

The Phoenix Rises,

by Ross Oakley

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The Phoenix Rises is a fascinating book which provides multiple insights for many and varied groups of potential readers. These include sports fans, business student, managers and directors of both for profit, and of not-for-profit organisations. This book covers a range of issues, personalities and sub-plots over a forty year span. Ross Oakley is uniquely placed to provide this high level and multi-faceted account, given his ten years as the CEO of the newly founded AFL across the mid- 80s to mid-90s. He is truly one of the founding fathers of the competition, and its first fully professional era CEO. His name and high standing will always be prominent in the AFL story.

The Phoenix Rises offers wise lessons into the world of elite sport and into the management of a national football code, which has become a multi-million dollar business. It recounts in fascinating detail the transformational story of how a grass-roots, suburban, Melbourne-centric, indigenous code, with an odd shaped ball, was re-imagined and operationalized into the current national, elite ball and team based sport, and pre-eminent in its field.

Ross Oakley's insights and lessons are all the more valuable for their longevity. This is truly a longitudinal study of the game, and the great challenges it faced and overcame as it emerged from the days of suburban club fiefdoms into a well-run business machine which, in its turn, dominates and influences the national sporting landscape in terms of all the elite measures. It is truly a change agent and one which all other codes, including rugby league and union, and soccer look to for inspiration, innovation and new ways of delivering sporting success in an increasingly crowded elite sporting landscape.

The great device at the code's success was the creation of an independent commission in the late 1980s and early 90s. This corporate entity – a brilliant head-office concept- lies at the core of the AFL's secret formula of on and off field elite performance. In essence, the AFL code and brand is commission driven. It is run like the board of a for profit company, even though it is a not for profit entity. This means there is always a concept of 'the good of the game' at play. This is the overarching strategic dimension of the code.

This strong unity concept is in contrast to the dying days of the VFL in the 1980s and the early and painful transitional years of the early 1990s. That era was dominated by the former ideology, which was a club-first mentality which dominated and nearly killed off the old VFL. Vested interest and petty politicking were rife; zoning was by suburb, and players

were very restricted in their ability to ply their short-lived trade as elite players at a rival club.

The other brilliant sporting, competition and business mechanism deployed by the Commission is the licence of each club by the AFL. Its success has led to adoption by imitators. The National Rugby League has followed suit with an independent commission, although the NRL also allows private ownership of clubs. The AFL's early experiments with private ownership were effectively killed off by the bold, but misguided enterprises of self-appointed moguls of the day such as Chris Skase of Qintex infamy, John Elliott and others.

The AFL has been criticised for its tight control of the game, but that control has created the clear dividend of an elite code at the top of the national sporting landscape.

As Oakley recounts in fascinating detail, the Silvio Foschini litigation in the Victorian Supreme Court across seasons 1982 and 1983 was a watershed moment. This gave rise to the national draft system, and to the salary cap. In terms of the employment rights of players, freedom of movement is now enshrined in the free agency concept.

Next came the nascent era of broadcast rights which led to fewer stadia being used for televised matches, and for more even lucrative gate receipts, especially for those elite clubs such as Collingwood and Hawthorn.

The AFL is a code in progress- everything changes and nothing abides- and the latest discussion is that free agency is rapidly reverting to the long-true 'mean' or norm of favouring the more successful clubs. That is, when talented players get to effectively choose a club at the end of their contractual commitments, they inevitably go to the current powerhouse clubs, which are highly successful and operating in the midst of their so-called 'premiership window.'

As Oakley points out, the AFL code is still pushing the boundaries of innovation. For example, it is anticipated that it will shortly complete a media and broadcasting rights deal with a value in excess of \$1.5 billion. This potential mega-deal, along with other leading practices of the AFL, are all part of the rich legacy of Ross Oakley's work as CEO.

The Phoenix Rises is an important book by one of this nation's best-ever sports leaders and administrators, recounted by reference to the insights only available to a key leader and architect who was there, operating at the coalface of a sport which matters, because so many people care about it. Oakley's witness to the lessons, mis-steps and successes of one of the nation's true cultural, economic and sporting success stories, is well worth reading this summer and beyond.

Professor Andrew Clarke

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