

THE LAWS OF THE GAME: SAM CHADWICK

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Sam Chadwick has sport in his blood.

If he'd had his way he'd have been a professional AFL footballer or cricketer. He grew up playing soccer, AFL and cricket, having played both AFL and cricket at the semi-professional level, but his greatest love has always been Australian Rules football. It's no surprise then that when the dream of a full-time playing career didn't eventuate, Sam still managed to find his way back to the sport he loves through a different avenue.

Sam is now the AFL's State Manager - Football, Policy and Major Projects in NSW/ACT, but his path to the AFL senior management role came via a range of other sports administration and legal positions, including with Football Federation Australia, initially in an in-house legal role, before being promoted to the position of General Manager - FFA Cup and soon thereafter General Manager - Hyundai A-League Operations. Prior to that Sam was in-house counsel at a sports betting company and sat on various sporting tribunals including for the VFL and Football Federation Victoria while a solicitor at Freehills (legacy). He also founded in 2012, managed and since sold his own boutique sport and media talent management company, Millennium Sport & Media, and has held board positions with Squash Australia and All Together Now, Australia's national anti-racism charity.

The media is often full of reports of sportspeople who either haven't achieved their dream or have retired, finding the transition into the business world a challenge, but that was never going to be an issue for Sam who established his back-up plan early on.

In the early 2000s he completed a double degree in law and commerce at the University of Adelaide and took on his first solicitor role at Griffins before joining the Melbourne office of Herbert Smith Freehills in 2007 in a litigation role. For someone so immersed in the competitive and social world of sport, what was it that attracted him to a discipline like the law? Sam says that the two pursuits have more in common than one may think.

"I just love the analytical aspect of law," he says. As a dispute lawyer, there is an adversarial nature as well as a strategic element.

“I think of myself as more of a practical lawyer than a technical one. But the legal profession and the skills I learned from it really suit me in terms of analysing a scenario and identifying the flaws or cons of a particular position.”

He also is drawn to the idea of integrity – working from a set of rules but interpreting those depending on the given situation – just as one needs to do on the sporting field.

“I am also a strong believer that sport teaches people great life and business lessons – teamwork, perseverance, hard work and structure.”

One of the highlights of his time at Herbert Smith Freehills was when the firm supported him to write an article that was ultimately published in the Bond Sports Law journal – ironically titled ‘Restraint Of Trade In Australian Sport - Was the AFL's hand forced on Ben Cousins?’(see: <https://epublications.bond.edu.au/slej/11>).

“For me that was meaningful,” he says, “because they could have easily said, ‘We just want you to work on our revenue earning matters.’ However, the firm and, in particular, my manager Mal Cooke encouraged me to do something I was passionate about. I am very grateful.”

There were other important attributes Sam credits from his career as a solicitor and time at the firm, including, attention to detail, business professionalism, and the ability to craft a succinct written argument. However, I was always driven to understand and support the business needs and objectives of the client.”

This background has certainly aided him in his current role at the AFL, as his experience means that when he briefs lawyers, internally or externally, he’s conscious of providing in depth context of the issues. He’s been on the other side, he says, and knows how beneficial this can be.

Sam’s role requires him to oversee state and community football and major strategic projects, as well as policy, integrity and regulatory matters across NSW/ACT. This includes oversight of umpiring, club development and support, and the growing area of female football competitions, working with staff and leagues in regions across Australia to help establish and develop female teams and competition to ensure a complete pathway for girls and women to the AFLW. The aim, says Sam, “is to ensure that females have the same opportunity to play the game as men do.” The numbers show the success of his team’s endeavours – in just a year the percentage of female participants across NSW/ACT has risen from 7.5 percent to 22 percent, and NSW/ACT now boasts more female AFL club participants than any state or territory with the exception of only Victoria, the AFL’s heartland.

“Ultimate success for us is where we don’t need dedicated female roles, because ‘female’ football is fully ingrained and is just football,” he says. “We are getting closer to that point every day.”

Another recent success for Sam and his team was the inaugural AFLX tournament, held in Sydney, Melbourne and Adelaide earlier this year. A new and shorter version of the traditional game was created by the AFL to showcase some of the most thrilling elements of Australian football; this project was a perfect example of Sam's passion for expanding the game he loves into new and emerging markets. He is also currently working on the development of both AFL NSW/ACT's first Reconciliation Action Plan and Disability Action Plan, with the objective to use the power of sport to deliver meaningful social outcomes.

The plans we make in our youth don't always come to fruition, but while playing the game at the elite level did not materialise for Sam, he has made sure that he remained even more central to supporting the sport he loves.

"As a teenager I always dreamed and hoped that I was going to play AFL football and, at certain points, I felt it might be a possibility, but ultimately that didn't happen. The next best thing is to work in sport, which I love," he says.

On reflection, Sam credits more than just his successful career in sport to the foundations he established at Herbert Smith Freehills.