

ABORIGINAL FOOTBALL, ADELAIDE OVAL: 1885 AND 2001

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It was a long time between lemons.¹

In May 1885 a number of Aborigines from the Point McLeay and Poonindie mission stations were visiting the city and, knowing that some were good footballers, the South Australian Cricket Association secretary, John Creswell, arranged two matches with them on Adelaide Oval on 29 May and 2 June. On the evening of the first match the entrepreneurial Creswell also organised the staging of a corroboree which according to some estimates attracted 20,000 spectators and was the biggest crowdpulling event staged on the Oval in the nineteenth century.²

On 13 October 2001 a second football match between between Indigenous Australians and a South Australian National Football League team containing more Indigenous players took place on Adelaide Oval. The game was played under the banner of a Centenary of Federation activity and was designed to recreate a match on the same ground 116 years earlier. It too was to be followed by a corroboree.

1885

Wanderers matches 29 May, 2 June

The city men were on both occasions styled the 'Wanderers' but the team selected was fairly strong. In the first match the majority of the men were from outside the major South Australian Football Association teams but their ranks included J. Hall, the South Adelaide captain, and E.T. Woods, Haldane and McKee from the Norwood club.³ The Aborigines were not represented by their best team as nine players were unavailable. Fifteen of their representatives were from Point McLeay and six from Poonindie. Harry Hewitt acted as captain and was an excellent player but his men were handicapped by playing barefooted on the lush grass. Their skill and general knowledge of football was attributed to the fact that at Point McLeay they played the game among themselves. Their lack of form was due to being heavily engaged in work and only able to devote two hours on a Saturday afternoon to the game. The money for the football was raised by subscription among the Aboriginal men themselves and they took considerable interest in the game as well as cricket in the summer.⁴

The first match was remarkable for the exhibition of little-marking⁵ shown by the Aborigines. Many times the ball was taken right down the ground in this manner without being touched by a Wanderer.⁶ Where they

failed was that they lacked discipline and had no idea of keeping their places.⁷ The *Register's* reporter 'Goalpost' noted that if successful in kicking a goal they were jubilant. Their supporters, who mustered in force, showed their appreciation of their comrade's abilities by urging them on to victory. If beaten, they showed good sporting behaviour in realising they had been outplayed, a comment which underlined the civilising propensity of sport for Aborigines.⁸ The remark needs to be set against a contrasting opinion offered by the *Advertiser* reporter who revealed there was disagreement with the result which gave the Wanderers a win by 5 goals 14 behinds to 4 goals 9 behinds.⁹

Notwithstanding the score, however, the 'blacks' are satisfied that the game was a draw, and in fact the majority of their opponents and the spectators are of the same opinion, despite the decision of the goal umpire that the ball was 'not touched' when the fourth goal was credited to the local men.¹⁰

As far as the Wanderers were concerned there was criticism of them playing too much to Hall, a player who it was felt had 'plenty of scope to distinguish himself in big Association matches, and gained no sympathy with the crowd by showing to advantage'. The best players were Alf Spender for his marking, running, kicking and heady play; Hewitt for his pace, kicking and leadership; while of the others Harry Hunter, Leonard Campbell, Sam Box, Archie Blackmore, Jimmy Close, Samuel Disher and Kartyeri were most prominent.

In the second match the Wanderers selected a stronger team with eight representatives – Kirkpatrick (Port Adelaide), Noble (Norwood), Poole (Adelaide) Osborne and Cook (South Adelaide) included in addition to Hall, Haldane and McKee – from the SAFA clubs while the Aboriginal team remained unchanged, four of their men playing in boots. After the ball was kicked off by the Wanderers, Hewitt immediately collared it, and rushing down the centre of the ground passed to Archie Blackmore, who kicked a goal within a minute's play. Overall, the Aborigines showed better form in the second match. While their little-marking was not as effective their position play was better, they were unselfish, and very fast. The Aborigines won 4 goals 9 behinds to the Wanderers 3 goals 7 behinds.¹¹

The best player for the Aboriginal team was Alf Spender who followed splendidly in the two games. In the latter part of the second match he moved into defence and was even better there than when on the ball. Hewitt again played brilliantly on the wing and his kicking was excellent. Of the others, Archie Blackmore, Box, Campbell, Hunter and Disher were the best. The Wanderers played fairly well and Hall's efforts in not attempting to dominate with his strength was appreciated by the spectators.¹²

Aboriginal Football, Adelaide Oval

Adelaide, 4 July¹³

As a follow up to the success of the Wanderers matches SACA secretary Creswell, alert to the attraction of novel amusements, proposed that a stronger Aboriginal team should play a series of football matches with better teams. Arrangements were eventually made so that a Point McLeay Aboriginal team would meet the Adelaide Football Club on Saturday 4 July. However, the day before Creswell received a telegram from Point McLeay superintendent Frederick Taplin stating that the Aborigines were still on the other side of Lake Alexandrina and would not reach Milang in time to catch the Saturday morning train to the city. At 6pm on Friday evening Creswell met Taplin with the result that a special steamer was chartered by a Mr A.H. Landseer who promised to deliver the Aborigines to Milang. The Aborigines reached Adelaide at 10am on Saturday.

The weather was good and there was a large attendance. On this occasion the Point McLeay Aborigines were able to field a strong team. Shortly after 3pm the visitors, who wore uniforms of white calico jerseys and trousers, started the ball towards the northern end against a strong wind. However, the Adelaide men stood firm and three goals were obtained by Darwent, R. Stephens and Monteith as well as seven behinds before the Aborigines began. Eventually the Point McLeay men got the ball forward and Hewitt kicked a goal shortly before half time. In the second half the Adelaide players secured several behinds but then the Aborigines notched three goals scored by Alf Spender, Hewitt and Frank Blackmore. Shortly before the end of the game Adelaide attacked and R. Stephens goaled as the final bell was ringing but the score was disallowed. The match thus ended in a draw in Adelaide's favour with 4 goals 14 behinds to 4 goals 6 behinds. The long kicking of the local men proved advantageous on a ground which was restricted to 160 yards in length. The visitors showed a lot of determination in the second half, and as in their previous contests with the Wanderers their little-marking was spectacular. Umpire P. Blackman officiated well in a fast game.

Combined Colleges, 6 and 7 July¹⁴

The Aborigines game two days later was against twenty players representing St. Peter's, Prince Alfred and Whinham Colleges.¹⁵ The game before a fair crowd for a Monday afternoon proved to be an exciting struggle and ended in favour of the boys, who scored 3 goals 11 behinds to their opponents 2 goals 11 behinds. The Point McLeay men showed better form than in previous games and the combined team was unable to take liberties with them.

Gwynne, who captained the College team, won the toss and kicked with the aid of a strong breeze to the northern goal. The first half saw the score tied at one goal apiece although the Colleges had more of the play with eight behinds to two. In the second half the Aborigines defended well and scored the first goal but the Colleges replied quickly with two more and then applied

their own defensive tactics to gain victory. The switch of Gwynne into the backlines and the Aborigines misfortune in hitting the post told against them. St. Peter's master Thomas Ainslie Caterer acted as umpire.

A return match between the two teams was played on the following day (Tuesday) and resulted in a draw in favour of the Aborigines 4 goals 16 behinds to 4 goals 6 behinds. The weather was fine but the attendance was poor despite being arranged to suit those whose lunch time allowed them to visit the Oval between 1 and 2pm. The game was very fast and the Aborigines tackling was vigorous. Alf Spender, Stephens, W. and H. Rankine were the goalkickers for the visitors while Warren, Cox, Griffiths and Joyce gained similar success for the Colleges. Mr Bushby was the field umpire.

As additional entertainment John Creswell arranged athletic sports by the Aborigines with prizes in the form of knives, pipes, spurs and a stockwhip. Alf Spender proved an outstanding athlete by winning all four events contested. In the 100 yards sprint he defeated Merrily and Dennis with the time of 11 seconds. In the 120 yard sprint he beat Merrily with Dennis and Willie Rankine who tied for third. The time for this event was 13 seconds. In the 170 yards hurdles Bonnin, a St. Peters boy, and Merrily led for most of the race but Merrily fell and Spender came with a rush at the finish to win by two yards. The final event was a 120 yard match race between Spender and H. Davison with Spender off an eight yard start. Although Davison got away quickly Spender won narrowly in 12 and a half seconds.

After the day ended Creswell visited the Coffee Palace where the Aborigines were staying. They had a busy time in the city. When their game against Adelaide ended on Saturday they presented entertainment in the City Mission Hall at night. On the Sunday they had a full religious day attending the Hindmarsh Square Congregational Church in the morning, Stow Church Sunday school in the afternoon, and the Pirie Street Methodist Church in the evening. On Monday and Tuesday evenings after the College matches they provided entertainment at the Young Men's Christian Association Hall. As well as singing several melodies, recitations were given by Frank Blackmore, M. Kropinyeri, H. Rankine, and W. Young, with dialogues given by Harry Hewitt, Harry Hunter, J. Harris and Leonard Campbell.

Superintendent Taplin and his party left for Point McLeay by train on Wednesday 8 July but in spite of the success of the football matches the team never played on the Oval again.

Results

29 May	Aborigines 4 goals 9 behinds lost Wanderers 5 goals 14 behinds
3 June	Aborigines 4 goals 9 behinds beat Wanderers 3 goals 7 behinds
4 July	Aborigines 4 goals 6 behinds drew Adelaide 4 goals 14 behinds
6 July	Aborigines 2 goals 11 behinds lost Colleges 3 goals 11 behinds
7 July	Aborigines 4 goals 16 behinds drew Colleges 4 goals 6 behinds

2001

SANFL, 13 October

Who needs a centre square? Did we miss the corridor? The game was played under modified rules. Downpours in the morning forced this. The most substantial modification was that a large central area covering the centre pitches (about 30 metres square) was covered by a large white tarpaulin, to prevent damage for a cricket match in four days time. That wouldn't be cricket! The centre area was effectively out of bounds. Other changes saw a shortened boundary at the southern end to accommodate a stage for bands and activities later in the day; teams to use 16 players on the field; and quarters to last twenty minutes. There was no time-on.

I watched some of the game from the South Australian Cricket Association Committee Lounge, gracing the 70-year-old but still comfy leather chairs in company with the Premier, an ex-Lord Mayor, a City Councillor, a former City Councillor and no other VIPs that I could determine. We wondered what would happen when the ball went on to the tarpaulin. Would the umpire tip-toe on to the area to retrieve it? How quaint that would be. Would a kick be given to the other side?

Someone said the idea of black and white Australians not being able to play on a white square sounded as though there was a matter of reconciliation, which needed to be fixed. Another offer was that the players would have to 'think outside the square'. One lady said she thought the idea of the centre bounce being taken off centre was 'naughty'. Why naughty? However, she then quickly proceeded to change the topic to start up a fresh conversation about sex.

Unable to cast off my sports historian's cap, I recalled the occasion when the recently departed Port Adelaide coach Fos Williams had his players sew white patches on their black shorts back in the 1960s and it was never discovered why. It has left some sort of Zen moment of wondering ever since. I think some fellow guests started to wonder about me. Nevertheless, was it a possible example of Fos' prescience?

Back to the game and it turned out the corridor didn't matter a damn. The ball didn't go on the hallowed sheet once, although it was kicked over it a few times. Despite the fact that the game was played in a blustery south-westerly wind and conditions favoured 'flooding' it was surprisingly open football. Even more surprisingly players avoided the eastern side of the ground and concentrated on play down the more protected western wing.

Marking and athletic skills were of a high order. Players passed accurately and positioned the ball superbly for attacks on goal. There was a complete absence of malice for who wants to be injured in a social match played a fortnight after the AFL grand final and six days following the SANFL final? The Indigenous team stormed home to win a thrilling encounter by three points 11.5 to 11.2 in a brilliant display of goalkicking in difficult conditions. Less was definitely more.

REFERENCES

1. Lemons used to be the thirst quenchers in quarter time breaks during league football in the era up to the Second World War. The breaks were often known as 'lemon time'.
2. B. Whimpress, *Corroboree: Adelaide Oval 1885*, Adelaide, 2000.
3. *South Australian Register*, 6 June 1885
4. *Register*, 30 May 1885
5. Little marking was a method of touching the ball to the toe of the boot and marking it while running, and was a method of keeping control of the ball as an alternative to bouncing it. A remnant of the little mark is retained in the game when a full-back kicks the ball to himself when playing on from the kick-off. It is commonly used in Gaelic football and skillful exponents can perform it at speed.
6. *Register*, 6 June 1885
7. Position play has been considered of great importance at various times in Australian football history although the concept of total football pioneered in the 1970s has meant that this has now been set aside.
8. *Register*, 30 May 1885
9. Behinds were recorded but did not count in the score until 1897. As a result drawn games were common.
10. *Advertiser*, 30 May 1885
11. *Register*, 3 June 1885
12. *Register*, 6 June 1885
13. *Adelaide Observer*, 11 July 1885
14. *Observer*, 11 July 1885
15. The idea of the Point McLeay Aborigines playing the colleges recalled the cricket matches played between the Poonindie mission and St. Peters College in the 1870s. For further details of these games see B. Whimpress, *Passport to Nowhere: Aborigines in Australian Cricket 1850-1939*, 1999, pp. 58-63. Whinham College was a boys school located at the corner of Ward and Jeffcott Streets, North Adelaide. It is now the site of Luther Seminary.