

THE PFA PLAYER
**PATHWAY
STUDY**

SUPPORTING THE PLAYERS
BUILDING THE GAME



Australia's first industry fund

LUCRFSuper



FROM THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE

The 2017 PFA Player Pathway Study (PPS) represents the most detailed analysis of the careers of Australian male footballers in the history of the sport in this country.

It concludes 12 months' work where the PFA tracked every professional minute played by an Australian footballer from 2002 to 2016. It provides a rich depository of information that we can use to help shape the decision making of current and future players.

This PPS is a starting point. It did not set out to prove or disprove a theory. It did not set out to unearth the formula that takes you from one of the thousands in the suburban crowd to the top of the footballing tree. That already exists. It's called hard work, sacrifice, support and a touch of fortune.

Instead, it was about trying to find the starting point for future discussion. Football is fertile ground for opinion and that's part of its attraction; we all have different views on the decisions that players need to make to reach to their goals. We hope that this PPS can help inform those opinions and lead to more considered decision making from parents, players, agents, and coaches.

The PPS has demonstrated a few things to us:

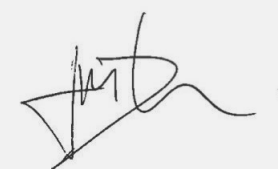
Firstly, Australia's international competitiveness is under threat. Performances like those against Chile in the 2017 FIFA Confederations Cup demonstrate that the gap between Australian players and the very best players in the world is not a chasm. Yet, since 2005, the amount of time that Australian players have played in the "Big 5" leagues of Europe has fallen by around 80%.

Secondly, everybody's football journey is different. Aaron Mooy made different decisions to Trent Sainsbury who made different decisions to Tim Cahill. In Australia, we don't have the luxury of churning through players in the hope that the cream will rise to the top. We don't have the critical mass, the volume. We need to nurture, monitor and manage the talent we have. This is labour intensive and often expensive, but it is necessary if we hope to keep up, let alone, surpass those football nations with more players, more money or more coaches.

Thirdly, the link between the volume of match minutes between 18 to 21 and a successful career is profound. We need to create opportunities for players to blossom in those key developmental years to increase our chances of being consistently successful at an international level and to increase the value of our players in the global market.

Unlike other sports, football does not have the luxury of insularity. The sport's practices and talent are challenged on a weekly basis somewhere around the world. This scrutiny dictates that we cannot afford misalignment or being at cross-purposes at different levels of the sport. Because it means players will fall through the gaps. Because it means teams will be beaten on the international stage.

Socceroos coach Ange Postecoglou has a single-minded focus on building an Australian way of playing football and winning football. The players believe this is possible. The starting point is collectively designing a solution to the challenge the data tells us is right in front of us.



John Didulica





CONTENTS

About the Report	6
Overview	8
The A-League	10
Overseas	12
Asia	14
After Asia	16
Youth	18
'Right' Time to Go	20
A-League Springboard	22
Socceroos Benchmarks	24
Weighted Appearance Model	26
Retirement and Transition	30

ABOUT THE REPORT

The PFA has catalogued and analysed every professional league minute played by Australian males between the 2002/03 and 2015/16 seasons.

The scope of this project gives us unprecedented perspective on Australian players' career pathways; where and how much they've played, where and when they've moved, and what factors increase the likelihood of a successful career.

The result is a helpful guide for current and future PFA members seeking hard data to inform their career decisions, and a valuable tool for all stakeholders across the game.

The report is not perfect; some players' careers are only partly captured because a cut-off had to be chosen and this is mentioned where relevant. But its conclusions are no less informative.

The PFA believes a better informed game leads to more impactful football education, analysis and decision-making.



Note: For leagues played inside the calendar year (e.g. J.League), take the second year listed i.e. 2010/11 indicates A-League 2010/11 and J.League 2011.

OVERVIEW



626

professional Australian
players covered
by this study

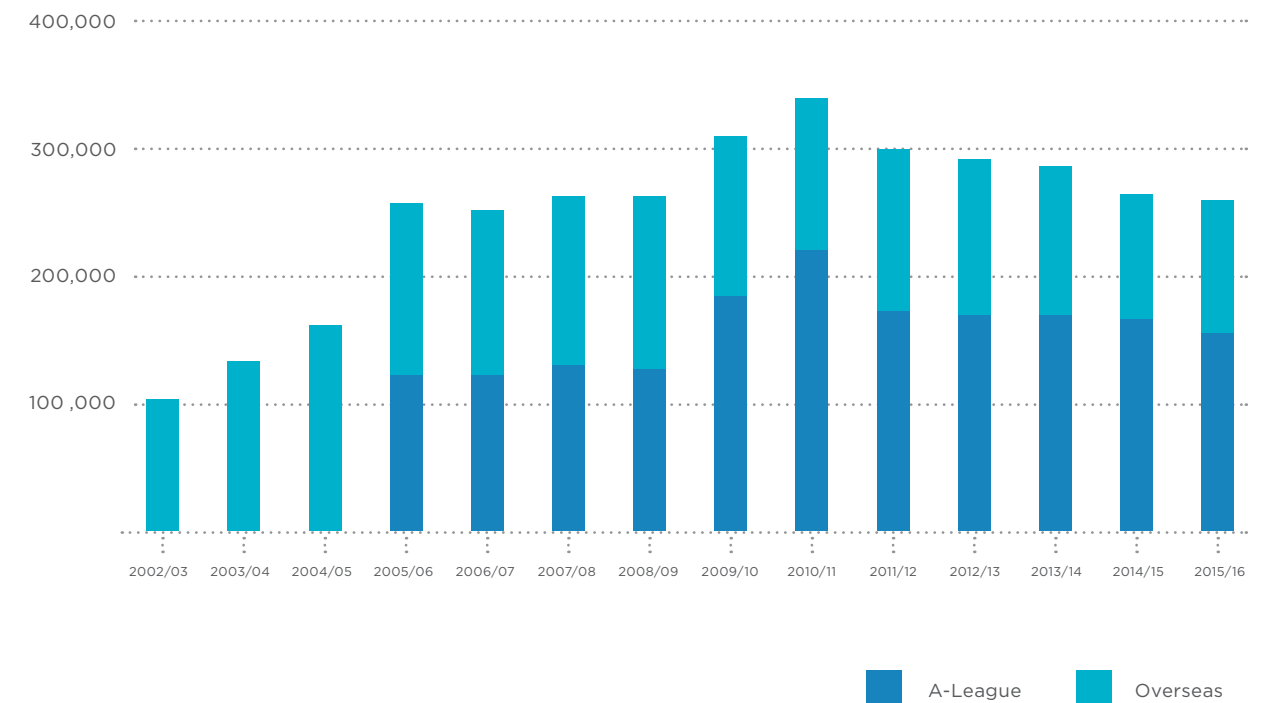


3,478,146

professional minutes played by
Australian players from
2002 to 2016



Total minutes played by Australians



The end of the NSL prompted a boost in total professional minutes played by Australians as formerly semi-pro domestic players rushed overseas to find football in lower tier professional leagues.

In the A-League era, opportunities for Australian players have grown and fallen in line with the number of teams and length of the season. Overseas minutes

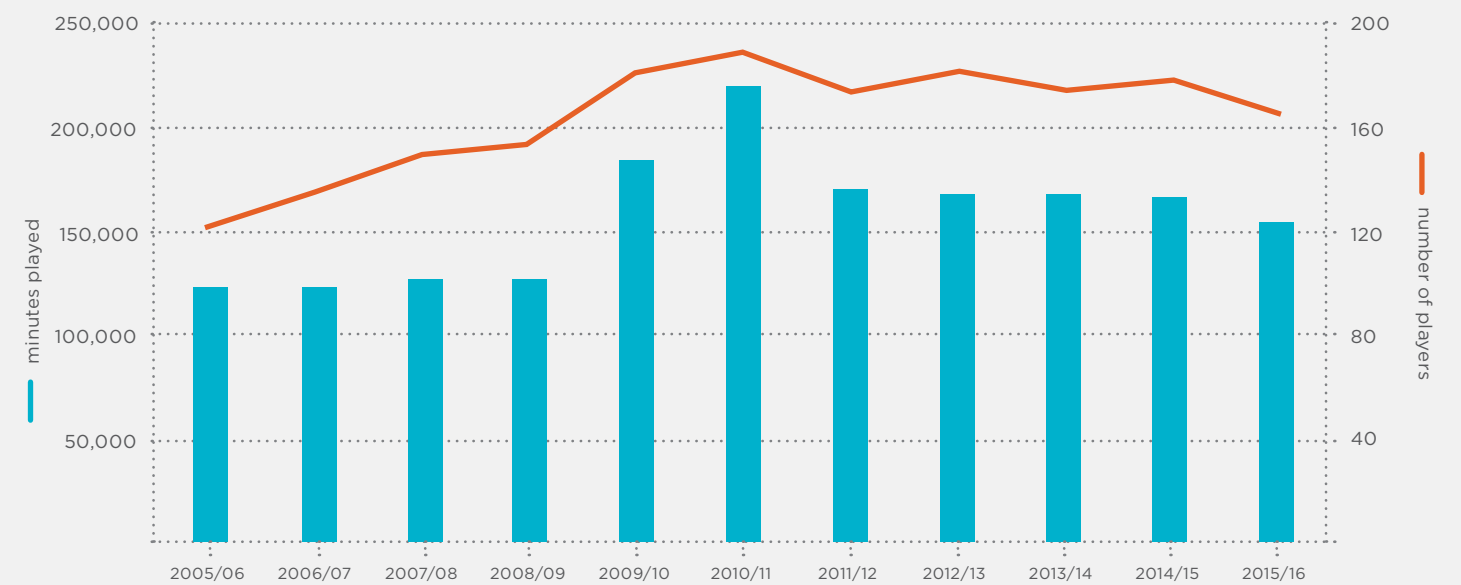
remained steady, dipping in 2010/11 when the A-League expanded to 11 teams, then dropped off recently.

Total minutes peaked in 2010/11 but have declined every year since due to the combination of a decline in overseas minutes and an increase in the share of A-League minutes played by visa players.

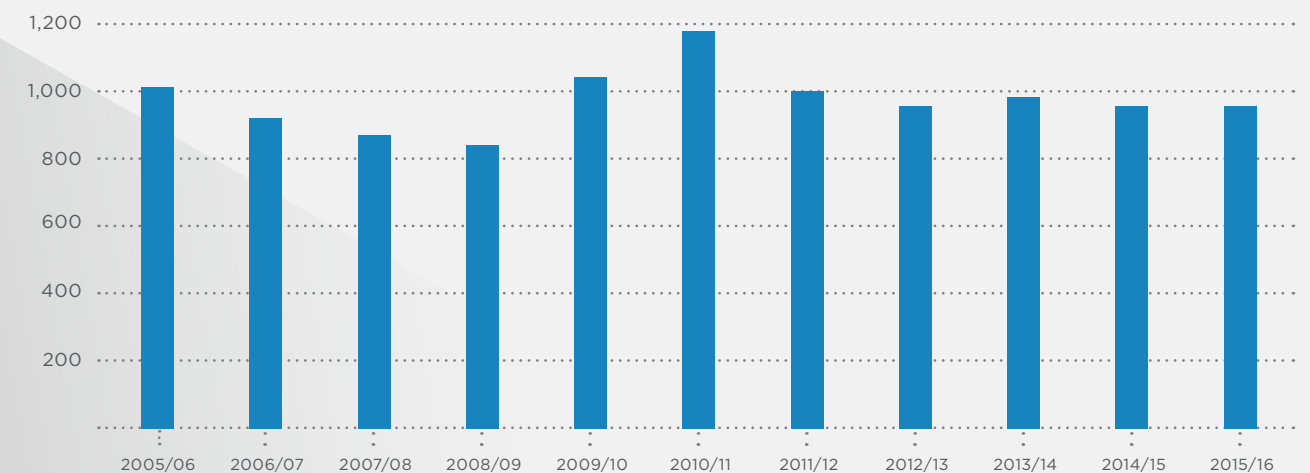


THE A-LEAGUE

Domestic minutes and number of players



Average minutes played per player



The number of teams and matches in the A-League have dictated the major changes in both the number of players getting a professional opportunity and the average minutes played by each player.

The increase from eight to ten teams for the 2009/10 season, and the lengthening of the regular season from 21 to 27

rounds, increased minutes played by Australian players (184,565) by nearly half from the previous season (127,240).

The jump to 11 teams and 30 rounds in the 2010/11 season saw only 11 extra Australians feature but each played on average 1,183 minutes, which was over 20% more than the average minutes (980) across the

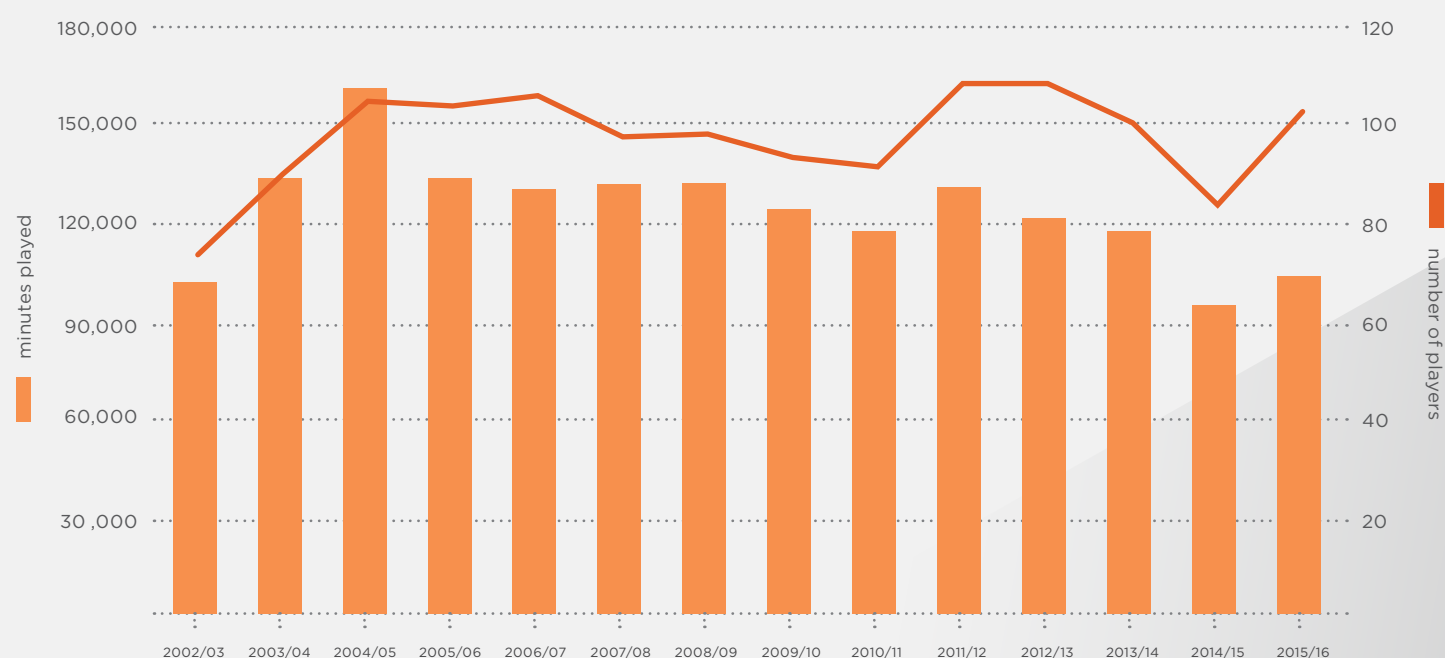
various seasons in which ten teams participated. One extra team made a big difference.

Even as the league structure has settled, there has been a recent drop in minutes by Australians because there has been an increase in the share of minutes played by visa players in the past few seasons.



OVERSEAS

Minutes played by Australians and number of Australian players overseas



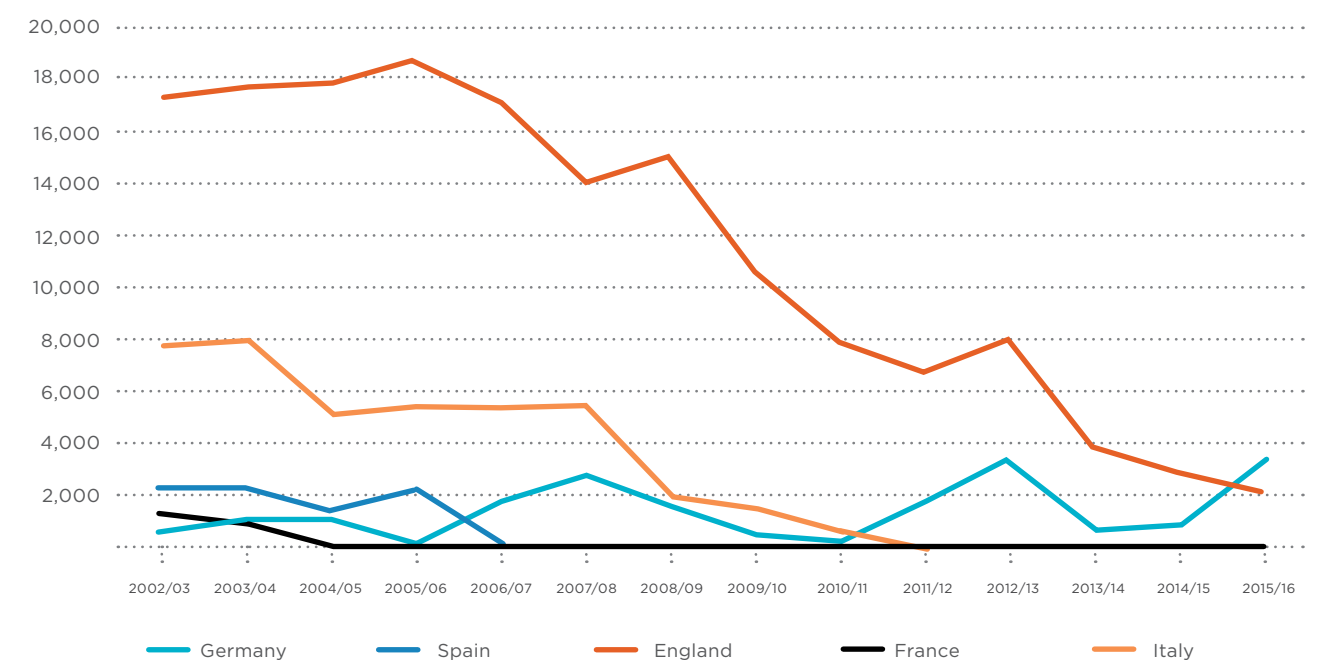
Surprisingly, the inception of the A-League didn't cut into the number of Australians playing overseas, which has remained steady between 83 and 107 since the end of the NSL. The expansion of the A-League around 2009 to 2011 did seem to eat into the pool of overseas talent, which then rose again as the league contracted back to ten teams in 2011/12.

The recent decline of total minutes played raises questions about the competitiveness of our players in the

global marketplace but it could also be a sign that the improving A-League has gradually attracted many of our best players back home.

The total number of Australians playing overseas was no different in 2016 than during the peak of the golden generation so we need to look at where those players are playing:

Minutes played by Australians in the 'Big 5'



At the start of our records in 2002, Australians had some representation in each of Europe's 'Big 5' leagues but this collapsed first in France, then Spain, Italy and England. Only in the German Bundesliga have we maintained our level of presence.

While this trend might also be explained by a concentration of wealth in these leagues that has

allowed their clubs to acquire an ever increasing share of the best talent from other European and global leagues, it nevertheless reveals a concerning decrease in Australians' ability to perform at the most competitive levels, at least relative to other nations.

ASIA



As Australians' ability to crack Europe's 'Big 5' leagues decreased, our players seemed to go in and out of fashion in other European countries such as Turkey, Scotland and Belgium. But our demand in Asia skyrocketed following Australia's acceptance into the Asian Football Confederation. Eddy Bosnar signed for JEF United in the JLeague in 2008 and the great migration began.

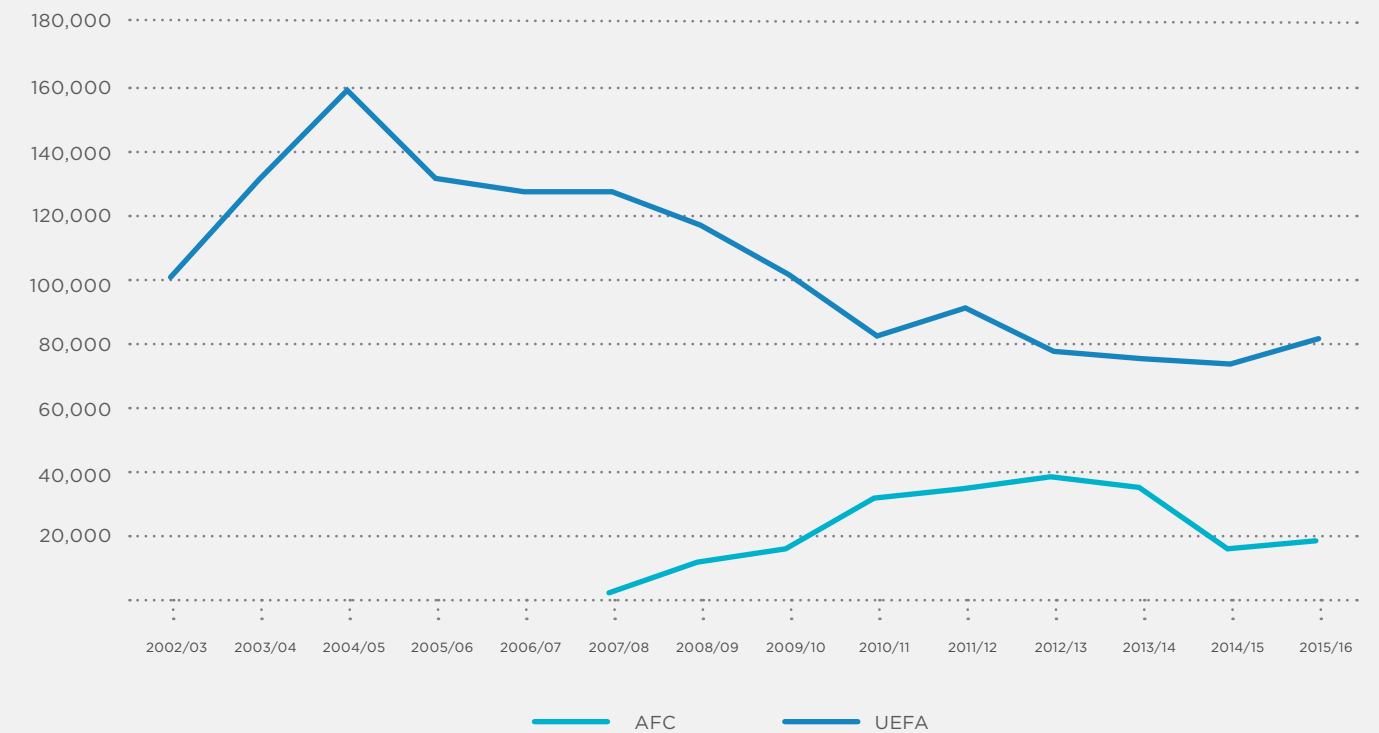
Demand for Australian talent in Asia peaked in 2013 with 31 players racking up 39,306 minutes between them. That peak fell by more than half just two years later and hovered there the following year.

China has been the most prolific market for Australian players; more than one third of total minutes played by Australians in Asia (210,098) were played in China (83,088). South Korea (43,650) and Japan (35,128) were the other largest employers of Australian players.

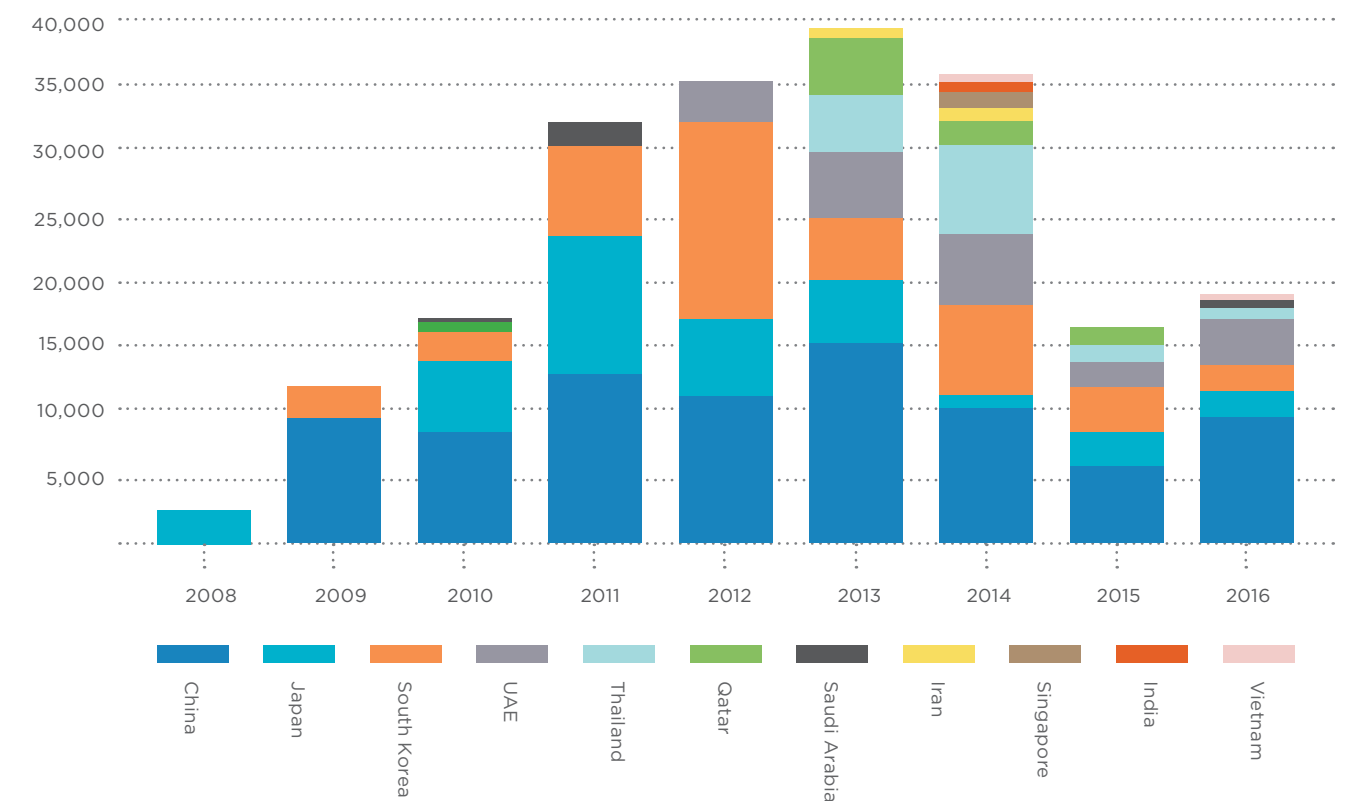
China should be followed closely by players and agents. In 2016, eight of the 20 Australians in Asia (40%) played in China, the highest percentage since the early years of the Asia boom. However, each player there appeared on average for only 1,201 minutes, the fewest of any year. From 2017, the Chinese Super League replaced its on-field 3+1 rule (which allowed a fourth import on the pitch if they were from an AFC nation) with a hard limit of three foreigners on the pitch. It retains a 4+1 limit for each squad.

If China drops its demand for Aussies as Japan and South Korea seem to have done, the Asian boom may be over, or our sights may need to shift to smaller, emerging leagues.

Minutes played by Australians in AFC and UEFA

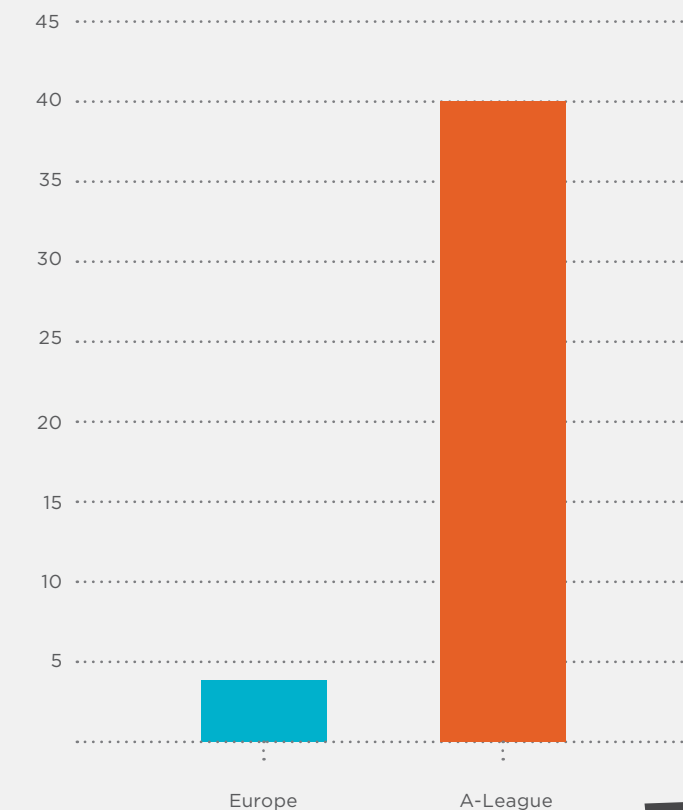


Minutes played by Australians in each AFC league





Next destination after playing in Asia



Of the 71 Australians who played in Asia up until 2016, only four players made the leap directly to Europe, compared to 40 who made their next move to the A-League*.

AFTER ASIA



Those four players were:



Ryan McGowan:
Shandong Luneng > Dundee United



Brent McGrath:
Port F.C. > FC Fredericia



Jade North:
Incheon United > Tromsø



Lucas Neill:
Omiya Ardija > Watford

Of those four, only McGowan and North went to first division clubs, and only North hadn't previously played in Europe before making this move.

Trent Sainsbury, Robbie Kruse and James Holland have all performed this rare feat in recent months. This could be interpreted as a shift in Europe's perception of Asia, but Kruse and Holland already had extensive experience in Europe and Sainsbury is back in Asia after one loan appearance at Inter Milan. So, it does appear very difficult to use Asia as a stepping stone to Europe.

*Players were counted twice if they moved directly from Asia to both Europe and the A-League on separate occasions.

YOUTH

Though match minutes fluctuated, the number of Australian U20s getting a taste of professional football increased every season after 2003/04 (1), peaking in 2011/12 (44) and dropping slightly since then.

The introduction of the National Youth League in 2008/09 coincided with the first professional minutes by U17 players.

The expansion of the A-League coincided with a further boost in opportunities for young players, with total U20 minutes doubling from 9,321 in 2009/10 to 18,694 in 2010/11.

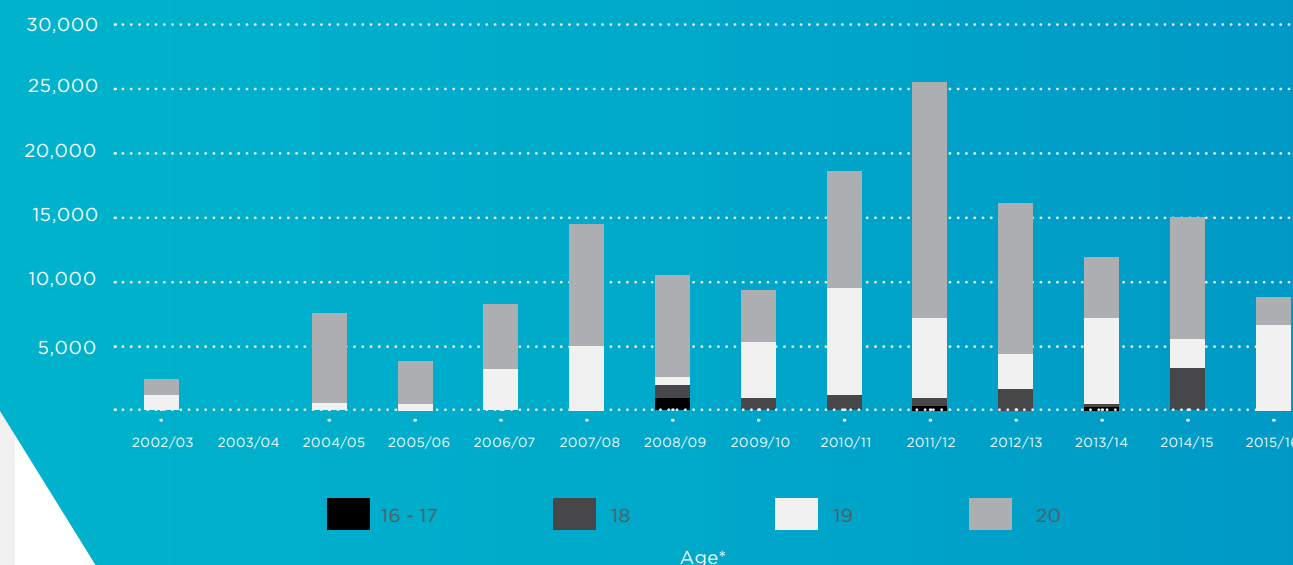
The total minutes played by Australians U20s grew to its peak of 25,284 in 2011/12.

Since this cohort graduated, the same penetration has not been achieved by our young talent.

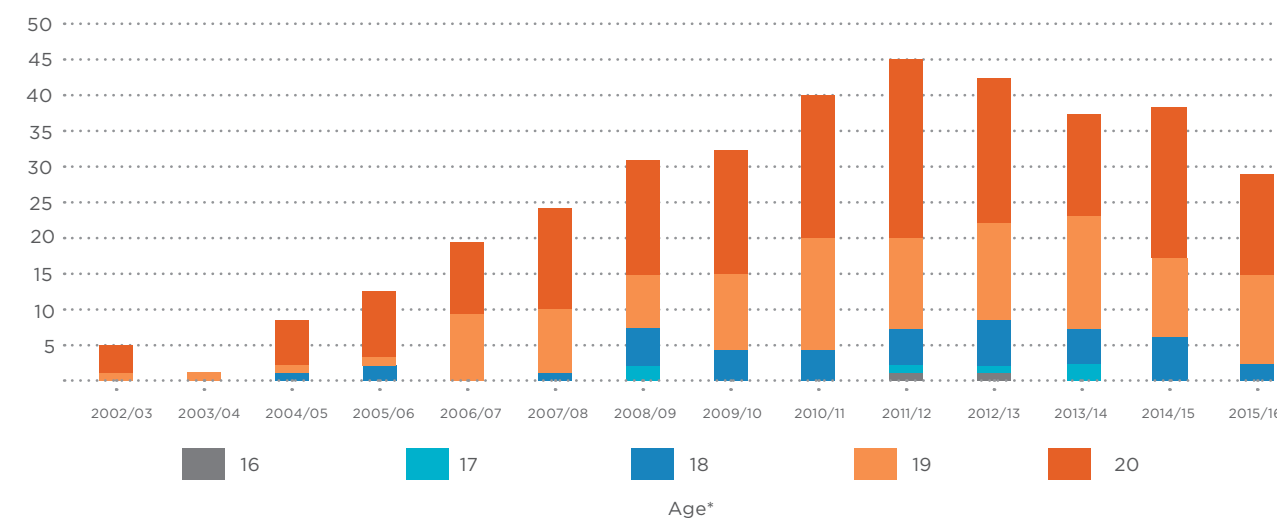
Since the A-League's inception, practically every minute played by an Australian U18 happened domestically, including by 15-year-olds Teeboy Kamara and Daniel De Silva, and 16-year-olds Daniel Alessi, James Virgili and Jacob Melling.

The prohibitive nature of FIFA Regulations in relation to the transfer of minors is highly likely to have been the major contributor to this and further highlights the importance of the A-League giving our youngest players opportunities to develop.

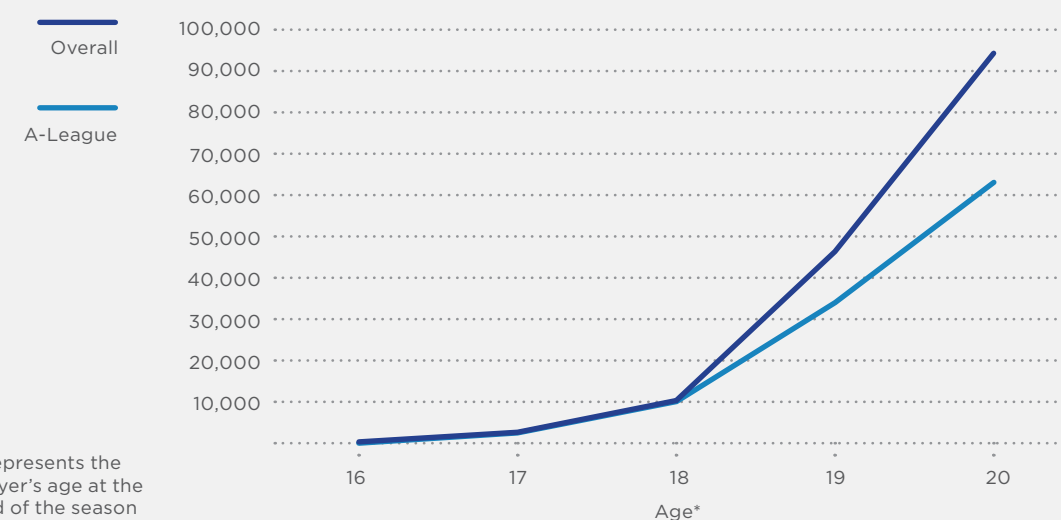
Minutes played by U20 Australians



Number of U20 Australians



U20 minutes in A-League vs overall, by age



*Represents the player's age at the end of the season





'RIGHT' TIME TO GO

While every individual player must make his own career decisions, lessons can be learned from those who have gone before. By analysing the 57 players to make their debuts in the A-League before moving overseas, we can try to better understand what age and level of experience has best set up our players for success abroad.

Firstly, it should be noted that some players, especially from the U21 cohort, are still active and

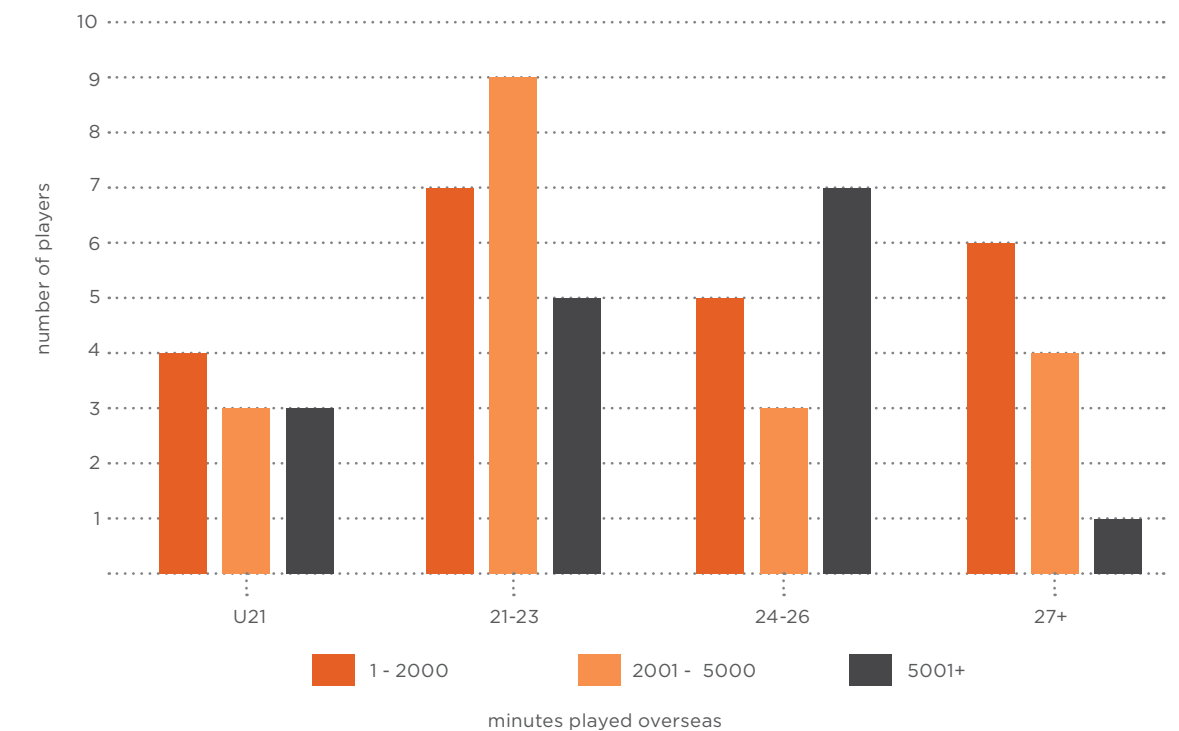
could move up through the categories as they play more minutes. At a glance it appears that there is no particular advantage or disadvantage to moving overseas at any age, although as expected the oldest bracket of A-League graduates mostly ran out of time before breaking the 5,000 minute mark.

If we instead look at the number of minutes played in the A-League before making the move abroad, something of a pattern

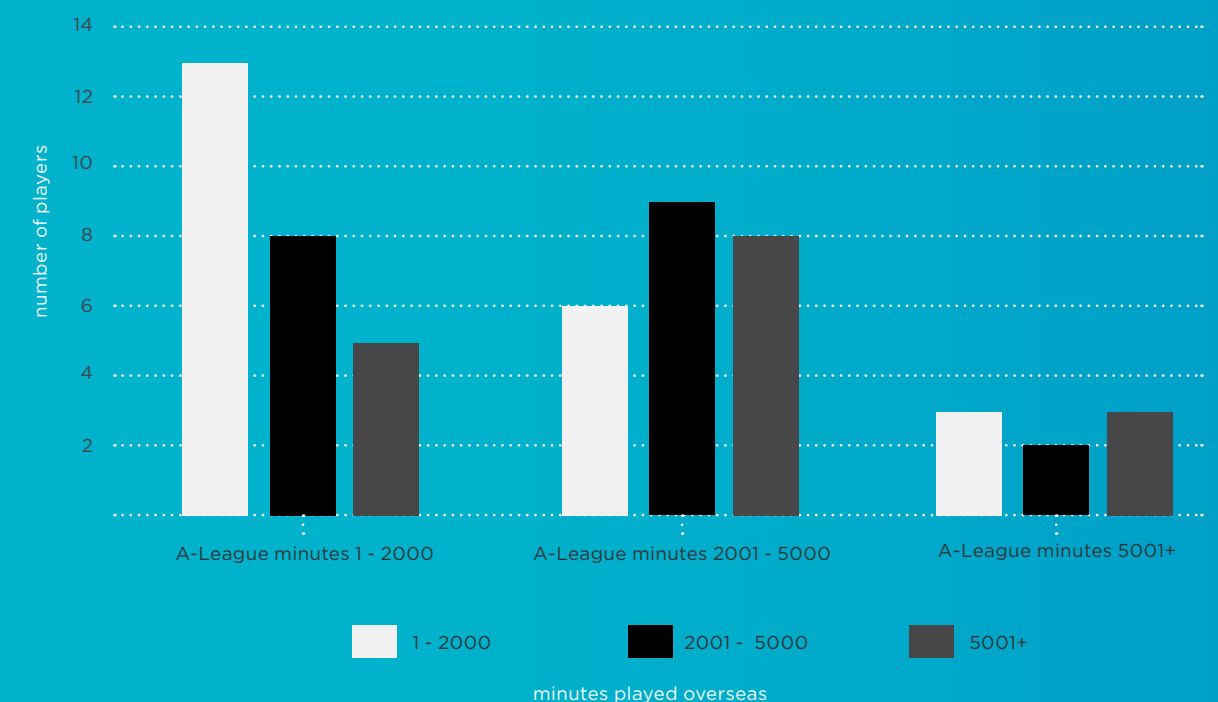
emerges. Players who racked up more than 2,000 minutes domestically were more likely to establish themselves abroad than those who left before earning that amount of experience at home.

Once again, some of these players' careers are ongoing so this limited sample should not be used as anything more than a rough guide, but it does provide food for thought for young players making decisions for their futures.

Minutes played by Australians abroad after debuting in the A-League - by age at time of transfer



Minutes played by Australians abroad after debuting in the A-League - by experience at time of transfer





A-LEAGUE SPRINGBOARD

When we think of players returning to the A-League and then moving back overseas, stories such as Aaron Mooy's A-League reboot stick in the mind. The narrative suggests that a player can relaunch his stalled career by coming home to gain regular match time, before kicking on to bigger things.

Closer inspection of the data failed to either confirm or debunk this theory. The 67 Australian players who had played abroad either side of an A-League stint fell into a diverse range of loose categories, from those who benefited

from a brief loan spell in the A-League (Tom Rogic, Aziz Behich) to those who returned home after a successful career abroad before hanging up the boots overseas (Craig Moore, Ned Zelic).

There was also no clear trend as to whether the first or second move abroad is more important. Fifty seven percent of players played more minutes in their first stint abroad (average 4,113 minutes) than their second stint (average 2,377 minutes), however some players are still active so the second figure will grow.

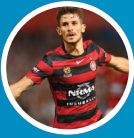
9 PLAYERS RETURNED OVERSEAS FOR A THIRD TIME:



Bruce Djite



Daniel McBreen



Dario Vidosic



Erik Paartalu



Iain Fyfe



Joel Griffiths



Mark Milligan



Milan Susak



Rostyn Griffiths

Socceroos Benchmarks



Youth Factor

Players with > 3,000 minutes while U21

Player	Minutes	Socceroo
Mathew Ryan	6,390	✓
Ben Kantarovski	5,252	
Chris O'Connor	4,860	
Joshua Brillante	4,459	✓
Joshua Risdon	4,381	✓
Bailey Wright	4,176	✓
Brett Holman	3,881	✓
Mustafa Amini	3,650	✓
Ben Halloran	3,627	✓
Scott Galloway	3,578	
Oliver Bozanic	3,449	✓
Callum Elder	3,435	
Adrian Leijer	3,353	✓
Adam Taggart	3,334	✓
Dylan McGowan	3,281	✓
Luke DeVere	3,224	✓
Terry Antonis	3,211	✓
Nick Ansell	3,197	
Alex Gersbach	3,186	✓
Connor Chapman	3,179	
Mathew Leckie	3,078	✓

These were the only 21 players to play more than 3,000 minutes before turning 21 during the period analysed, out of 322 players in the data set who had played at least a minute before turning 21.

Of those 21 players, 15 (71%) have represented Australia at senior international level. Reaching this milestone seems to give a player a high likelihood of representing Australia.

Of course, failing to reach this milestone does not mean an international career is impossible; Mile Jedinak is just one notable exception.

Note: Other players in the data set might have played some or all of their U21 minutes before the sample period began, while others might play more U21 minutes and/or play for the Socceroos in the future

Players with > 8,000 minutes while U24

Player	Minutes	Socceroo
Mathew Ryan	14,040	✓
James Meredith	13,713	✓
Bailey Wright	13,673	✓
Aaron Downes	13,352	
Brett Holman	11,754	✓
Luke DeVere	11,014	✓
Massimo Luongo	10,349	✓
Trent McClenahan	10,127	
Ryan McGowan	9,834	✓
Mathew Leckie	9,803	✓
Ben Kantarovski	9,649	
Scott McDonald	9,520	✓
Chris O'Connor	9,472	
Joshua Risdon	9,429	✓
Dylan McGowan	9,295	✓
Rostyn Griffiths	8,551	
Thomas Oar	8,304	✓
Oliver Bozanic	8,280	✓
Rhys Williams	8,251	✓
Mustafa Amini	8,228	✓
Neil Kilkenny	8,160	✓

If we extend the age range to U24 and raise the threshold to 8,000 minutes to maintain a similar sample size, we see that 16 of these 21 players (76%) have played for the Socceroos, another strong correlation.

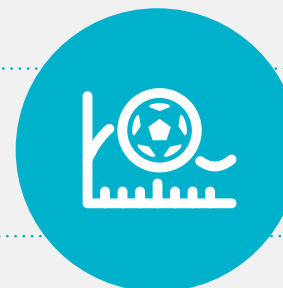
Consistency Factor

28 players in our data set managed to play more than 2,000 minutes in at least five separate seasons. Of those 28 players, 20 (71%) have played for Australia (or in Andrew Durante's case, New Zealand).



WEIGHTED APPEARANCE MODEL

To further explore the concept of the 'ideal' career pathway, the PFA partnered with football statistician Andrew Howe to extend the search back to 1977 and include all national leagues (including the NSL).



1977 - 2016
Period analysed



2,489
Players



11,615
Seasons played



170,500
Appearances

We created a Weighted Appearance Model which ranked the strength of players' careers. The model applied higher value to a match in the English Premier League compared to the NSL or A-League, and higher value to an NSL or A-League match than one in Qatar, for instance. The weightings were sourced from FIFA's Categorisation of Clubs 2016.

The Weighted Appearance Model's top 250 players (approximately the top 10% of all players) were analysed in depth.

The study found that the typical (median) player from the top 250 had made:



appearances before
turning 20



appearances before
turning 22



appearances before
turning 24

Over their careers, the top 250 players made an average of 307 national league appearances, with around two thirds of those matches played in Australia.

THE TOP 50

Rank	Player	Career (years)	League appearances (Australia/overseas)	
1	Mark Schwarzer	1991-2016 (26)	626	(58/568)
2	Brett Emerton	1997-2014 (18)	490	(151/339)
3	Lucas Neill	1996-2014 (19)	517	(3/514)
4*	Tim Cahill	1998-2016 (19)	559	(0/559)
5	John Aloisi	1992-2011 (20)	438	(76/362)
6	Harry Kewell	1996-2014 (19)	380	(41/339)
7	Mark Bresciano	1998-2015 (18)	425	(32/393)
8	Mark Viduka	1993-2009 (17)	408	(48/360)
9	Joe Simunic	1996-2015 (20)	373	(33/340)
10	Kevin Muscat	1990-2011 (22)	530	(222/308)
11	Robbie Slater	1982-2001 (20)	458	(251/207)
12	Tony Vidmar	1989-2008 (20)	465	(182/283)
13*	Brett Holman	2001-2016 (16)	396	(12/384)
14*	Scott McDonald	1999-2016 (18)	444	(3/441)
15	Zeljko Kalac	1990-2010 (21)	385	(143/242)
16	Graham Arnold	1984-2001 (18)	459	(225/234)
17	Vince Grella	1997-2013 (17)	315	(38/277)
18	Stan Lazaridis	1993-2008 (16)	346	(86/260)
19	Craig Johnston	1978-1988 (11)	267	(13/254)
20	Mile Sterjovski	1996-2014 (19)	422	(183/239)
21	Aurelio Vidmar	1985-2004 (20)	492	(294/198)
22	Ned Zelic	1989-2008 (20)	342	(78/264)
23	Eddie Krncevic	1979-1997 (19)	423	(100/323)
24	Jason van Blerk	1989-2005 (17)	395	(75/320)
25	John Filan	1990-2007 (18)	417	(81/336)

Rank	Player	Career (years)	League appearances (Australia/overseas)	
26*	Luke Wilkshire	2000-2016 (17)	357	(0/357)
27	Shaun Murphy	1990-2004 (15)	396	(47/349)
28	Scott Chipperfield	1997-2012 (16)	401	(131/270)
29	David Mitchell	1980-1999 (20)	350	(108/242)
30	Stuart Lovell	1991-2006 (16)	440	(0/440)
31	Ante Covic	1998-2016 (19)	433	(230/203)
32	Steve Corica	1991-2010 (20)	442	(209/233)
33	Carl Veart	1990-2007 (18)	482	(351/131)
34	Paul Agostino	1992-2009 (18)	336	(36/300)
35	Frank Farina	1983-1999 (17)	368	(206/162)
36	Josip Skoko	1996-2011 (16)	390	(22/368)
37	Mark Bosnich	1990-2009 (20)	219	(9/210)
38	Jason Culina	1997-2013 (17)	282	(108/174)
39*	Mile Jedinak	2001-2016 (16)	303	(73/230)
40	Michael Petkovic	1996-2011 (16)	393	(192/201)
41	Alex Tobin	1984-2004 (21)	522	(522/0)
42	Danny Tiatto	1995-2010 (16)	332	(93/239)
43	Danny Invincibile	1998-2013 (16)	412	(44/368)
44	Craig Moore	1994-2010 (17)	309	(63/246)
45	Tony Popovic	1990-2009 (20)	416	(189/227)
46	Patrick Kisnorbo	2001-2016 (16)	369	(143/226)
47	Paul Okon	1990-2007 (18)	296	(66/230)
48	Archie Thompson	1997-2016 (20)	426	(334/92)
49	Chris Kalantzis	1983-2000 (18)	344	(138/206)
50	Clint Bolton	1994-2013 (20)	479	(479/0)

Note: Data ends at 2016. Some players are still active.



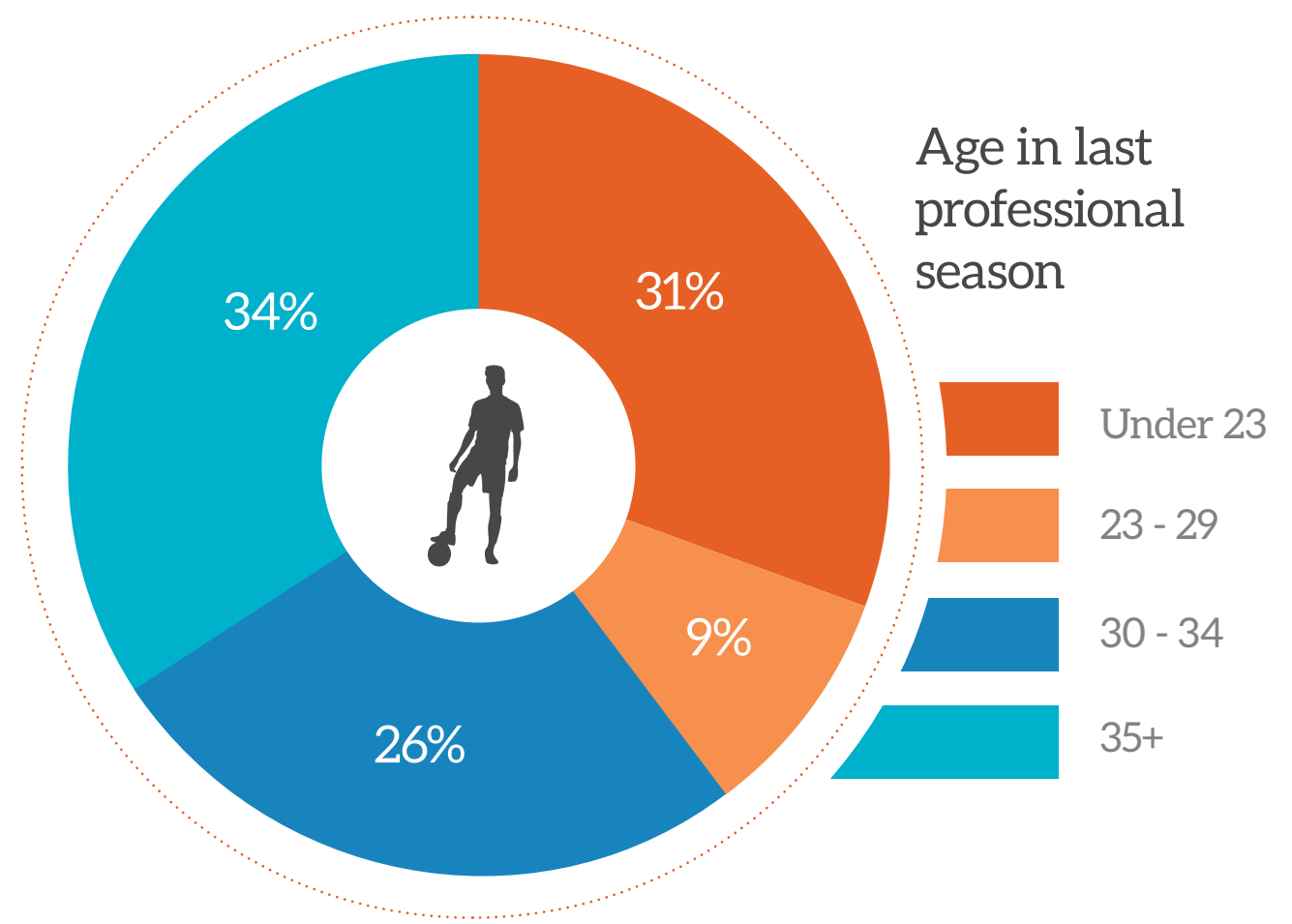
RETIREMENT & TRANSITION

The image of a testimonial send-off at the end of a long and glittering career does not match the reality for most Australian players.

We looked at the 326 players who have not played a professional minute since 2014. It should be noted that many players are still playing in the National Premier Leagues and could technically return to the professional level.

More than half of players were under 27 when they played their last professional match, and nearly a third were under 23.

- 27.2** Average age in last professional season
- 26.7** Median age in last professional season





COURAGE
WORLD CLASS
INTELLIGENCE
TRUST
RESPECT



Professional Footballers Australia Inc.

221/757 Bourke Street, Docklands, Victoria, 3008,

Email: info@pfa.net.au

Tel: 1300 650 497



@thepfa



@thepfa

Proudly Supported by PFA Major
Partner LUCRF Super



Australia's first industry fund

LUCRFsuper

