Thunder grow from humble beginnings

MARC McGOWAN

“Of all the unimportant things, football is the most important.”
Anonymous

DICK Pratt (pictured), the billionaire cardboard box king, leaned in menacingly close to AFLNT boss Tony Frawley.

“You’ll have to do a hell of a lot better than that,” Pratt snarled, not losing eye contact with Frawley.

Frawley was in Pratt’s Vinya boardroom, flanked by Territory football legend Michael Long, and trying to secure the first piece of the puzzle that eventually became the NT Thunder Football Club.

It was May, 2008. Thunder kicked their first ball in anger not even a year later.

The meeting was six months in the making and only came about through Frawley’s father Brian’s friendship with Carlton’s 1961 Brownlow medallist John James and Pratt’s affection for Long.

Pratt, of course, was the Navy Blues’ president, having assumed the role a year earlier at another football meeting where people requested his money.

On that occasion it was $5 million to save the Carlton Football Club. This time it was $500,000 to breathe life into Territory Thunder.

Pratt came through each time, but lost his own battle with prostate cancer 11 months after agreeing to put the first financial stake in Thunder’s future.

James, who went to school in Ballarat with Brian Frawley, died in late 2010 from throat cancer. A Thunder jumper adorned his coffin.

“Someone had to go in first. It got us going,” Frawley said of Pratt’s investment.

“He didn’t show it, but he loved this team … he had no understanding of the draft or recruiting, because he said to me, ‘When are we going to get some players from the NTT?'”

AFL chief executive Andrew Demetriou and then-Prime Minister Kevin Rudd joined Pratt as Thunder allies along the way, with timing playing a great role in each case.

Rudd rubberstamped a $2.5 million deal across the Thunder’s Federal funding.

The players — more than 58 communal-registered community players, predominantly indigenous — don’t get a game under lights at Darwin’s TIO Stadium.

Thunder are a powerhouse of the NEAFL, a competition that features five Queensland, three NSW and, until this week, two ACT teams.

Ainslie withdrew from the league on Thursday in response to the AFL rejecting their bid to be the AFL-NEAFL hybrid.

Lost in that was Frawley’s intel, mostly through in-augural Thunder chief executive and Stuart’s general manager Stuart Totham, that SANFL club delegates did not want an NT team.

Ex-AFL CEO Wayne Jackson, then on AFLNT’s board, was desperate for Thunder to join what was once his beloved SANFL.

Jackson at one stage dobed Frawley into Demetriou for disobedying his wishes, not knowing they already had a handshake agreement on Thunder joining the AFL.

Demetriou confided in Frawley about impending AFL franchises GWS and Gold Coast, and the AFL needed those two clubs to have a decent reserve-grade competition.

Thunder also has an annual $200,000 salary cap in the NEAFL.

Frawley said the business case just didn’t stack up.

The twist in the tale is AFLNEAFLCHIEFS10/04/2015

The twist in the tale is WAFL chiefs did want Thunder and seriously considered bringing the Territorians west to make what would have been a SA-AFL-NT potential venture end.

Logistics and costs saw that potential venture end.

Nightcliff coach Damian Hale, once AFLNT’s State Academy coach, is adamant Thunder should be in the SANFL.

Hale is a former Federal MP and was in Thunder’s initial meetings with Rudd.

Part of Thunder’s mission statement was to offer a pathway for Territory footballers who didn’t want to follow Cyril Rioli, Steven May, Shae Edwards and Jake Nealie in leaving home to pursue their AFL dreams.

“That doesn’t suit everyone and the private schools are not giving as many scholarships as they used to,” Hale said.

“It’s a way they can play the second-tier level and get seen by the recruiters, but one of the problems is recruiters mainly only watch NEAFL games involving AFL clubs.

“We haven’t had enough guys drafted out of it.”

Experienced NT football people Joel Bowden and Wally Gallo also want to see more Territorians playing AFL, but see the Thunder program as so much more.

Gallo, AFLNT’s high-performance manager, describes the Territory’s recent AFL draft record as “poor” and is torn on the NEAFL-SANFL debate.

“You do get questioned, but people only say that Thunder is crap because people don’t get drafted, but there’s more to Thunder than people can see,” Bowden says.

“When did anyone say Thunder was preparation for AFL?”

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