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Phoenix rising

Our last hope of a successful professional soccer team rests in the hands of the Wellington Phoenix. PRISCILLA DUNCAN talks to the key players.

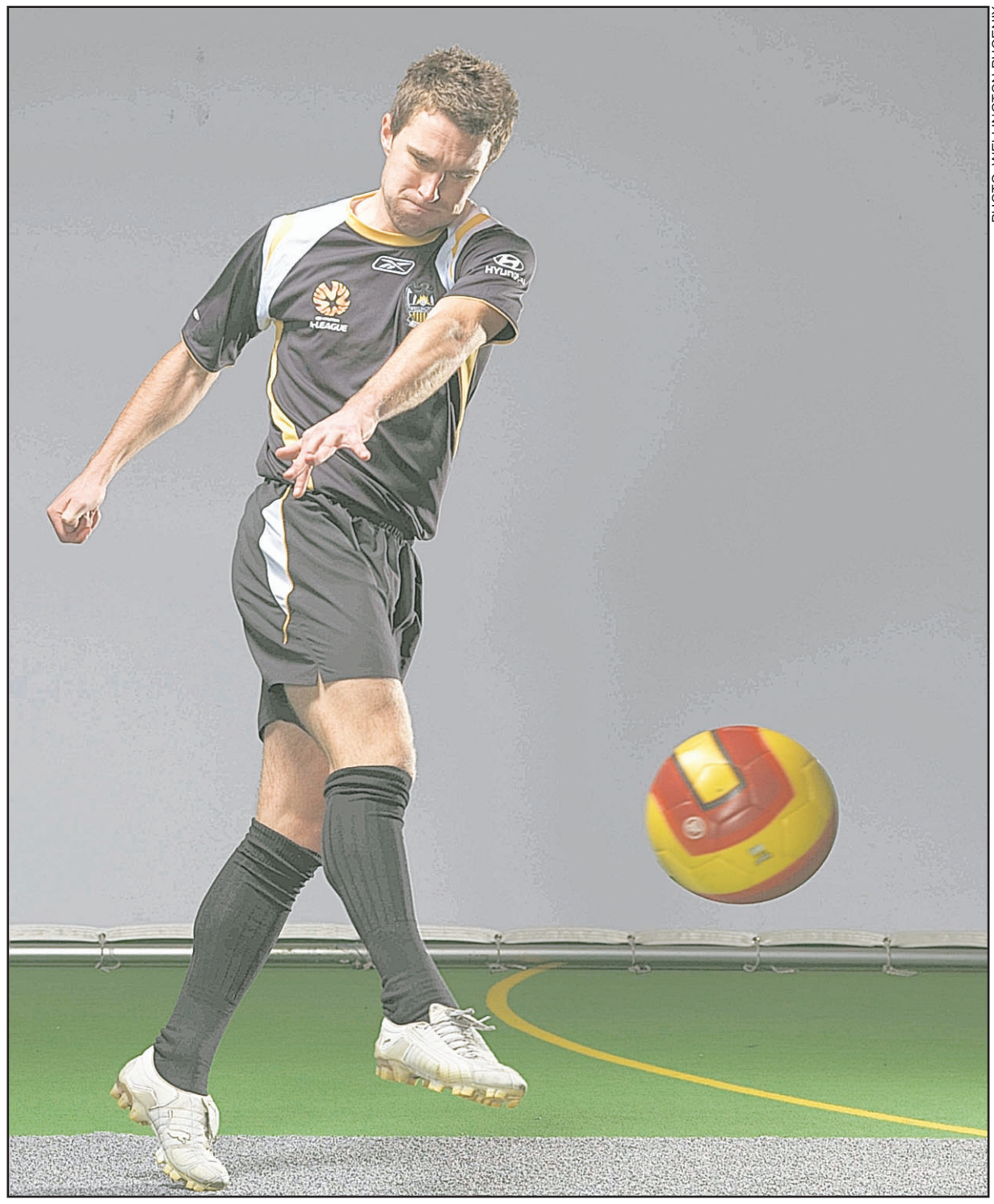

PHOTO: WELLINGTON PHOENIX

HIGH HOPES: Tim Brown is the vice-captain of the Wellington Phoenix.

It has been dubbed the beautiful game, but professional football in this country has been far from beautiful in recent years. You couldn't fault fans for losing faith after dismal campaigns by the New Zealand Kingz franchise and their successor, the Knights. But thankfully there is still hope.

The Wellington Phoenix, which represent New Zealand's latest, and potentially last, attempt at professional football, get their season underway on August 26 at Westpac Stadium. Chief executive Tony Pignata insists the team will do well in the Australian Hyundai A-League.

"The team has been together just six weeks, but already the players have looked impressive during pre-season," says Pignata. "I believe the squad will be competitive."

Pignata knows just how important it is for the club to be successful.

"I think the fate of the Phoenix is important in terms of the future of football in this country," he says. "Without a professional team, the whole code would suffer."

Pignata, former CEO of Football Federation Victoria, brings with him a wealth of administrative experience and could be just the person to get results.

But history shows it's no easy task setting up a professional football club in New Zealand.

There were high expectations in 1999 when the Kingz ushered in the professional era, but the club failed to cement itself in the Australian National Soccer League. After a credible eighth finish out of 16 in its first year, the Kingz never again threatened to make the play-offs.

It went from bad to worse when the newly-named Knights entered the inaugural eight-team A-League in 2005, picking up the wooden spoon in their next two seasons. Spectator support for the team dropped to an average of 3000 per game in the 2006-07 season and the The *New Zealand Herald* reported debts ran up to around $A600,000. The club dissolved on January 21, 2007.

So does the same fate await the Wellington Phoenix?

Respected soccer writer Terry Maddaford doesn't think so.

"I'd be very surprised if they don't make the top four play-offs," says Maddaford, who writes for the *Herald* as well as the monthly magazine *SoccerTalk*.

Maddaford believes coach Ricki Herbert has got the recruiting right with four impressive Brazilian imports and a balance of Kiwis and Australians. He also says the players will be in good condition despite coming together in only two months

"The other seven teams started so close to the end of last season that players got no real rest," says Maddaford. "Starting much later might actually work out better for the Phoenix."

But *Dominion Post* writer Fred Woodcock isn't quite so convinced. "I think just being competitive in the first season would be an achievement," he says. "Finishing sixth or seventh is realistic."

Perhaps the most optimistic about the club's future is Mike Greene, who helped set up Yellow Fever, the Phoenix supporters club. Greene says preseason cup results, which include two wins and two losses, have given people a good indication of the team's potential.

"Prior to getting the squad assembled, many would have said the goal was to avoid the wooden spoon.

But now we know what depth and quality we have, more is expected," he says.

The Yellow Fever already boasts 1500 members, which rivals any Australian club. Its website predicts there will be around 15,000 to 20,000 at the 'Cake-tin' for the season opener and a 10,000 average over the whole season. Pignata says 10,000 to 12,000 will be needed at each game to recover costs.

Greene says this solid support is a start to helping the club put memories of the Kingz and the Knights behind.

"It is hard to disassociate this team from the other New Zealand teams that went before. However, it is a whole different set-up and fans have become very optimistic," says Greene. "Wellington has embraced the team whole-heartedly."

It is clear the Phoenix will have to take a vastly different approach to that of the Kingz and the Knights to be successful.

And from most accounts, they are doing just that.

Firstly, the new franchise does not seem to have financial limitations holding it back. Owner Terry Serepisos, who signed the three-year licence with Football Federation Australia in March, is estimated to be worth around $300 million. The Greek-born property developer is reported to have invested $5.5 million into the venture and expects to lose as much as $2million of that in the first season.

Secondly, the new club has an experienced coach in Ricki Herbert. When he completes his UEFA professional licence next year, he will be one of the most qualified coaches in the world.

While there are concerns over Herbert's ability to coach both the Phoenix and the All Whites, he showed he can bring a team together at short notice and make them competitive.

Herbert became the caretaker of the Knights for the last five games of the A-League season in 2006, taking them to three wins, a draw, and a loss.

And thirdly, the Wellington Phoenix appear to have more genuine talent on the field. Captain Ross Aloisi, from Adelaide, brings with him 18 years of professional experience and will be a dominant force in the midfield. Tim Brown will be vice-captain.

Soccer writer Fred Woodcock also believes the four Brazilians will shine.

"Daniel will be one of the stars of the A-League in my opinion," says Woodcock.

Daniel showed signs of brilliance during the pre-season, including a stunning winner in the 87th minute on route to a 2-1 victory over Melbourne.

"Felipe, who hasn't had a lot of game time yet, will be another one to look out for when the season starts," says Woodcock.

Meanwhile, All White striker Vaughan Coveny will be eager to impress in his hometown after playing overseas for 15 years. Fellow Kiwi Shane Smeltz also looks in top form up front.

If the Phoenix can make the play-offs it will certainly be a major achievement.

As one Australian journalist suggested, it's like the club is starting a 100m race 30m behind the seven other competitors. But hopefully the club will have success despite entering the fray so late. The future of the beautiful game in this country depends on it.