

2024-25

# A-LEAGUE MEN REPORT



SUPPORTING THE PLAYERS  
BUILDING THE GAME



# SUPPORTING THE PLAYERS BUILDING THE GAME



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# FROM THE CHIEF EXECUTIVE

## Foreword by Beau Busch



### Welcome to the 2024-25 PFA A-League Men Report.

Last year's Report described the A-League Men (ALM) as reaching an "inflection point". It highlighted player concerns over the performance of the Australian Professional Leagues (APL) since it took control of the league from Football Australia (FA).

The APL has taken some decisions that have not stood it in good stead with fans or players. Perhaps more concerningly, there has been an apparent lack of acceptance, accountability, and transparency over its track record and the structures that enabled it. Even as we lost a club to hibernation over the off-season, there has been an absence of public leadership or a comprehensive recovery plan.

Sometimes we try things that don't work – that's business. But the ongoing, underlying culture of unilateral decision-making makes us fear that lessons have not been learnt. This mindset now threatens player rights that have been entrenched for decades.

In April 2025, the APL 'announced' reforms to the ALM labour market model for the 2025-26 season onwards, despite having had no discussions with the players through the PFA. The reforms included a 'hard' salary cap to be trialled in 2025-26 and enforced in 2026-27, despite the first year conflicting with the 2021-2026 A-Leagues Collective Bargaining Agreement (CBA) and no agreement being in place beyond.

For 20 years, the salary cap has been accepted by the players as one part of a collectively bargained set of conditions and policies that promote the health of the industry and the wellbeing of the players. The continuation of a salary cap beyond the CBA will require their agreement again. Any attempt to impose it unilaterally will be strongly resisted.

The PFA's recent 2024-25 A-League Women Report revealed that the APL adjusted the 2025-26 A-League Women (ALW) salary cap in contravention of the CBA without first consulting the players.

These episodes speak to a concerning drop off in respect shown towards the game's most essential stakeholders, at a time when it is critical to rebuild trust and on the eve of a new collective bargaining negotiation.

To the state of the ALM, this Report highlights the need for a holistic, comprehensive plan to lead us forward. The league's sharp pivot towards youth continued, and it is fantastic to see the level of talent being produced by the clubs' maturing academy systems. We must strike a balance between opportunity and quality so that our best young players are challenged by established pros and not only members of their own cohort. Similarly, we must weigh up how to manage costs while enabling clubs to build revenues by attracting fans and competing in Asia.

The APL's rhetoric to date implies it is focused only on one side of the equation. Through the collective bargaining negotiations and public advocacy, the players will put forward a constructive agenda that will give full consideration to the league's many challenges and opportunities.

Congratulations to Premiers Auckland FC for showing us what is possible on and off the pitch and to Champions Melbourne City for continuing to set the standard for players' workplace experiences.

**Beau Busch**

PFA Chief Executive

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# EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The ALM continued to transform in 2024-25, with clubs pivoting hard to youth development but experiencing increasing challenges in growing the fanbase and competing in Asia.

The league's recent trend towards younger players went to new extremes, with an all-time high share of match minutes going to players aged under 21. Under 21s accounted for 18% of match minutes in 2024-25 and players aged 25 and under grabbed more than half (56%) of the league's match minutes for the first time.

The youth focus is a product of maturing academies, cost-cutting, and pursuit of transfer revenue. League-wide transfer receipts of at least \$11.4m in 2025 was down from the past two years, but still much higher than the long-term average. Player payments per club fell from around \$4.8m in 2023-24 to \$4.5m in 2024-25 as clubs reduced spending on Marquee and Designated players.

Average attendances were up 9% to 8,788, but if new club Auckland was removed, they fell marginally to 8,011 from 8,076 in 2023-24. Only three clubs – Auckland, Adelaide United, and Western United – filled half of their stadiums' seats on average. Brisbane Roar filled just 11% of Suncorp Stadium on average. The low utilisation across the league highlights the urgent need for the sport to adopt a more effective approach to matchday infrastructure development.

There were mixed results in the first year of the AFC's relaunched men's club competitions, with Central Coast Mariners failing to take advantage of the more lucrative AFC Champions League Elite (ACLE). The ALM is at risk of losing its berth in the 2027-28 ACLE should its clubs' performances in AFC competitions fall short in 2025-26.

In terms of other special football revenues, the ALM is well placed to benefit from changes to FIFA's World Cup Club Benefits program, with a massively increased total pot now to be partly shared with clubs that released players for qualifiers, in addition to the final tournament.

Together, these trends hint at a potential strategic miscalculation on behalf of the league and its clubs. The growth of transfer revenue has been a welcome trend, but a focus on developing youth should not come at the expense of other football revenues or traditional fan revenues. The optimal revenue strategy is a balance of all of the above. Additionally, the fluctuating nature of transfer revenue and the continued underperformance of several clubs suggest the APL must adopt a 'league-think' approach to its economic model to make the most of what it has.

Meanwhile, survey data showed that player satisfaction with club environments declined slightly in 2024-25. There was also a concerning increase in the incidence of players being forced to train alone, with 22% of players reporting that they saw this practice occur. Champions Melbourne City topped the player Index scores across all categories. The players rated Auckland's Go Media Stadium as having the best atmosphere and Perth's HBF Park as having the best pitch quality.

# INSIGHTS



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# METHODOLOGY

## PFA end of season survey

The 2024-25 end of season survey of ALM players received a record response of 276 players, with at least 17 players from each club participating. The ALW version also received a record response in 2024-25. The survey asks players about their lives, their careers, their club, the league, and the PFA. The online ALM survey collected responses between the 1st of April and 19th of May, 2025. Participation is encouraged but optional.

## PFA post-match surveys

The PFA attempts to survey at least one away team player after every match, via an online survey. The survey asks players about the pitch, the officiating, the atmosphere, and any extreme weather. In 2024-25, surveys were completed for 78% of ALM matches.



**Where you see this symbol, the data is from the PFA's program of surveys.**

## PFA fan focus groups

In June 2024, the PFA conducted a series of focus groups with Australian football fans, to gain a deeper understanding of what was required for the A-Leagues to attract greater support. On the men's side, the seven participants were mostly one-time passionate ALM supporters who had dropped off to some degree. On the women's side, the 12 participants were mostly new Matildas converts.



**Where you see this icon, the quote is from a PFA focus group participant.**



# LEAGUE ASSESSMENT

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# ATTENDANCES

## Average ALM attendances stalled if not for excellent Auckland FC

Auckland FC had an outstanding first season in the league on and off the pitch, attracting league-high average crowds of 18,101 on their way to the Premiership.

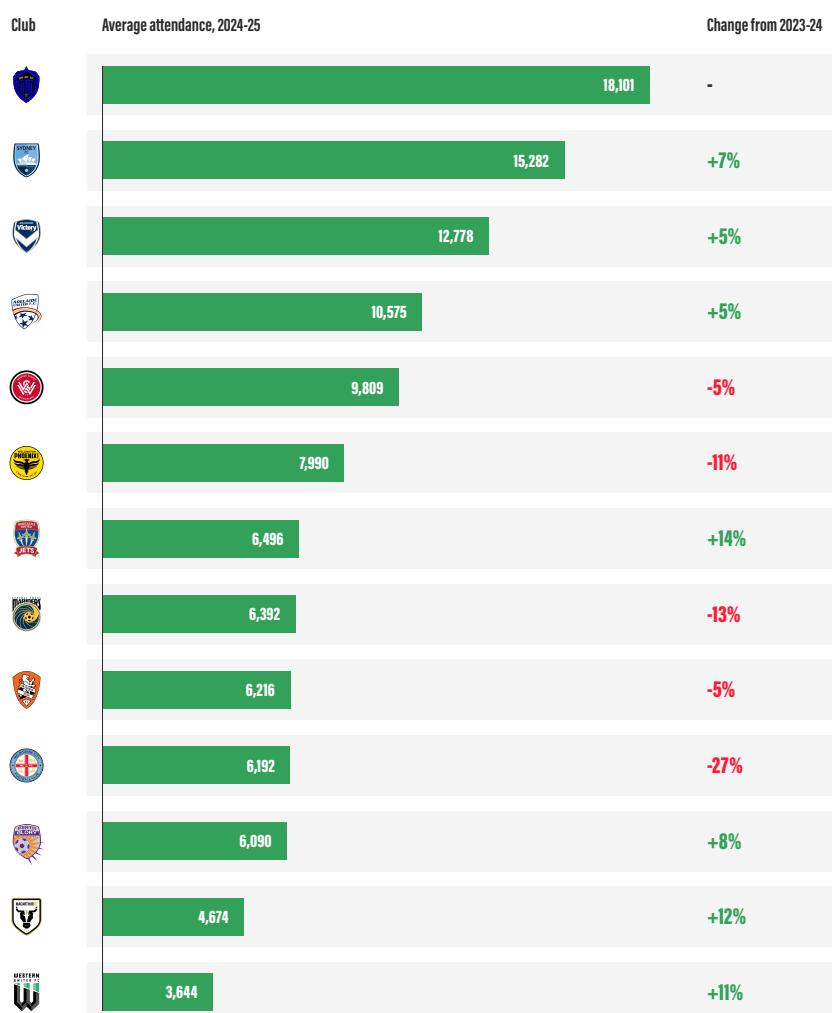
Because of Auckland's introduction, the average ALM attendance rose to 8,788, up 9% from 2023-24. This was the third successive season that average attendances increased since the challenges of COVID-19.

However, without Auckland's home games, the league's average attendance would have been 8,011, down marginally from 8,076 in 2023-24.

Of the other 12 clubs, seven increased their attendances, led by Newcastle's 14% improvement. Among the five clubs whose attendances fell, Melbourne City's 27% drop-off was the largest.

The figures are slightly distorted by Unite Round, which saw six matches played at Allianz Stadium in late November 2024. Unsurprisingly, Perth Glory's 'home' match against Western United at 5pm on a Friday was their lowest attendance of the season, as was Wellington's fixture versus Melbourne Victory on the Sunday afternoon. But Brisbane's 'home' match against Adelaide, which acted as a curtain raiser to the Sydney derby, was Roar's highest crowd of the season. Unite Round will not continue for 2025-26.

### Change in average attendance, by club



## Stadium utilisation data highlights the ALM's unaddressed infrastructure problem

Only three clubs – Auckland, Adelaide, and Western United – filled more than half of their seats on an average matchday in their main stadia (including the mini-stadium at Tarneit).

Brisbane Roar's average crowd at Suncorp Stadium was only 11% of the stadium's capacity, while Newcastle, Melbourne City, and Wellington filled under a quarter of their seats.

By contrast, in 2024, 22 of the 29 MLS clubs played out of 'soccer-specific' stadia sized between 18,000 and 30,000, with an average capacity of 22,218. All those clubs had utilisation rates of 79% or above, with over half selling out practically every match.

The MLS and Australian football both recognised the importance of matchday

infrastructure around the turn of the millennium. But while we have continued to talk, the MLS got on with building. All of its 'soccer-specific' stadia have been built since the late 1990s and several of the remaining seven clubs still sharing larger multi-sport venues are in the process of developing their own smaller new homes.

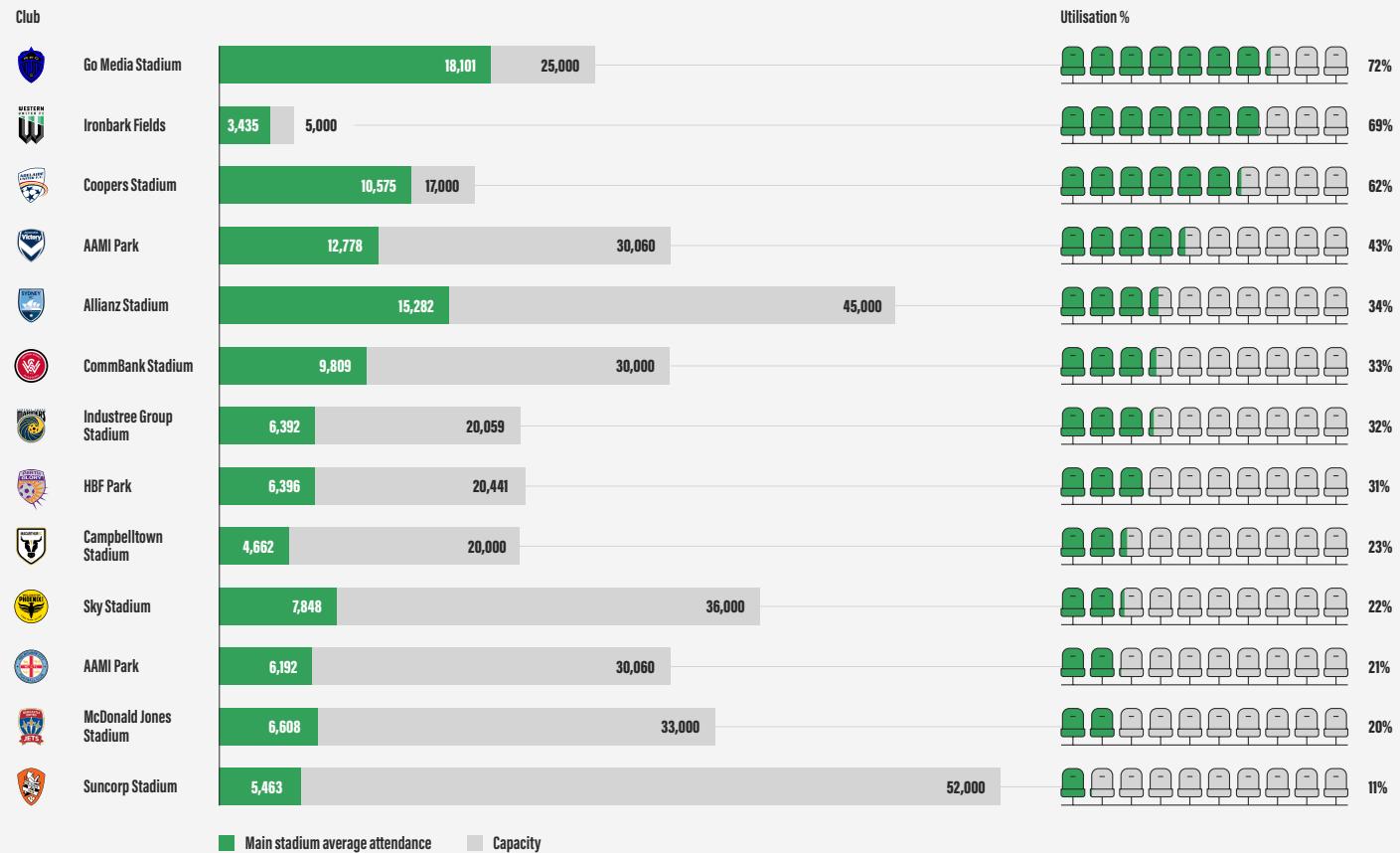
The PFA's 2002 blueprint for a new professional league, *For the Fans*, called for boutique stadia sized between 10,000 and 15,000. Several of our game's strategic documents have since repeated this call, but not a single such venue has been built. In fact, where ALM venues have been rebuilt or upgraded, the capacity has always been increased away from the Goldilocks zone.

Market research by the PFA has identified atmosphere as arguably the leading driver

to ALM attendance, but the absence of mid-sized rectangular venues undermines this potential asset. Compact grounds intensify the atmosphere from a given number of people and, close to their limits, create a scarcity factor that drives sustainable support regardless of results or other conditions.

There are many reasons why attendances have fallen across the board over the past decade or so. It is critical that the league address all of these. But it is important to recognise that for clubs such as Brisbane and Newcastle, which have vastly oversized stadia, low utilisation will be a gravitational drag on crowds even if other factors are improved.

### ALM main stadia utilisation, 2024-25



# PLAYER PERCEPTIONS

## ALM players overwhelming prefer an independent commission to the current APL board

Players continue to be dissatisfied with the performance of league management and the governance model that sits above it.

In the 2024-25 end of season survey, 52% of players were dissatisfied with the APL's performance regarding the ALM, including 26% who were very dissatisfied. Thirty-six percent were satisfied and 12% were not sure.

Similarly, 51% were dissatisfied with the governance model of the A-Leagues, including 26% who were very dissatisfied. Thirty-one percent were satisfied and 18% were not sure.

Asked whether the ALM board "should be an independent commission, instead of mostly club owners", 60% agreed and only 4% said to keep the club owners. Thirty-seven percent were not sure.

Both the AFL and NRL are overseen by independent commissions. Their commissioners are still appointed by their clubs, but the individuals must have no formal connections to any team and must meet a range of skills and representation prerequisites.

The PFA has long recommended such a model for our professional leagues, including throughout the process of the leagues' separation from FA. Instead, the APL and FA agreed the model we see today, where five of the eight APL board members are club representatives. Such a model contains inherent conflicts of interest and does not ensure the board will have the requisite experience or expertise to deliver excellent decision-making and oversight.



### How satisfied are you with the performance of these organisations with regard to the A-League Men competition overall?

#### APL (A-League management)



#### A-League Clubs



#### The PFA



■ Very dissatisfied ■ Slightly dissatisfied ■ Slightly satisfied ■ Very satisfied ■ Not sure

### How satisfied are you with the governance model of the A-Leagues?



■ Very dissatisfied ■ Slightly dissatisfied ■ Slightly satisfied ■ Very satisfied ■ Not sure



***"There's a series of business decisions the APL have taken rightly or wrongly that have not put them in good stead with the footballing community."***

*- ALM fan focus group participant*

# PLAYER PROFILES

## ALM youth trend hit new extremes in 2024-25

The ALM is skewing younger than ever, with a record share of match minutes going to players aged under 21 at the start of the season.

Under 21s accounted for 18% of match minutes in 2024-25. Players aged between 21 and 25 claimed 38% of gametime, meaning that players aged 25 and under grabbed more than half (56%) of the league's match minutes for the first time.

In terms of appearances, 30% were made by under 21s, equalling the record from 2019-20. But the fact that that share only translated to 13% of match minutes in 2019-20, compared to 18% in 2024-25, shows that clubs' and coaches' willingness to give young players substantial minutes has increased.

The trend to youth is likely driven by three main factors: club academies are maturing,

clubs have shifted to transfer-focused revenue strategies, and clubs are turning to youth to cut costs.

The youth pivot shows up remarkably in club-level data shared by the CIES Football Observatory. The PFA's 2023-24 ALM Report shared CIES data showing the share of match minutes played by under 21s at each club from September 2021 to September 2024 (CIES includes players aged 21 in their under 21 bracket, whereas the PFA does not).<sup>1</sup> In early May, CIES released the same data for the 2024-25 season to that point.<sup>2</sup>

Comparing the two data sets shows that most ALM clubs have at least doubled the share of their match minutes provided to players aged 21 and under. Adelaide United, which provided the most youth opportunities in both periods, went from 18% in 2021-2024 to 36% in 2024-25.

Adelaide United was ranked 50th on a list of hundreds of clubs from 65 leagues around the world. Premiers Auckland FC were at the other extreme with only 0.3% of match minutes played by youngsters.

In a separate post, CIES ranked the ALM first out of 50 leagues in terms of the share of match minutes played by under 21s eligible for the league's nation in 2025.<sup>3</sup>

Australian U21 players claimed 17.7% of match minutes in the ALM in the calendar year to 19 November, ahead of 15.8% of Serbian U21s and 11.7% of Danish U21s in their respective domestic leagues.

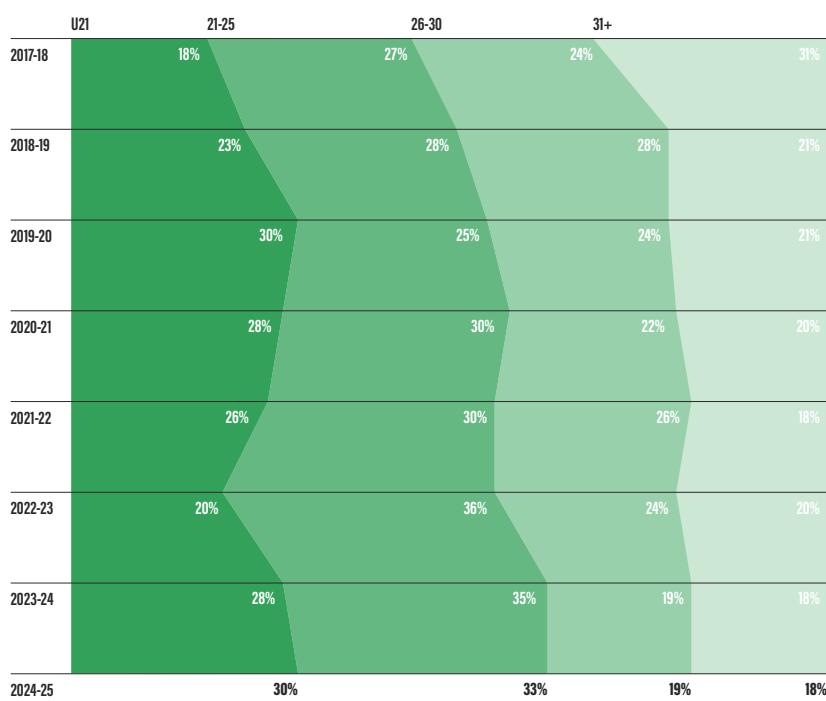
<sup>1</sup> <https://football-observatory.com/WeeklyPost472>

<sup>2</sup> <https://football-observatory.com/WeeklyPost503>

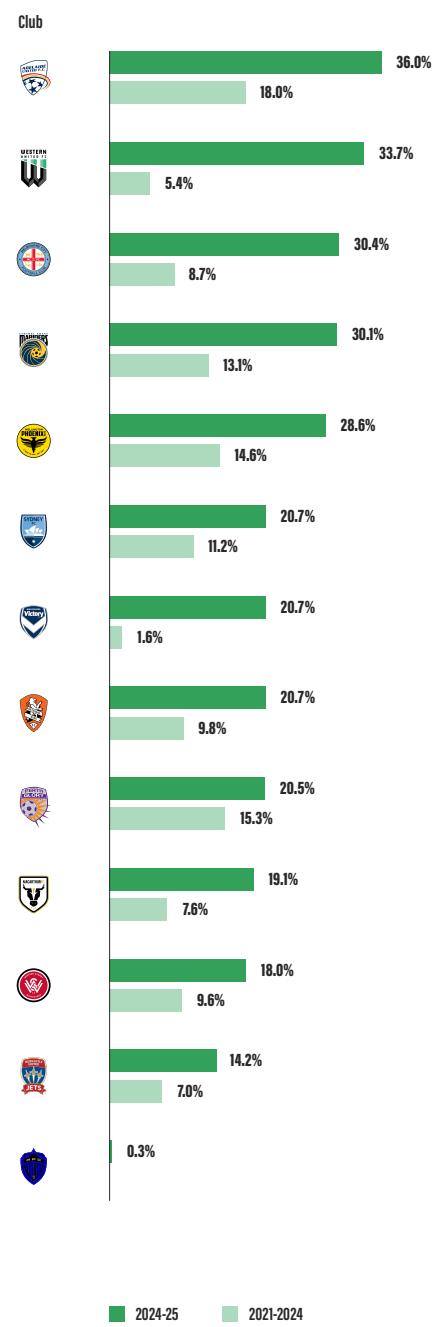
<sup>3</sup> <https://football-observatory.com/WeeklyPost522>



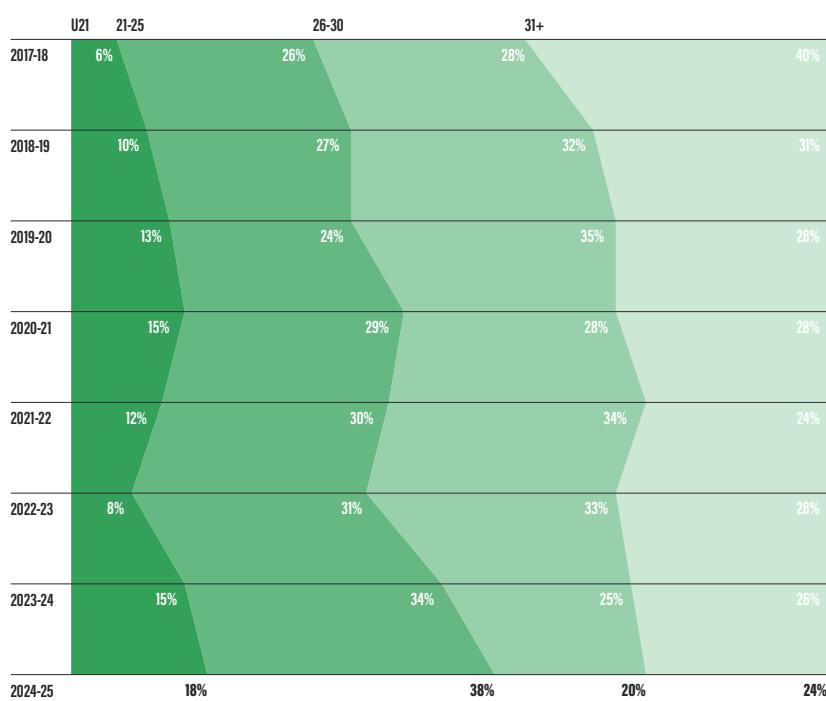
### Share of appearances by age



### Share of match minutes played by U21s, 2021-2024 vs 2024-25



### Share of match minutes by age



**Note:** Data via CIES. References on Page 12.

# FOOTBALL REVENUES

## Clubs must take a 'league-think' approach to leverage transfer opportunity

ALM clubs received at least A\$11.4m in transfer fees across the two main transfer windows in 2025, according to FIFA data.

This included around A\$3.8m for six players in the January window and A\$7.6m for 13 players in the midyear window (June 1 to September 2, 2025). At the time of writing, FIFA has not released its full-year 2025 data. Its full-year data has historically come in 10-20% greater than its two interim transfer window reports combined, so we would expect to see the A\$11.4m figure rise.

Still, the 2025 take is likely to end up lower than the figures provided by FIFA for the full years of 2023 and 2024, which were around A\$15.8m and A\$21.7m respectively.

It is worth noting that Brisbane Roar has agreed a club record transfer for Lucas Herrington that will not take place until January 2026. One of the league's brightest talents, Dylan Leonard, joined Schalke 04 for free due to Western United's 'hibernation'. And clubs are negotiating sell-on clauses that may realise greater gains down the line. So, the outlook continues to be healthy.

Nonetheless, the 2025 result shows the challenge of the league becoming overly reliant on transfer revenue as a replacement for the traditional revenues (such as broadcast) that have declined from previous peaks.

It is certainly a positive that the league has begun to seriously tap into the global transfer system, including by heeding the PFA's long-time call for more stable contracting practices. Long-term investments in academies have also begun to mature. It has certainly been timely that this has occurred just as other revenues (and the league's central distributions) declined, softening the financial blow.

But the league risks making a strategic overcorrection by now solely focusing on player sales and almost giving up on fan-based revenue streams. Unhelpful terms such as 'development league' are treated as a binary, when in reality the league can and should do all of developing (and selling) players, competing in Asia, and attracting fans.

Another risk of a narrow focus on transfer revenue is that it is a volatile stream, at league level and even more so at club level. In last year's report, the PFA combined proprietary league benchmarking data from Twenty First Group with a review of ALM outgoing transfers to conclude that these new higher levels of annual revenue should be sustainable. But they will obviously go up and down each year within a range, creating financial uncertainty.

At club level, player sales can generate millions in one year and nothing in the seasons either side. FIFA generally does not provide club-level data but it does apparently treat the New Zealand-based ALM clubs as distinct from the Australian ones when using a nation filter, allowing us to make a case study of Wellington Phoenix using its data.

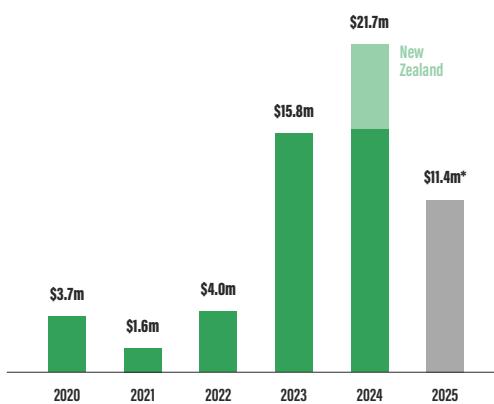
In midyear 2024, Wellington sold Alex Paulsen, Ben Old, and Finn Surman for fees. FIFA reports transfer receipts of approximately A\$5.6m for the New Zealand market in that window. It is safe to assume most of that figure is attributable to those players. Other than those sales, FIFA's data does not contain any other transfer revenue for New Zealand from 2020 onwards. We think it is missing at least one minor sale, but the point stands that Wellington and other clubs are subject to unpredictable booms and busts.

Even for clubs that do relatively well in the transfer market, the difficulty of planning around such revenue as a substitute for a steady central league distribution is obvious. The result is a collective action problem: even if aggregate transfer revenue could fully offset the league's reductions in traditional streams, prudent individual clubs would restrict investment as they awaited their next isolated windfall. In aggregate, this would erode the product. Clubs would also be inclined to take the first offer for their saleable players rather than optimise towards the best offer.

For these reasons, the PFA is floating a policy of partially sharing incoming transfer revenues. If 25% of each player sale was distributed among all clubs, the central distributions would receive a boost of perhaps A\$500,000 (if receipts totalled A\$24m). Individual clubs would also still retain the lion's share of their windfalls but their financial peaks and troughs would be smoothed, allowing for more stable operations across time. And receipt of the shared revenue could be made conditional on a club fulfilling player development criteria, to ensure all beneficiaries are contributing to the pool over time.

Whether this or other 'league-think' type policies, the league must urgently consider how to leverage its collective potential for the good of the whole.

## Australian transfer receipts, according to FIFA data



\* Based on sum of January and midyear window data, likely to be higher when full-year data is released

### Notes on data:

The analysis uses data from FIFA's new and improved transfer reports portal.<sup>4</sup>

In previous ALM reports, the PFA has aggregated transfer data by speaking with players, agents, and clubs. FIFA's data has limits; as noted in the analysis, FIFA's data for its two windows do not sum up to its data for the same full year those windows sit in. We have also identified at least one instance where a known transfer is absent from the data.

The analysis assumes a conversion rate of A\$1 = US\$0.66.

Readers should note that we define transfer revenue for the 2024-25 season as being the windows in the middle of and at the end of the season. APL has apparently reported transfer revenue for 2024-25 as being the windows at the start of and the middle of the season.<sup>5</sup> There is no right or wrong, but we think it is more useful to analyse player sales as they relate to performance and policies during the players' time in the league.



<sup>4</sup> <https://inside.fifa.com/transfer-system/transfer-reports>  
<sup>5</sup> <https://aleagues.com.au/news/a-league-transfer-news-fees-figures-signings-latest-market/>

## Clubs will Benefit from propelling players to World Cup selection

ALM clubs can already count on revenue from FIFA due to changes to its Men's World Cup Club Benefits program.

Previously, FIFA paid out Club Benefits to the clubs of players that were selected for the World Cup final tournaments. On the men's side, one third of the allocation for each player went to his current club, and the rest was split between his clubs for the two years preceding the tournament.<sup>6</sup>

FIFA recently announced that for the 2026 Men's World Cup, the pot will also be shared amongst clubs that released players for World Cup qualifiers, in addition to the final tournament.<sup>6</sup>

The pots for 2026 and 2030 have been agreed to be US\$355m, a 70% increase from 2022. At the time of writing, it is not yet clear how it will be divided or what the impact on ALM clubs will be.

ALM clubs were well placed to benefit from the expansion of the final tournament to 48 teams, because it made Australia and New Zealand much more likely to qualify. It is possible that the inclusion of qualifiers may dilute that relative advantage, although in nominal terms, FIFA's massively increased pie may see our clubs eclipse the A\$3m they received from 2022.

For reference, the final Socceroos squad during qualifying contained nine players at ALM clubs at the time. The final All Whites squad contained 11 ALM players.

The race to be selected for the World Cup final squads will be a defining storyline of the 2025-26 season. In a league sense, the more domestic-based players that make it to North America, the better.



2022 TOTAL POT:

**US\$209M**



2026 TOTAL POT:

**US\$355M**

*now including clubs of players released for qualifiers*



<sup>6</sup> <https://inside.fifa.com/organisation/media-releases/club-benefits-programme-reward-record-number-of-clubs>

## Performance in Asia is crucial to maintaining Champions League Elite berth

The 2024-25 season saw the first editions of the relaunched AFC club competitions. Central Coast Mariners competed in the new ACLE and Sydney FC reached the semi-finals of the new AFC Champions League Two (ACL2).

Central Coast received US\$800k for qualifying for the ACLE, a far more lucrative figure than what was previously offered in the early stages of AFC competition. In the ACLE's league stage format, the club had eight shots at a US\$100k win bonus (in addition to the greater incentives for advancing to the next stage). Unfortunately, the club was not able to win a match.

Sydney FC's run to the ACL2 semis earned the club just shy of US\$1m in prize money. The ACL2 prize pot is heavily skewed towards the final, in the vein of the old AFC Champions League, so Sydney FC just missed out on the additional US\$1m or US\$2.5m the club would have received for becoming runner-up or Champions respectively.

The ALM is at risk of losing its ACLE berth for the 2027-28 season. AFC slots are determined by the performance of each nation's teams in Asia over the previous eight years, with a one-year gap. That means that the slots for 2026-27 are already confirmed based on the performance

between 2016 and 2024-25; Australia will again have one team in each of the AFC's top two tiers. But the 2027-28 slots will be determined by the performance from 2017 to 2025-26.

Higher weighting is given to more recent seasons. That means the performance of Melbourne City in the 2025-26 ACLE and Macarthur FC in the 2025-26 ACL2 will be crucial to maintaining Australia's league ranking within Asia.

The top six nations in East Asia gain entry into the ACLE league stage: one slot for the fourth to sixth ranked nations, and multiple slots for the top three. Australia was ranked fifth in the East (tenth in Asia overall) at the end of the 2024-25 season, securing the slots for 2026-27. But that was the last year which counted Australia's strong score from 2016, when both Sydney FC and Melbourne Victory cleared the group stage of the old Champions League. As that result falls out of the scoring, Australia is at risk of being overtaken by both Malaysia and Vietnam, which would drop Australia to 7th in East Asia and only eligible for two slots in the 2027-28 ACL2 (one direct and one in the qualifiers).

Each nation's yearly score is an average of the performance of all its competing teams, so Australia ideally needs both Melbourne

City and Macarthur FC to do well in 2025-26. Macarthur's head-to-head matches with Vietnamese clubs, starting with group opponent Cong An Hanoi FC, carry extra weight for our league's long-term fortunes.

Australia's ranking is artificially pulled downwards by its score of zero in 2021, when its three Champions League entrants withdrew due to COVID-19. That score will remain in the total for a few more years, although its relative weight decreases slightly each season.

The situation highlights the importance of the ALM enabling its clubs to be competitive in Asia. One way to do this is ensuring favourable scheduling for our competing teams. APL has done a good job of this for 2025-26, perhaps with the exception of an away trip to Perth between Macarthur's two ACL2 semi-final legs should they reach that stage.

But the most important factor is that our clubs can invest in attracting and retaining the talent required to compete. Given the returns available, in terms of both immediate prize money and future earnings by maintaining (or improving) our slot allocations, the league could even consider providing concessions to clubs in Asia.

### AFC club competitions ranking at end of 2024-25

East Asia rank	AFC rank	Nation	Club points
1	2	Japan	107.7
2	3	Korea Republic	91.0
3	7	Thailand	54.9
4	8	China	54.7
5	10	Australia	40.4
6	11	Malaysia	40.0
7	14	Vietnam	35.0

**Note:** The top six East Asia teams gain entry into the AFC Champions League Elite

# COMPETITIVE BALANCE

## Perennial underperformers are evidence of a suboptimal economic model

Competitive balance was generally strong again in the league this season. There were four changes in the top six (including Auckland FC's debut). The points spread was similar to recent seasons, which have been tighter from top to bottom than the seasons before COVID-19.

The exception to this point is that three clubs – Newcastle Jets, Perth Glory, and Brisbane Roar – extended their streaks of missing the finals. The clubs have been absent from the top six since 2017-18, 2019-20, and 2020-21 respectively. Perth has finished last in three of the past four seasons.

This record illustrates a shortfall of the ALM's economic model. Unlike other successful closed leagues, the ALM does not have sophisticated revenue sharing mechanisms. The central distributions are the same for all clubs, regardless of their market size or spending power. As the central distributions have fallen, any

inherent financial differences between clubs have been exacerbated.

The main mechanism to drive competitive balance in the ALM has been the salary cap. Salary caps are blunt instruments best used to equalise and control spending between teams with relatively similar capacities. The AFL, for example, makes its teams have similar spending capacities by dividing its central distributions unequally between them; in 2024, Gold Coast Suns (\$34.8m) received more than double what West Coast Eagles got (\$16.9m).<sup>7</sup>

The ALM has clubs with vastly different spending power (due to either market size or ownership), and it also exists in a far more elastic global market for talent than the AFL, rugby league, or even basketball. Those factors have contributed to a trend towards more cap concessions over time, allowing some of our better equipped clubs to drive top end talent and improve the quality of the overall league product,

at some expense to competitive balance. But none of this additional value or excess capacity is channelled into lifting up the 'floor' of investment at the smallest or lowest-performing clubs.

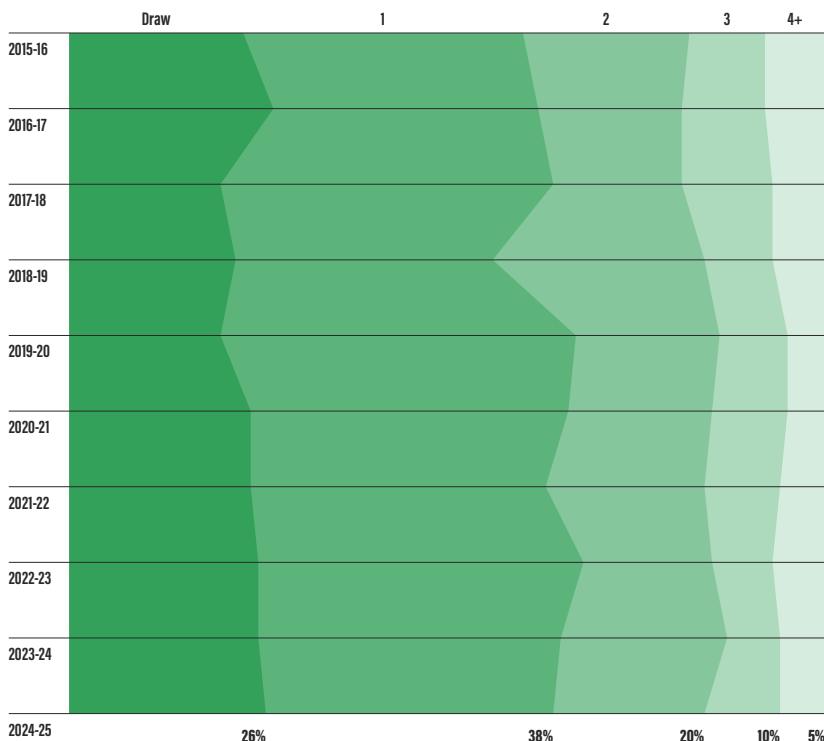
To be clear, economic factors are not the only cause for results at either end of the league, and clubs with similar resourcing to those aforementioned three have been able to achieve success, at least in brief cycles. Even with its concessions, the salary cap keeps things close enough for anyone to potentially compete. But the league does not enable or support all its clubs to fulfil that potential in the way that other leagues do. The trends of repeated success or failure in the absence of overall growth speak to the APL's everyone-for-themselves approach to league strategy.

<sup>7</sup> <https://www.afl.com.au/annual-reports/2024>

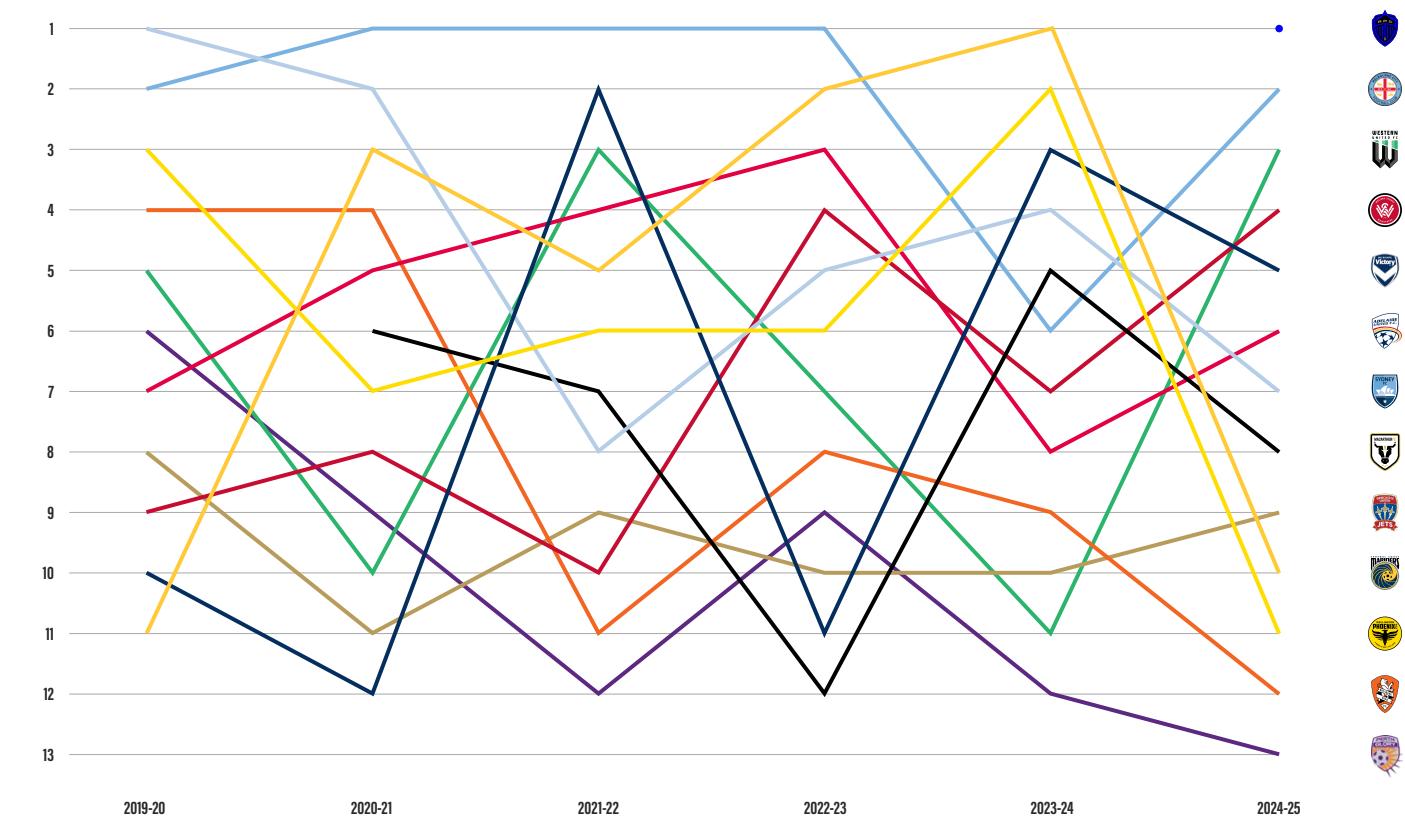
### Points spread comparison



## Goal margins



## Finishing positions





# EMPLOYMENT FRAMEWORK

21. CBA progress | 23. Western United | 24. Mental health and wellbeing

# CBA PROGRESS

## Clubs cut discretionary spending in pivot to youth development

Player payments per club fell from around \$4.8m in 2023-24 to \$4.5m in 2024-25, as total player payments remained flat despite the introduction of Auckland FC.

In the fourth year of the five-year A-Leagues CBA, there were no major changes to the league's regulations, but there were signs that clubs were responding to the reduction in central distributions by trimming their player budgets.

Total spending on players was around \$58.3m, half a million less than the amount in 2022-23 when there was one less team.

The per-club decrease in spending from 2023-24 was almost wholly contained to the Marquee and Designated Player categories.

Spending on Scholarship Players, who also sit outside the salary cap, reached a record high. Scholarship Player payments exceeded \$316,000 per club on average, reflecting clubs' strategic focus on youth development and player sales.

Negotiations for a new CBA will commence during the 2025-26 season.

### Total player payments



### 2021-2026 CBA salary cap



Current CBA

Salary floor

Salary cap

## Sadly, the chance for industry collaboration on regulatory reform was not taken

Last year's ALM report explained that FA had been invited to join the CBA's body for discussing league regulations, the Professional Men's Football Committee (PMFC).<sup>8</sup> The purpose of inviting FA to join the PFA, the APL, and the clubs was to "enable a broader and more collaborative discussion of the league's economic and regulatory framework" (p26).

As the report explained, the ALM's economic landscape was shifting; traditional revenues were down, football revenues were up, and clubs had to pursue a more diverse set of potential strategies within a shared ecosystem. The PMFC had important work to do.

Disappointingly, the PMFC has not convened since FA was invited.

Instead, the APL worked on its own set of reforms, which it publicly announced in April 2025 and said would apply from 2025-26.<sup>9</sup> The APL apparently failed to understand that it cannot unilaterally impose a labour market framework on the players, particularly in contradiction to an existing CBA and especially one that involves wage restraints. The PFA immediately rejected the APL's proposal and conduct.<sup>10</sup>

Further debate of specific ideas will be reserved for the upcoming CBA negotiations, but it would be remiss of us not to follow up on last year's report (and on announcements by FA and the APL trumpeting the expansion of the PMFC) to update the football public about the unfortunate state of play.

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<sup>8</sup> <https://pfa.net.au/wp-content/uploads/2024/11/PFA-ALM-Report-2324-2.pdf>

<sup>9</sup> <https://aleagues.com.au/news/a-league-salary-cap-apl-board-appointments-statement-announcement-what-does-it-mean/>

<sup>10</sup> <https://pfa.net.au/news/professional-footballers-australia-rejects-australian-professional-leagues-attempted-regulatory-reforms/>



# WESTERN UNITED

## Players were left stranded by the last-minute decision to 'hibernate' the club

The governance failures around the handling of Western United caused significant harm to the club's players in particular.

The club's ability to participate in the 2025-26 seasons was under challenge by two parallel processes: the club's attempt to be licensed by FA, and a pursuit of outstanding debts by the Australian Taxation Office (ATO). The two processes are related because FA's licensing criteria require that clubs can operate without the significant threat of liquidation, which was the remedy sought by the ATO.<sup>11</sup>

By early September, both processes continued to drag on due to appeals by the club. The APL decided season preparations could wait no longer, and announced on September 6th that the club would be put into 'hibernation' for the 2025-26 season.

The removal of a club (even if it is temporary) is obviously a catastrophic outcome for fans, staff, players, and all people involved. The timing of this decision, so close to the starts of the new seasons, severely impacted players in particular, due to the reduced opportunities to find new employment.

This impact landed differently on the women's and men's squads due to the different nature of contracting in the two leagues.

On the men's side, the vast majority of players have been able to secure new clubs, but most players have had to accept reduced salaries compared to their Western United contracts. Some players dropped down to NPL clubs and several players lost the security of multi-year deals.

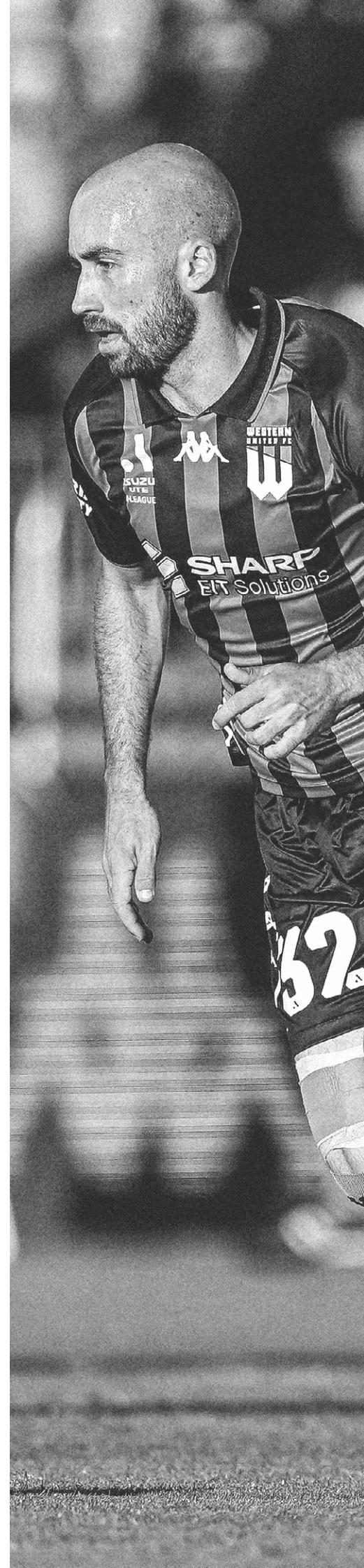
On the women's side, there were fewer players contracted but around one in three

have been left without a club. Of those who did find a new ALW club, most will receive similar salaries, but they have had to move interstate or across Melbourne. So they would need to rebuild the life of a part-time ALW player in a new home, which for most players includes finding supplementary employment. Several ALW players also lost the security of multi-year deals.

This combination of direct and indirect harms was exacerbated by the last-minute timing of the hibernation decision, which should have been avoided. According to its regulations, FA's licensing process was supposed to be completed by the end of May, 2025 (including an appeal period).<sup>11</sup> This deadline exists to give all stakeholders certainty ahead of a new season. The fact that the licensing decision had still not been finalised more than three months later shows that FA was either unable or unwilling to enforce its own regulations.

As the likelihood of the club's exclusion firmed, the PFA tabled a proposal with the APL that modest concessions be made to the salary caps and squad regulations of both leagues. The concessions would have given other clubs the option to rehome Western United players without impacting the rest of their rosters. Even though the ALW salary cap had already been increased slightly, it was the disadvantageous timing of the hibernation decision that needed remedy; other clubs were well advanced in their recruitment for the new seasons before Western's players became available. The proposal was rejected by the APL Board.

The PFA commends the players and staff of Western United for their professionalism and dedication in the face of extreme adversity.



<sup>11</sup> <https://footballaustralia.com.au/sites/ffa/files/2025-03/Football%20Australia%20Club%20Licensing%20Regulations%202025%20.pdf>

# MENTAL HEALTH AND WELLBEING

## Most mental health symptoms have improved among ALM players

In partnership with FIFPRO (the global players' union), the PFA undertook a mental health audit of members playing in the A-Leagues and National Teams players overseas. A total of 553 A-Leagues players completed the e-survey, including 313 ALM players. The study followed up a similar project in 2020 (before the pandemic), allowing for a comparison across time.

Sport-related psychological distress (a range of symptoms specific to the context of being an elite athlete) was prevalent among 67% of ALW players and 43% of ALM players. The prevalence of sport-related psychological distress among ALW players had increased slightly from 2020 (63%). Over the same period, it had decreased among ALM players (down from 52% in 2020).

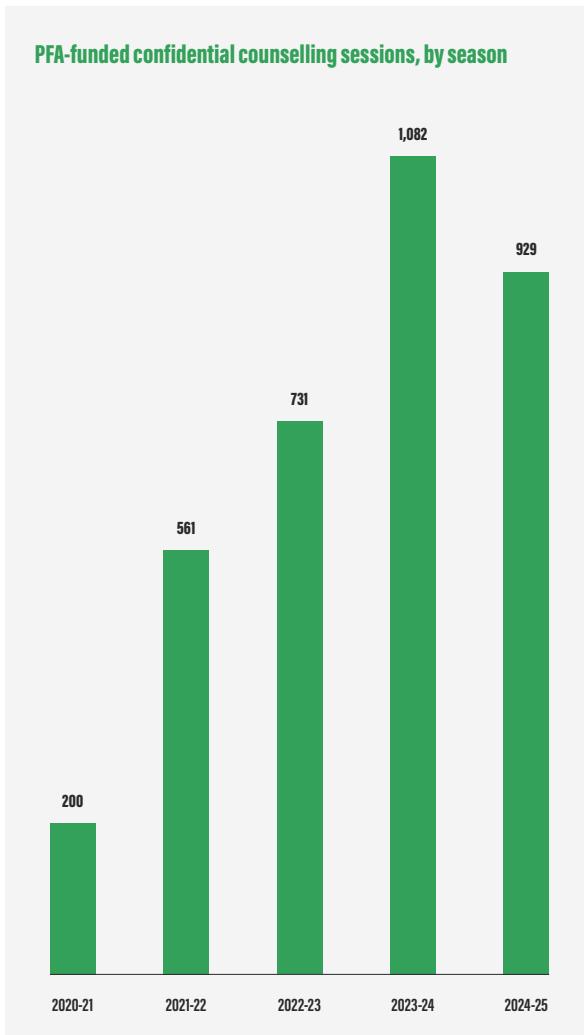
Global (general) psychological distress was much lower among ALM players (7%) than among ALW players (27%).

In 2024-25, the other most common symptoms among ALM players were disordered eating (32%), alcohol misuse (31%), and problem gambling (28%). In terms of changes since 2020, the statistically significant differences were drops in alcohol misuse (down from 51%) and in depression, which was less common, and fell from 7% to 3%. There were non-statistically significant increases in problem gambling (up from 24%) and sleep disturbance (up to 17% from 12%).

Problem gambling was the only symptom more prevalent among ALM players than ALW players, where prevalence was only 5%. Suffering an injury in the past six months meant that an ALM player was marginally more likely to experience problem gambling, but not other symptoms.

Through the PFA Player Development Program, all members have access to confidential psychological services. The use of the services has increased steeply over time, the greatest driver of which is likely an increased awareness of the program among players. In 2024-25, the PFA funded 929 counselling sessions, just below the previous record of 1,082.

PFA-funded confidential counselling sessions, by season





# CLUB BENCHMARKING

26. Club Indices | 28. Workplace safety | 29. Pitch and atmosphere ratings

# CLUB INDICES

## Melbourne City topped all categories of PFA's Club Index scorecard

Players' satisfaction with ALM club environments declined slightly from 2023-24 to 2024-25, according to the PFA's end of season mass player survey.

Excluding Auckland FC, the average scores for the Indices for Club Operations, Facilities, and Culture all fell year-on-year. The average score in the overall Club Performance Index, which is simply an average of the previous three, therefore also decreased when excluding Auckland, which scored well across the board.

The highest Club Performance Index score of 3.72 (on a scale of 1-4) belonged to Champions Melbourne City, with Premiers Auckland FC second with 3.52. Melbourne City was top in all three sub-Indices.

The average Club Culture Index score in 2024-25 was 2.92 among the 12 continuing clubs, down from 3.00 in 2023-24. Excluding Auckland, the average Club Operations Index score fell to 3.10 from 3.16 and the average Club Facilities Index was 3.18, down marginally from 3.20.

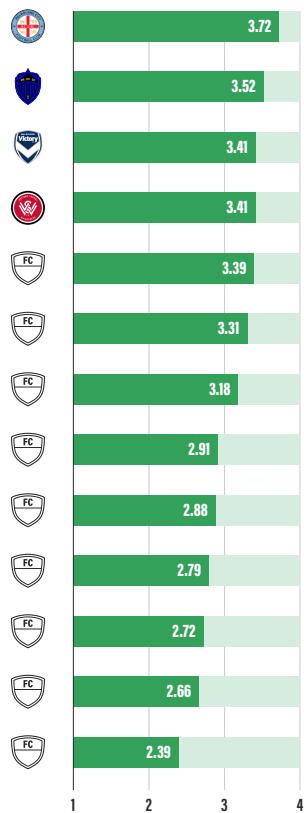
Each of those three Indices reflects the players' feedback across between six and ten specific elements in that area. For example, the Facilities Index includes satisfaction with elements ranging from the training pitch to the dining area.

As with last year's report, the PFA is publishing the top four in each category to recognise and reward success.

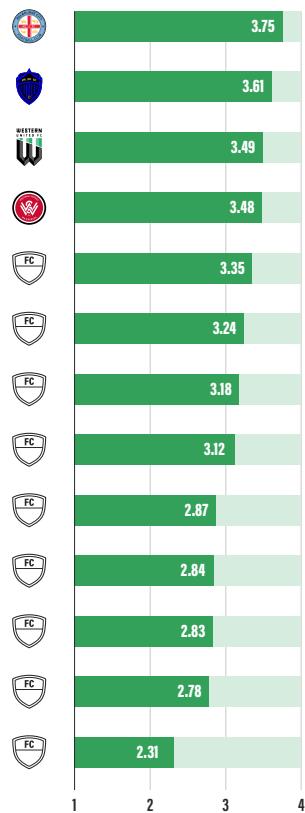
The PFA offers the APL and all clubs the opportunity to meet and discuss their results. This off-season, all clubs engaged with the PFA.



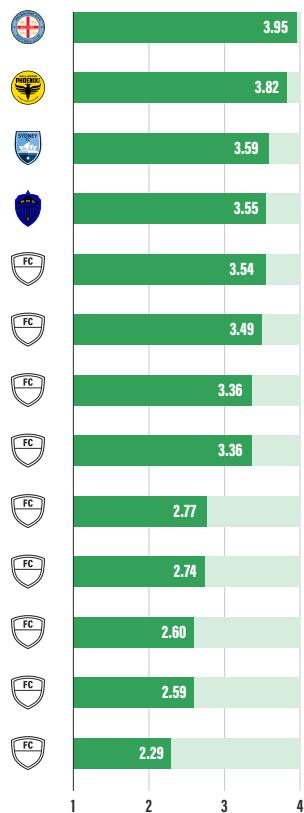
## Club Performance Index



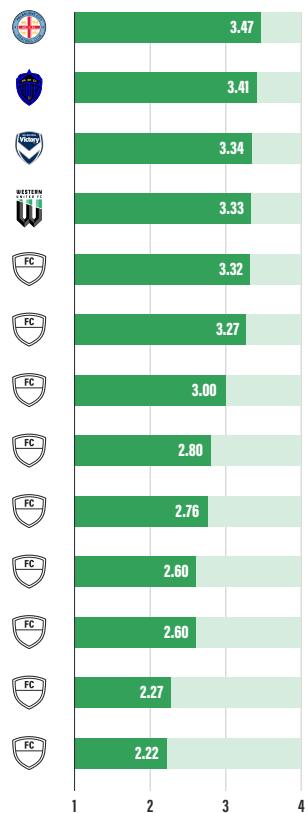
## Club Operations Index



## Club Facilities Index



## Club Culture Index



## Index methodology

At least half of every ALM squad answered the survey, providing a sufficient sample for robust club-by-club comparison. Each Index has a 1-4 scale where 1 would be total dissatisfaction from every player in every aspect, and 4 would be universal satisfaction. 2.5 is the midpoint. N/A responses are excluded.

# WORKPLACE SAFETY

## There was a concerning increase in the practice of players training alone

Twenty-two percent of ALM players reported that a player at their club had been forced to train alone during the season, up from 7% in 2023-24.

The share of players who said they or a team-mate had been unwilling to discuss issues with the coaching staff due to intimidation or fear of retribution also rose, from 20% in 2023-24 to 23% in 2024-25.

The share who said players might not raise issues with club management was up to 18% from 16% the season before.

More positively, the share of players who personally felt that their club environment posed a risk to their physical or mental safety was down from 11% in 2023-24 to 9% in 2024-25.

The result around training alone needs context. The question is attempting to uncover the practice of players being ostracised, usually for the purpose of attempting to get them to leave the club while waiving their contractual rights. The tripling in reporting does not necessarily mean a tripling in incidence, since one incident could be reported by all players at a club. And not every instance of a player being "forced to train alone away from the main group" (as the survey question asks) is necessarily inappropriate, should it be related to injury recovery or done with the consent of the player. The question text will be amended for next season's survey to specify that it is searching for instances where the club or coach isolated the player with malicious intent.

Even with these caveats, it is clear from the survey and other conversations that the problematic version of this practice occurred and increased this season. Given the high and increased reporting of players being unwilling to discuss issues with coaches or club management, there is a concerning pattern of mistreatment that must be eradicated.



# PITCH AND ATMOSPHERE RATINGS

## HBF Park's pitch and Go Media Stadium's atmosphere were players' favourites

Perth's HBF Park had the highest-rated pitch in 2024-25 among main stadia, while Auckland's Go Media Stadium set the benchmark for atmosphere.

The PFA's A-Leagues post-match surveys seek feedback on the pitch and atmosphere after each match, alongside other match factors such as extreme weather and the refereeing.

HBF Park's surface received an average rating of 4.4 on a scale of 1-5. Pitch quality

was generally good, with five other main stadia scoring at least 4.0 (counting AAMI Park once).

Concerningly, Suncorp Stadium's pitch averaged only 2.0 after scoring 2.1 last season.

When it came to atmosphere, Adelaide's matches at Coopers Stadium and Melbourne Victory's matches at AAMI Park were the regular fixtures that joined Auckland in scoring above 4.0 on average.

The Attendances section of this report discusses the ALM's ongoing stadium utilisation challenge. On that theme, Brisbane's matches at Suncorp had the lowest rated atmosphere, with an average score of 1.8.

### Matchday venue player ratings, 2024-25

Club	Stadium	Games surveyed	Pitch quality (ave.)	Atmosphere (ave.)
	Coopers Stadium	10	★★★★★ ★	★★★★★ ★
	Go Media Stadium	10	★★★★★ ★	★★★★★ ★
	Suncorp Stadium	11	★★★ ★★ ★	★★★ ★★ ★
	Industree Group Stadium	8	★★★★★ ★	★★★ ★★ ★
	Campbelltown Sports Stadium	10	★★★★★ ★	★★★ ★★ ★
	AAMI Park	8	★★★★★ ★	★★★ ★★ ★
	AAMI Park	9	★★★★★ ★	★★★★★ ★
	McDonald Jones Stadium	11	★★★★★ ★	★★★ ★★ ★
	HBF Park	9	★★★★★ ★	★★★ ★★ ★
	Allianz Stadium	12	★★★★★ ★	★★★★★ ★
	Sky Stadium	8	★★★★★ ★	★★★★★ ★
	Apollo Projects Stadium	1	★★★★★ ★	★★★★★ ★
	CommBank Stadium	9	★★★★★ ★	★★★★★ ★
	Ironbark Fields	8	★★★★★ ★	★★★ ★★ ★
	AAMI Park	2	★★★★★ ★	★★★ ★★ ★

**COURAGE**  
**WORLD CLASS**  
**INTELLIGENCE**  
**TRUST**  
**RESPECT**



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