

# Thematic Reviews

## *A National Game at Last? Australian Rules Football in the 1990s*

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**Dan Mulcahy**, *Them and Us: National League?* Access Press, Northbridge WA, 1993.

**Ross Fitzgerald**, *The Footy Club: Inside the Brisbane Bears*. University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1996.

Speaking on ABC radio after the 1996 AFL Grand Final, commentator Tim Watson, a former Essendon champion, described the win by North Melbourne as ‘a victory for suburban football’ against interstate rivals which boasted better training facilities and fist-growing supporter bases. What he failed to mention was that the runner-up, Sydney, has been a laughing stock of the AFL competition during the 1990s, whether in terms of facilities for players, depth of playing talent, on-field performances, or public support for the team. Far from being a ‘suburban’ victory the rise of ugly duckling Sydney (and for the second year running former Carrara-based weakling Brisbane) as a flag contender suggests that Aussie Rules is beginning to have a national dimension that can be taken seriously, particularly as public support for teams in ‘foreign’ football territory— New South Wales and Queensland—has grown significantly in 1996, and ought to last if teams from these regions remain competitive in years to come. With two teams each from football strongholds Western Australia and South Australia by 1997, the presence of so-called ‘interstate’ teams in the Australian Football League (AFL) is more pronounced than ever. This has led to a backlash in Melbourne against non-Victorian clubs, headed by people who view football as Victorian first, and Australian second. It seems timely, therefore, to review two books about Aussie Rules from a relatively unusual perspective—authors Dan Mulcahy and Ross Fitzgerald both being

expatriate Victorians now supporting 'interstate' teams passionately. It is also an opportunity, in the wake of the AFL's most successful season, to consider the position of our great game as a national, rather than simply as a Victorian, pastime.

Unlike most Australian football scribes Dan Mulcahy is neither a journalist, an academic, or a practising historian; by trade he is a farmer in Western Australia and New South Wales. Perhaps, as a consequence of this vocation, his book, *Them and Us: National League?* has a rather down to earth, no-frills approach. The text may lack sophistication, but that is surely compensated by the vigour in which Mulcahy, as a football fan, argues his points. As a reader I felt as though, at times, I was having a couple of beers in a country pub listening to him 'call a spade a spade' about his great passion—the Australian game. Some of Mulcahy's ideas are crudely explained, or simply unexplained, such as 'the 50 metre penalty is stupid—get rid of it' (p. 114), but he has wide experience in football and is certainly knowledgeable about the game's development under the aegis of the AFL. This book will not win any prizes for academic scholarship, but it is tantalisingly polemical and consistently thought provoking. Like many football supporters of the 1990s, Mulcahy has found a voice and he won't rest until we've taken the time to listen—which, of course, we should.

Mulcahy grew up in country Victoria as an Essendon supporter so he is not, by birth, anti-Victorian—as some 'interstate' critics appear to be when discussing football. Mulcahy supports the concept of a nationwide Australian Rules competition, but he complains that because the AFL is really an offshoot of the VFL, the label of 'national' league is a misnomer. He argues that the gradual emergence of a VFL-AFL competition from the late 1980s was not intended to move football's power base away from Melbourne and Geelong. Rather, when the AFL accepted a team from Sydney in 1982, Brisbane and Perth in 1987, and Adelaide in 1991, the millions of dollars they paid in licence fees was used to prop up financially strapped (former VFL) clubs in Victoria. Meanwhile, Mulcahy complains, the fledgling 'interstate' AFL clubs were resented by many football supporters in Victoria—as if these teams were somehow the 'cause' of the dire economic situation that faced many of their local clubs. Few Victorians were prepared to admit that the acceptance of 'interstate' clubs into the VFL-AFL actually offered a financial lifeline to suburban-based battlers like St Kilda and Footscray

(pp. 19-38). An obvious exception to Mulcahy's argument is, of course, South Melbourne whose finances were so dire by the early 1980s that the VFL demanded that the club relocate to New South Wales as the Sydney Swans. So, despite Mulcahy's claim, it seems that the expansion of the VFL outside of its home state was not simply a strategy to preserve struggling Victorian clubs. If that were the case Sydney would have been set up solely as a New South Wales club while its licence fee kept the Swans ticking over in South Melbourne.

Mulcahy is, nevertheless, certainly right to highlight the troubled financial position of several Victorian football clubs in the late 1980s and early 1990s, and their opportune revenue share from new AFL club licences. He also acknowledges that among the 'interstate' clubs which came to the AFL with open wallets, the Swans and Bears soon had serious economic problems of their own (pp. 20-1, 28-9). Situated in regions where the rugby codes have dominated, they had difficulty in attracting quality players, their matches were often sparsely attended, and they were poorly managed by private owners, two of whom (Edelsten and Skase) left in disgrace. Thus while Brisbane and Sydney provided a cash injection of \$4m each to the AFL when they were first licensed, just a few seasons later they were in financial straits themselves, requiring the AFL to subsidise and oversee them in order that they remain viable. The acceptance of 'interstate' clubs into the old VFL was, therefore, not only part of a solution to the economic woes of Victorian clubs, it was also (at least in the cases of Brisbane and Sydney) something of a gamble. Hence, although Mulcahy seems unwilling to say so, Melbourne clubs facing threats of mergers or closure have, quite understandably, been incensed that Brisbane and Sydney were given special financial assistance by the AFL, in order to remain in the competition.

Given that discussions about the recent direction of the AFL often centre upon money and finances, it is regrettable that there has been a failure among many observers (Mulcahy included) to acknowledge the distinctive economic bases upon which football clubs and associations are, in fact, organised. In particular, it is rarely appreciated that the financial structures of AFL clubs are fundamentally different to privately-owned football 'businesses' overseas. In British soccer, for example, many leading clubs have long been limited companies, with shareholders and/or wealthy private owners. On an even larger scale, American team sports have, without exaggeration, been monopolised by multi-

millionaire proprietors. This has given entrepreneur owners firm control over the destiny of a club—irrespective of whether their main goal is the pursuit of profit or the personal glory of being associated with a winning team. In Australia, however, leading footy clubs have, with few exceptions, been run by a board of salaried directors and fee-paying members. These organisations have been financed by a combination of local fund-raising initiatives, commercial and government sponsorship, and revenue from media coverage. In other words, there is a tradition in this country of footy clubs comprising a community of members rather than a consortium of investors. Moreover, while critics of the AFL argue that it is ‘too business-like’, such a claim ought to be put in context: the AFL is a profit-taker, but not a profit-maker in the sense of paying dividends to owners or investors. The AFL is, in fact, an economic cartel that redistributes a portion of its earnings to member clubs. However, an ongoing problem for the AFL is that some of its constituent teams have barely been able to stay afloat despite receiving such subsidies. These club ‘co-operatives’ are, of course, subject to the same kinds of economic pressures faced by commercial businesses. They must maintain playing facilities, employ club staff, pay players, etc., and although the AFL has (sensibly in my view) tried to maintain equity between clubs by imposing salary caps and regulations with respect to transfer fees, some clubs have simply lacked a membership base or financial structure by which to stay ‘in the black’.

This brings us back, therefore, to a reconsideration of why the AFL has been so keen to promote football outside of Victoria, and why Sydney and Brisbane were given special treatment to remain viable. Although Mulcahy doesn’t have much time for the AFL commissioners, he ought to admit that they faced a policy dilemma in the early 1990s. A team each from Perth and Adelaide (with an expectation of more to follow) meant a huge cash injection from \$4m licence fees, increased revenue from big crowds at Football Park and Subiaco (or the WACA), plus a huge television audience that promised to keep revenue dollars spinning for years to come. Such earnings from the media and associated income from advertising sponsorship, and endorsements of the AFL as a national competition meant that the continued involvement of Brisbane and Sydney was necessary—even though, at times, it proved to be embarrassing. So the AFL, bouyed by the success of the Eagles and the Crows in attracting members, crowds, and sponsors, chose to subsidise

the lowly Bears and the Swans (who, of course had already paid \$4m for a licence) in order to keep the national competition afloat. But supporters of teams in Victoria struggling for economic survival (even though they had not been required to pay a licence fee)—Footscray, Fitzroy, Richmond, North Melbourne, St Kilda (and more recently Hawthorn and Melbourne)—this was perceived widely as a traitorous policy by the AFL. Why, they quite understandably asked, were AFL supremos so keen to prop up below average ‘invented’ teams in non-Aussie rules territory, while encouraging proud, historic, teams from football-loving Victoria to either merge or go to the wall? Mulcahy is not unsympathetic to such claims, but his determination to paint Victorian clubs as ‘parasites’ that have drained other states of their best players suggests that he is not altogether moved by their plight (p. 82).

Mulcahy is surely right, though, to emphasise that Victorian teams have long been strengthened by importing many of the best players from around Australia. He also reminds us that Victorian football fans have basically been unconcerned whether this has had a detrimental effect on local leagues elsewhere. Mulcahy thus finds it ironic that, despite claiming many of the best footballers outside of their state, Victorian clubs have since felt threatened by the introduction to the AFL of teams from longstanding football strongholds, WA and SA. To suggest that the Vics have, as a consequence, been fearful of losing their on-field supremacy to these ‘foreigners’ is an under-statement; they have been terrified and, at times, even unsporting. Mulcahy recalls how shabbily the West Coast Eagles were treated when they were accepted into the ‘big league’ in 1987. As mentioned earlier, the Eagles paid a \$4m licence fee to join, but they must have been wondering whether it was value for money because the AFL took steps to ensure that this Perth-based club would not compete on equal terms with its established rivals. While other teams were entitled to choose from fifty-two registered players, the ‘Weagles’ were allowed a squad of only thirty-five! (p. 23). After intense lobbying by the Sandgroppers this imbalance was lifted in 1990, which helped West Coast to its most successful season, finishing third. Such improvement, however, only heightened anxiety among Victorian-based clubs that a dominant team from Western Australia was only a matter of time - as proved to be the case with premierships in 1992 and 1994. What incenses Mulcahy, however, is that many Victorian football supporters claim that in achieving this West Coast had all sorts of

‘privileges’, such as better access to quality players and an ‘unfair’ home ground advantage thousands of kilometres from Melbourne on sandy soil. In response Mulcahy points out that in 1991, for example, players from Western Australia constituted 30 per cent of the national draft—the majority of whom ended up with Victorian clubs. How was this special treatment, he asks, particularly as West Coast had no more call on local players than did clubs outside of WA? (p. 63). His second rebuttal is that Eagles’ players were obliged to travel interstate to play every second week, quite unlike their Victorian rivals: how did that constitute an advantage, he asks? (pp. 44-5).

While Mulcahy supports the concept of a nation-wide football competition, he insists that there must be major structural changes if the AFL is to become a truly national league and not, as he puts it, simply a means for subsidising Victorian clubs. Instead of (the now) ten Victorian teams he recommends four, with the addition of two from SA, WA, NSW, and Qld, plus one each from Tas. and NT. That way, he contends, something akin to the old VFL could be reformed, allowing struggling teams like St Kilda and Footscray to continue at the local level, while at the national level stronger clubs or composite sides could represent Victoria—as happens in WA and SA (pp. 50-2). In an ideal world, Mulcahy seems to be suggesting, a national football league ought to have been structured around teams representing states and territories, while club sides in the VFL, SANFL, WAFL, etc., continued to represent local communities. His idea of three composite sides from Melbourne and another from Geelong is, however, a bit hard to fathom. Victorians have always been far more animated about club football than interstate contests (although South and Western Australians certainly relish knocking off the ‘big V’).

Perhaps, therefore, an alternative model for a national competition could have been a league involving leading clubs from WA, SA, and Vic., plus representative sides from Qld, NSW, NT, and Tas. This might have allowed for better preservation of local leagues (including the former VFL), while still allowing for promotion of the game at a national level. Although South Australia, for example, began with a composite side—the Crows—a traditional club side Port Adelaide (thirty-four SANFL premierships) is set to emerge in the AFL as Port Power from 1997, and will continue to field a side in the local competition. Some SA commentators argue that Norwood (twenty-eight SANFL premierships),

arch-rival to Port Adelaide, should also have been admitted to the AFL, as this would have allowed for the continuation of historic battles between the two great foes under a national framework. The Crows, however, cannot simply be scrubbed out: they were put together in haste after Port threatened to join the AFL in 1991, which would have left the SANFL without its most powerful club. Yet although the Crows have been disappointing on the field, they have been an outstanding financial success. The Adelaide Football Club operates under the auspices of the SANFL and is required to provide local clubs with a proportion of their sizeable annual profit (as Port Power will be expected to do). This has enabled the SANFL to survive, despite an evaporation of considerable playing talent to various AFL clubs around Australia, and something like a two-thirds drop in spectator numbers. As Mulcahy complains, though, the state of club sides in SA, WA, Tas. etc., has never really worried football fans in Victoria. They have made plenty of noise about saving their own teams from merger or extinction, but they are basically ignorant about the sacrifices that clubs and associations outside of Victoria have already made in order to accommodate new teams into the AFL (pp. 94-5).

Mulcahy, therefore, certainly comes across as a champion of the football 'underdog', and a stem critic of the seemingly imperious AFL. Curiously, though, his complaint that the player draft system has been a 'solder for the hopeless clubs in the AFL' seems to suggest otherwise (p. 63). He argues that this piece of football 'socialism' drags the best clubs down to 'the lowest common denominator' (p. 62). Sydney and Brisbane would certainly disagree with these sentiments. Mulcahy claims, instead, that a top club assumes its status through 'good planning and sheer hard work' (p. 63). He thus fails to appreciate that if team personnel and salary payments were unregulated by the AFL, then wealthy clubs like Carlton or Adelaide would soon buy up all the stars and dominate the competition. What is more, if there were no salary caps player payments would skyrocket, this forcing up ticket prices, making the game less affordable than it currently is.' Overall, then, *Them and Us: National League?*, is not a convincing blueprint for a revamped AFL. But it is at least a passionate plea for debate about our game, and that seems to have been the author's intention right from the beginning. In this respect the book is certainly a success.

By contrast to Mulcahy, Ross Fitzgerald is an experienced author

and academic. As a long-time supporter of Collingwood, however, we should be immediately suspicious of his capacity to be even-handed about anything not black and white! Yet Fitzgerald has resided in Queensland since 1977 where exposure to regular doses of sunlight seem to have worn down his resolve. He now claims dual allegiances to both the Magpies and the Bears, which made it all the more awkward for him during the final game of the home and away series in 1995: Sydney needed to defeat Collingwood for Brisbane to make the final eight. The Swans' eventual victory propelled the Bears into their first ever major round— achievement that Fitzgerald could hardly have been expecting when he began his ethnographic, 'fly-on-the-wall', study of the club and its players during 1995. Whether by good fortune or grand design *The Footy Club: Inside the Brisbane Bears* was put together during a critical period; and, since the author was freely allowed to attend club meetings, interview players, and speak regularly with the coach and officials, he was privy to information and events normally hidden from either the supporter or the scribe.

Hence Fitzgerald certainly takes us 'inside' the Brisbane Bears; we hear of the clubs' aspirations to improve during 1995, the team's determination to win respect from other AFL sides, and the devotion of a relatively small band of supporters who have 'hung in there' during the past eight seasons. He thus provides insights into the workings of a struggling 'interstate' AFL team, its power brokers, and its personalities. Most dramatically, though, we learn that coach Robert Walls had planned, before the season began, to leave Brisbane at the end of 1995 to return to Melbourne. Fitzgerald explains that this was announced to a bewildered club board meeting mid season, at a time when the team was in the doldrums, which set in motion debates about whether Walls should be replaced immediately and who, for that matter, the Bears should be seeking as a replacement (pp. 83-8). It seems that an unstable club off the field was certainly being reflected by several poor on field performances. Yet, ironically, the team slowly began to find form just when it appeared that Walls's commitment to the job had waned. A 'miraculous' win against Hawthorn in round sixteen when the Bears came from forty-five points behind at three-quarter time, gave the players a new-found confidence which led to victory in five of their following six games and, as mentioned previously, into a maiden finals appearance.

Given this dramatic, roller-coaster ride for the team during 1995 it

seems quite odd that *The Footy Club: Inside the Brisbane Bears* actually begins with a chapter describing the club's preparation for its first ever finals match, and the players' gallant, albeit losing, performance against eventual premier Carlton. In other words, we learn about the climax to the season before Fitzgerald has even discussed the first bounce of the ball in 1995. So when readers come to the end of the book they are basically obliged to return to the beginning in search of a climax they have seen previously. In his defence Fitzgerald has put together a postscript that tries to explain why the team found a form reversal during 1995, but one and a half pages of analysis is insufficient given that the book consists, for the most part, of 150 pages of description. This is not the author's usual style, so I can only presume that editors have ridden roughshod over the text, supposing that a straightforward narrative would appeal to Bear's supporters and football fans generally.

Yet, as Mulcahy reminds us, so-called 'ordinary' people have a multitude of opinions about football: what is more, the position of the AFL and the future of its member clubs are topics that strike up arguments in workplaces and pubs around the nation, as well as on talk-back radio. In other words, football is a subject for debate. While Fitzgerald confides in us about numerous 'behind-the-scenes' dramas, and he conveys the pain and emotional turmoil of playing AFL footy at an 'unfashionable' club, we are left basically to draw our own conclusions about these experiences. Ironically, while Fitzgerald has a chapter devoted to the need for 'passion' in football, his book never really shows a passion for critical debate. It is, in essence, a 'bird's-eye' account of season 1995 for the Bears, but it has little to say about the history of the Brisbane Club or its position within the AFL.

As we now know, during season 1996 the Bears have become one of the dominant teams in the AFL, a status that has also been achieved by Grand Finalist Sydney. The performances of these two clubs, despite fielding teams from states where rugby league has dominated, produced an unprecedented surge of public interest in Aussie Rules north of the Rivirena. The Swans are, of course, originally the bankrupt South Melbourne, and while a relocated team in Sydney was unpalatable to Victorian fans, it was preferable to extinction. Significantly, though, before the bounce of the ball for the 1996 flag the media emphasised that this was the Swans' first Grand Final appearance since 1945. So although South Melbourne is very much the Sydney Swans, the club's history and

memories of its former champions have not been eradicated to the dustbin of history—as they would have been if the ‘red and whites’ had faced a swansong in Melbourne. Similarly, the amalgamation of Brisbane and Fitzroy to form the Brisbane Lions in 1997 staves off seemingly inevitable collapse for the ‘Roy Boys’. It is time, therefore, for Victorian football supporters to think laterally about this great Australian sport, admitting that the game is much larger than the city in which it began. More generally, though, all Australian football fans should consider supporting their club as members, not just as once-a-week barrackers. Only by grass-roots support will footy retain its heritage of being member-based, rather than privately owned. And with the rise of Super League in one of the rival football codes we need, more than ever, a strong national competition to ward against take-over bids by entrepreneurs.

NOTE:

- 1 A free-market structure, such as that applying in English Premier League Soccer should be avoided strenuously: Newcastle United (owned by multi-millionaire Sir John Hall) paid £15m for striker Alan Shearer this season, while fans are now expected to pay anything between £12 to £30 to see their teams play.