

A Mad Game: The Crazy World of Footy Statistics

Bernard Whimpress
Flinders University

In the nineteenth century a verse writer (one would hesitate to say poet) came up with some lines about football which began ‘A mad game, my masters!’¹ At the time the game couldn’t decide whether it was Victorian Rules or Australian Rules football but it has never been as mad as the statistics which surround it.

I am not suggesting anything complicated here. Once upon a time before the days of recording shepherds, spoils, knock-ons and run pasts it was games, goals and premierships that mattered. But even dealing with these is like treading in a veritable minefield. I will deal with each in turn.

Games

What is a game? At the top level of footy we have league games, club games, interstate games, intrastate games (in Tasmania), interstate club games which may be trials of greater or lesser seriousness, and perhaps what might be called special games.

Let us take each of these categories one at a time. League games are those played for premiership points and include both those of the minor and major rounds. There is simple agreement on these.

Club games include league games but also the early season knock-out cup games under the control of a major league. These include the AFL Fosters Cup, and in times past there were Escort Cups, Sterling Cups, Ardath Cups, Datsun Cups, Coca-Cola Cups, and Advertiser Cups, run by the National Football League (NFL), the Victorian Football League (VFL), the South Australian National Football League (SANFL) to mention just some.

Interstate games should be straight forward enough except as we shall see they can provide problems. Interstate club games are often used

as high class trials but when they draw 35 000 people as Geelong did against Port Adelaide in 1990, it is tempting to give them official status except crowds alone cannot be used as a determinant. Intrastate games consist of those between the three major Tasmanian leagues for most of the last century but also such early games as those between the Kalgoorlie goldfields and Perth teams in the early years of football in Western Australia.

Special games are a strange category but might include Port Adelaide against England in 1888; Hawthorn against Carlton in London, Vancouver or Athens; the Aborigines against Collingwood this year, or Premiers versus The Rest as occurred in the past. The Test Matches in Ireland in the early 1980s wouldn't qualify because they were Gaelic Football,

Unfortunately there is not now, and (so far as I have been able to establish) never has been, any consistency in how these games are recorded. If one association in one state maintains some order it does not do so indefinitely. And different associations in each state have conducted things the way they wanted to.

In 1975 I was the co-founder of a football newspaper, *Football Times*, in Adelaide and at the time my partner and I agreed on the need for a category which we termed senior games.² The ides behind senior games was that it embraced the categories of club, state and other games, the latter referring to club and state games played in another state.

Football Times was pretty successful with this concept and continued with it until its demise in 1992. It allowed for a player's record from one state to carry over to another. For example at the end of 1983 Bob Beecroft's record stood at 279 games: forty-six for his then club, Woodville, and 233 'other' which comprised 127 for Swan Districts, ten for Western Australia, and ninety-six for Fitzroy.

The concept was not perfect, however, nor was the South Australian paper alone in using it. Ken Pinchin and Alan Neeson's *A Century of Tasmanian Football 1879-1979* came closest to accurate record

keeping with Roy Cazaly's fantastic forty year career enumerated to the extent of 393 senior games. These included 199 in the VFL (St Kilda one hundred, South Melbourne ninety-nine), thirteen for Victoria, 162 in the major Tasmanian league clubs (City forty-four, North Hobart thirty-seven, New Town eighty-one), five for Tasmania, and fourteen intrastate games for the Northern Tasmanian Football Association. It did not include twenty VFA games (Preston seventeen, Camberwell three) which were used as part of a larger 429 total games.³

One problem was the recognition of leagues for senior club status. The then VFL, WAFL, and SANFL counted, as did the then three Tasmanian leagues when a player crossed state boundaries but no one worried about the VFA, Canberra, Sydney, Brisbane, or Darwin. A player's games for Devonport might be counted but not Williamstown, Ainslie, St George, Kedron or St Mary's.

As I mentioned earlier the problem of getting uniformity between different state leagues and associations is difficult in a given year but how much worse when one is trying to make sense of records of the past.

For instance even the relatively straightforward case of league games provides nightmares. How often (for example) is former Richmond star Royce Hart credited with playing one league game for Glenelg? Hart who was on national service and stationed at Woodside in the Adelaide Hills was a controversial inclusion in the 1969 South Australian Grand Final at a reported match fee of \$3000, a huge amount in those days. Glenelg lost!⁴

And what about the problem of league games during wars?

In South Australia during World War II an SANFL rule enabled players to count all games missed due to service towards league player life membership and this led to some funny recording. In one example a prominent South Adelaide and state player, Len Laphome was recorded as having played 222 games when his real figure was about 130 games. Another problem created by war-time football in Adelaide was when the eight teams split into four combined teams. Who exactly played for whom has never been worked out.

The most ludicrous record keeping regarding league games, however, has to be the result of the VFL ruling of 24 September 1969 which credits a game to players who appeared in an interstate game on the same day as their club was playing a game. Jim Main and Russell Holmesby in their comprehensive book, *The Encyclopedia of League Footballers* (published in 1992), point out that they have followed this ruling which I believe detracts from the credibility of their task.⁵

How could Alex Jesaulenko kick ten goals against South Australia in Adelaide and be credited with representing Carlton against St Kilda at Moorabbin on the same day?, not to mention the player who replaced him who undoubtedly also recorded a game. Let us consider a hypothetical question. If Geoff Southby, Bruce Doull and Robert Walls all represented Victoria in the same match, and (for arguments sake) St Kilda had no representatives would they have been able to demand, retrospectively, a count of the players supposed to have played against them? It is not as ridiculous as it sounds. Double counting could have been avoided by adopting the category of senior games.

Club games can be curly with the proliferation of extra competitions from the mid-1970s, but what status do the older night football competitions conducted in Melbourne and Adelaide in the 1950s and 1960s have? Someone like Neil Kerley in South Australia played 297 senior games made up of 149 for West Adelaide, fifty-seven for South Adelaide, and fifty-nine for Glenelg, as well as thirty-two for South Australia. However, he also played thirteen Advertiser Cup night games for West which have not been counted. So far as I know Bill Kelly's 1965 *History of the West Adelaide Football Club* is the only history which records these games in South Australia.⁶ In Victoria the old night games used to be recorded separately but have been ignored in Main and Holmesby's book.

Club games provide further headaches when it comes to a matter of regarding interstate club fixtures. From the 1880s to World War I these games were more common than intercolonial and interstate games, and

often were played for the Championship of Australia. When Norwood beat South Melbourne in 1888 it was a best of three series but what status do these games have in record keeping? In the late 1960s and early 1970s the concept was briefly revived and Championship of Australia club games involved the premiers from Victoria, South Australia, Western Australia and Tasmania. Again the status of such matches has not been resolved.

Interstate games can also send the statistician in search of some panadol. Although an excellent idea, the State of Origin matches opened several cans of worms, but especially when the four Daniher brothers all rolled out to play for New South Wales against Victoria.

Another difficulty with interstate matches is whether one regards them as being between the first eighteens, twenties, or twenty-threes as the years go by or whether other matches also fit the bill. Again, let us take a walk through footy history.

In the 1920s it was a common practice for state second eighteens to play each other when a triennial Australian Football Council Carnival was being played. Thus a second South Australian team played second Victorian side in Melbourne when the first team was playing Western Australia at the Perth Carnival in 1921, and South Australia and Victorian second teams met in Adelaide in 1924 on the same day the first sides were playing at the Hobart Carnival. Should the second matches count? ⁷

At later periods second South Australian sides played representative teams from Broken Hill. Should these games receive interstate status? Bring the clock forward to when the VFL on a couple of occasions fielded three interstate teams in different cities over the same weekend. Should all players feel entitled to say they wore the 'big V'? What price a Victorian jumper, Teddy Whitten?

Intrastate games can perhaps be left to the Tasmanians except that their status lies between that of club and state games. They are certainly senior games. Special games I briefly alluded to at the beginning and

would generally include one off specials. Certainly they should not be overlooked.

If recording games matter, and plainly they have exhausted the energy of a lot of people for many reasons, it seems essential that they be placed on a proper footing which each of the states major Australian football bodies is willing to recognise. As I have said already the concept of senior games is the best way of going about this but perhaps the *Football Times* model did not go far enough in the past. Accordingly I offer a new formula which could be expressed in the following equation.

$$\text{Senior games} = \text{league and club} + \text{interstate} + \text{intrastate} + \\ \text{interstate club} + \text{special games.}$$

I would argue that senior games should be the criterion for membership of special bodies like the 300 club. If a player has played 280 matches and twenty for Victoria surely he would merit a place in such a group.

It seems to me that very able statisticians such as Norm Sowden and Graeme Atkinson in Melbourne, and Ian Everett⁸ in Adelaide have been tearing their hair out over these problems long enough.

Goals

What is a goal is not difficult to determine under the rules but for record keeping purposes the story is again different.

I have no argument with the awarding of the leading goalkicking awards such as the Coleman and Farmer Medals to the player who scores most goals in minor round matches but then the VFL/AFL, SANFL, WAFL and other leagues also keep separate records which include the finals series. By this means there can then be two leading scorers.

In 1993 for instance Gary Ablett won the Coleman Medal with 124 goals but Tony Modra ended the season with the same tally by virtue of three finals appearances.

At the moment we are discussing league matches for premiership points. But there are further anomalies. In 1980 the Western Australians really threw a cat among the pigeons by not counting five goals kicked by

Warren Ralph in a league game for the purpose of deciding the WA leading goalkicker award.

The logic behind this was that Ralph's tally occurred when the Western Australian team was playing a match in Adelaide. The end of year leading goalkicker award was thus shared by Simon Beasley and Ralph with eighty-two goals even though Ralph's tally was eighty-seven. This situation is a startling reverse of the earlier Jesaulenko example where he was supposed to be in two cities at once. Warren Ralph's match on 14 June 1980 just didn't exist at all.

Let me raise a further point about the status of AFL games versus the other leagues' games. The AFL obviously has higher status yet record keeping in the other main football states is taken seriously (if not as I have been arguing) accurately. But taking the question of one hundred goals in a season what would have happened if someone like Scott Hodges had scored fifty goals for the Crows and fifty goals for Port Adelaide? Would that constitute a one hundred goal league season?

Probably not, because two clubs were involved but let us examine another 'if'. If Port Adelaide wins the second AFL licence from Adelaide in 1996, Hodges could well be the spearhead. But Port is also determining to maintain a team in the SANFL competition. Effectively Port would have an A team and a B team both playing league football. If Hodges kicked his fifty goals for each team would he have scored one hundred league goals? A real twister!

In the past a player who might score a hundred goals in any combination of Under 17s, 19s, reserves or league games as not considered to have done so. The leagues insisted it had to be in the one grade.

Recording goals in other club games such as Foster's Cup matches and local knockout cup matches in the major leagues are frequently recorded in club and league annual reports. But this has not always been the case. In some years players such as North Melbourne's John Longmire in 1990 recorded more than one hundred goals for his club but ninety-eight in premiership matches. The North Melbourne Annual Report

records the ninety-eight. Did he have a one hundred goal season or didn't he?

In 1971 the SANFL recognised (for a time) Fred Phillis's total of 102 goals because he scored three goals in a bodgie end of season knockout trophy known as the Coca-Cola Cup for teams which missed the finals. Later, however, the league put his total back to ninety-nine. In Glenelg records he is shown as scoring the century tally three years in a row and five times in all. In the league records based on premiership matches he achieved the mark three times.⁹

The final confusing area is that goals in interstate matches have rarely been recorded. During my time as editor of the *South Australian Football Budget* a list of players interstate matches and goals was published¹⁰ although this was not without imperfections regarding the status of games I alluded to earlier.

Again, the question must be asked should these games be considered when one hundred goal seasons or career records are taken into account? Certainly a footballer who kicked ninety-nine goals for his team and then turned out for his state and booted ten goals in the match would perhaps feel he had been denied some honour.

The state which has overcome this situation has been Tasmania although until recently they adhered to an even stricter policy than the other main states by basing their leading goalkicker tally on minor round premiership matches only. It seems the man who inspired the change was Peter Hudson when he first returned from Victoria in 1975.

In the Tasmanian Football League Hudson (playing for Glenorchy) was recorded as leading goalkicker with tallies of fifty-four goals (1975), 113 (1976) and 142 (1978) in Pinchin and Leeson's history, yet in Graeme Atkinson and Michael Hanlon's *3AW Book of Footy Records* published in 1989 Hudson's totals have leapt to eighty-nine, 157 and 191 goals respectively.¹¹ What happened in the meantime was that goals kicked in finals, state games, intrastate games and state or Australian club championship were now added on. No doubt some Tasmanian

statisticians were ‘cock-a-hoop’ when in all games in 1979 Hudson kicked 209 goals and I have recently seen this ‘fact’ referred to in the Rising Star advertisement in the *Football Record*.

By some of the arguments I raised earlier there is not necessarily any harm in this except that this record lacked consistency with other leagues. Furthermore there was also no attempt to make retrospective adjustments to the TFL’s goalkicking records of earlier years, except those of Hudson himself but neither do these show consistency. In Hudson’s early career with New Norfolk he was the top TFL goalkicker and his season’s tallies were originally recorded as sixty-nine goals (1963), seventy-seven (1964), 101 (1965) and ninety-seven (1966). Subsequently, though, the first two years were revised to seventy-nine and eighty-six goals to include finals matches but those for 1965 and 1966 remain unchanged despite the fact that he kicked nine goals and six respectively in the major round.¹² If Hudson’s figures for the period 1963-6 were measured the same way as those at the end of his career the TFL would show his season’s tallies as eighty-five, 102, 133 and 140 goals.

Goals recorded in other club games and special games are not that difficult to deal with but should not be abused as in the Hudson examples. Overall, however, it seems sensible to ensure that at least goalkicking records are maintained for all senior games.

This brings me to my final point about premierships.

Premierships

Every league footballer I ever interviewed (and that was about a thousand) said the reason he played was to win a premiership.

But when it comes to counting the pennants or shields down the years where does one start? Don’t forget a lot of the old timers played their guts out for their clubs. And the nineteenth century games were bloodier than those today.

So in Victoria do we begin in 1858 with the foundation of the game, 1877 with the establishment of the Victorian Football Association,

1897 with the foundation of the Victorian Football League, or 1991 with the establishment of the Australian Football League? In South Australia does one start in 1877 when the South Australian Football Association (SAFA) was established, 1897 or 1899 (take your pick) when electorate football was introduced, or 1907 when the SAFA changed its name to South Australian Football League? It is my view that if a club can show that it is genuinely the same entity down the years its records should begin at the beginning.

In Victoria the VFA clubs which broke away to form the VFL should combine their premierships in both competitions to form a complete tally.

In South Australia I have written several times about how, for a long time the record keeping used to begin in 1907 when the only change from the old SAFA to SA Football League was the substitution of one word for another.¹³

It was a major breakthrough that in the 1980s (acting with some authority as an SANFL official) I was able to bring back thirteen extra premierships for Norwood and eight for South Adelaide.

Even more importantly, in the light of the way the game has developed nationally, was the successful revival of the memory of an Adelaide Football Club which existed as the foundation club of football in the South Australia well over one hundred years before the advent of the Crows.

NOTES

- 1 This poem which celebrated the match between the Adelaide and St Kilda Football Clubs in 1877 is quoted in full in Bernard Whimpress, *The South Australian Football Story*, South Australian National Football League, Adelaide, 1983, p. 12.
- 2 *Football Times Yearbook*, 1975, pp. 50-3.
- 3 Ken Pinchin and Allan Neeson, *A Century of Tasmania Football 1879-1979*, Tasmanian Football League, Hobart, 1979, pp. 146-7.
- 4 Whimpress, *South Australian Football Story*, p. 64.
- 5 Jim Main and Russell Holmesby, *The Encyclopedia of League Footballers*, Information Australia, Melbourne, 1992, introduction.

- 6 W T Kelly, *History of the West Adelaide Football Club*, Adelaide, 1965, p. 123.
- 7 This information has been obtained from various newspaper sources and old record books. An interesting sidelight is that a photograph of the 1924 South Australian second team is part of a display of historic memorabilia in the relatively new Football Park Functions Room, Adelaide.
- 8 Graeme Atkinson is best known as the compiler of *Everything You Always Wanted to Know about Australian Rules Football but Couldn't be Bothered Asking*. Norm Sowden in Melbourne and Ian Everett in Adelaide are long time methodical record keepers whose work has been widely acknowledged in football publications.
- 9 South Australian National Football League records were adjusted in the late 1970s.
- 10 *South Australian Football Budget*, 12 June 1982, pp. 44-9.
- 11 Pinchin and Neeson, *History of Tasmanian Football*, pp. 149, 170, 180; Graeme Atkinson and Michael Hanlon, *3AW Book of Footy Records*, Matchbooks, Melbourne, 1989, p. 271.
- 12 Pinchin and Neeson, *History of Tasmanian Football*, p. 149.
- 13 My most recent comment on this was in 'The Value of Facts in Sports History', *Sporting Traditions*, vol 9, November 1992, no 1, p. 12.