

# NINETEENTH CENTURY FOOTBALL AND THE MELBOURNE PRESS

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### I

In the second half of the nineteenth century, Australian football in Melbourne developed into a fully codified spectator and participant sport of massive proportions. At the same time, the print media enjoyed enormous increases in circulation and readership. How were the two phenomena linked? By examining the various sectors of the print media and how they reported on football, we gain insights into the role played by football in increasing circulation; by scrutinizing a number of issues that were central to the development of the game, we gain an appreciation of the role that the print media played in determining the structure of this unique game.

### II

Media coverage of football in nineteenth century Melbourne and Geelong was generally confined to three sections of the press: metropolitan papers (from about 1860); local or suburban papers (from about 1870); and the specialist sporting press (generally from the early 1880's). However, it was an early specialist sporting papers, *Bell's Life in Victoria*<sup>1</sup> that was the first (1858) to consistently report on matches. By 1861 *Bell's* weekly reports consisted of results, news, fixtures and composition of teams, thus establishing a format that is still found in the print media. Reports of matches were also appearing spasmodically in the *Age*, *Geelong Advertiser* and *Argus*. In addition, papers of a specialist (non-sporting) nature sometimes carried reports about football, but related them to their special field e.g. in 1863, the *Yeoman & Australian Acclimatiser* reported on the care and maintenance of the playing area and surrounds at Melbourne, including the information that the soil was enriched by burying in it all the dogs shot by Richmond police.

The incorporation of *Bell's* into the weekly *Australasian* in 1868 meant that the major metropolitan papers were now the principal vehicles of information about football, at the same time as they were locked in a battle for circulation supremacy, centred on the *Age* (which also published the *Leader*) and the *Argus* (which published the *Australasian*).

Whilst the turf remained the major sporting topic, the advent of the Challenge Cup matches in the mid-1860s resulted in most papers devoting more column space to football, and less to aquatics, pedestrianism, wrestling, pigeon-shooting, bowling, angling, coursing and cycling. Over the course of a season, football reports would comprise details of Annual General Meetings, prospects of each club, new personnel, rule changes, fixtures, team selections, detailed match reports, school football, provincial and interstate results, contentious issues, letters to the editor, and conclude with a summary of the season. The sporting columns were also used for clubs to issue challenges to each, other as no formal structure existed for the arrangement of fixtures.

Who read these early columns? They were probably young men of "good" family, employed in banks or commerce, well-educated (possibly in Britain), and necessarily highly literate, as the reports were difficult to read. There was no attempt at layout, information was presented in lengthy paragraphs of closely-written text, and many reports contained classical literary allusions and extracts from poems. Writers in the *Australasian* were particularly fond of this style and continued with its use into the 1890s, e.g. Markwell, in the *Australasian*, drew parallels between Carlton's inexplicable loss of form in 1888 with the death of Julius Caesar, and included an extract from Mark Anthony's speech in the Shakespeare play.

Of the writers themselves, not a great deal is known. They invariably used pseudonyms such as "Fairplay", "Rover", and "Observer" and it seems certain that they were ex-players. They extolled the manly, character-building virtues of the game, and apparently viewed their mission via their columns as one of improvement of moral standards, rather than merely providing information about sporting contests.

The metropolitan press also played an important role as a forum for the airing of numerous grievances and disputes in the years prior to the formation of the Victorian Football Association in 1877. Typical was that which raged in the *Australasian* through 1870 and which centred on the on-field behaviour of one of the founders of the game, H.C.A. Harrison who was accused of injuring a young Albert Park player by knocking him down and jumping on him. His final retort was that "football is essentially a rough game all the world over, and...not suitable for men poodles and milksops."<sup>2</sup>

By the mid-1870s, football was also growing steadily as a participator sport at junior and local level. Every populated area of Melbourne and its suburbs had one or more teams in regular competition, as did provincial centres. Teams were formed in schools, churches, lodges, hotels, at workplaces, and at cricket and social clubs.

For details about a local team, the football supporter of last century usually turned to the suburban newspaper. Many such newspapers had been set up during the 1860s and early 1870s and most perceived their role as similar to that stated by the *Richmond Guardian* i.e. "devoted to the fearless advocacy of local interests and to the advancement of the district."<sup>3</sup> They soon saw the benefit in reporting on local sport, and by the early 1870s, those in Richmond, South Melbourne, North Melbourne and Fitzroy were regularly devoting columns of about 750 words to local football activities.<sup>4</sup> Over the period of a season, a typical suburban paper would publish fixtures of a number of prominent junior clubs, weekly team listings, meeting-places for practice and home games, travel arrangements for away games, details of venues, and match reports. Whilst not all local players would purchase a paper, they would be passed around in hotels and other meeting places, or the match and team details would be posted in local shop windows. Local businesses, particularly hotels, that supported junior clubs were often "patrons"), and social events organised by junior clubs also received coverage.<sup>5</sup> A football "gossip" column was common, which referred to local players by nicknames and which alluded to romances, betting, feuds, etc. - presumably, such columns were fully comprehended by locals "in the know".

Football reports in the suburban press were generally parochial in nature, local biases were apparent, and the reports were used to encourage competition for trophies that existed in most districts. The season's coverage would usually commence with reports of Annual General Meetings of local clubs, at which gratitude to the local press for their support was usually expressed e.g. the sixth A.G.M. of the Brighton F.C. thanked the *Brighton Southern Cross* for "gratuitously inserting notices of matches"<sup>6</sup> However, as most local papers were also in the business of printing handbills, letterheads, posters and pamphlets, the amount of coverage given to a junior club was often dependent on the club ordering all their printing from the paper, and advertising social events, meetings and important matches in its pages. The *Richmond Australian* complained bitterly in 1895 that it devoted over 40 columns per season to the activities of local clubs, requiring an immsense amount of writing, type-setting, proof-reading and printing, yet received printing jobs and advertising from only one junior club (which, not surprisingly, received excellent local coverage). The paper requested support from the clubs and promised them "good value for their patronage."<sup>7</sup>

Generally, the attitude of the suburban press towards their market was more pragmatic than that of their metropolitan counterparts: they concentrated mainly on local issues, council meetings, court reports, clubs and associations, volunteer fire brigades, etc. By 1882, there were 22 suburban papers, mostly printed and published locally by small firms (the largest number published by any one firm was four). Some were family concerns, with family members carrying out all functions from reporting to distribution. Most were about four to six pages, so the majority of items were necessarily brief; in addition, the literacy level of their market was probably below that of the metropolitan press, so reports were generally in "plainer" language. This usually meant that football reports were free of the flowery prose and military metaphors so prevalent in the metropolitan press.

The suburban press often played a critical role in gathering support for the establishment of a senior club in their district. Such a club meant thousands of people flocking regularly to the district, spending in local shops, with cab-drivers and in local

hotels. As many of the businesses that stood to benefit were frequent advertisers in local papers, the support of the local press for a senior club was not surprising. Typical of this process was the role of the *Collingwood Observer* in the formation of the Collingwood F.C. in 1892. It reported meetings of players, supporters, local businessmen and politicians, the improvements in Victoria Park, and supported deputations to the V.F.A. as early as 1889. But whilst beneficial to the district, the formation (or rise to prominence) of a senior club sometimes caused problems for the junior clubs, as some local papers then tended to report only on the actions of the seniors.<sup>8</sup> Other local papers mentioned the senior club only briefly, reasoning that the metropolitan press carried complete accounts of their matches and that their primary responsibility was to support (and provide a voice for) local junior teams.

As with the metropolitan press, there were differences of opinion between suburban papers as to how issues such as football were to be treated; overall, the development of the game at grass roots level, and the maintenance of local support, was aided significantly by the dissemination of information from local suburban newspapers.

The early 1880s saw the emergence of the third category of print media, the specialist sporting press. This was a period of enormous development in Melbourne and one by-product was a huge increase in crowds at sports events, particularly football. The new sporting press was directed primarily at the turf fraternity, but football featured prominently. Many reports were similar to those in the metropolitan press, but some of the papers realised that a new trend had emerged amongst the affluent supporters in that many now wanted to bet on the results of matches. They were hungry for information such as odds, expected winners and margins, profiles of star players capable of winning games single-handed, inside stories about internal affairs at clubs, etc. - in short, those facets of the game that the metropolitan press appear to have been reluctant to publish.

Most of these papers were published weekly, cost 3d or 6d, and consisted of four to six pages. Major stories were often preceded by a number of headlines, and the stories themselves were broken up

by line-drawings. Some papers only had a life-span of one to two years or even less whilst others were published by large concerns and lasted for well over a decade e.g. the *Sportsman*, which was published by the *Herald*. Some combined sports results with theatrical news and gossip, whilst others combined football reports with social and political comment. One of the most interesting papers of this genre was the *Free-Lance*, published in the mid-1890s and heralded as a "white paper for white people: with a creed of "popular franchise, pure justice, reconciliation of the sexes, education of the Upper House, etc." It interspersed political comment with sports news and was perhaps the first to feature political cartoons in a football context, with some of the cartoons being drawn by members of the Lindsay family.

It was in the pages of the specialist sports press that sensational headlines first emerged. The *Sporting Echo* asked the question "HAS VICTORIAN FOOTBALL DEGENERATED?" and concluded that it had, due to the twin evils of too much money in the game and poor umpiring standards'; the headlines in the *Sporting Wire* were regularly along the lines of "THE CARLTON CLUB-RUMOURS OF DISBANDING."<sup>10</sup> The sporting paper that probably had the greatest impact on the football world was the *Sporting Standard*. Whilst others of its ilk and the metropolitan press were vehemently opposed to betting on games, it introduced a weekly contest whereby it nominated three games and readers had to forecast their results. Entry was free, but was only on coupons from the *Standard*. It is not known by how much this competition improved circulation, but the prize of 10 guineas in 1891 was increased to £20 in 1892. Such contests gave rise to the phenomenon of the sports "tipster", whereby an "expert" would forecast the likely results of a range of matches.

The *Standard* was also heavily involved in developing the concept of leading players as "stars", combining potted biographies with accurate line-drawings (facilitated by development of printing technology). It also ran a competition to decide who was the best player in Victoria, to be decided by readers and with a £10 prize for the fortunate player. A logical extension of the "star" system was to use players to advertise goods such as footballs, suits and boots - all featured in its pages.

Overall, little is known of the specialist sporting press. We know that many of its innovations in football reporting have endured; we can assume that its content filled the requirements of large sections of football crowds of the day; and we know that similar publications emerged at around the same time in other states, the U.S.A., Britain and Europe. But, as elsewhere, "It remains a mystery... we know comparatively little about who owned it and who wrote for it. We do not know much more about who read it."<sup>11</sup>

### III

The growth of popularity of football in Melbourne has few parallels: by 1900, the city supported two major competitions and their matches attracted about 50,000 people each Saturday. At the same time, enormous increases in circulation and readership were made by all sections of the print media. For example the daily circulation of the *Age* had risen from 14,500 in 1860 to 50,000 in 1882 (at which time the *Age* claimed readership figures of 5 times that number). BY 1899 its circulation was 120,000. The *Herald* increased circulation from 20,000 in 1880 to 50,000 in 1900.<sup>12</sup> Sport in general, and football in particular, was obviously important to the sale of newspapers, but it should be viewed as only one of a number of factors that contributed to the phenomenon. Others included new methods of production of newsprint which reduced costs of papers significantly; the opening of electric telegraph between London and Australia in 1872; government education policies in the 1870s which increased literacy; and the reduction in working hours for some sectors of society.<sup>13</sup>

Thus, we can only guess at the degree to which reporting on football directly contributed to increased circulation, particularly in the metropolitan and suburban press. We are left with a number of unanswered questions. We don't know if differing styles and content in football reports caused some readers to choose one paper over another, and whether purchasers of a specialist sports paper also bought a daily paper (or vice versa). Nor do we have any way of knowing what effects changes to reporting methods had on circulation, such as the publishing of final scores in the *Saturday Herald*,

or the printing of senior teams on Friday morning. Also unknown is how much emphasis newspaper publishers placed on sports reports in seeking to improve their market share.

#### IV

However, in examining the role that the print media played in determining the structure of the game, we can be more certain about the nature of the relationship. A number of issues central to the conduct of the game serve as illustrations: codification and organisation, the role of umpires, behaviour of players and crowds, and the amateur/professional debate.

Many of the rules that were codified in football's nascent years were proposed by football writers in the metropolitan press. An early example concerns the changing of ends of teams, which in the early years occurred only after a goal was scored. "Fairplay" in the *Australasian* in 1869 proposed a fairer system - a half-time change of ends, regardless of the score. He again raised the issue in May 1870 (supported by reports from England on the success of the rule in Association matches). Later that season, the rule was used in a match between Albert Park and South Yarra (probably under an informal arrangement between the clubs) and it soon became adopted at all levels of the game. A delighted "Fairplay" reported that it was he who was responsible for bringing this innovation under the notice of the football world."<sup>14</sup> Other innovations that originated with him were goalposts "40 to 50 feet high", matches between metropolitan and provincial teams, and the proposal that teams of unequal strength should have different numbers of players.<sup>15</sup>

Writers from other metropolitan papers also contributed significantly to rule changes, but with the advent of the V.F.A. in 1877 and Intercolonial Football Conferences soon after, rule-making became solely the province of delegates. The role of the football writers then changed from that of innovators to that of lobbyists (particularly on behalf of the Victorian delegates at conferences).

The print media as a whole played a significant role in improving conditions and status of those who enforced the rules - the umpires. The Challenge Cup matches of the mid-1860s placed a far

greater emphasis on winning and meant that a more equitable method of adjudication was required. By 1866 it was apparent that a goal umpire at each end (one appointed by each club) was insufficient. The *Australasian* called for the appointment of a central umpire at important matches. By 1869, the field umpire was a common sight, but the problem of impartiality remained. Each club had at least one "gentleman" upon whose services they could call to act as umpire. However, as they were never convinced of the impartiality of their opponents' nominee, they would "toss" for umpires as well as ends. The solution proposed by Peter Pindar in the *Australasian* in 1879 was to have impartial umpires appointed by the V.F.A. (at least to big games) and to ensure their neutrality by paying them. Much to his chagrin, his proposal was ignored for years, during which many games were lost due to the vagaries of poor umpires. In 1882, he was still calling for "regular paid men...(to)...be appointed independently."<sup>16</sup> Finally, in 1884, umpires (both goal and field) were regularly appointed and paid.

The metropolitan press was also successful in reducing violence towards umpires. By the early 1890s, senior football had become increasingly brutal, with much abuse, both verbal and physical, being directed at umpires by crowds, officials and players. The problem was exacerbated by umpires having to share dressing rooms with players (often aggrieved members of the losing side) and having to reach these rooms without benefit of an enclosed race or a police escort. "Markwell", in the *Australasian*, campaigned on the issue for a number of years, until a violent attack on an umpire at North Melbourne led him to call for a ban on V.F.A. matches at that ground.<sup>17</sup> Largely due to his efforts, protection for umpires on and off the field was soon announced.

Similar support was not always forthcoming from the parochial suburban press. Complaints were common (usually following a local defeat) and local reporters would sometimes recommend that the local team refuse to play under the same umpire in future.<sup>18</sup> Nor was the specialist sporting press always kind towards umpires. The *Sporting Echo* (1889) cited umpires as a major cause of degeneration of the game. Generally, however, this sector gave credit where due and criticised an umpire's performance only if it was glaringly bad.<sup>19</sup> We can only wonder at the effect on umpire's performances

following the publication of their home addresses in the *Flag*.<sup>20</sup>

A major concern of the 19th century press was that of crowd behaviour, particularly that of "larrikins". During the 1860s, disruption of games was common due to crowd encroachment. From 1870, the Australasian and other metropolitan papers called for police control of grounds (on horseback, if necessary) and enclosing of grounds. The Richmond "larrikins" were repeatedly attacked by this sector of the press as being a "mob" that could not "behave like respectable people,"<sup>21</sup> as also were supporters from other working-class suburbs during the 1880s. Those from the "Borough" (Port Melbourne) received particularly harsh condemnation for hooting and howling at umpires, throwing sand in their faces and throwing boundary flags at opposition players. By 1892, "Markwell" had become so sickened by the actions of rougths and larrikins that he called for arrests and severe action by magistrates. However, he feared that "nothing short of hanging will eradicate the cowardly instincts of the barracker."<sup>22</sup>

Whilst the suburban newspapers also deplored poor crowd behaviour, they were reluctant to risk losing sales by apportioning blame to the locals. Nor were they about to risk possible printing jobs from the local senior team by intimating that they were unable to control their supporters. In 1886, the *North Melbourne Advertiser* noted that behaviour towards visiting South Melbourne players was "disgraceful in the extreme", but that it occurred as retaliation for brutal treatment of North players at South earlier that season.<sup>23</sup> Supporters from other districts were always "fair game", particularly those from Richmond, which in 1873 had been declared "unsafe to visit" by a reporter from North Melbourne.<sup>24</sup>

The specialist press, probably reluctant to attack the behaviour of regular readers, generally paid little attention to crowd behaviour: in fact, their pages provided an opportunity for expression of sentiments of those supporters that had long been under attack by the metropolitan press. Most notable was the *Bull-Ant* (later the *Ant*), which glorified the antics of larrikin supporters" in a column called "Barracker on the Job." The hero, Ginger Steve, regularly bet on matches, abused umpires, fought opposition supporters, and displayed contempt for a bumbling police force. His greatest scorn, however, was reserved for players from

the "straw boater" teams, such as Melbourne and St. Kilda. In his usual phonetic style, he described his method of barracking against the latter club as follows: "Well plade, Percy! Pass it on t' Bertie! Good shot, Adolphus! Mind your eye-glass, Horace, dear boy! Pla lite, Ruben, or yeh may be karried ome t'yer mar in a bucket. "<sup>25</sup>

It is ironic that the solution to the problem of crowd encroachment that was advocated by the metropolitan press in the 1870s, the fencing of arenas, was the first step in total enclosure of grounds, thus facilitating admission charges. The disbursement of large amounts of gate revenue was to be the most controversial issue in football last century, and was directly responsible for the breakaway of the clubs that formed the Victorian Football League in 1896.

It was the *Australasian*, in the early 1870s, that first proposed the idea of proceeds from one round of games being donated to hospitals. Although adopted, it was opposed by some clubs and its effectiveness was greatly reduced. By 1881, largely due to constant criticism of "greedy" clubs in the metropolitan press, the V.F.A. voted to distribute 5% of net proceeds of *all* matches to charity.

Over the two decades, 1880 to 1900, the metropolitan press waged war against all the elements of professionalism: player payments in the guise of prizes and expenses; housing subsidies; cushy jobs; betting on matches; the involvement of bookmakers in club affairs; and the amassing of bank balances by clubs. The accumulation of surplus resources, noted Peter Pindar in the *Australasian* in June 1880, will "reduce the game from a fair, manly recreation to a mere bidding for gate money", resulting in the attendant curses of bookmaking, betting and scheming. He was right. Bookies flourished at most games, but were particularly prevalent at the boom club of South Melbourne, where they tended to gather and shout their wagers in front of the press box! Fixtures were arranged to suit the financial interests of the established, powerful clubs. The metropolitan papers constantly raised the spectre of players "laying down" in order to secure better odds for their next match, and it was largely as a result of a number of editorials that the V.F.A., in May 1890, voted to ban delegates from

betting on matches in which their club was involved, and caused some clubs to ban bookies from the area in front of the grandstand.

The suburban press, meanwhile, generally adopted a pragmatic view of the issue and made little comment. The attitudes of the specialist sporting press towards professionalism ranged from that of the *Sporting Wire*, which gave the odds and "goals in" on each match, to that of the *Sporting Echo*, which attributed degeneration of the game to player payments. Others such as the *Sporting Standard* were ambivalent, deploring the disbursement of gate receipts to clubs on one hand whilst running a tipping competition with a 10 guinea prize on the other.

Underpinning the war against professionalism in football was a belief that sport and games should be played for sheer enjoyment, as a result of which participants would develop manliness, leadership skills, gracious acceptance of defeat, etc. In simplistic terms, it can be called the "Muscular Christian" ethic, and it was championed by the metropolitan press and sections of the suburban press. Many rule changes proposed by football writers can be directly attributed to this set of beliefs, e.g. when Fairplay Australasian, 1872) proposed that junior teams have more players than their senior opponents, he viewed it as "character-building" for the juniors, who obtained "more good...from playing with...betters than by playing with...equals or inferiors." A different view emerged in the specialist press, with the *SportsMan* discarding questions as to "whether or not we are forming our national character in a manner worthy of our great country" and concluded with the statement that "we like football".<sup>26</sup>

Despite the combined efforts of the metropolitan and suburban press and some club officials, the battle against professionalism was lost, although the debate raged until the 1920s and vestiges of it are still around today. What remained was the paradox of members of the capitalist press (concerned with economic profit) using the growing passion for football news to increase sales, whilst decrying the disbursement of gate proceeds to those providing the entertainment.

By 1900, the structure, form and organisation of senior football had largely been determined. Over the previous forty years, the print media had not only reported on the game, but had taken an active, innovative role in attempting to provide a better product for the consumer. The relationship between a fledgling sport in a booming colonial city and the various sectors of the print media had proven to be mutually beneficial. Without the efforts of the members of the press, it is doubtful whether the game would have evolved in such a distinctive manner, and without a football-mad population, we can question whether nearly as many newspapers would have been sold in nineteenth century Melbourne.

## NOTES:

1. *Bell's Life in Victoria* was modelled on a British counterpart; it featured sport, theatrical news, shipping and transport details, and appeared weekly from 3 January 1857.
2. *Australasian*, 30 July 1870.
3. Advertisement in *The Victorian Press Manual & Advertisers Handbook*. (Melbourne: 1882).
4. The *Fitzroy Observer* reported on football whilst its rival - the *Mercury* - regarded communications from football clubs as "partaking too much of the style of advertisements...(so)... we omit them" (*Fitzroy Mercury*, 22 April 1876).
5. Such reports sometimes filled two columns e.g. in 1895, the *Richmond Australian's* report of the half-yearly social held by the Waltham F.C. included descriptions of decorations, prominent guests, toasts, dances and concluded with a list of the gowns worn by the ladies.
6. *Brighton Southern Cross*, 20 March 1886.
7. *Richmond Australian*, 30 March 1895.
8. Examples were the *North Melbourne Advertiser* in 1891, *Footscray Chronicle* in 1892, *Williamstown Chronicle* in 1892 and *West Bourke*

- Times* in 1890.
9. *Sporting Echo*, 7 December 1889.
  10. *Sporting Wire*, 10 August 1889.
  11. T. Mason, *Association Football & English Society 1863-1915* (Sussex 1981), p.196.
  12. H. Mayer, *The Press in Australia* (Melbourne 1964), p.11.
  13. This influenced the *Herald* in swapping from morning to evening publication in 1869; it claimed that "at home in the evening there is ample time for each member of the family to read.. .an evening paper". *The Victorian Press Manual & Advertisers Handbook*, 1882.
  14. *Australasian*, 18 June 1870.
  15. *Australasian*, 22 Sept. 1866, 3 June 1871, 10 June 1871.
  16. *Australasian*, 8 July 1882.
  17. The problem at North Melbourne was that, unlike most other grounds, admission to the members reserve was open to anyone willing to pay an extra 6d. The club therefore disclaimed any responsibility for the actions of the crowd in the reserve, as the rules for admittance had been framed by the ground trustees.
  18. "Vigilant", in the *North Melbourne Advertiser* of 17 September 1886 advocated such a step after defeat by arch rivals South Melbourne; "the umpire", he said, "knew very little about football".
  19. Comments on umpiring performances had appeared in press reports since the introduction of those officials - typical was that found in the *Australasian* of 29 June 1878 which stated that "Mr. Wills acted as central umpire and gave every satisfaction".
  20. *The Flag*, 19 June 1895.
  21. *The Australasian*, 22 July 1871.
  22. *The Australasian*, 13 August 1892.
  23. *North Melbourne Advertiser*, 17 September 1886.

24. This followed an incident where a Richmond player responded to a tackle by a small North player by kicking him as he lay on the ground - the Richmond crowd encouraged their hero with cries of "kick him again" and "serves him right"! *North Melbourne Advertiser*, 3 August 1873.
25. *The Ant*, 15 May 1890.
26. *The Sportsman*, 21 April 1886.