

WHERE THE BIG MEN FLY: AN EARLY HISTORY OF AUSTRALIAN FOOTBALL IN THE RIVERINA

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I

Just out of Lockhart in southern New South Wales on the road to Walbundrie there is a signpost to "Osborne". After travelling the proverbial country mile down a typical wide open Riverina road, one arrives at Osborne to find only a football ground. For there are no houses, no post office or general store, no church or railway siding; there is not even a pub at Osborne - just a football ground. This feature of the rural landscape reflects the attitude of many of the people in this part of New South Wales to the game of Australian Football. Indeed football grounds with four goal posts at each end of the field are as much a part of the Riverina skyline as wheat silos and windmills.

Australian Football is the major football code in the Riverina; in terms of players and clubs it outnumbers all of the other football codes in the region. Throughout the season it attracts strong and active spectator support and considerable media attention. Many people identify closely with their local team and they take its wins and losses to heart because the performance of the football team is seen as a reflection on the town and its inhabitants. The community's interest in and allegiance to Australian Football stems from several generations of active involvement in the code since the "last quarter" of the nineteenth century. In many cases the foundation of a football club can be traced to a period soon after the settlement of the town or land in the district. Once the game was established as part of the life-style it developed its own dynamics and thus it was ensured of a certain perpetuation.

My study has two main objectives. One was to account for the rise of Australian Football in the Riverina from about 1880 to 1914 and to explain its growth and popularity in advance of the other football codes. The second was to establish what type of people were involved in the game at both the playing and administrative

level in those early years.

It may help at this stage to state briefly what I will argue about these two problems. Australian Football established an early dominance because the colony of Victoria, in particular Melbourne, was overwhelmingly dominant within the Riverina economy, consequently the recreational pursuits of the region reflected those of Victoria more than New South Wales. The game, although initially played in Wagga Wagga by men in professional and clerical positions, ultimately became a "social mixer" with no evidence of occupational distinction at the playing level. However, at the administrative level there is some evidence of occupational dominance by professional, business, and clerical people.

It is now recognised that sport fulfills an important social role in society. It provides a form of identification as well as a release from a work routine for the individual in a society. As such it is a form of 'social control' for it makes people feel a part of the society. It was in the 19th century that organised sport became a regular part of modern industrial society. By looking at one sport in a particular region in this period, one is able to in a general sense, contribute to a fuller understanding of a community.

II

The Riverina is a distinct region which is characterised by isolation and distance from the capital cities and which has developed an identity of its own. This has reflected in its folklore and literature, in its sport and recreations, and in its various political and social movements. Yet one of its outstanding characteristics has been the close economic and social links with Victoria.

G.L. Buxton in his authoritative work *The Riverina, 1861-1891*, took the Riverina to be "the area enclosed by the Murray and Murrumbidgee Rivers eastwards from their junction to a line adjoining Albury and Wagga Wagga."¹ But as Buxton points out, in the nineteenth century, every man defined his own Riverina to suit his own purpose. For writers like Furphy, Paterson and Lawson, the problem did not exist because everybody knew where the Riverina was! In general, I have accepted Buxton's definition of the Riverina.

However, the Riverina is much too large an area and football is too widespread throughout the region to provide for a useful analysis. Therefore in terms of football, discussion will be confined to the area encompassed by the Riverina Football League and the Farrer Football League. Both of these leagues are entirely based in New South Wales within the broadly defined 'Riverina'.

From the earliest settlement of the region, the Riverina developed a comprehensive network of economic and social ties with Victoria. In every way the Riverina is remote from Sydney and closer to Melbourne. In terms of distance, it is about 260 miles from Narrandera to Melbourne while it is about 400 miles from Narrandera to Sydney. In terms of trade, commerce, finance, transport, communications, sport and culture, the Riverina has been inextricably linked with Victoria.

The settlement of the region had its origins in the establishment of overland stock routes between the colonies in the eighteenth-thirties and forties. Vast tracks of land in the Riverina were taken up by squatters in this period. Station supplies were taken from Melbourne to the Riverina by dray, and wool and back-loaded to Melbourne.' The approach to the Riverina from Sydney was made difficult by the mountain range which stretches along the eastern seaboard dividing the coast from the inland. By comparison the route from Melbourne is more direct and the terrain not as rugged.

The gold rushes in the colony of Victoria in the early 1850s provided the means for an economic boom in the Riverina and strengthened economic ties between them. It provided the impetus for the development of a live-stock market. A complex and widely diversified market system evolved linking the Riverina pastoralists to the Victorian goldfields.

The change of emphasis in the pastoral industry in the 1860s from cattle to sheep strengthened the hold that Victoria held over the Riverina trade. It was river transport which was to prove to be the key to this trend. For the rivers provided the chief routes for the transport of wool and stores. In the mid-fifties Victoria and South Australia shared the river trade but by 1870 Victoria had secured the bulk of it. The extension of the railway to Echuca from Melbourne in 1864 was a decisive factor for it made Melbourne more accessible to the Riverina than Adelaide. In this way the

Riverina largely became the commercial preserve of Victoria in this period.³

The approach of the New South Wales colonial railway-lines spanning out from Sydney in the 1870s and 1880s was to offset the monopoly that Victoria had on regional trade. The Main Southern Line from Sydney to Albury was completed in 1881, and the 'east-west' track line from Junee to Hay was constructed in 1882 linking the Western Riverina to the Main Southern Line. The construction of the railway provided NSW with means of countering Victoria influence in the Riverina. Strong and determined intercolonial rivalry for the valuable Riverina trade was to be a feature of relations between Victoria and New South Wales in this period. In the face of the railway challenge, the colonial government of Victoria implemented an elaborate rebate system in order to maintain its share of Riverina trade. The NSW reply was a system of differential rates on rail haulage.⁴

By the turn of the century, New South Wales through a concerted strategy of railway construction had managed to make some inroads into the trade of Riverina. Yet much of the area for whose trade New South Wales had so earnestly sought did not come under the influence of Sydney. Even to the present day much of the same area lies under the influence of Victorian social and economic domination. There is a striking similarity between the area which diverted trade to Melbourne in this period and that area claimed in this paper to represent the zone of Australian Football.

The NSW Land Selection Acts were crucial to the 'unlocking of the land' and to the settlement of large numbers on the land in the Riverina. It has been demonstrated by Buxton that the land selection process was in fact successful in the Riverina. Buxton's regional study of the Riverina shows that as a direct result of the Land Acts and their amendments that there was much more 'genuine settlement' than has previously been acknowledged. This is supported by the figures on the area under cultivation and on urban and rural population.⁵

In addition to the transport and trading links which bound the Riverina to Victoria was the pattern of regional migration. Throughout the latter half of the nineteenth century there was a constant influx of settlers into the region. Many of the new

settlers in the Riverina came from Victoria or came from Britain to Victoria before moving inland. Buxton's figures which show the number of persons in each Riverina county in 1891 giving the place of birth as N.S.W. or Victoria supports the view.⁶ The greater proportion of Victorians settled in the southern and western Riverina but there was a significant proportion of settlers in areas north of the Murrumbidgee River. Many of the early squatters came 'up country' from Port Phillip because sheer distance prevented a large number from Sydney. The decline in returns on the Victorian gold-fields released thousands of men for work as casual labourers on the large pastoral runs of the Riverina.⁷ The settlement of a large number of people from Victoria under the land selection process further cemented the strong economic and social ties between Victoria and the Riverina.

III

The first recorded game of football in the Riverina was played on the Bank Holiday (1st August) in Wagga Wagga in 1881 between teams representing Wagga and Albury. The match was won by Albury, the scores being Albury 4 goals to Wagga's 1 goal. The *Wagga Wagga Advertiser* reported that "for the most part play was unruly, lacked discipline and [was] generally chaotic. There was a large attendance of the townspeople and there were also many visitors from the country... there could not have been less than five hundred persons".⁸

The game of football generated such interest amongst the local players that a series of matches followed against clubs from the border city where the game was already well-established. The fact that these matches were played under 'Victorian Rules' illustrates the extent to which colonial Victoria dominated the economic and social life of the Riverina. It also reveals the level of New South Wales influence - or rather lack of it.

The Australian game of football was firmly established in Melbourne when it was introduced to the Riverina. The rules had been codified in 1866, and the Victorian Football Association had begun its competition in 1877. Many country centres in Victoria formed football clubs in the 1860s and 1870s and in these formative years matches were played amongst members of the club in teams

with names like 'smokers v non-smokers'.⁹ Soon, however, the emphasis shifted to matches between club and club. This pattern was also reflected in the development of the game in the Riverina - the scratch matches and casual teams predominated in the first three seasons, but from 1884, clubs of a more permanent nature began to emerge. Football in this early period was viewed more as a leisurely pursuit than as a form of competition. Matches were usually played on a Saturday afternoon and commenced whenever the players were ready or the train arrived. There was not always a fixed number of players and teams varied from fifteen to twenty-five. Goal-posts were set up at either end of the playing field and the boundaries were lined with flags or other markers.

The initial games of 'Australian Rules' were played by grammar school-boys and the young gentlemen of Melbourne. Football came to be regarded as a 'fine, manly past-time'; and according to Turner and Sandercock, 'it became firmly embedded in the culture of the colonial middle class'.¹⁰ Similarly the impetus for the introduction of Australian Football into the Riverina came primarily from young men in the professional, managerial and clerical group of occupations. It was not possible to check members of the early Wagga football teams with the electoral rolls for occupations. However, it is evident from newspapers and other local sources that the bulk of the players came from these group of occupations. Of the Wagga Wagga team in 1881, five were known to be in banks or law, one was a storekeeper, one was a wheelwright, and two were graziers. This view is supported further by the fact, that among the first teams were 'Bank and Law' and 'Commercials'.¹¹ It is more difficult to determine the occupations of officials involved in the initial stages, but for the 1884 season the officials for the Mechanics Football Club included a bank/law officer (president), a publican (vice-president), a clerk (secretary) and a medical practitioner on the general committee.

From the beginning, Wagga Wagga was an important regional administrative centre. Business, professional, and administrative centre. Business, professional, and administrative sectors developed to serve the town and its hinterland. During this period the number of services grew and an increasing number of administrators were employed. Keith Swan, the historian of Wagga Wagga, claims

that the urban managerial class challenged the leadership of the community by the pastoralists from the 1870s on.¹² And it was these men of the professional and business sectors who initially established and played the game of Australian Football in Wagga Wagga.

In order to fully understand the nature of the development of football in this period, the region known as the Riverina must be placed in the context of an advanced capitalist society. The growth of organised sport is one of the outstanding features of social life of the latter half of the nineteenth century. The modern game of 'football', along with cricket, was one of the 'popular recreations' that emerged in this period. The development of the economy transformed people's leisure patterns. The development of organised sport was directly related to the new time-work disciplines of an industrial society. The outcome was that a greater quantity of leisure time at more regular intervals became available for the mass of the people.¹³

The Riverina did not escape these developments for the region prospered in this period as the area developed an extensive pastoral and agriculture sector and the urban areas developed diversified retail services and manufacturing industries. Economic and social developments in the Riverina provided a base for the growth of football as an organised sport for the people of the region.

IV

By 1914 nearly every town village or district fielded a football team in the winter months. The pattern of closer land settlement and the extension of the railway were crucial factors in the development of the game. Agriculture developed rapidly in the Riverina largely because of railway extensions. These also led to the growth of many towns and villages at regular intervals along the line and thus played a major role in the consolidation of the Australian game of football in the region. The introduction of regular and direct passenger rail services linked the major urban areas of the Riverina to the outlying rural districts and it became possible to transport large groups of people by rail to almost any destination within the Riverina in relatively quick time.

Most of the competitions in the Riverina came to be based on the rail network, and were known as 'line' competitions. The South-West Districts competition took its name from the railway line passing through its area. Special trains were run each Saturday in order to transport players and supporters to their matches. The draw was arranged in such a way that a special train travelled along the line from either Yanco or Junee on alternative Saturdays. It was decided to run a special train from Yanco to Ganmain for the purpose of conveying Leeton, Narrandera and Matong to their destinations and it was agreed that Grong Grong should travel by the ordinary mail train returning by goods train that night'.¹⁴ The rail thus provided the means for the establishment of district competitions on an inter-town basis.

The change in the social status of football players in the Riverina can be traced by reference to tables 1 and 2 which break down into percentage figures the occupation of players from various football teams in the region. The names of players were taken from the team lists published in the newspapers and matched against the player's stated occupation in the electoral roll.

Table 1: Players' Occupations, Wagga, 1895-1912

	1895 %	1903 %	1912 %
Professional	4	0	0
Business, Farmers, Agents & Employers	20	20	20
Tradesmen	16	20	24
Employees-Clerical	20	10	4
Employees-Manual	28	40	38
Unknown	12	10	8

Source: NSW Electoral Rolls, 1895/1903/1912.

In the early stages of the game's development most of the players were from the professional, commercial and propertied sectors, there was by the onset of World War One a preponderance of players who were labourers or manual workers. Nevertheless the figures clearly show a 'social mix' in terms of the status and occupations of the players. The urban-based clubs (e.g. Wagga) tended to be made up

Table 2: Players' Occupations, Coolamon-Ganmain, 1895-1912

	1895 %	1903 %	1912 %
Professional	6	0	0
Business, Farmers Agents and Employers	39	55	24
Tradesmen	6	0	0
Employees-Clerical	0	0	0
Employees-Manual	11	22	54
Unknown	38	23	22

mostly of manual employees, tradesmen and other self-employed while the rural clubs (Coolamon-Ganmain) were comprised almost entirely of farmers and labourers. In football, players were able to establish social relations with men from diverse social backgrounds.

Throughout the period, as is shown in Table 3, there was a clear trend at the administrative level of the game towards occupational dominance by men in the professions, business and clerical sectors in both rural and urban areas. In the larger towns such as Wagga and Narrandera it was the businessmen who controlled the game, while in places like Ganmain and Coolamon it was the farmers and the agents. It is worth noting that there was a strong representation by publicans and hotel-keepers on the various committees. While the representation of the professionals and clerks was not as high as 'business', these people often played key roles by filling the important position of secretary and/or treasurer. The level of representation from manual workers was very low and, in most instances, they were not represented at all.

There is a significant social consequence in the differences between the social standings of players and officials. While playing became something for the lower orders to do, administration became a normal activity for the socially higher grades. It was these people who entered local government, were involved in charitable agencies, and sat on hospital boards etc. - in short, the community's leaders. There was a certain amount of prestige attached to holding office in football. Football thus became totally respectable, through its leaders - the officials not necessarily the players.

Table 3: Officials' Occupations, Wagga, Narrandera, Ganmain, 1895-1912

	1895 Wagga %	1903 Wagga %	1903 Narr %	1903 Ganmain %	1912 Wagga %	1912 Narr %	1912 Ganmain %
Professional	9	0	6	0	0	6	10
Business, Farmers, Agents & Employees	27	47	46	60	60	72	52
Tradesmen	27	13	10	18	18	0	6
Employees, Clerical	26	0	0	0	22	6	0
Employees, Manual	0	20	12	0	0	0	10
Unknown	11	20	24	2	01	16	22

Whereas football became a mass spectator sport in Melbourne, rural communities developed their own capacity for self-entertainment. Football was a community game in the Riverina in the sense that football became totally integrated within the society - i.e. it embraced people of the whole range of occupations, religions and localities within the Riverina region. The game of football was the focus of community interest each Saturday in the winter months. The football was a social occasion, a place to meet friends and neighbours and, of course, together to cheer on the local sporting heroes. In an interview with local football legend E.S. "Poddy" Slade, he recalled that in those days, "almost the whole town went to the football".¹⁵

The various football bodies in the Riverina had by 1914 developed stable administrative structures as basis for the organisation of their respective competitions. They were highly organised; they conducted regular meetings, arranged various social functions, and in general, contributed much to the social and sporting character of the community. It is worth noting that they also adopted nearly all of the features of the game as it was played in Victoria. This included numbers of guernseys, boundary umpires, six points for a goal and one point for a behind as well as the same system as the V.F.L. for deciding the premiership, that is, a play-off.

The first sign of rugby in the Riverina was in 1882 when a match was played between Wagga and Cootamundra. There were no further reports of rugby until 1889 when a club was formed in Wagga and affiliated to the Southern Rugby Union based at Goulburn. It was not until mid-August, that the rugby club played its first game following a series of postponements due to lack of players. Little was then heard of rugby until 1897 when it was revived in Wagga and challenge matches were played against teams from Junee, Gundagi and Goulburn. A competition was instituted in 1898 between rugby teams from Tarcutta, Junee, Cootamundra and Wagga which suggests that Rugby Union was becoming organised. In the early years of the twentieth century, the rugby game expanded further to take in teams from Humula, Tumburumba and The Rock. Then in 1905, a school's rugby competition finally got underway.

The code now received almost the same amount of local press coverage as its rival in the form of results, match reports, and club notes. But it is significant to note that it was referred to as 'Rugby' and the Australian game was reported under the heading of 'Football'.

It is also important to note that all of these places where rugby was played, with the exception of The Rock, were in areas to the north-east of Wagga, that is, in districts with closer ties with Sydney especially now that the railway provided these places with a direct transport link to the New South Wales capital. The rugby game continued to make progress up until the start of the war but by no means did it match the stranglehold over the Riverina established by Australian Football. I could find no mention of rugby league or soccer being played in the area at this time.

Australian Football was firmly established at the onset of World War I as the dominant winter sport in the Riverina. The game was played extensively throughout the region and almost every town, village or district fielded a team (see Appendix). It also embraced junior and schools competitions in the major urban centres.

The game had established an early prominence because Victoria, and in particular Melbourne, was overwhelmingly dominant within the Riverina economy than the colony of New South Wales. Although government policies in relation to railways and trade tariffs had greatly increased the influence of Sydney in the Riverina, Victorian influences, particularly of a social and cultural nature, continued to be dominant over much of the region. This trend had been reinforced by the migration of many new settlers into the Riverina as a result of the twin processes of land selection and closer settlement who had their origins in Victoria.

The consequence of this trend was that the recreational activities pursued by many people in the Riverina mirrored that of Victoria. The net result was that the game of football that had been devised in Melbourne in 1858 was adopted by sportsmen in the Riverina after 1881. It subsequently became the major football code played in the Riverina. Although the rugby game was introduced soon after, it was not able to make significant headway against the Australian game. It should be noted that for the rest of NSW, rugby union came to be established in this period as the dominant football code.

Football also fulfilled an important social role in the society of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. For people in the Riverina, isolated and remote from the capital cities and the 'home country' and subject to drought and a harsh climate in an alien land, football provided a form of identification and attachment to a place or a locality. It contributed much to people's sense of belonging.

The game of football in the Riverina, as in Melbourne, was initially played by men in professional, business and clerical employment. Football was regarded by the respectable classes as a 'fine, manly pastime'. The game was seen as more than a form of exercise and amusement but also as a source of character development which encouraged such 'social qualities' and 'manly virtues' as morals, health, leadership, responsibility and honesty. Football as a sport was promoted in this way as a healthy and wholesome activity. It ultimately became a 'social mixer' with no evidence of occupational distinction at the playing level. However, at the administrative level, there is some occupational dominance by pro-

fessional, business and clerical people.

Australian football was an important means by which the Riverina society was able to achieve social maturity. People arrived, settled, established themselves in work, on the land, in business and, most importantly, in a community of social relationships. Many aspects of society helped, schools and churches were, however, partly divisive in Australia at this time because of the strength of sectarianism, and so sport assumed a greater role. In the Riverina, the game of Australian football was a major agent in achieving a social consensus and community cohesion.

Appendix:

List of Football Associations and Clubs in the Riverina, 1914.

Ariah Park and District

Ariah Park
Methul
Linton
Mirrool
Tara

Barellan and District

Barellan
Moombooldool
Ardlethan
Yalgogrin

Culcairn and District

Culcairn
Henty
Mangoplah
Cookardinia
Yerong Creek
Germanton

Lockhart and District

Lockhart
Osborne
Boree Creek
Milbrulong
Napier
Pleasant Hills

South West District

Junee
Coolamon
Ganmain
Matong
Grong Grong
Narrandera
Leeton

Wagga Association

Oldtown
Newtown
Federals
North Wagga
Lake Albert
The Rock

NOTES AND REFERENCES;

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8. *Wagga Wagga Advertiser*, 2nd August, 1881.
9. L. Sandercock and I. Turner, *UP Where, Cazaly?: The Great Australian Game* (London, 1981), p.25.
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12. K. Swan, *A History of Wagga Wagga* (Wagga Wagga, 1970), p.109.
13. E.P. Thompson, 'Time, Work-Discipline and Industrial Capitalism, *Past and Present*, Vol. 38, December 1976, p.71.
14. *Narrandera Argus*, 23 August, 1913.
15. Interview with A.S. Slade, 12 August 1981. Slade played his first game of football for Coolamon in 1908, and subsequently played senior football for twenty three years. The highlight of Slade's career was when he captained the South West representative team against a Collingwood VFL team that included the legendary Coventry brothers, Syd and Gordon, at Narrandera in 1925.