

A significant event took place at the Australian Institute of Sport national football challenge for males in January – Tasmania gained respect.

The Tasmanian Institute of Sport played eight games, losing three, drawing four and winning one.

That record may not leap off the page, but it is a major improvement on past challenges, when six or seven defeats for TIS were normal. And it does not tell the full story.

On the last day of the event, January 29, TIS tied 1-1 with Queensland and beat Victoria 1-0.

Against Queensland, victory was snatched with the last kick of the game, the mainlanders scoring from a direct free kick that video proved should not have been given. The Queensland coach admitted TIS were robbed.

In equally heartbreaking fashion, TIS gave up the lead in two other games in the final two minutes, one goal offside, as video again demonstrated.

In another game, TIS took a 2-0 lead, coughed up two goals and then missed a good opportunity to grab the win.

In the end, TIS ended with seven points, but the margin between that and 16, or even more points, was paper thin.

Only one team, South Australia, overpowered TIS, winning 3-1.

Two TIS players, Jeremy Walker and Will Abbott, were voted to the All-Star team by the rival coaches. Walker played. Abbott missed out due to a final day injury. A third player, Jamie De Smit, was voted into the top 20 players.

Overall, the challenge represented a leap forward for Tasmanian football and Football Federation Australia Technical Director Han Berger personally congratulated the team on its performance.

Of course, this is just the beginning. All areas can be improved.

Tasmania has to produce more goalkeepers. TIS keeper Tristan Prendergast capably held the fort, but a second goalkeeper would provide the competition all players need.

The same is true for a number of outfield positions, with some players not being pushed by any rivals for their role.

Tasmania – as with all the states – needs to produce more creative players, those who can turn a game upside down.

Much of the play of all the institute teams was predictable. Virtually everything was done with the side of the foot or the laces. Hardly anyone used the outside of the foot or swerved the ball. The number of players who could dribble past opponents appeared to be minimal.

There was a lack of shooting from distance, perhaps due to fear of failure or lack of confidence. One of the wisest phrases I ever heard from a coach was: Missing is not the mistake; failing to take the shot is.

I watched the Australian Institute of Sport play Brisbane in the Youth A League and in training. I saw the outside of the foot used three times. Trying to swerve the ball around opponents was non-existent.

In Africa and South America the opposite is true. Flair predominates there. With those players you expect the unexpected.

Han Berger is always pointing out that at the highest levels of football, where all else is equal, it is not the fittest and strongest players who win games. It is the genius of the likes of Lionel Messi, Kaka, Wayne Rooney, Ronaldinho and Cristiano Ronaldo that tip the scales.

Big Phil Scolari, the Brazilian who has successfully managed various club and international teams, including Brazil to a World Cup win, has repeatedly said that the most organized defence can be undone by a gifted individual.

At the AIS challenge only a minority of players – Walker was one – showed the individual ability every team needs.

As coaches we **must** promote, encourage and nurture gifted young players who travel along our development paths.

Players who can turn opponents inside out must be allowed to do so. Players who run at opponents and go by them with devastating pace must be encouraged to use that ability. Players who can swerve the ball with the inside and outside of the foot must be granted the green light to do it. Players who can shoot from 25 and 30 yards must be allowed to go for it.

And those players who, in whatever manner, can produce those sublime moments of magic that lift us all from our seats, must be given licence to do so. Anything else is criminal.

If Australia is to be a world leader in football, such players need to be in a starting XI.