

The Community Fights Back: The Resurrection of the Footscray Football Club

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Most Australian Rules Football clubs originated as community-based sports clubs in a strict geographical sense. All but one of the teams that formed Australia's major football league (the Victorian Football League) in 1897 represented suburbs of Melbourne. The traditional attachment of local communities to League clubs has been a declining feature of Australian Rules Football in recent decades, but the saga of the Footscray Football Club in 1989 dramatically demonstrated that the bond between a local community and a major league sports team was not obsolete.

The Footscray Football Club had been very successful in a rival Victorian football competition between the 1890s and 1924. Consequently, in 1925 it was admitted to the VFL as the only team in Melbourne's lowly, western suburbs. Footscray languished however after joining the League, winning one solitary premiership (championship) in 1954 and making the finals (play-offs) only twelve times in 65 years. During the past two decades its season-ticket sales have declined, its local football arena has not been adequately upgraded, and the threat of insolvency has accompanied growing indebtedness. Thus, as part of a rationalization program to facilitate the creation of a national football competition, the VFL in 1989 determined that Footscray would be merged with another League club.

The response of the Footscray community defied all expectations. Local supporters organised rallies at which thousands of fans voiced indignation against uncaring administrators who were consigning **their** club to oblivion. Enthusiastic fund-raising efforts saw the modest financial contributions of working-class supporters swelled by those of local businesses, and the Footscray City Council committed the necessary expenditure to improving the facilities at the Footscray football ground. As a direct result, the VFL capitulated and agreed that the merger would be called off.

What saved the Footscray Football Club from extinction was the realization that it was vital to a sense of community in Melbourne's western suburbs. The salvation of the club became a social issue rather than merely a sporting one. The football team was seen as providing role models for youth in a depressed social and economic environment, as well as being a source of pride, identification and bonding for local residents. In addition, a revolt against the increasing commercialization of sports generated support from fans of other football clubs and from the media.