.



Tom Glover

The Sydney-born shot stopper is a regular in Tottenham Hotspur’s under 21 team. He played in the Sutherland Sharks youth teams before joining Spurs in 2014. Glover was recently handed a contract extension until 2018.



Jake Brimmer

An all-action midfielder with an eye for goal, Brimmer has been a fixture in Liverpool’s academy sides since joining as a 16-year-old. After three years with the team he supported as a boy, Brimmer’s contract ends this season but rival clubs are lining up for him.



Dylan Ryan

Snapped up by Liverpool, the left-footed centre-back from Bulli recently signed his first professional contract with Willem II in the Dutch Eredivisie. At just 16, Willem II saw enough to offer him a three-year deal and expect him to debut within 12 months.