

Double Agents, Double Trouble

Let me make a qualification from the outset: I believe football agents are a valuable necessary go-between in the football world, providing a crucial service for players in contract negotiations, transfers and in many cases, looking after the player's total welfare.

It is, however, a job that requires enormous integrity and football experience in order to properly serve the best interests of the player.

Unfortunately in Australia at the moment there are many people calling themselves agents, who in my view are not properly qualified to carry out the trade.

The job of an agent is a demanding one requiring sound specialist knowledge of one or more leagues around the world before the agent can act in the best interests of the player at all times.

Here in lies the difference between the career agent who retains clients over several years, and the fly-by-nighter in for a quick buck.

Quality representation also means being capable of judging the player's ability and maturity.

Is the boy ready for a move overseas, or could he benefit from another year or two in Australia. Remember that the agent earns money on transfer of the player, so it's mighty tempting to encourage the player to move before he's ready.

What concerns me is the number of people now holding themselves out as agents, many with no experience of international football.

I know of ex-players, many of whom never played overseas, who now represent young players. Under FIFA rules any solicitor can act as an agent, and many are, with little or no expertise in football at all.

Running an agency is not just about preparing a legal contract but about assessment of a young player, his or her skills, aptitudes, maturity and capacity to adapt to different leagues around the world.

And what about the FIFA endorsement of agents?

It can be obtained by passing a simple test administered by Soccer Australia, accompanied by a \$100,000 bond or professional indemnity insurance from the agent.

Trouble is, many agents are not even registered, including several with high profiles in Australia.

In my view Soccer Australia should uphold the FIFA regulations and take action against those agents shown to be involved in the transfer of a player and yet who are not registered.

What many agents are doing, of course, is forming agreements with FIFA-endorsed agents in Europe and using their perceived credibility and skills.

We have all seen and heard the figures thrown about in international transfers, such as the 28million pounds paid by Manchester United for Juan Sebastian Veron.

To the Australian fan, these sums must seem astronomical indeed and it doesn't take much to fathom what five per cent here or ten per cent there will add up to. Someone, people are thinking, is making big money on these transfers.

And it's true, they are.

I know of cases in Europe where agents have picked up in excess of \$1 million for their part in a major transfer deal, typically where a club wants to offload a big earner and is prepared to pay handsomely for the right. Find a buying club, negotiate the deal, and bingo you're in the money.

But there is a murkier side to the world of football transfers.

Sometimes agents double dip or even triple dip, receiving money from the selling club, the player's contract, and the buying club, all of which is highly profitable but also highly illegal.

Managers worldwide have also been implicated in .bung. deals, taking kick-backs when signing a player.

It's a difficult international marketplace and recent cases involving Aussies Dylan McAllister and Mark Rudan highlight the pitfalls awaiting young players who enter into contracts with the wrong agent.

So how does one pick an agent? How does a young player, and his family advisors, tell a good agent from bad?

One should look for a strong track record, and one that is demonstrable not just rumored. See evidence of deals done and talk to the agent's existing clients. Ask if they are they satisfied.

How many players do the agent represent and are they players of quality? What is the length of contract? FIFA regulations stipulate a maximum of two years, yet I personally know of cases three years and longer.

A talented youngster's task is made particularly difficult by the temptation to auction his talents.

It goes like this. Two or more agents court the parents. The reputable agent advises that the youngster is not ready for European football; in fact he needs at least another year in Australia to mature and to aim for the Australian Youth Team.

Another agent, with considerably less vision and ethics, can easily seduce the family with advice that suggests the boy is more than ready.

In fact the agent would be surprised if he doesn't win a first team contract at a major European club. Sign with me the spiel goes, and you'll be on your way.

In this scenario everyone loses: the good, reputable agent, the player and Australian football.

My advice to young players and their parents is this: avoid long-term management contracts.

Essentially an agent is needed to facilitate a transfer for a player, and negotiate the contract terms.

I advocate short term contracts, which allow the agent exclusive rights for a short period to ensure performance. No transfer, no pay. Trust is earned not given.

After performance comes a greater level of trust and long term relationships are built.

In a virgin market assumptions are quickly made, and it seems long term management contracts are becoming the norm in Australia. Yet in Europe that's by no means the case.

For instance the English players union provides a service in negotiating transfers and contracts on a fee only basis with no contract involved. Such high profile stars as Steve McManaman and the Neville brothers of Man United and England have used it.

Too many players have been caught with a sales spiel and no performance, locked into a

long-term deal that resulted in stalemate and stalled career.

It's a rare agent who has knowledge of different leagues around the world. Mostly they form alliances with a second agent in each country to build a contact base. The player is then at the mercy of the skills of an agent who is in another and whom he has never met.

One saving grace for Australian football's future is the recent set of FIFA transfer regulations that prohibit players under the age of 18 from transferring overseas, except for non-football related reasons.

This has certainly taken the heat out of the feverish rush to sign up our best youngsters and although it may not prevent a tiny percentage from moving abroad, it has most certainly saved many of our kids from bad experiences by transferring too early and to the wrong league.

As a Board member of the Player's Association, I know the players are concerned about the current situation.

I believe there needs to be a register set up in Australia with high minimum entry standards to give peace of mind to young players and their parents, and some stability to a market that is in danger of harming our football future.