

‘The Greater Game’
Australian Football and the Army in Melbourne and
on the front during World War I

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One of the great ironies regarding the playing of football during World War I, sportingly dubbed ‘the greater game’, was that while the anti-football patriots in Australia were attempting to have football stopped, the organisation at the cutting edge of the cause they purported to support – the army – was supportive of football played in war-time and used it to fulfil their own needs.¹ The military in Australia, and other parts of the British Empire, had a long tradition of involvement in sport and football. Tony Mason has suggested that along with exercising and drilling, sport was one of the few other activities for British troops posted in far-flung colonial settlements, such as Australia and India. So the army patronized sport in many ways – creating facilities and ovals, organising regimental teams and competitions – because sport enhanced fitness, boosted morale, provided a physical outlet and countered boredom.² Military involvement played a role in the emergence of many sports, including horseracing and the various football codes. The matches between British garrison regiments and local Victorian teams in the 1860s were an important feature of the early development of Australian Football, or Victorian Rules, as the local Melbourne version was then known.³

The relationship between the military and sport appeared a natural and convenient one for both institutions, however, there were occasions when this relationship became strained such as in the years immediately preceding World War I. While Federation co-incided with a rapid growth in football’s popularity, due mainly to increased working-class involvement as players and spectators, it also heralded an increased

commitment to Australia's defence. The introduction of universal conscription throughout Australia in 1911 led to an awkwardness between military authorities and the various football bodies. Under this scheme youths between the ages of fourteen and twenty (senior cadets) were required to undertake compulsory military training. By this time large crowds were regularly attending games in Melbourne. A problem occurred because Saturday afternoon was generally the nominated day for drill but was also the day on which football was played. From the outset absenteeism plagued the conscription scheme with football undoubtedly contributing to some of the scheme's problems.

A former trainee, who was eventually sentenced to fourteen day's detention at Fort Queenscliff, recalled finding it 'hard to pass the Collingwood football ground'. Labor heavyweight Frank Tudor – Federal Member for Yarra and Richmond Football Club President – was approached by several youths, and a father of one of them, who urged him to convey their disenchantment with the scheme which clashed with the only day on which they could 'enjoy football'. Tudor took up the issue with the Minister of Defence, Senator Pearce, who in turn raised the matter with the Adjutant-General, Colonel Chauvel who dismissed this complaint. Chauvel contended that senior cadets generally had two Saturdays a month free to themselves.⁴

Football players were also affected. Arthur Roy Leach, who played for St Kilda in the post-war period, was fined £1 for being absent from military duty. He had fallen fifty-seven hours behind in his drill attendance because he was playing for a Victorian Football Association (VFA) club at the time. Percy Ellingsen, who started his Victorian Football League (VFL) career with Richmond at age sixteen, was a constant defaulter and achieved some notoriety with his flagrant forfeiting of his military training. He preferred to play football on Saturdays.⁵

Conflict between the army and football interests did not prove intractable and in many instances there was a compromise on both sides. An agreement was struck up, for instance, between the South Australian

League and military authorities. It was agreed to devote one Saturday each month to the military so that football demands would not conflict with the cadets' drill. The military agreed, in return, not to conduct training in districts hosting football matches. This compromise was planned to take effect in 1915 but by then the League had decided to abandon football from the end of that season until the war's end.⁶

With the outbreak of World War I a vigorous debate ensued over the merits of playing sport, including football, in wartime. There were two sides of the football debate; the middle-class view, as encapsulated in amateur ideals, that sport was a proving ground for some higher calling. Implicit in this philosophy was an expectation that sportsmen would be among the first to hear the call of duty when it sounded. The popular metaphor of football mimicking was clearly intimated what that duty was. This was a view espoused in the public schools, amateur sporting clubs and the daily press. The working-class view was less quixotic and pragmatically held sport to be a recreation, a distraction from the rigours of the working week and, in the case of 'professional' footballers, an opportunity to supplement the week's wages.

Until the eve of the opening round of the 1915 Victorian football season, opposition to playing the game had been kept to the periphery of public debate. The publication of a speech by L A Adamson, Headmaster of Wesley College and President of the Metropolitan Amateur Football Association (MAFA), changed the nature of the debate and helped galvanise the game's opponents. Its content was tantamount to a declaration of war against professional football and its adherents.

Adamson proved to be the champion and knight-errant of amateurism and was the living embodiment of the ideology of Muscular Christianity – a complex concept which fused physical endeavour with notions of imperial duty, national identity and military imperatives.⁷ Schooled at Rugby he had absorbed the traditions and ideology of that famous institution. While senior resident master of Wesley College, he had sought to fashion Wesley into a 'Rugby of the Antipodes' introducing

awards of colour and codes of privilege.⁸ In his speech Adamson assailed the poor contribution of professional footballers to enlistments while extolling the excellent record of amateur sporting clubs. He argued that professional football was a deterrent to recruitment and was even treasonable by asserting that a patriotic German could make no better gesture than to 'support our paid gladiators to perform in the League and Association circus'. He appealed to his students to resist their inclination to attend football matches as the sixpence they paid for admission was an indirect inducement for men to stay away from the war and 'cheerful crucifixion'.⁹

In the best traditions of the 'old school tie', the *Argus*' football scribe, 'Old Boy', greeted Adamson's speech with approbation. 'Old Boy' was in fact R W E Wilmot, the MAFA's Vice-president, and followed with an attack on the mercenary nature of professional football. He argued that it did not improve the calibre of the man and did nothing to improve the sport and as such was of no value to the community.¹¹ 'Pivot', the football writer for the *Age*, expressed a more sympathetic view of the predicament in which football was placed. He attributed a lack of volunteers from senior teams as being largely due to many of their players being married and considered the discussion of whether sport was to be continued during war to have almost become 'a hackneyed subject'. He defended football as being good for a community by providing some relief from work and war.¹²

In counter argument to the patriotic critics, the *Football Record* (established in 1912 as the VFL's official publication) also embraced the notion of Muscular Christianity. The *Football Record* asserted that football in its current form provided the best training for soldiers and claimed that it had stood many of the soldiers in good stead in the field of battle at Gallipoli.¹³

That football was singled out for attack ahead of other sports, horseracing and cricket in particular, was a source of great agitation among football supporters and was constantly alluded to in the *Football*

Record throughout the war. Racing and cricket were regarded as the sporting institutions most closely affiliated with the affluent middle-class and received scant criticism in the daily press, although in a reflection of class bias, race-goers were often dubbed as 'slackers' while the racing clubs escaped criticism.¹⁴ Footballers could hardly feel singled out by Adamson's attack, however, as he had also accused Victorian Shield cricketers of cowardice for not enlisting.¹⁵

While many in the football community had hoped to see games continue normally, the seriousness of the war coupled with the pressure exerted by the patriotic and anti-football sections of society, did not allow it. The publication of casualty lists from the Gallipoli campaign brought the real shock of war home to many communities. If Adamson's speech had touched a nerve then the sacrifice of Australian soldiers succeeded in exposing it completely. Letters directed against playing professional football began to appear more regularly in the city press. Football supporters and race-goers were branded 'loafers' and the theme of sport and war was incorporated into some sermons.¹⁶ Canon Hughes appealed to supporters and players alike to take the Creator's gift of 'haelth, strength, vigour and manhood' and defend the country.¹⁷

Following the opening rounds of the 1915 season it became clear that both the VFA and VFL competitions would play before reduced crowds. Black armbands and flags flying at half-mast became a standard sight at football grounds. Amateur competitions were abandoned for the duration while the Association cut short its season in 1915 and did not resume until 1918 when six sides, from predominantly working-class suburbs, opted to play after threatening to form a breakaway competition if the VFA did not heed their wish to resume.¹⁸ In the VFL only four sides, Carlton, Collingwood, Fitzroy and Richmond contested the 1916 season but thereafter the competition began to steadily regain support with many returned soldiers conspicuous in the crowds. South Melbourne and Geelong resumed in 1917 and Essendon and St Kilda followed the next season leaving only Melbourne on the outer in 1918.

That football did continue to be played in Melbourne was due mainly to the response of the four VFL clubs which represented some of the largest working-class areas of the city: Carlton, Collingwood, Fitzroy and Richmond. They refused to be swayed by accusations of disloyalty levelled against those who continued to play and support the game. In the Association it was working-class Brunswick which was at the forefront of the push to resume playing in 1918. The principal reason Brunswick proffered for resuming was that football assisted recruiting. The poor response to the Sportsman's Thousand, a special unit raised exclusively from sportsmen representing all sports, was cited as proof of this. It had taken ten months to recruit 956 men and it was argued that this number would have been much improved had football been played rather than curtailed.¹⁹

Given the constant beating of the war drum by patriotic zealots, the spirit of co-operation shown between the VFL and military authorities was a victory for common sense. The previous conflict between military duties and football during pre-war compulsory training had perhaps left its mark. Rather than antagonise the football public, the military sought to accommodate them in their recruitment planning. Recruitment activities were permitted at VFL games and games to assist war funds were undertaken between military and League teams. Richmond had undertaken a game against the Pioneers as part of their preparation for the 1916 season and a fortnight after the previous year's grand final, Carlton played a military combination at the Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG). Attired in Collingwood colours the military side, which comprised a number of League players among whom were several of Carlton's premiership side, eventually lost to the 'Blues' after a close contest. Such games, which attracted large crowds, provided a convenient forum for recruitment officers who were able to address the spectators.²⁰

The co-operation of the League and the military was most clearly evident when the VFL cancelled a round during 1917 to assist a recruitment drive. This may have been done for pragmatic, rather than

idealistic, reasons. The move was, perhaps, a concession designed to placate the anti-football sentiment in some sections of the community rather than a genuine display of patriotism. Earlier in the season recruitment officers had allegedly been given hostile receptions at three League grounds which prompted cries of outrage in the daily press.²¹

As much as anti-football patriots railed against the game their protestations were weakened by the absence of any overt support from government or military authorities. The most compelling factor which undermined the patriots' campaign was the war itself. By late 1916 the length and experience of the war had diminished the public enthusiasm for it. Death was a frequent visitor to Australian homes including those of footballers and football supporters. As war weariness set in football began to re-establish itself.

While there was some divisiveness associated with playing football at home in war-time, there were no qualms about the value of games within the army. Football, and sport in general, was seen as providing the troops with recreation as well as keeping them fit for active service. It is not surprising that football was enthusiastically played and supported by the soldiers overseas, apart from the obvious relief from the rigours of front line service, the game provided a tangible link with home through the memories it evoked in homesick soldiers. For soldiers from the southern and western states the unique nature of the Australian game might also have further underscored their view of themselves as distinct from the soldiers of other nations. Lt. G. H. Goddard, of the 59th Battalion, commented on the enthusiasm of the troops for football: 'It was possible to make a good guess at the State from which a certain man hailed by the vehemence with which he supported a certain brand of football . . . The patronising manner in which a supporter of one particular game would ask another to "come and see a real football match" was quite amusing.'²²

A popular portrayal of the game as played during the war is contained in Peter Weir's film *Gallipoli* which includes a scene in which a game of Australian football is played in the shadows of the Great Pyramids. The incongruity of the game's setting, as well as the men's passion, was highlighted by a conversation between one of the heroes, Frank, and his mate Bill. Gazing at the pyramids, Bill is drawn to the magnitude of the attempts of the Pharaohs to beat death. His observation was lost on Frank who remonstrated: 'Thanks Professor, look, can you get your mind back on the game, let's think about the West Australians' first attempts to beat the bloody Vics'.

The passion many soldiers held for football resulted in games in some strange settings. Even the confines of the position at Gallipoli, it would appear, could not dampen the men's enthusiasm. T J Richards, who was a member of the 1st Battalion (NSW) and a former rugby international for Australia, later recalled one of his army sporting experiences: 'Football matches were out of the question at Anzac; yet, one afternoon when I came over from Brown[s] Dip towards White's Gully I was surprised at seeing a football floating through the air. I set off down into the blind valley, and joined in with a number of Victorians who had brought the ball from Egypt with them.'²³

The lack of proper playing fields, particularly of sufficient size required for a game of Australian football, was always a problem. The 40th Battalion, a Western Australian unit, resolved the problem by devising their own game which they called 'mobbing'. It was played with a hessian bag filled with straw, had no rules other than it could not be kicked. The basic object of the game was to force or throw the bag through the opposition's goal. The beauty of the game was that it could be played 'on any old ground'.²⁴

Undoubtedly the showcase of Australian Football overseas was a match held in at the Queen's Club, London before a crowd of 3000 and in the presence the Prince of Wales on the last Saturday of October 1916. This match was played between sides representing the 3rd Division and

the Combined Training Unit and was notable for the many star players on both sides.²⁵ Padre C J Perry, vice-captain of Norwood (South Australia) led the Training team and Bruce Sloss, a South Melbourne star and 1911 Champion of the Colony, captained the 3rd Division team. It was one of the last games of football Sloss played as he was killed in Flanders a little over two months later during a German raid upon his Battalion's trenches.²⁶

The majority of games played overseas were played under vastly different circumstances to the London match. A description of an encounter on the Somme, near the village of La Boisselle, between the 27th and 28th Battalions indicated the conditions often endured by the soldiers:

The ground was situated amidst the heavy system of entrenchments that had constituted the German front line ... Practically surrounded by trenches, the ground frozen and strewn with pieces of barbed wire and fragments of shells. Sheltering from the cold wind, the spectators viewed the game from the trenches, their heads just visible above the ground. A few plucky volunteers held the goal posts in position during the game.²⁷

Lt. L G Shout, a former staff member of the *Argus*, wrote home giving an account of a match played upon a pock-marked field within shell range of the main firing line. The match was one between officers and NCOs in which sheepskin jerkins and cardigans were worn as playing shirts. 'But the saddest and most realistic touch of all', wrote Shout, 'lay behind the goal-posts on the southern end. It was a small heap of earth the grave of dead soldiers -with the simple but sublime superscription, "To unknown British Heroes".' The war could never be forgotten, Nevertheless, Shout felt that the game had given the men fresh heart for it 'had carried their thoughts vividly back to those happy days when football was played in certain Melbourne suburbs they had called "home"'.²⁸

Recognising the important role which sport could play, the organisers of the British Expeditionary Forces sports scheme in 1919, issued specific guidelines for the conduct of the sports and attempted to elevate the purpose of play by including ideals which were borrowed from amateurism. One of its objectives was to ‘instil the root principle of true sport, viz: “Play for your side and not for yourself”’; this was to be achieved by the abolition of money prizes, the provision of individual winners with trophies of ‘little intrinsic value’ and by the presentation of team trophies.²⁹

This article has suggested that while there were occasional differences between the army and the organisers and players of football, there was rather more co-operation than conflict, particularly on the front line. Given the appalling circumstances of life behind the trenches and the lack of entertainment, sport was seized upon by both the military organisers and ranks as a means of maintaining morale and as a degree of normality. Playing even the most primitive games was a reminder of home. Since sport was such an integral element of Australian culture, playing it in most inhospitable circumstances was a way of asserting identity on the war-front.

The irony of war-time football lay in the mock tragedy of the game against the genuine tragedy of war. While players and spectators pondered the ‘what ifs’ of near misses on the football field, near misses at the front had a sharper edge and constituted the fragile line between life and death in the trenches. To support football while supporting the soldiers at the front was not a contradiction to large sections of the community.

Another sidelight of footballers involved in front-line activity was that it did strip away one of the myths of sportsmen and war. The premise that sportsmen would make the best soldiers may have been questioned by even the staunchest advocates following the war. The early deaths of Melbourne’s ‘Joe’ Pearce and Collingwood’s Allan Cordner, both killed on the first day at Gallipoli, before their sporting prowess could be put to

the test, and the manner in which Carlton player George Challis was literally 'blown to bits' in France provided conclusive proof that athleticism was rendered impotent in the face of modern war.³⁰

NOTES

- 1 For a fuller description of attitudes toward sport during World War I, see, Michael McKernan, *The Australian People and the Great War*, Collins, Sydney, 1980, pp. 94-115, and on Australian football in particular, my own thesis, 'Will They Never Come? A study of professional football in Melbourne during the Great War, 1914-1918, BA Hons thesis, La Trobe University, 1993.
- 2 Tony Mason, 'Football on the Maidan', in J A Mangan, ed., *The Cultural Bond: Sport, Empire and Society*, Cass, London, 1992, pp. 142-3.
- 3 Geoffrey Blainey, *A Game of Our Own*, Information Australia, Melbourne, 1990, pp. 52-3.
- 4 John Barrett, *Falling In: Australians and 'Boy Conscriptioin' 1911-1915*, Hale & Ironmonger, Sydney, 1979, pp. 247, 142-3.
- 5 Barrett, *Falling In.*, pp. 200-202.
- 6 Australasian Football Council, Minutes of Council Meetings, Laws of the Game, Constitutions, etc, 1906-1927, See Minutes for August 1914, pp. 36-42.
- 7 David W Brown, 'Muscular Christianity in the Antipodes: Some Observations of the Diffusion and Emergence of a Victorian Ideal in Australian Social Theory', *Sporting Traditions*, vol. 3, no. 2, May 1987, pp. 173-5; Bob Stewart, 'Athleticism Revisited: Sport, Character Building and Protestant School Education in Nineteenth Century Melbourne', *Sporting Traditions*, vol. 9, no. 1, Nov. 1992, p. 37.
- 8 G Blainey, J Morrissey and S Hulme, *Wesley College: The First Hundred Years*, Melbourne, 1967, p. 104.
- 9 *Argus*, 22 April 1915.
- 10 Joseph Johnson, *For the Love of the Game: The Centenary History of the Victorian Amateur Football Association 1892-1992*, Hyland House, South Yarra, 1992, pp. 41,51.
- 11 *Argus*, 23 April 1915.
- 12 *Age*, 23 April 1915.
- 13 *Football Record*, vol. 4, no. 12,3 July 1915, p. 11.
- 14 Michael McKernan examined some of the hypocrisy and class bias associated with racing and cricket during the war in *The Australian People*, ch. 5.
- 15 Johnson, *For the Love of the Game*, p. 51.
- 16 *Argus*, 11 May 1915.
- 17 *Argus*, 10 May 1915.
- 18 *Brunswick and Coburg Leader*, 12 April 1918. The six sides were Brunswick, Northcote, Port Melbourne, Footscray, North Melbourne and Prahran.
- 19 *Brunswick and Coburg Leader*, 12 April 1918.
- 20 *Essendon Gazette*, 4 May 1916; *Sporting Judge*, 2 Oct. 1915.
- 21 *Argus*, 19 and 21 May 1917.
- 22 Lt G H Goddard, *Soldiers and Sportsmen*, AIF Sports Control Board, London, 1919, p. 17.

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- 23 *Sydney Mail*, 13 Sept. 1916.
- 24 Captain C Longmore, *'Eggs-a-Cook'*, Colour type Press, Perth, 1921, p. 79.
- 25 Garrie Hutchinson, *Great Australian Football Stories*, Viking O'Neil, 1983, pp. 6-8. Some of the players were: Dan Minogue (Collingwood), Hughie James (Richmond), Jack Brake, Carl Willis, Leo Little, Stanley Martin (University), Billy Stewart, Clyde Donaldson (Essendon), Charlie Lilley (Melbourne), Harold Moyes, Percy Jory (St Kilda), Ted Alley (Williamston), Billy Orchard, Lou Armstrong (Geelong), Jim Foy (Perth), Jack Cooper, Percy Trotter (Fitzroy), George Bower (South Melbourne).
- 26 *AIF Nominal Roll: The History of the Thirty-ninth Battalion, AIF*, G W Green & Sons, Melbourne, 1934, pp. 83-4.
- 27 Lt. Col. W. Dollman and Sgt. H. M. Skinner, *The Blue and Brown Diamond*, Lonnen and Cape, Adelaide, 1921, p. 81.
- 28 *Argus*, 10 May 1917.
- 29 Goddard, *Soldiers and Sportsmen*, pp. 13-14.
- 30 Challis' death is described in the diary of David Doyle and cited in, R S Corfield, *Hold Hard Cobbers: The Story of the 57th and 60th Australian Infantry Battalions, 1912-1990, 57/60th Battalion* (AIF) Association, 1992, p. 29.