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New move to make tanking 'impossible to conceal'

■ Greg Baum

The draft order would be decided by how soon clubs fell out of finals contention rather than how low they finished on the ladder under an anti-tanking scheme developed by an economist and now on the AFL's desk.

"Once a team is eliminated from finals contention under this proposal, they would know immediately which draft pick they have, and so would have no reason to try to lose any of their remaining matches," La Trobe University sports economist Dr Liam Lenten said.

Dr Lenten has reviewed draft data from the AFL as a 16-team competition from 1997 to 2009 and modelled his alternative. He said typically, teams began to disappear from mathematical finals contention from round 16, leaving two of the bottom eight in the running in the last round. He said his model-

ling suggested the draft order would not have changed radically in any one year under his scheme. But it did indicate the chances of a team that cannot make the finals beating a team that can would increase by 40 per cent. This alone would make it worthwhile, he said.

Dr Lenten said the flaw in the current draft system is that it provided for the bottom-most teams, not necessarily those that most acutely needed assistance, and so offered an incentive to fail.

He said he had looked at drafts in other sports, for instance the US National Basketball Association, in which the order of the bottom four picks are decided by lottery. "It works to an extent," he said, "but it also partially undermines what the draft is trying to do: allocate talent to the teams that need it most."

Dr Lenten acknowledged that it was impossible to say how mindsets would change under his system, and what effect this would

have. He also admitted that it could not pre-empt tanking altogether. But he said the window would be smaller, and involve fewer clubs.

Crucially, he said, if teams began to tinker with selection at round 15 or 16, the standard alibis about the need to trial young talent and trial new tactics would not hold water.

"It's going to make tanking impossible to conceal," he said.

Dr Lenten said Mick Malthouse had looked favourably on his idea in his short period as a vice-chancellor's fellow at La Trobe University between coaching jobs at Collingwood and Carlton. He said he had presented it to AFL Players Association chief Matt Finnis, who forwarded it to AFL operations manager Mark Evans.

Dr Lenten's research, which is still under peer review, emerges on the anniversary of severe AFL sanctions against Melbourne in the wake of a tanking scandal.