

SPORTS

Campese firmly in Asia's corner

One of the Wallabies' finest blasts IRB for ignoring rugby development

IAN DE COTTA

ian@mediacorp.com.sg

SINGAPORE — He is one of the all-time greats of rugby union, rated by many as the best finisher in the game. Australia's David Campese starred for the Wallabies in their 1991 World Cup triumph, scoring six tries to be named player of the tournament.

When he retired in 1992, he had accumulated 101 caps and a then world record 64 Test tries. Today, the 48-year-old continues to be busy with rugby, spending a lot of time in Asia.

The fiercely patriotic Wallaby believes the prospects of the sport reaching the next level in Asia is high, even if the International Rugby Board (IRB) don't think so.

Speaking to MediaCorp on Tuesday on the sidelines of a coaching clinic at the Singapore American School, Campese was as blunt as ever, when he said: "Obviously the IRB have got to really look at what they want to do with rugby, if they actually want to improve the game or want it to stay as it is.

"But by what they've done in the past, they are quite happy to look after the big countries and not really help the smaller ones."

Campese is in Singapore to conduct a series of coaching clinics for more than 300 kids all over the country in conjunction with insurance group Chartis. Last week in



Wallabies legend David Campese (left, in yellow) was in Singapore to conduct a coaching clinic for more than 300 kids. PHOTO BY IAN DE COTTA

Hong Kong, he was named coach of the new Asia-Pacific Barbarians side, with All Blacks legend Sean Fitzpatrick the president.

Launched by veteran sports marketing consultant Jon Phelps, the idea is to invite players from Australia, New Zealand and around the region, including Singapore, with the make-up of the squad hinging on the level of competition they would play in.

"The whole idea of the system is that you go to countries and pick up a couple of guys and talent and you might put them in a sevens tournament or you might put them in a 10s tournament and give them exposure," Campese explained.

The winger who made famous the "goose-step" feels international rugby has become so exclusive at the highest level

that during the World Cup, only the big three from the southern hemisphere and the countries that play the Six Nations in Europe reach the last four, let alone win.

Only New Zealand (once), England (1), South Africa (2) and Australia (2) have lifted the Webb Ellis trophy.

Argentina gatecrashed the party when they reached the semi-finals in 2007.

"The rest of the teams might not as well turn up for the World Cup because you know who is going to be in the semis and final," said Campese.

"It's always the same ... teams ... the ones who've got all the money and they are the ones who really control the IRB. If you want to make it a truly global game, you've got to put more funds into the lesser teams so they can grow."

He is hopeful the sport can grow in Asia and is counting on events like the sevens at the upcoming Asian Games to give rugby a boost on the continent.

"The Asian Games can give more emphasis on rugby with more headlines in this part of the world," he said.

"The 15-man game is not competitive for a lot of the Asian countries because of their physical size and the physicality of the game.

"When it comes to the sevens, there are more opportunities for Asia because sevens is more on skill, you don't have to be big."