

HAVE THEY RUINED OUR GAME?

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There is much talk these days about the spoiling of sport. In the southern states the complaints are usually directed at the Australian Football League (AFL), while along the eastern seaboard the National Rugby League (NRL) is the favourite target of the critics. In Australian rules, criticisms have recently intensified with the debacle of the first year of the AFL's new stadium at Docklands. One of the most recent examples of the low regard in which football is held was a radio talk programme which devoted an hour to the subject of the decline of sport.¹ Most of the discussion was about football, Australian rules or rugby league, and all but one of the many contributors asserted that sport was being ruined by an unholy alliance of greedy administrators, pervasive sponsors and the commercial media.

There is no doubt that there have been big changes in football over the last twenty years or so. The elite level of the game thrived pretty well unchanged for the first seventy or so years of its life. Victoria was begrudgingly accepted as the epicentre of the national game with a strong gravitational pull on players from the other states. The competitions were organised around a dozen or so suburban grounds that were home to clubs that proudly fielded teams mostly of local boys or recruits from the country zones. In summer, the grounds were used for cricket.

Paralleling national political and economic trends, a new direction was taken in the early 1980s when falling attendances and rising costs resulted in several dramatic events. In 1982 one of the League's foundation clubs, South Melbourne, broke and losing, was forced to relocate to Sydney, marking the genesis of a national competition. Before the decade had closed two more clubs had been created by the then Victorian Football League (VFL), the Brisbane Bears in 1986 and the West Coast Eagles in 1987.² In 1984 the administration of the competition was removed from the collective control of the club presidents and entrusted to an arm's-length Commission. That change marked the beginning, I argue, of the game being run as a branch of the sport entertainment industry.

Clubs were also being prised from their traditional homes. Although three clubs had moved their home games to larger grounds in the nineteen 1960s and 1970s the process of ground rationalisation was accelerated through the 1980s and 1990s to a point where by 1996, only four grounds in Melbourne and one in Geelong were being used for games. By 2000 another one had gone.³ Not only were games being played at large and neutral grounds, but they were being spread over more days in the week. The traditional Saturday afternoon at the footy was giving way to Friday night, Sunday and later all nights of the week. If footy in Victoria was contracting geographically it was voraciously eating its way into our time. The trend

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reached unprecedented levels when in 1999 a somewhat ridiculous game was played between Collingwood and Carlton on New Year's Eve.

The game it seemed was also in danger of being taken over by a new breed of president. Although prominent local businessmen had always served on the committees of football clubs, 1980s entrepreneurs, the so-called 'white shoe brigade', saw an opportunity to make money or achieve status by running or even owning their own football clubs. Some such as Edelsten, Willessee, Pellerman, Skase and Cronin saw business opportunities in Sydney and Brisbane. Some such as Bond and Fox saw themselves as white knights riding in to save beleaguered clubs like Richmond and St. Kilda. And some such as Elliott were probably just wealthier and more hubristic versions of the traditional football club president. One or two of the newcomers had slender playing connections with the game such as Fox (St. Kilda), Elliott (Carlton) and Willessee (South Melbourne).

Inevitably the law began to intrude into the game during the 1980s. Two of the most notorious cases were the Silvio Foschini restraint of trade action against South Melbourne in 1982 when the mercurial player wanted to cross to St. Kilda, and the police case against Leigh Matthews for an assault on Neville Bruns in a spiteful game between Hawthorn and Geelong in 1985.

The VFL Commission, politically strengthened by its new independence from the clubs, instituted several reforms in the mid-1980s designed to make the competition more even. The principal policy instruments were the salary cap, which imposed a limit on the total amount a club could spend on player payments, and the national draft which gave lower clubs priority access to a pool of recruits. Over the next ten years the zone system was gradually reduced until the draft, combined with a regulated system of player trades, became the sole mechanism of recruitment. These policies, designed to introduce order and equity into the 'industry', have been stridently denounced as socialism by the likes of John Elliott whose desire for 'free agency' would produce precisely the lop-sided outcomes the League is seeking to avoid. In the final year of the decade the VFL changed its name to the AFL in recognition of the expansion of the competition outside Victoria.

The game, then, in many important respects is undoubtedly very different now compared with the decades prior to the 1980s. But is it worse? What are the barrackers actually talking about when they complain of the ruination of footy? This would be a pretty fair sort of a list:

- > long cherished clubs disappearing or relocating to other states;
- > the abandonment of suburban grounds;
- > club colours, designs and other icons of the game changing;
- > the alteration of club names to disassociate them from the localities of their birth;
- > frequent and widespread migration of players and coaches from one team to another;
- > the intrusion of business interests and the commercialisation of many aspects of the game:

- the substitution of the running game for the old style man-on-man approach and a hypersensitivity to physical clashes;
- a lop-sided draw and the obliteration of traditional inter-state rivalries.

There is truth in all these complaints, and the underlying concern is undoubtedly that the game is being spoiled and removed from the reach and influence of ordinary people, those who infuse passion into the game. To what extent does the perception measure up to the facts? Let us look at the complaints in turn.

Firstly, the disappearing clubs. In the 105 year history of VFL/AFL football two clubs have disappeared from the competition. At the end of the first world war University removed itself from the League because of its creeping professionalism and joined the new amateur competition. That created very little fuss. In contrast, the case of Fitzroy was extremely acrimonious. In 1996 the 113 year old foundation member of the VFL/AFL was forced out of the AFL because of financial difficulties and the desire of the AFL to allocate a license to Port Adelaide. Eight Fitzroy players joined the list of the Brisbane Bears, which changed its name to the Brisbane Lions and its guernsey to one resembling that of Fitzroy. Some of Fitzroy's historical artefacts were relocated to Brisbane and some Fitzroy members joined the new club although most did not preferring instead to transfer their allegiance to other Melbourne-based AFL clubs, the Coburg-Fitzroy Lions in the VFL or fall away from football altogether. Fitzroy had won eight premierships since 1897, the last in 1944.⁴ When South Melbourne moved to Sydney in 1982 facing similar problems to that of Fitzroy, the club was partially lost to its Melbourne supporters but many stuck with the red and white, attending games when the Swans played in Melbourne and watching the rest on television. Although the total number of disappearances of clubs from Melbourne has been remarkably small the two fraught instances have happened within the last twenty years and in that period several other clubs have been under serious threat.⁵ However, for the most part, the history of the VFL/AFL has been characterised by remarkable stability in terms of the durability of clubs.

Many people feel that the game has been wrenched away from them as the league has abandoned most of the traditional suburban grounds. Over a period of about twenty years Victoria has moved from playing games at eleven grounds in Melbourne and one in Geelong to three in Melbourne and one in Geelong. Only two of these four venues are the actual homes of footy clubs (Optus Oval for Carlton and Shell Stadium for Geelong). A distinction is now drawn between *training venues* and *home grounds*. All the Victorian clubs still train and operate at their traditional home grounds. Only one home ground has been lost to the game, the Brunswick Street Oval where Fitzroy played until 1966 and trained until they folded in 1996. In other states, new playing grounds have been brought into the game: Football Park (Adelaide Crows and Port Adelaide), Subiaco (West Coast Eagles and Fremantle), the Sydney Cricket Ground (Sydney Swans) and the Gabba (Brisbane Lions).

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The non-Victorian clubs also have their own training venues such as South Fremantle Oval for Fremantle and the Alberton Oval for Port Adelaide. The net result has been that, although clubs still have their old homes, games are now played on far fewer grounds located further from where people live. However, that does not appear to have deterred the barrackers. The game seems to be attracting larger crowds at fewer venues not to mention increased television audiences.⁶

Apart from the vibrant colours of the new entrants to the competition, some Victorian clubs have altered their playing strips. Some have adopted different guernseys for home and away games such as St. Kilda, Geelong, North Melbourne and even conservative Collingwood, which now plays in a subtly different away guernsey. Some other clubs have made slight alterations to their traditional strip such as Richmond and Essendon which both widened their sashes and, in the case of Richmond, removed it altogether from the back of their guernsey so that new yellow numbers would stand out more. In 1975 Melbourne changed its navy blue to royal blue to avoid confusion with Essendon and Carlton on colour television but reverted to the traditional navy blue and red in 1987 vowing never to abandon their traditions again. Footscray introduced a stylised bulldog to the front of their guernsey when in 1997 they adopted the playing name of the Western Bulldogs. Carlton wore a light blue guernsey for one game in 1990s as a sponsorship gimmick but attracted so much derision that they have never tried the stunt again. Cash strapped North Melbourne did the same thing with an orange guernsey in 2000. For the most part the colours and designs of the clubs have remained substantially unchanged, at least since the 1930s.

The North Melbourne and Footscray Football Clubs changed their 'trading names' in the late 1990s to the Kangaroos and the Western Bulldogs respectively to get away from the idea that they were confined to the old suburbs which spawned them and to appeal to a wider supporter base. North had its eye on other states, especially New South Wales, and Footscray wanted to associate itself more broadly with the western suburbs of Melbourne. Although many people were initially suspicious of Footscray's name change in particular (rumours circulated that it presaged a move to the western suburbs of Sydney) the uncoupling of *the club* from *the place* seems to have been accepted by most supporters after a relatively short period of time. After all, the change is merely a reflection of a wider societal trend in which few of us these days live *for* the suburb in which we reside. Moreover, successive waves of migration, especially from Asian countries, have resulted in the many of the old suburbs being populated by people who have little interest in the game.

Perhaps the greatest stress on the loyalty of late the twentieth century footy barracker has been the indiscriminate migration of players and coaches between clubs. At the end of every season now there is a reshuffle of coaches and players between clubs while many others exit the game altogether. At the end of the 1999 season six clubs employed new coaches and there were innumerable players sacked or traded. Between seasons

2000 and 2001 the average turnover rate for the sixteen clubs was 22 per cent.⁷ St. Kilda, Collingwood and West Coast each let go fifteen players. Occasionally the ego and ambition of a top player will drive him to seek a home at a club that promises to win a flag. A recent example of the clash of individual ambition and club interest was at the end of 1998 when Richmond's Wayne Campbell made no secret of his desire to leave the struggling and erratic Tigers. It was made clear to Campbell that he was a required player and he stayed on to play under his sixth coach at Tigerland.⁸ Disloyalty had its own rewards. At the end of the 2000 season the admirable Matthew Knights was sacked as captain and replaced by Campbell.

The migration of players and coaches from one team to another has been a part of the game from the beginning but has increased over the last twenty years as salary caps, collective bargaining agreements, player drafts and smaller player lists have made it necessary for clubs to run very lean with precisely the right mix of players. The trend took an upward turn in 1965 when Melbourne's favourite son, Ronald Dale Barassi, defected from the reigning premier to the ascendant Carlton lead by President George Harris. Curiously the more flagrant defections still have the capacity to outrage as shown by the move of Geelong's captain Leigh Colbert to the Kangaroos in 2000, but on the whole supporters remain loyal to their team and quickly adopt the newcomers to the family.

Football and business have always been bedfellows – local wealth and the popularity of footy have had a longstanding symbiotic relationship. The patronage of the notorious John Wren on the Collingwood Football Club in the 1930s is legendary, and the political and financial power of Archie Crofts, local councillor and owner of a grocery store chain, greatly assisted South Melbourne to their third and last flag in 1933.⁹ Yet, burgeoning television coverage and corporations' desire to capture attention catapulted the relationship between boot and loot to stratospheric heights by the millennium. Even treasured place names such as Princes Park and Kardinia Park have surrendered to the crassness of 'Optus Oval' and 'Shell Stadium'. The cancer plumbed the depths of desperation when in 1999 Geelong's champion Garry Hocking changed his name by deed poll for one week to 'Whiskas' in return for money from a pet food company into the empty pockets of the Cats.¹⁰

There has been significant and controversial change on the field too. The game itself is played differently from the way it was played for 100 years and many people do not like it. The evenness of the competition has forced coaches to find new ways of defeating opponents. Techniques of running in waves, low risk passing, flooding the back half and rotation of players off the bench have produced a game with fewer man-on-man contests and less of the spectacular long kicking and high marking that thrilled the barrackers of yesteryear. The need to sanitise the game in the face of competition from other codes has removed much violence from the sport. I personally now find the game more attractive than ever before. I enjoy the fluid unforgiving flow of the modern running game, which rewards skill, good decision-making, speed, endurance, hardness at the ball and team work.¹¹

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Now that there are sixteen teams in a nation-wide competition the AFL has not been able to design a fixture in which all teams encounter each other an equal number of times in a season, a problem which seriously compromises the integrity of the competition.¹² Moreover, in an effort to maximise attendances and viewing audiences the AFL contrives the fixture to create 'block buster' games on certain 'high' weekends. Either the number of teams must be reduced or the season extended if the draw is to be made fair. The League had its fingers badly burned in the past by conspiring to remove particular clubs so, unless a weak club or two goes to the wall like Fitzroy in 1996, an extension of the season, probably by using some of the time currently used by the pre-season competition, seems to be the only way of redressing the situation. The expansion of the competition into the other states has also robbed the once very popular inter-state games of nearly all their meaning to the point where the state-of origin matches were suspended in 2000.

The big changes in the game have been a corollary of the irresistible march of three major forces: the expansion of the media which was accelerated by the introduction of colour television in 1975 and is about to expand again with the introduction of new digital media; the preparedness of business enterprises to spend large amounts of money on sponsorship advertising; and the gradual rise of expectations and standards among both barrackers (the consumers) and the clubs (the suppliers) facilitated by modern transport and communications. Concomitant with these trends has been a clear shift of power, wealth and influence away from the clubs towards the AFL as the owner and manager of the industry.

Has it all been for the better or for the worse? It no doubt depends on your point of view. If you value localism, loyalty and affordable footy and do not mind a bit of discomfort, it is a pretty sure bet that you will think the game has been ruined. On the other hand, if you enjoy elite sport and like a bit of comfort watching it, you will probably think the changes have been for the better, especially if you are fairly well off. On balance I think we are slightly better off now than we were twenty or thirty years ago. Valuable things have certainly been lost from the game but we now have an even competition, high performance standards, tactical innovation, greater opportunity for minority groups and very little violence; in fact most games are played in heart-warming spirit and it is a pleasure to be among the good will in the crowd. And for those who prefer their footy on a smaller scale at the local level there is the VFL, which now includes several teams from country Victoria. High standard football is also played in the VAFA and the major suburban leagues. Over 10,000 people attended the grand final of the Eastern League in 1999 between Vermont and East Burwood. Diversity characterises today's footy.

League footy has proven remarkably durable in the face of so much change. It is amazing that the loyalty of the barracker has stuck despite wholesale changes that, in some cases, have not even left the name of the club in tact let alone the player list. The loyalty is testimony to the democratic nature of the game and the strength of its tribal traditions. AFL administrators

need to be careful not to allow their business urges to get the better of them because they run the risk of killing the goose that laid the golden egg. Much of the egg cannot be unscrambled – it is hard to see the suburban grounds returning. But through sensible pricing and scheduling, the AFL can prevent further erosion of the egalitarian and inclusive nature of the game. It can also nurture its beautiful Australian character in the face of predatory American culture. If you want to see what the sport would be like without its history, traditions and tribalism, try going to an NRL game in Melbourne. It would be nothing short of social vandalism if footy ever required American style razzamatazz like men jumping out of aeroplanes, fireworks, dancing girls, acrobats, rock bands and disc jockeys to enliven a barren and boring game. Like an egg, the game is strong and resilient but when enough force is applied in certain places it will be crushed.

NOTES

1. *Night Life*, 774 ABC Radio, hosted by Tony Delroy, May 2000. The discussion was prompted by an article in *Inside Sport* magazine which called for legislation to limit the destructive effects of sports sponsorship.
2. More franchises were created when the Adelaide Crows were admitted to the competition in 1991, the Fremantle Dockers in 1995 and Port Adelaide Power in 1997. (The Port Adelaide F.C. (the Magpies) have had a long and honourable history in South Australia dating back to 1870.)
3. Richmond began playing its home games at the MCG in 1965; Fitzroy left the Brunswick Street Oval at the end of 1966; Hawthorn left Glenferrie Oval at the end of 1973; North Melbourne left Arden Street Oval at the end of 1983; Essendon left Windy Hill at the end of 1991; Melbourne left the MCG at the end of 1993; Footscray left the Western Oval at the end of 1996 and Collingwood left Victoria Park at the end of 1999. On the other hand, by year 2000, four venues had been added to the nationwide competition, one in each of Sydney, Brisbane, Adelaide and Perth.
4. For an excellent account of the demise of Fitzroy see Dyson Hore-Lacey, *Fitzroy*, Lion Publications, 2000.
5. St. Kilda from 1980 to 1990, Footscray in 1989, Richmond in 1990 and Melbourne and Hawthorn in 1996.
6. Attendances, allowing for the expanded competition from 12 to 16 teams, increased by 24 per cent over the twenty years from 1980 to 1999, from an average of 314,243 per team to 390,224 per team. That is an average annual increase of 1.2 per cent, but it is not clear whether the game is attracting more people or whether supporters are attending more often. Also, the strong crowd pulling power of teams like Adelaide and the West Coast Eagles might well be 'dragging up' the 1990s average figures.
7. Turnover rate is calculated by dividing the average of the arrivals and departures by the size of the list in the year before expressed as a percentage.
8. Interview with Wayne Campbell on *Talking Footy*, Channel 7, Monday 29th May 2000 and an article by Caroline Wilson, *The Age*, Friday 2nd June, 2000.

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9. M. Branagan and M. Lefevre, *Blood Stained Angels, The Rise and Fall of the Foreign Legion*, Melbourne: 1995.
10. \$70,000 went to the club, \$20,000 to Hocking and \$10,000 to a Geelong animal shelter.
11. For a good summary of the differences between the modern and the old game see Robert Walls, *The Age*, 23 June, 2000.
12. There are teams based in all states except Tasmania, the Northern Territory and the Australian Capital Territory. This is not the first era when all teams have not played each other an equal number of times. For many years in the 1900s when there were twelve teams in the competition, there were only eighteen home and away games.