

Rita's resolve in a league of its own

Rita Saffioti is not someone who likes to hear the word “no”. That’s not just my appraisal after 20 years reporting on her political career.

That’s what some of Saffioti’s colleagues say, adding the State’s most powerful minister “normally gets what she wants”.

So, with that in mind, you would imagine Saffioti being told by overseas soccer authorities (sorry, I know purists call it football) she could not get her beloved Italian Serie A league game in Perth without agreeing to unreasonable conditions, has had her raging. As I reported earlier this year, Saffioti flew to Milan to personally stitch up a deal that would involve two Italian sides playing in Perth for Serie A points.

No Serie A regular-season match has ever been played outside Europe. Saffioti came back from that Milan trip feeling confident the Italians were coming.

But the Asian Football Confederation has apparently seen things differently.

The sticking point, I understand, is that the AFC was

JOE
SPAGNOLO



OK with a match being played in Perth between two Italian teams, but not for Serie A points. Neither would they sanction Serie A referees.

That, of course, completely defeated the purpose of what Saffioti wanted to achieve.

The AFC’s refusal to play ball also raised serious legal issues for the Cook Government.

Were it to proceed with the clash without the blessing of confederation and Football Australia, the WA taxpayer could be up for massive legal bills in the event of a legal challenge.

So, what’s the big deal? It’s just a game of soccer. Who cares if the game doesn’t go ahead?

Well, Saffioti cares. A lot.

It was insightful that when I interviewed her last year about the opening of the Ellenbrook rail line, she said that had the project never eventuated — given she promised it to the good people of that area — she would

have struggled to show her face in the electorate. On a personal level, not being able to bring the Serie A game to Perth will no doubt be embarrassing for Saffioti — even though she was trying to do what no one else had been able to achieve. This was her project — her baby. She has made that crystal clear.

There is no doubt that getting the soccer deal done would have already cost WA taxpayers a lot of money.

Sure — nothing ventured, nothing gained.

But I’m 100 per cent sure some of her Labor colleagues would be questioning the need to pursue the match when there are bigger fish to fry, despite the fact there’s a precedent in the rugby league-loving Roger Cook insisting on throwing nearly \$100 million on a NRL team for Perth.

But there is a bigger play here.

It is no fluke that Saffioti, in May’s Cabinet reshuffle, asked for and got David Templeman’s Sport and Recreation portfolio, in addition to being Treasurer, Transport Minister and Deputy Premier.

If you wanted to become Premier, which Saffioti does,

what better way to win over the hearts and minds of sports crazy West Australians by bringing big events to Perth.

And what better way to win over Labor backbenchers, in the event of a future vote to decide a new ALP leader, than handing over a few crispies for cricket pitches, oval lights, and new soccer facilities and the like in their electorates.

If Saffioti can make the Italian match happen; if she can still bring Serie A to Perth, it will be a huge addition for her already impressive political CV.

Cook was so worried about continued speculation he would not stand at the 2029 election that he recently stood up at State Conference and promised the ALP faithful he was hanging around for the next poll.

It’s not quite a Bob Hawke-Paul Keating situation — yet.

Cook is still riding high and his Treasurer does not yet pose much of a threat to his leadership.

But politics is not for the faint hearted.

As Michael Corleone said in the Godfather: “It’s not personal. It’s strictly business”.

