

# *Harry and the Galahs: Remembering the Meeting of Two Football Codes Thirty Years On*

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October 1997 marked the thirtieth anniversary of the first international tour by the 'Galahs' — a team of Australian Rules footballers who played and beat the Irish Gaelic football champions in Ireland. The ground-breaking tour instigated a series of exchanges between the two codes — Gaelic and Australian Rules — that has carried on sporadically until the present day.

The first tour was organised by a Melbourne entrepreneur, Harry Beitzel and occurred at a time when Australian football stood poised upon the threshold of the modern era. While the Galahs' victories over the Gaelic footballers represented a victory of semi-professional athletes over the amateurs of the Gaelic game it raised other issues such as the ability of footballers raised and trained in fundamentally different codes adapting with ease to another. (The tour games against the Gaelic footballers were played under Gaelic rules except for slight allowances to the Australians.)

Almost twenty years after the inaugural tour an intensive recruiting campaign by a then Victorian Football League (VFL) club Melbourne successfully realised this possibility. Circumstantial evidence is that the success of the Galahs also served as a catalyst for proponents of modernisation in the Gaelic game. The meetings between the two codes in the years following 1967 also propelled the myth that Australian Rules football had descended from Gaelic football.

## The Role of Harry Beitzel

Harry Beitzel first came across Gaelic Football in early 1967. After mowing the lawn one warm day he settled in the cool of his shed and switched on a portable black and white television. As the television flickered to life the picture revealed a football game. Beitzel automatically identified the game as Australian Rules but he did not recognise the teams. Then he noticed the players were kicking and punching a *round* ball. Eventually he realised he had stumbled upon a replay of the All-Ireland Gaelic football final, played a couple of weeks before at Croke Park in Dublin, Ireland.<sup>1</sup>

Beitzel's confusion of Gaelic with Australian football was understandable. The two codes shared important features including methods of passing the ball and the absence of an off-side rule. But there were also significant points of dissimilarity between the two codes including the shape of the playing surface, the amount of legal physical contact and the shape of the ball.

The similarities between Australian Rules and Gaelic Football led Beitzel, a former top VFL umpire, to consider promoting a game between players from the two codes. Beitzel had dabbled in various business ventures and football promotions throughout the 1960s. For

that time the idea of sending a team of footballers overseas was novel. Overseas travel was still very much a novelty for most young Australians. After the 1963 season the Geelong and Melbourne clubs played a series of promotional games in the United States. Beitzel had participated in this tour as the official umpire. Beitzel's proposal was something altogether different though. He proposed an overseas tour by a representative team of Australian Rules footballers where the focus would be games against a foreign team in a foreign code.

Football in 1960s Australia was still very much a semi-professional sport. Each Saturday afternoon the twelve VFL teams took to the suburban ovals of Melbourne as did teams in other city-based competitions in cities such as Adelaide and Perth. For most Melbourne players and supporters the furthest they had to travel for a game was down the Princes Highway to Geelong — a trip of just over an hour for the average Holden. In 1966 St Kilda had won their first, emotionally-charged premiership flag. Just a few seasons earlier football crossed the threshold to the modern era when the legendary Ron Barassi defected from Melbourne to become the well-paid captain-coach of Carlton.

The idea of taking a team of barnstorming Australian footballers, the Galahs as they were later called, to Ireland to take on the locals aroused a few interested and amused eyebrows but little money or support from the corporate world, where Beitzel had envisaged support. Beitzel had friends in the VFL hierarchy but the proposed tour gained little more than tacit approval from the most powerful football body in Australia.

A major ingredient to Beitzel's plan was players. Clubs regarded Beitzel's plans for an overseas tour with some scepticism. They did not encourage their players to participate and in some cases actively discouraged or disallowed their players from involvement. Speculation about a mid-tour collapse led Beitzel to arrange for paid return tickets for all participants prior to departure. Even so some clubs still expressly prohibited their players from participating. Ian Drake, the St Kilda secretary at the time, explained his club's stance by saying that no-one was prepared to accept a long-range insurance policy against injuries.<sup>2</sup> However, the lure of an adventure overseas proved enticing and most players who were approached gladly accepted Beitzel's invitation.

Beitzel took responsibility for selecting a squad for the tour. In selecting the players he leaned heavily towards the athletic types, those players armed with speed and good skills. Gaelic football differed sharply with Australian Rules in that it did not feature the tough physical clashes.

#### The Selected Team

On 6 October 1967 the players selected for the tour were publicly announced: Bob Skilton, Herbie Matthews, Stuart Magee (South Melbourne), Norm Brown (Fitzroy), Hassa Mann, Don Williams (Melbourne), Barry Davis, Ken Fraser (Essendon), John Dugdale, Lawrie Dwyer (North Melbourne), Royce Hart, Paddy Guinane, Billy Barrot, Neville Crowe (Richmond), Ron Barassi, John Nicholls, Alex Jesaulenko (Carlton), John Jillard, Graeme Chalmers (Footscray) and Ian Law (Hawthorn). Bob Keddie from Hawthorn and Peter Body from New South Wales were later added to the squad and Roger Dean of Richmond replaced Neville Crowe after he was injured in a practice game on the eve of the team's departure.

The players selected for the Galahs squad comprised one of the most precociously

talented football teams ever assembled. Amongst the selected players were four club champions from 1967 (Brown, Mann, Jillard and Keddie). In Dwyer and Jesaulenko were two of the top three vote getters in the 1967 Brownlow Medal. Without a doubt Jesaulenko and Hart were the best first year players of the 1967 season and in fact went on to become legends of Australian Rules. Barrot, Barassi and Hart earned acknowledgment from writers of the time as the three of the best footballers of the 1967 season.<sup>3</sup> Leadership was not lacking in the squad as a number of serving and future club captains were selected. Most of those selected were either in the midst or the beginning of highly successful playing careers.

Beitzel expressed satisfaction with the selected squad. One player he had hoped to take away was Jack Clarke, the Essendon veteran and brother of Ron Clarke, the champion middle distance runner. A skilled and classy centremen, Clarke seemed to fit the bill for the Gaelic game. However, Clarke bowed out and 1967 was his last season of big time footy.

Barassi, then only a novice in VFL coaching terms, was appointed as captain-coach of the squad. In 1967, his third season at Carlton, he had enjoyed finals experience for the first time as coach.

Soon after being appointed captain-coach, Barassi set about moulding a team that could seriously challenge the champion team in Gaelic football. Before being recruited it was unlikely that any of the players had heard of Gaelic football, let alone seen a game. For most of the players their introduction to Gaelic football came in Royal Park behind the Royal Melbourne Children's Hospital. Barassi enlisted the help of Irish expatriates to teach Australian players the fundamentals.

While Barassi pushed his charges through a crash course in Gaelic football Beitzel's representative in Ireland, Bernie Doyle, desperately sought to arrange a top-level game. But the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), the guardian and administrator of Gaelic sport, and the clubs were proving elusive.

The GAA could never work out how to take Beitzel. Sean O'Siochain, GAA secretary and the power broker, hardly encouraged the tour. As the scheduled date for the departure of the Galahs from Australia rapidly approached, Beitzel, as a last resort, fired off a telegram to the Irish Times where he threw down the gauntlet to the All-Ireland finalists. To further tempt the Irish Beitzel offered a £10 000 purse for the winner.

### Gaelic Football

Gaelic football in Ireland was essentially an amateur sport, mainly played by republic supporting Irish. Originally Gaelic Football had been developed as a bulwark of Irish republicanism against English imperialism.<sup>4</sup> In deference to the strong anti-British strain of Gaelic Football, the Galahs played 'Waltzing Matilda' at four matches rather than the actual Australian anthem of the time, 'God Save the Queen'. For the same reason the Union Jack dominated Australian flag was not flown on tour.

The Galahs squad played their final practice game prior to departure in Royal Park on 22 October 1967. The Australians beat their opponents, a combined Irish-Australian Athletic Association team, proving that they had at least adapted to the basic skills required in the game. Noel Eisse, their Gaelic Football tutor, predicted that they would not beat a top Irish county side. He added, accurately as it turned out, that their 'main advantage is that they have the element of surprise — Ireland won't expect them to have such a high standard'.<sup>5</sup>

Bernie Doyle advised Beitzel to dress the tourists in a travelling uniform. Doyle, a former English commando, believed the slouch hat to be a definitive Australian symbol and Beitzel adopted his suggestion to include it in their uniform. On seeing the team members in their smart blazers and slouch hats complete with lairish plumes the running coach Percy Cerutti curtly dismissed the footballers as a 'pack of galahs'. Beitzel, however, seized on the jibe and fed it to journalists and before long the touring squad was being referred to as the Galahs in the Australian press.

After a lunch-time motorcade through central Melbourne and an official farewell from the Mayor the Galahs headed off for their first official game of the tour, against a combined Northern Territory Football League (NTFL) in Darwin. The previous October Collingwood had become the first VFL team to meet a representative team from the NTFL. Collingwood won by nineteen points after trailing by fifteen at half time. The star studded Galahs were less troubled by their NTFL opposition. In the oppressive heat Hart bagged seven goals as the Galahs cruised to victory by a margin of over ten goals.

Shortly after arriving in Ireland Beitzel and Barassi confronted an underwhelmed Irish media. The Irish sports writers hailed the tourists with a mixture of amusement, doubt and condescension. One referred to Beitzel's 'braggart cablegram'. Another suggested that the Galahs might be better off playing a junior league side rather than taking on one of the champion sides. Meath was the current champion and when it was suggested that they would treat any challenge game as a 'picnic match' Barassi erupted and snarled back at the Irish pressman, 'What sort of — footballers have you got anyway? If they're anything like ours they'll be flat out to win. That's the only way we know how to play!' Father Tully, the Meath chairman, pacified the Australians by saying that their team would be out to uphold the prestige of the Gaelic game.<sup>6</sup>

As a preliminary to the Meath game a match with a junior team the Civil Service was arranged. Civil Service officials did not anticipate a big attendance and so threw their gates open to all-comers. Pleasant surprise followed when a record crowd turned up to see the Galahs take on the Civil Servants. In this game, like all the Gaelic Football games on the tour, one concession in the rules favoured the Galahs. Gaelic Football rules required players running with the ball to 'toe' the ball every few yards; that is, flick the ball from hand to toe to hand. The Australians were permitted to bounce the ball on the ground, as in Australian Rules, instead of having to toe the ball.

One of the players to represent the Civil Service that day was Brian Stynes. His son, the then eighteen months old Jim Stynes, later became a winner of the coveted Brownlow Medal in the Australian Football League.

The Irish were intimidated by various aspects of the appearance of the Aussies. 'They all seemed like giants', Stynes senior later said, 'They wore these strange sleeveless guernseys and we thought it was just so they could show off their muscles. They looked tall, powerful and very athletic.'<sup>7</sup>

### **Victory for the Galahs**

Despite their physical advantages the Galahs approached the game tentatively, intent on a defensive style of game. The Civil Service led comfortably throughout until the final few minutes when the Galahs pinched a narrow two-point victory. Brian Stynes attributed his

team's loss to over-confidence and the Aussies greater fitness: 'We thought we had it won, but had not counted on the Australians superb fitness', Stynes explained. 'We were amateur club footballers pitted against semi-professionals who were bigger and stronger. They towered over us.'<sup>8</sup>

Beitzel breathed a huge sigh of relief as he watched the Galahs' narrow escape. The crowd attendance also quietly unpressed Beitzel as interest in the Australians tour seemed to be growing by the hour. The Aussies still needed to improve drastically upon their performance in the game with the Civil Service. The Galahs had very little time though to find further improvement-the preliminary game against the Civil Service was played on Saturday 28 October and the game against Meath was scheduled for the following day.

All the training and instruction the Galahs had received before leaving Melbourne emphasised the importance of playing defensively. Possession was held to be important and moving the ball forward was to be done with the least amount of risks. On the morning of the all important game against Meath the theory was turned on its head and the Australians decided to go for all out attack.

On the Sunday morning a team meeting discussed tactics for the game. Barassi, Beitzel and other senior members of the squad recognised that a repeat of their unconvincing performance of the previous day would most likely see them laughed out of Croke Park, the home of Gaelic football. Therefore it was decided to throw caution to the wind and risk everything with a strategy that emphasised all-out attack. The meeting decided to rely on speed, quick movement of the ball and to play on at all opportunities. Features of the Australian game such as long kicking and high marking, seen as strengths of the Galahs, were to be exploited at every opportunity. Great emphasis was placed upon handball as a way of moving the ball quickly.

As the team bus travelled from the hotel to Croke Park, the home of Gaelic football, the players settled their nerves by taking it in turns to sing their respective VFL club songs. Before the game the players spirits sunk as they surveyed the near empty stands. Soon after the game started the crowd had grown to more than 20 000. The Irish habitually arrived to their games in the final few minutes.

Barassi 's attitude to coaching and playing had always been to win at all costs and this was certainly no different. In his pre-match address Barassi emphasised that they were wearing the Australian jumper and they must do it honour as had John Landy, Herb Elliott, and Lew Hoad who had brought glory to Australia. As Skilton, the dual Brownlow medallist, donned his green and gold Galahs guernsey, tears welled in his eyes, moved by the opportunity of representing Australia.

#### Versus Meath

As the Meath team marched onto the arena in regimental style the Australians reassuringly noticed the non-athletic appearance of many of their opponents. To the Australians the Meath players looked small and relatively undersized for the serious game of football. Others were plainly overweight. In the crowd Beitzel stationed an American style cheer squad dressed in bright green slouch hats complete with plumes in the Australians green and gold colours. Beitzel had also armed them with green and gold streamers, a kangaroo mascot and strangely, an antique hunting horn.

The first ten minutes of the game went exactly as the many sceptical locals had predicted. Meath maintained possession of the ball and moved the ball around without giving their opponents a sniff. They had scored within the opening twenty seconds and continued peppering away at the goals. A series of three dramatic saves and down field dashes by Graeme Chalmers saved further Meath scores. Slowly the game turned in favour of the Galahs as their nerves settled. The vigour of the Australians worried the Irish and their over-confidence had left them mentally unprepared for a close contest. As the game continued the Australians confidence grew. What they lacked in natural skill they made up for with greater fitness and athleticism. The high marking and long kicking of the Galahs impressed the crowd. Hart pulled down two big marks in the first half and scored each time.

At the end of the game the score was 25-13 in favour of the Galahs, a result that the Melbourne press gloated over. Barassi had expected to do well but not to beat their champion team in their backyard. The Irish were aghast, but they were also enthralled by the Galahs style of play. The Galahs were credited with 39 'near misses' at goal. The excessive rate of near misses resulted from the Australians unfamiliarity with the round ball. The Irish estimated that had many of the near misses been converted then a record high-score would have been possible.

The change in the tactics had brought the Galahs victory. Gaelic football had not witnessed the style of football played by the Australians previously and the Meath team had been unable to match the Australians far greater fitness. At an official reception after the game Seamus Riain of the GAA consoled the Meath team by telling them they had 'played the game as they know it and went under to a team which played as you don't know it. We will have to put on our thinking caps.'<sup>9</sup>

At the Galahs celebration a delighted Beitzel belted out Tom Jones 'Green Green Grass of Home'. Already though he was angling for another crack at the Irish. Beitzel was eager for another match between his Galahs and a local team as this would remove any doubt that the Aussies had fluked the win over Meath. More importantly though, Beitzel was keen for another game as despite a large crowd being present at the game gate takings were far below expectations. Time was short as an exhibition game of Australian Rules had been arranged in England for the coming Tuesday and another Gaelic match had been arranged for the next Sunday in New York on the return leg of the trip.

Following the victory the tourists became the toast of Dublin. Whereas before their victory the Galahs were treated sceptically they now found themselves being feted by the public and press. On the streets of Dublin the Galahs were conspicuous in their slouch hats and blazers. The press lauded their abilities and used their victory to criticise the complacency of the GAA administrators. Their exciting style of play and professional approach to their sport had captured the imagination of the Irish.

### **London Exhibition Match**

Soon the Australians were on a plane back to London for a rain-soaked exhibition game of Australian Rules. Under lights at Crystal Palace on Tuesday 31 October an Australian representative team took on a British team. 'Britain' consisted largely of expatriates but was bolstered by the inclusion of several Galahs. Australia defeated Britain 101 points to 75 in front of a thousand spectators. Unsurprisingly the British ring-ins stood out. Jesaulenko

scored five goals while Hart scored five for Australia.

The GAA hastily arranged a game between Mayo, at that time ranked second to Meath, and the Galahs. As the Aussies were due in New York on the following Sunday the match was arranged for the coming Saturday. The eagerness of the Irish for a return match can be gauged by the fact that this was the first Gaelic match of any importance played on a Saturday. Most organised sport in Ireland at that time was played on Sundays.

Almost 25 000 attended the game between Mayo and Australia. Unfortunately the Irish crowd again went away disappointed to see their team lose but enthusiastic about the type of football they had witnessed. Mayo led for most of the first half but relinquished that just before the half-time whistle. The Australians continued to improve after half time and restricted Mayo to just two points. The final score, Australia 2-12 (18) to 2-5 (11), did not fully reflect their dominance. Once again the Australians greater fitness and adventurous style of play delivered victory.

Celebrations were short as the Galahs dashed to meet a specially arranged flight to New York. Beitzel was keen on the New York leg as he saw the game as an opportunity to recoup some of his investment in the Galahs tour. While much interest in the Galahs had been stirred up during their time in Ireland this had not translated to a financial return. The New York game, a 'gate money game', promised to provide some financial relief.

The hurried arrangements for the game meant that Beitzel and the Galahs were largely unprepared for what awaited them in New York. The New York Irish were certainly prepared as news had made it across the Atlantic of the Australian triumphs over Ireland's best.

The Australians arrived in New York after midnight on the day when they were to play the New York Irish. When the travel-weary Australians first arrived at New York's Gaelic Park for their game against the local Irish a somewhat bloody-thirsty game of hurling was taking place.

### **A Violent Match in New York**

Gaelic Park was not large by VFL standards and the 9000 spectators almost filled it to capacity. Located in New York's famously tough Bronx district in an area central to the local Irish expatriate community, Gaelic Park was a run-down, shabby stadium, that had certainly seen better days. The playing surface lacked a decent covering of grass — broken glass glistened on many of the brown patches.

As the Australians assembled for the playing of national anthems some could be heard muttering about the disgraceful state of the ground. The Australians also noted that their opponents appeared physically bigger than the teams they had played in Ireland.

As the Australians own uniform was primarily green the New York Irish were prevented from choosing the same coloured jerseys, a choice that may have been the most natural. Instead the Irish ended up in *orange* jerseys, an unusual choice considering the vociferous republican tendencies of the Irish team.<sup>10</sup>

Not surprisingly the Australians started the game slowly. When the game started they had not been in the country more than twelve hours, and just 24 hours before they had played probably the most competitive match of their tour. Despite their tiring schedule leading up to this game they managed to hold the lead briefly in the opening moments. Then

the New Yorkers slipped away. Before long the game was showing signs of deteriorating into a running brawl. Players grappled with opponents in bear hugs and head-locks and blows were freely exchanged. At half time the scores showed 11-5 in the New Yorker's favour. In the rooms Barassi attempted to fire up his jet lagged players. After half time the team attempted to throw the New York Irish off the game. The Australians attacked with a lot more determination and what, in VFL terms is known as 'physical pressure'.

The second half had not been under way a long time before the Australians attempts at physical pressure caused the Irish to retaliate. Hassa Mann of the Melbourne Football Club had his jaw broken in three places when he was king hit behind the play. That incident started a brawl involving most players. No sooner had play restarted when Barassi's nose was broken by Brendan Tumulty, a brawny New York policeman, and again it was on. Along the sidelines players freely exchanged blows as the game was forgotten. The Australians came off second best in the brawls and on the scoreboard. They were unable to add to their half-time score and New York won comfortably.

The wounded Galahs winged their way home via California where they exhibited their kicking skills at a couple of local high schools. Following a short stop-over in Hawaii most of the squad arrived back in Melbourne on Sunday 12 November to an impressive welcome. Even the Melbourne Irish Pipe Band turned out for the occasion. Beitzel announced that the 'tour had paid big dividends' — despite a personal loss of more than \$10 000.

#### **Further Tours**

Beitzel was encouraged enough by the venture to promote further tours. The following March Meath travelled to a drought-stricken Australia for a series of games. The feature match of the tour was a St Patrick's Day re-match with the Galahs at Princes Park in Melbourne. The men from Meath emerged from the tour unbeaten and relieved to have rescued Ireland's footballing reputation. Another Galahs team toured Ireland in late 1968. The tours then lapsed until 1978 when Beitzel organised a third Galahs tour of Ireland. In the 1980s a series of official exchange tours by junior and senior national teams took place. However, despite the hype and promotional efforts, Australian crowds and football administrators never embraced the concept with any great passion. In recent years though interest in representative exchanges and recruitment of Gaelic players has re-emerged. The Australian Football League has recognised the promotional benefits that the international exchanges offer. Contact with Gaelic football provides a rare opportunity for Australian Rules players to represent their country.

Since the first Galahs tour officials from both codes had considered recruiting players from the other code. Barry Davis, the Essendon defender, won selection in a Gaelic all-star team after his performances with the Galahs. At the height of Meath's Australian tour the Melbourne football club toyed with the idea of recruiting Pat 'Red' Collier. Nothing came of these suggestions until Melbourne, at the behest of Barassi, organised an expensive recruitment program of young Irish Gaelic footballers in early 1984. The doubting Australian public was forced to eat their words when a couple of the recruits developed into champions. Sean Wight, the first player brought back by Melbourne went on to play over a hundred games, in an injury-affected career. The greatest success story was Jim Styne who won the 1991 Brownlow Medal and later set a VFL/AFL record for consecutive number of games played.

**Notes:**

- 1 Interview with Harry Bietzel, 5 July 1996.
- 2 Sun, 6 Oct. 1967.
- 3 Barrot, Barassi and Hart were named among the five footballers of the year in the 1968 Footy Annual, ed. by John Dunn and Jim Main, Lansdowne Press, Melbourne, 1968.
- 4 Nicholas Mason, Football! Hicks Smith & Sons, Great Britain, 1974.
- 5 Sun, 23 Oct. 1967.
- 6 Football Life, Mar. 1968
- 7 Jim Stynes, Whatever it Takes, Celebrity Publishing, Melbourne, 1995, p. 25.
- 8 Stynes, Whatever it Takes, p. 25.
- 9 Herald, 30 Oct. 1967.
- 10 New York Times, 6 Nov. 1967.