New draft plan can stop a tank in its tracks

DON'T pay much attention to what the NAB Cup throws up. Teams are often not at full strength, senior players are nursing injuries, stars are being rested and coaches are blooding young players.

But for a team that's languished in the shadows for years — like, let me think, Melbourne — they need to come out and make a statement of intent. And the Demons did.

Under new coach Paul Roos, a rejuvenated midfield led the way to a solid 14-point win over last year's big improver, Richmond.

Roos quite rightly played down the win, but pointed to the important confidence boost it gives a fragile team that has enjoyed such little success.

You'd be forgiven for forgetting that before the supplements soap opera that played out last year, the football heartbeat was all Melbourne. The drugs scandal that took centre stage dwarfed the tanking story that had until then been the AFL hangover scandal.

A year ago tomorrow, the AFL hit the Dees with a half-million dollar fine and staff suspensions for not tanking. Months of investigations and scores of interviews had not been able to pin anyone down for formally doing what several teams had informally done for years — throw games to secure early draft picks.

And for as long as the AFL insists on denying that the system provides incentives to lose, the temptation for teams will stay.

New research, released to coincide with the anniversary of the tanking penalties, has thrown up an alternative system that deserves close examination by AFL powerbrokers. Modelled by La Trobe economist Dr Liam Lenten, it sprang from an idea by fellow academic Noel Boys from Melbourne University.

At its core is a rule change that would tie the order of picks to the "least number of games played before a team is eliminated from the finals" — rather than "least number of games won at the end of the home-and-away season".

In other words, as it becomes mathematically clear a team is not able to make the finals, the first draft pick is awarded. The next team to miss out on the finals gets draft pick two and so on as the season progresses.

What's smart about this method is that it's usually about the halfway mark of the season that it becomes clear which teams are going to miss the finals. But it keeps the season alive for those teams and keeps their football departments working hard to achieve the best results, not trying to contain them. They can start the rebuilding and refocusing process for the following season even if the current one is lost and the need to keep losing to secure preferential draft picks is taken out of the equation.

"Such a policy has, of course, never existed," Dr Lenten says. "However, I have figured out a scientific way to estimate what effect the policy would have had from past games."

Using a database of more than 2000 regular season AFL matches from 1997 to 2009 — a period of stability in draft policy and with 16 teams in play — he identified games in which teams were out of finals contention playing against teams still in contention. He further narrowed it down to games in which winning or losing could not affect the place on the ladder.

"Using a set of variables, we concluded that the chances of winning for those teams would increase on average by about 40 per cent."

His work has attracted the interest of the ML Players Association and Carlton coach Mick Malthouse, and Dr Lenten hopes to get a hearing from the AFL hierarchy soon.
“I believe this is an area where we can lead instead of follow,” he says. “I have started similar modelling based on US baseball and NBA leagues, which gives me a higher sample, and the early results show similar results.

“Given we have followed many of the big US codes on salary caps and drafting rules, this would give us a chance to be a world leader.”

A big selling point of such a system is that it’s easy for fans to understand the logic behind it — yes, occasionally it would throw up a scenario in which two teams would be knocked out of finals contention in the same round.

“In that case, a formula that takes into account ladder position, current percentage and the result of the two teams playing each other could come into play,” he says.

“It could even lead to a minor blockbuster that saw two teams playing off for the right to secure the draft pick by winning a remaining home-and-away game.”

It also has financial spin-offs — nothing turns fans off more than a season without hope — but this could help to stop dwindling attendances for lower-ranked teams.

It may take a leap of faith to give it a trial but, if it helps restore faith in the badly discredited system in place now, surely it’s worth a go.