

by Archie Bayvel



A Black Swan or goalie for The Jags?

goalie for Lerwick Thistle Soccer Club – otherwise known as The Jags – in the desolate Shetland Islands, far north of Scotland. Wrong guy!

But quite a few of the remaining 70,000 Google entries are about the bloke who is CEO of Sydney Ports Corporation and the person this profile is supposed to be about.

Right now he's preoccupied with the Port Botany Landside Improvement Strategy – an unimaginative name for what he says will emerge as a world breakthrough in port management – whose objective is to co-ordinate all interfaces between ships, stevedores, road and rail transport, warehouses, Customs and customers.

“We're already more than half-way to achieving that,” Grant says, “and we'll have a big chunk of the whole operation in place by August.

“We will be a world first where a port authority has created and put into effect a really efficient, fully co-ordinated logistics blueprint for its port.

“It means the whole cargo handling process will be predictable and on-schedule.

“It will see an end to the situation where truckies complain about peak-hour performance at the terminal and say that even when they do pick up at night there is nowhere to deliver because the warehouses are closed.

“It will also end the truck queues in which drivers don't know whether it will take them one hour or three to drop-off or pick up.

“Traditionally terminals have a high commitment to service: Ships expect to arrive at a specific time, unload at a specific time and depart on time. But it's been a different story for landside transport. Stevedores traditionally haven't believed they need to service the transport industry beyond their so-called best endeavours.

“Our new master plan will co-ordinate all that and there will be reciprocal penalties and rewards for complying with it, a peak pricing structure to encourage warehouses and container parks to open at night and at weekends, and commercial incentives to access off-peak time slots.”

Gilfillan accepts that he will stand and be judged by the degree of success his team achieves. Only a year into his three-year contract, his port's a different place. He inherited a management team of seven people, today that's down to four and all are new. “We have,” he diplomatically says, “a very different level of energy. All I say to everyone is: ‘Watch this space.’”

Over the years this magazine's Viewpoint articles have reviewed bottlenecks and anomalies in the shipping industry and complained that their satisfactory solution could be achieved only by appointment of someone with over-arching authority plus the Nelson Touch; someone prepared to turn a blind eye to the naysayers and rally the fleet to do what must be done!

Joe Tripodi, who assures me he reads the magazine, has delegated exactly such authority to Sydney Ports' new chief and if all goes well with Gilfillan and his team the result of their labours will appear like a veritable Black Swan.

Trendy US philosopher Nassim Nicholas Taleb defines a Black Swan as a highly improbable and unpredicted event that has massive impact and which, post-event, seems less random and more predictable than it really was. The concept of Port Botany without truck queues and everything running on time seems to fit that description.

Grant is a country boy from Jamieson, in South Australia, where his father was a wheat farmer who served 12 years in Parliament. But Grant never fancied politics; he liked tinkering and fixing things around the farm so when he left school at Scots he went to uni and became a mining engineer.

Writing about Grant Gilfillan isn't as easy as it seems.

Invited to his office the other Thursday for morning water one got a visual image pretty much what one would expect: A large youngish man of middle age apparently in excellent health doing what port managers do.

It was a shock therefore to look up “Grant Gilfillan” on Google only an hour later and find 70,100 entries. Even more astounding to discover in only the second entry that Grant had broken his leg and a lot of young women were deeply concerned about him. A third entry declared the state of his injury depended on “how drunk I am”. Interesting days indeed for a leader at Sydney Ports!

A lot seemed to have happened to the bloke I'd left undamaged and sober such a short time before.

And so the best part of an afternoon is shot finding out there's *another* Grant Gilfillan who at age 38 blogs that he is “scared of nothing” and happiest when he's skiing. Turns out he's the highly acclaimed

Soon after that he married and headed off to his first job at Paraburdoo, in the Pilbara of WA. The township was so small that his bride didn't notice it until the plane had landed.

At Paraburdoo Grant worked virtually as a labourer for 12 months driving trucks and drills before being promoted to a supervisor of other people doing the same.

"The mine superintendent was Peter Coates who went on to become a coal industry icon," he says, "and under him I got to know what people do and learnt to appreciate how a blue-collar worker operates. It had a profound impact on me and moulded me on how to view people. It was an experience that has helped me in Sydney, in Dubai, in Romania, wherever I've worked."

After five years in the Pilbara with CRA (now Rio Tinto) he moved to Singleton in the Hunter Valley in 1982 to work for Coal & Allied (now also part of Rio Tinto).

The coal strike of 1997 was a landmark year. He was mine manager at Hunter Valley No. 1 opencut and for the 16 weeks of the strike the management operated the mine. The strike there was a long one because of the severity of the dispute.

"My job was to drive trucks as well as manage the mine," Grant says. "It was a most profound experience because when the dispute was over we had shown the miners that they could trust us, the mine executives, to operate the equipment and that broke down many barriers between them and us. It also taught me personally how to handle tough working conditions."

"But at the end of it all I'd had enough of coal, got a chance to change jobs and decided my time had come and moved not just to another company but to a whole new industry – stevedoring – with P&O Ports."

"I arrived as general manager at Port Botany just in time for the 1998 waterfront dispute."

"I walked into a very hostile industrial environment ... Patricks had locked out its workforce and we were left to move all the cargo at Port Botany."

"Even when the issues at Patricks had been resolved we still had a hostile workforce because it had not been part of that resolution so we had to spend 1999 negotiating. That involved a lot of hard bargaining and as general manager of the

terminal I was right in the middle of it dealing with the strike committee and the unions."

"I learned that there had to be changes of cultures and personalities on both sides. Some of our managers clearly weren't right and likewise for some of the union people; there needed to be a change of personalities."

"And that's what happened. We changed supervisors, moved people around and some people took redundancy; on the union side there were retirements."

"All that made Port Botany a much better place to work and got me back to doing what I like: managing people in an atmosphere of mutual responsibility and enjoyment."

"When I left there one of the union people said: 'Grant, you're a completely different person to when you arrived here.' In fact we'd both changed. In the early days the union people had walked into my office and made demands and I had to be hard. Now they were coming with effective suggestions on how to make things better and in that atmosphere there was no cause to be hard."

Altogether he spent six years at P&O with a short break midway through as managing director of CSX World Terminals.

Immediately before joining Sydney Ports, Grant worked in Africa, the Middle East and Europe as a senior vice-president, managing director and general manager for DP World.

That involved a six-month stint as director of operations at Constanta on the River Danube, in Romania, then nine months based in Dubai.

"In Dubai the philosophy has been: Build it and they will come. But the question is: How long will they keep coming? Construction has been fuelling its boom and if you take that away, why would people go there? We'll soon find out because the construction bubble appears to be bursting right now? People call Dubai The Miracle but it could just as easily be The Illusion."

His task at Sydney Ports involves a fundamental issue that he says hasn't been addressed anywhere in the world.

"We'll have the rest of the world coming to see it when we're finished," he says. "The Minister driving it has the vision and power to implement it but he wants the port management to run it. We have

full government and industry support for carrying it through. It's the first time in the world a port authority has taken such a role, often they are just landlords."

"Everyone knows I'm dead-set serious, a man on a mission and it's going to happen. My expectations of myself are getting higher and higher."

You never wish an actor luck before a big performance; they prefer to be told: "Break a leg." Grant Gilfillan faces the most demanding performance of his career so we should wish him the same. It seems to have worked for that guy in the Shetlands – scared of nothing! ▲

