

# *A Mania for Bicycles: The impact of Cycling on Australian Rules Football*

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If the papers presented at 'Sporting Traditions', the biennial conference of the Australian Society for Sports History (ASSH), provide some indication of the range and current research interests of scholars in Australia, then the historiography of cycling would appear to be in poor shape. The conferences, which have grown in size and been rotated around various states over the years, have highlighted work on a variety of individual and team sports, but after twenty years the activity of cycling has featured only three times in presentations by ASSH members. At the very first conference, held at the University of New South Wales in 1977, Jim Fitzpatrick presented a paper on 'The Spectrum of Australian Bicycle Racing: 1890-1900', and on the same program, Helen King presented a paper on 'The Sexual Politics of Sport: An Australian Perspective', which included a small section on women and cycling.<sup>1</sup> The only other ASSH conference to feature a paper on cycling was in Brisbane in 1995, when Clare Simpson outlined her doctoral research on women's cycling in New Zealand.<sup>2</sup> Published works on the topic have also been few and far between, with Fitzpatrick's *The Bicycle and the Bush*, and Geoffrey Blainey's *Jumping Over the Wheel*, a history of the Pacific Dunlop company, standing out in a very small field.<sup>3</sup> In terms of *women* and cycling, Penny Russell's excellent discussion of the relationship between the 'New Woman', femininity and cycling in New South Wales at the turn of the century is perhaps the best example of work in the field outside the realm of Australian sports history studies.<sup>4</sup>

While additional studies which address the historical and social development of cycling in Australia might go some way to filling significant gaps in the literature, the results of such further research may well be problematic. Most histories of particular sports tend to have a linear focus, and the evolution of a particular sporting activity is usually presented in isolation from competing or complementary organised leisure pursuits. Thus, the relationship between one activity and another is usually neglected, even though particular sports may share the same

facilities, compete for a common audience and revenue base, or in some cases exchange playing personnel. When such associations are ignored, opportunities presented by a cross-sport analysis are lost. Fresh lines of enquiry can therefore be generated by an examination of the relationships between different sports and, as a consequence, different questions become paramount. For instance, how might administrators react in situations where new sports threaten their power and significance? Are older, more 'traditional' sports forced to redefine themselves when threatened by the emergence of new sporting fads? In what way have multi-sport venues developed in response to the competing demands of a variety of sports and leisure activities? The histories of particular sports therefore have substantial scope to be enriched by an examination of their association with other sporting activities. It is with such an approach in mind that this article sets out to analyse the relationship between cycling and Australian Rules football in colonial Melbourne. Given that a number of other books provide much more detailed accounts of the development of Australian Rules football than can be offered in this article, it is appropriate to provide some brief descriptive narrative on the history of cycling as background material before the relationship between the two activities is discussed.<sup>5</sup>

### The Velocipede

There were three boom periods for cycling in Australia during the nineteenth century, each of them varying in length and significance. The initial craze for cycling began in the 1860s with the invention of the velocipede and peaked around 1872. The velocipede made its first appearance on the streets of Melbourne in 1868, and on 10 July 1869, just a week after the Melbourne Velocipede Club was formed, a crowd of 12 000 'curious spectators' gathered to watch races held for these machines on the perimeter of the Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG).<sup>6</sup> Women, as well as men, were captivated by the new machine and just a few months after these races, the *Australasian* recorded that a number of females in Collingwood had also participated in cycling contests, held as part of a local athletic sports meeting. It is notable, however, that they were censured by the press for daring to be involved in a 'struggle in which their good sense and feminine instincts might have told them they should never have engaged'.<sup>7</sup>

These events occurred in 1869, the first year that a football match was permitted on the Melbourne Cricket Ground. The Trustees of the ground

were beginning to take a more pragmatic attitude towards who could, and could not, make use of the oval and its amenities, and the ground was slowly becoming a multi-sport facility. Such developments were not without opposition, as there were those in the older, more established cricket clubs who wanted to preserve the 'hallowed turf' for cricketers only.<sup>8</sup> In terms of the relationship between various sports, the role of Trusts and Trustees deserve further attention, for these 'middlemen' played a key role in determining what sporting facilities would be made available to particular groups in society.

### The High Wheeler

The next boom period for cycling occurred in the late 1870s and early 1880s with the advent of the high wheeler, also known as the 'ordinary', or the penny farthing. As popular advertising posters for an American firm, the Pope Manufacturing Company, show, the heavy, cumbersome and expensive velocipede was quickly superseded by the sleek, superior high wheeler. The 'ordinary' was quickly adopted as the new, easy, relatively cheap form of transport, marking a new way of life for some people, particularly young males, who rapidly formed themselves into clubs for mutual enjoyment and protection.<sup>9</sup>

On the local scene, the first penny farthing was imported into Melbourne in 1875 and the Melbourne Bicycle Club was formed three years later, quickly becoming the centre for cycling in Australia.<sup>10</sup> During this period, high wheeler races were usually run in connection with other athletic sports, and it was not until 1880 that a *bona fide* penny farthing race meeting was held.<sup>11</sup> A few years later the Austral Wheel Race at the MCG became the Melbourne Cup of the cycling fraternity, and large amounts of prize money were offered to contestants at annual meetings from 1886 to 1910. At the first race on 30 January 1886, 144 entries were received for the event, and first prize was listed as a grand piano valued at 80 guineas.<sup>12</sup> Many members of the Melbourne Cricket Club were horrified when the event began to attract not only professional cyclists from all around the world, but also a large number of bookmakers, with the atmosphere at the ground more akin to that of a racetrack than that of a stately cricket oval.<sup>13</sup> It is significant in terms of arguments developed later in this article that even though the Austral was a summer event, cycling itself was a year round leisure activity, patronised increasingly by a wide cross section of society.

While a thorough examination of primary sources for the 1880s would reveal much more detail, a selected range of secondary material clearly indicates that cycling met with opposition from some sections of society, and in several cases the activity distracted many young males from participation in older, more established sports. The rise of a new sport thus presented a clear challenge to those who wanted to preserve the popularity of more familiar sporting activities. Geelong Grammar School, for instance, formed a bicycle club in 1881 and the teachers expressed their concern that such a club was a threat to the traditional team sports of football, rowing and cricket. An even more serious objection, according to the school magazine, was that 'boys in bicycles are practically out of control of the school'.<sup>14</sup> In this respect, the more individualistic sport of cycling may have represented something of an unruly alternative to the prevailing 'cult of games' and the ethos of muscular Christianity, which had permeated most private schools in Melbourne during the late nineteenth century. As Martin Crotty points out in his study of public school ideology and sport, team games were considered to be 'of superior moral value to individual pursuits ... because the latter involved struggling for one's own glory'.<sup>15</sup> The collective goals of the team or school were therefore compromised by the pursuit of more singular sporting activities. Moreover, the requirement for a suitable and often expensive machine, rather than the basic equipment of bat and ball required for team games, also had the potential to set the activity of cycling apart from the ethos surrounding many traditional sports in elite educational institutions. The bicycle's role in school settings has received scant attention from historians and further investigation of cycling in this context would be worthwhile.

### **The Safety Bicycle**

Although some women also took to the ordinary, and tricycle races were held for women in South Australia in 1885, many long-standing objections to female involvement in cycling were swept aside with the invention of the pneumatic tyre in 1888 and its application to the safety bicycle during the early 1890s.<sup>16</sup> The widespread popularity and availability of the safety bicycle thus created the third and biggest boom for cycling, not only in Melbourne, but throughout the industrialised world.

The pneumatic tyre first reached Melbourne in 1890. Although the safety bicycle with its air-filled tyres was initially more expensive than the high wheeler with its solid tyres, within two years sales of the new machine began to overtake those of the 'ordinary'. Thus, despite the

impact of a severe economic depression in Australia during the first half of the decade, bicycle production increased markedly. Given that the Victorian Government was a strong supporter of protectionism, it therefore made good sense for the Dunlop Company to import the raw materials for assembly in Melbourne, rather than attract an import duty of about 30 per cent on bicycles manufactured overseas.<sup>17</sup> It is not surprising that sales of the safety bicycle soon increased to the point where by 1894, there were 8000 cyclists in the city alone, and supply could not keep up with demand. By the following year, however, the bicycle manufacturing industry throughout the world had responded to the seemingly insatiable desire for new machines. Production increased to such an extent that supply quickly exceeded demand and the price of the safety bicycle began to fall accordingly. In Victoria, where local supplies were still limited, the League of Australian Wheelmen exerted sufficient pressure on the government for the tariff on bicycles imported from overseas to be reduced by 20 per cent.<sup>18</sup> As a consequence, towards the end of 1895 safety bicycles were selling in Melbourne at their lowest price to that point — £16 10s — far less than the purchase and upkeep of a horse. Given the strong second hand market, prices were soon within the purchasing range of the majority of working class men and women.<sup>19</sup>

By 1895 the safety bicycle was fast approaching the peak of its popularity, as both males and females throughout the world now realised the benefits that the relatively inexpensive new machine could bring to work as well as to leisure. Newspapers could no longer ignore the phenomenon, and as the editor of the *Australian Cyclist* observed:

In this colony at least, cycling has had but poor recognition from the daily press. Of late, however, the dailies have been forced to notice the tremendous hold that cycling has gained, and for the public interest it has been found necessary to give the pastime more than passing notice.<sup>20</sup>

By the following year, 31 cycling clubs had affiliated with the League of Victorian Wheelmen, an organisation first formed in November 1893. It should be noted that, as with similar bodies overseas, the focus of this group was less on recreational touring and more on the racing potential of the machine.<sup>21</sup>

But how deeply had bicycle mania permeated Melbourne during the 1890s? One newspaper report suggested that the bicycle should be part of the 'new' national coat of arms.<sup>22</sup> Other enthusiasts wanted to write songs

about the marvellous new machine.<sup>23</sup> Specialist cycling magazines, such as the *Australian Cyclist*, declared their faith in 'the freemasonry of the wheel' and promoted all aspects of the activity with almost evangelical zeal.<sup>24</sup> Certainly an increasing number of entrepreneurs realised that there was money to be made from the popularity of the bicycle, and it was common for existing businesses, many with no direct connection to cycling (such as booksellers or piano dealers), to become agents for particular brands.<sup>25</sup> Thus while the initial impetus behind the formation of cycling clubs in Melbourne may have come from young men intent on seeing how fast and how far they could ride, the wider uses of the bicycle for transport and recreation soon broadened the attraction of cycling for a significant cross section of the community.

As in the previous two boom periods, the more well-to-do sections of society were eager to embrace the new technology that the bicycle represented, and the opportunity it provided for the conspicuous display of wealth must have been an incentive for some groups and individuals to take up cycling. For example, 'Nearly all the medical profession ... [were] members of the Victorian Cycling Tourists' Club', and their weekend exploits, including lengthy trips to the countryside, were recorded in the social columns of the Melbourne press.<sup>26</sup> Vice-regal patronage of the safety bicycle was also important for the respectability of cycling as an activity, and the trials and tribulations of the plutocratic Governor, Lord Brassey, and his wife, as they cycled the sometimes hazardous streets of the city, were noted with delight by *Melbourne Punch*.<sup>27</sup> When they visited the Austral Wheel Race for the first time in 1895, they 'were greeted with enthusiastic cheers' and entertained in the members' pavilion by the officers of the Melbourne Bicycle Club. As the Governor explained:

Lady Brassey and I do a little cycling and therefore take a special interest in watching the contests. We are delighted to notice the admirable manner in which the racing is being conducted, the extreme fairness of the contests and the evident desire of each cyclist to win. So long as the pastime is conducted in such a fair and honourable way it will always command the approval of the public.<sup>28</sup>

Given that football clubs were also keen to encourage vice-regal patronage of their activities, it was not surprising that Lord and Lady Brassey were also feted by football officials during the 1896 season.

## Women and Cycling

Women in Melbourne also took up cycling with relish, and as has been noted in much of the secondary literature, the invention of the drop-frame bicycle and the adoption of rational dress for female cyclists proved to be a significant liberating force for women, not only in the context of sport and recreation, but in society as a whole.<sup>29</sup> As Jennifer Hargreaves explains, the activity of cycling not only quickened a revolution in social relationships, but it also ‘accelerated ... a process of reappraisal of women’s potential for physical and bodily freedom which various forms of games-playing and sports carried forward into the twentieth century’.<sup>30</sup> However, media representations of the female cyclist were somewhat ambiguous, and as Penny Russell correctly points out, all these developments took place within broader debates concerning the limitations of the physiological and reproductive female body.<sup>31</sup>

The Sydney Ladies’ Bicycle Club, formed on 6 February 1895, appears to have been the first club for female cyclists in Australia, and its profile was boosted by the exploits of the captain of the club, Mrs. E A Maddock, the first woman to ride overland between Sydney and Melbourne, and between Sydney and Brisbane.<sup>32</sup> The popularity of the bicycle for women in Melbourne was reflected in a full page sketch in the *Illustrated Australian News* which depicted ‘The Cult of the Modern Maid’. In the illustration, females clad in rational dress kneel in worship at the foot of a bicycle altar, while in the accompanying poetry by J H Wagner, changing attitudes toward the female form are reflected in the claim that:

The girl who owns a shapely limb,  
That might inspire a poet,  
No more her pride is forced to hide,  
She lets the whole world know it.<sup>33</sup>

The ladies of the Austral Wheel Club had their first ‘run’ through the streets of Melbourne in March 1895.<sup>34</sup> However, given that the debate over rational dress was far from resolved, it is noteworthy that a Mrs MacDonald wrote to *The Australian Cyclist* a week later and complained that ‘lady cyclists ... [were] still subject to insulting remarks whilst riding in and around the city’.<sup>35</sup> For some women, cycling was one means of transgressing a largely male public domain. Accordingly, the way in which they attained a new found mobility and occupied public space worked to challenge, if not break down, the traditions of the dominant Victorian moral order.<sup>36</sup>

## Bicycle Mania and the Split

It is against such a backdrop that the influence of the cycling phenomenon on a number of sporting activities can be better understood. While the mass appeal and the multi-purpose use of the bicycle affected both summer and winter leisure pursuits throughout Victoria, the remainder of this article will focus specifically on the impact of the cycling craze on Australian Rules football in Melbourne. As noted in the introduction, many sports histories have lacked a comparative analysis in terms of different sporting pursuits, and the significant impact of one sporting activity upon another has often been ignored. The obvious example in terms of the southern states of Australia is football and cricket-traditional winter and summer sports that have usually shared the same grounds and amenities on a formal basis since at least 1875. Rarely are these two sporting activities, and their relationship and impact on each other, examined together. Geographical/historical/spatial analyses of sport, as exemplified in European studies by John Bale, have thus been rare in an Australian context, although they do represent a potentially fruitful line of inquiry.<sup>37</sup>

More specifically, this section explores how the established sport of Australian Rules football dealt with the rise of a new sport. Many officials and writers in the press were concerned about the damage which might be done to the local game, and there was an explicit fear that the popularity of cycling would diminish the already dwindling attendances at football matches in Melbourne. As a case study, the juxtaposition of the cycling craze with the circumstances surrounding the schism which created two rival football bodies in October 1896 says much about the relationship between the disparate sporting activities.

The extent of the popularity of cycling as a weekend social activity was particularly evident in Melbourne during 1895 and 1896, as many football scribes began to pass comment on the new social phenomenon. For example, 'Kickero', writing for the *Herald*, sounded a note of warning when he admitted that the 1896 season was 'not being ushered in with that flourish of trumpets', partly because 'cycling has caught on with such a strong grip'.<sup>38</sup> A few months later, it was evident that cyclists had not abandoned football altogether, for it was observed in the *Sportsman* that 'bicyclists are to be seen in large numbers at football matches every Saturday'.<sup>39</sup> Some commentators even took to describing the results of football games in terms of cycling terminology. In the *Sportsman*, for

example, the victorious Essendon team were described as playing like 'well regulated machinery ... like a properly adjusted bicycle'.<sup>40</sup> Moreover, it seems that some clubs made deliberate attempts to accommodate those spectators who preferred the new mode of transport, for it was claimed that there was now storage space for 1000 bicycles at the South Melbourne ground.<sup>41</sup>

*Melbourne Punch* often commented on the social aspects of sport and leisure in the town and it is not surprising that it chose to reflect on what were new expressions of tribal affiliations to various teams. As the writer explains:

A number of cyclists rode to a football match last Saturday on brilliantly enamelled orange yellow cycles and wore black and yellow rosettes [Richmond colours] in their buttonholes.<sup>42</sup>

Hence, fans were now dressing up their bicycles in club colours, and the machines themselves were becoming means of expressing loyalty to teams and suburbs. But the social activities of cyclists from particular suburbs also impinged on and had a negative effect on the popularity of Australian Rules football at a number of levels. Bicycle clubs formed on district lines, for instance, often played football matches against one another, perhaps as an alternative to watching their own teams play. For example, the Fitzroy and Richmond Bicycle Clubs played a game of football against each other on a Saturday afternoon in August 1894.<sup>43</sup> During the following year, a series of football games were played between various suburban cycling clubs, with some of the matches attracting large crowds and extensive reports in the cycling press.

The Richmond Bicycle Club (as distinct from the Richmond Cycling Club) was particularly active in staging football games. For instance, its match against the South Melbourne Cycling Club, played at the Richmond Cricket Ground, attracted a 'large attendance' and the game was followed by dancing, singing, recitations and 'a splendid tea' in the Richmond Bicycle Club rooms.<sup>44</sup> Rather than attend Association games as spectators, it seems some bicycle club members preferred to play matches among their peers.

By 1896, the peak of the cycling boom throughout the world, it seems evident that the popularity of cycling was having a direct impact on crowd attendances at Association games. In summing up the season, 'Drop Kick', bemoaned the new craze, and reflected on the trend away from sports spectatorship.

VALE, 1896! The End of the Year ... The attendances have not been very large and some clubs have lost pretty heavily owing to the small 'gates'. Cycling has claimed an immense number who have hitherto favoured football, and this, I think, can scarcely be wondered at, for men rather prefer to make their own pleasure — by pedalling on their bikes in this reasoning — than in looking at others making it for them.<sup>45</sup>

'Skipper', in his column, 'Sport and Play', also observed that:

Football is undoubtedly the winter pastime most suited to Victorians. They love the manly game, for its exhilarating and exciting points are just to their liking. It has been said that cycling would take thousands away from the football matches on Saturday afternoons, but from what I can see the bicycle is being largely used by football enthusiasts as a means of taking them to the grounds. Football has come to stay, it has become thoroughly established, and I think I am expressing the opinion of the general public when I say that we have not yet seen a winter pastime which is likely to replace it.<sup>46</sup>

But he was less optimistic a month later when football crowds seemed to be in decline:

What has come over football this season? First of all the bicycle has cut in and taken thousands away from the football grounds, then some of the critics in the daily Press seem to take every opportunity to write the pastime down, and some of these gentry have even had the audacity to predict its early demise.<sup>47</sup>

Many football writers were of the opinion that the game was under threat, and it was evident that on some occasions spectators preferred to watch cyclists in action rather than give their support to teams in the increasingly troubled Association. An acrimonious split between Association clubs at the end of the 1896 season resulted in the formation of the rival League competition. 'Drop Kick', writing in the *Sportsman*, blamed low attendances at the opening round in 1897 not on the rift between the Association and the League, but on the fact that 'Admission to the cycle sports at St Kilda was free on Saturday'. He added that as a consequence there were '... not so many at the football matches'.<sup>48</sup>

On a more mundane level, and in a somewhat more humorous vein, 'Drop Kick' also noted that the activity of cycling was having a physical

impact on some football officials. In this case, the writer took some delight in describing how William Molyneaux, who was to have umpired the game between Port Melbourne and Williamstown, was unable to do so, owing to a bicycle accident:

Molyneaux the association umpire injured himself last week while cycling. He fell in front of something under a dozen wheelmen on St Kilda road. Then followed a scrimmage, with Molyneaux underneath. His cry of 'ball up' was quite natural under the circumstances, but nobody heeded it. Billy could not act on Saturday owing to the injury.<sup>49</sup>

Furthermore, in a somewhat ironic twist to the situation where clubs were losing spectators and players to the new fad, some clubs were able to recruit well known cyclists as footballers.<sup>50</sup> Most of these athletes were no doubt reasonably fit from their year round endeavours, but their physique may not have necessarily suited the rigours of Australian Rules football. Other sports enthusiasts wanted to combine the activities in a more direct manner. In the summer, for example, a group of cricketers, proposed the formation of 'nomadic' clubs, with matches to be arranged in the outer suburbs of Melbourne. After the game, players would then 'have the option of a spin home for a late dinner or tea at one of the cyclists' hotels and a ride home in the moonlight'.<sup>51</sup> The footballing fraternity was quick to follow their lead, as it was reported in June 1897 that 'about a dozen South players and supporters travelled to Geelong on Saturday on bikes, and arrived home about four o'clock on Monday'.<sup>52</sup> Earlier in the decade, one Geelong player managed to combine football and cycling on a regular basis. Angus Greenfield distinguished himself not only as a talented young ruckman in the VFA, but as the Australian half-mile cycling champion. According to club historian Russell Stephens, Greenfield moved to Ballarat after completing his schooling in Geelong, and for three years he cycled from Ballarat to either Geelong or Melbourne to take his place in the team.<sup>53</sup> Such examples of devotion to the new machine continued for most of the middle part of the decade, with bicycle mania affecting spectators, officials and players, and developments debated keenly by the press, which continued to play a significant role as advocates of public opinion.

Reference to cycling in Ballarat is also noteworthy for another reason. After the creation of the Victorian Football League in 1896, the Ballarat Football Association was faced with the dilemma of deciding whether to

follow the VFA's lead in having eighteen players per side, or the new League's stipulation that twenty players should be allowed on the field. The evidence indicates that the activity of cycling played a role in the decision. Ballarat's main football venue, the Eastern Oval, had been reduced in size by the installation of a banked cycling track, and therefore it was speculated that a smaller sized team, and the concomitant rules, would best suit the style of game played in Ballarat.<sup>54</sup> Both Ballarat and Bendigo eventually favoured the eighteen player team format, with the VFL themselves adopting this model in 1899.<sup>55</sup>

The reduction in the size of football grounds due to the installation of cycling tracks also affected teams in Melbourne. The newly formed Victorian Football League experimented with a number of different formats for finals matches in its early years, and individual clubs were often dissatisfied with the often *ad hoc* arrangements made by the League. At the end of the 1898 season Essendon opposed the choice of the St Kilda ground as a venue for its Grand Final against Fitzroy. According to the *Leader* newspaper, Essendon's objection was valid, not only because the ground had just been top dressed for the cricket season, but because the oval was 'surrounded by one of those abominations — an asphalt cycling track', creating an undue risk of injury for players.<sup>56</sup> The match went ahead at the last moment, but the activity of cycling had clearly created a problem for the League on this occasion.

In this context it is important to note that the accommodation of different sports within the one arena can obviously alter the dimension and the potential use of that facility. For instance, Richard Cashman points out that the addition of an asphalt cycling track to the perimeter of the Sydney Cricket Ground affected crowd behaviour at the oval in small but significant ways. Not only were spectators pushed further back from the on-field action, removing them from more intimate contact with the players, but during a Test match in 1903 bottles were thrown and smashed on the sloping track during a crowd disturbance.<sup>57</sup>

Conflicts between facility managers and sports officials who were torn between maximising revenue and placating the needs of spectators and participants from various activities were not confined to Australian circumstances. Kenth Sjöblom, for example, drawing on the work of John Bale, explains how the spatial development of competitive cycling at this time in Finland was also hampered by a lack of suitable facilities for racing and the need for amenities to be shared with other sports. The

struggle to construct a purpose-built velodrome in Helsinki thus represents an important bifurcation in the perceived relationship of cycling with other sports in that particular urban environment, a development that seemed slower to emerge in Melbourne at the turn of the century.<sup>58</sup>

### Football and Cycling

While the above discussion outlines some of the perceived negative effects of cycling on Australian Rules football, a case can be made that the two activities were, in fact, of mutual benefit to each other. A closer examination of the problems surrounding football in Melbourne will therefore illuminate this argument, especially when such developments are situated within the broader debate about the social role of the bicycle in industrialised society.

Recent histories of the code have noted that football in Melbourne during the 1890s was at a particularly low ebb and many of the social tensions arising from a severely depressed economy were evident in standards of behaviour both on and off the field. It is therefore not surprising that the game was under close scrutiny from the press and the public as unruly crowds, violent play, creeping professionalism, high stakes gambling and an increasing gap between rich and poor clubs precipitated a crisis which only a schism in the Victorian Football Association (VFA) could resolve.<sup>59</sup>

Not only was football in Melbourne having difficulty adapting to the impact of wider social forces, the code was also in danger of self-destructing. Club rivalries, threats of umpire strike action, and the trenchant attitude of some administrators, particularly in response to increasingly violent incidents at football matches, threatened to make relationships between clubs in the VFA untenable.<sup>60</sup> Given that the growing importance of other leisure activities and sports, and their inter-relationship with Australian Rules football, has been overlooked in most secondary sources, a closer analysis of cycling and its impact on Australian Rules football may offer not only clearer insights into the development of particular sporting activities, but may also assist in formulating a better understanding of society in Melbourne during the late nineteenth century.

In the volatile environment of the 1890s, football administrators were somewhat mixed in their response to the phenomenon of cycling. Such was the strength of the mania, however, that few players, spectators or officials were unaffected by the impact of the bicycle on social life in

Melbourne during this period. A number of press reports illustrate various aspects of the impact of the cycling craze on Australian Rules football. Material drawn from football club documents also demonstrates that the mania for bicycles had a direct influence on the financial affairs of particular football clubs. For example, the financial statement in the Collingwood Football Club *Annual Report* of 1895 demonstrates that cycling had become so popular in the suburb that almost 30 per cent of the club's gross receipts for the season were raised not by football-related activities, but by the club's cycling carnival — a clear example of one club that embraced the craze rather than resisting it.<sup>61</sup> While Stremski notes that the net profit from the event was, in fact, quite small, the club continued to receive rental from various cycling groups who made use of the track over the next two years.<sup>62</sup> More importantly, perhaps, the cycling carnival generated considerable publicity for the nascent football club, with an extensive report, a full-page photographic spread, and a complete list of results subsequently appearing in Melbourne's leading cycling magazine.<sup>63</sup> Collingwood, like a number of other Australian Rules clubs, was quick to capitalise on, and work with, cycling clubs which wished to use the facilities that football and cricket grounds could offer. In 1894, the Victoria Park Cyclists Racing Club, in collaboration with the local council, organised the 'relaying' of the cycling track around the perimeter of the Collingwood ground, and the gravel surface remained a feature of the oval until 1920.<sup>64</sup> Footscray Football Club also hosted bicycle racing at its ground during Easter 1894, although the races did not take place on an asphalt track.<sup>65</sup> Two years later the club considered installing a more permanent track as part of a significant overhaul of facilities at the ground.<sup>66</sup>

The track at the St Kilda ground, laid in October 1893, was much admired by cyclists on account of its banked asphalt surface and its size. Moreover, according to the *Australian Cyclist*, the initiative to lay the track came from the St Kilda Cricket Club, which agreed to build the track if cyclists would guarantee £100 for the project. As the *Australian Cyclist* reported:

The idea was to get 100 cyclists to agree to pay the above club one guinea on completion of the track. Besides having the use of the track and pavilion at all times for training purposes, each guarantor of one guinea would be entitled to admission, together with two ladies, to all events, including bicycle

meetings, football matches etc., held on the ground during the year.<sup>67</sup>

The project had no trouble finding guarantors, and on at least one occasion the St Kilda Bicycle Club held its open mile (amateur) handicap at the ground during the interval of the football match.<sup>68</sup> Moreover, according to club historians Jules Feldmann and Russell Holmesby, some of the footballers themselves used the track to maintain aspects of their fitness.<sup>69</sup> With such excellent facilities it is no surprise that by 1897 the St Kilda Bicycle Club was hailed as 'the leading amateur club of Melbourne'.<sup>70</sup>

Fitzpatrick makes the point that similar links between football and cycling clubs also existed in Western Australia, for the financial benefits to be gained by the those governing the grounds was often quite substantial. Given that football and cricket ovals were the optimum shape and size for racing, it is not surprising that the activity of cycling was closely linked to many grounds in both urban and rural areas throughout Australia.<sup>71</sup>

In Melbourne, however, administrators and the press were sometimes divided regarding whether or not the cycling craze was good for football. As always, a certain amount of boosterism was at play, with some apologists for football denying the impact of the bicycle on the code, and others declaring that the popularity of cycling was having a detrimental effect on crowd numbers. A match report on the South Melbourne-Essendon game by 'Dropkick' captures some of the ambivalent attitude towards the new leisure activity:

So keen was the interest that even the festive cyclist, who usually whizzes out into the country on Saturday afternoons, wheeled into the ground to watch the war. Football has not lost its attractiveness.<sup>72</sup>

### **An Urban Paradox**

Aspects of this commentary also reflect what Richard Harmond has called a paradox in the way the bicycle was received in western industrialised society. In summary, Harmond suggests that the growth and development of cycling has traditionally been placed in an urban context. The bicycle was the epitome of an urban machine in an age where people were seeking maximum efficiency in their workplace and lifestyle. Constantly exposed to unprecedented manifestations of technology, people soon learnt to embrace new inventions such as the

telephone, the sewing machine, and the bicycle. It was urbanised industrial centres that were able to produce mass quantities of these goods, and the safety bicycle was manufactured in huge numbers at the peak of its boom. The paradox Harmond points to is that while, on the one hand, the bicycle represented the benefits of technological progress and typified the refinements of civilised existence, on the other hand it was the means of escape from a tension-prone industrialised society. The activity of cycling into the countryside can thus be portrayed as representing flight from the detrimental effects of life in the city, and as Harmond claims, it was this activity that became an emotional palliative for urban problems.<sup>73</sup>

In the Australian context, it is this aspect of the bicycle's development that writers such as Fitzpatrick fail to adequately address, for in his case the focus was intentionally on the rural aspects of the activity — the relationship of 'the bicycle and the bush'.<sup>74</sup> From a close reading of the specialist cycling magazines and from commentary in the press, it is evident that the purpose of cycling was a contentious issue for a great number of city-dwellers. For many, the bicycle offered a means of escape from the city and the pressures of urban life, but for others the quest for speed was more important, and there was something of a split among the cycling fraternity on these opposing objectives. An editorial in the *Australian Cyclist*, for example, lamented that many cycling groups were becoming sporting clubs and not social clubs, with the object of the former being road racing and a quest for speed. Therefore 'instead of meeting on Saturday afternoons, and combining in a pleasant run into the country, the club is attending to road racing'.<sup>75</sup> The 'unattached' touring cyclist was thus 'isolated', according to the editorial, and the cycling fraternity consequently risked fragmentation.<sup>76</sup> A few months later, the situation seemed to have worsened somewhat, as the following editorial makes clear:

The very name of a cycling club has an odour of 'race' or 'scorch' about it, and if an unattached cyclist were invited to join a club he would almost look upon it with contempt. Cycling in Melbourne is not represented at all. The unattached are the great body of cyclists, and the club members are a mere handful.<sup>77</sup>

Importantly, this split also had a gender dimension, for the social uses of the bicycle were clearly a liberating force for females. As Richard Cashman points out, the leisure activity of cycling was much more socially acceptable

than many other strenuous sports, and the bicycle provided women with not only greater mobility, but ‘increased access to public space’.<sup>78</sup> At a practical level, women were able to use the machine for everyday transport, while some females took their passion for cycling more seriously, participating in a number of arduous intercolonial bicycle tours, although as Fitzpatrick acknowledges, these endurance rides by women never received the publicity or support they deserved.<sup>79</sup> By way of contrast, though, it should be noted that the experience of women who were now able to travel independently from one suburb or town to another represented a form of mobility which, according to Penny Russell, ‘would be the most lasting legacy of cycling for women’.<sup>80</sup>

As mentioned previously, cycling was also liberating for women in other ways, particularly in regard to rational dress and the development of the ‘New Woman’ social movement at the turn of the century. However it was the romance and the freedom of a trip to more rustic surroundings that inspired both men and women to sing the praises of ‘the steed that tired not’. In the pages of the specialist cycling magazines, for example, poetry often summed up the allure of an escape to the countryside for harried office-workers:

Away from the office and desk at last,  
The business-haunted room.  
The roar of a city, hurrying past,  
The heat, the worry, the gloom;  
To the glorious red of the sun-set sky,  
The sweet cold wine of the air,  
On the frozen road, my wheel and I,  
A dusty, dusty pair.<sup>81</sup>

The theme is repeated constantly in the contemporary literature, and this belief in the resuscitative powers of cycling to the countryside is reflected in the views of the editor of the *Review of Reviews*:

Cycling is an ennobling art; it takes the weary worker out among the green fields and to quiet places where he can *live* and breathe the pure air and find time to realise what a *soul* is [Emphasis in the original].<sup>82</sup>

These sentiments were shared by the editor of the *Australian Cyclist*, which proudly proclaimed that:

People of all ages, without regard to sex, have taken to the wheel, because it enables them to enjoy the very essence of

life — fresh air and invigorating exercise, besides being an additional incentive to travel. The workman values the wheeling convenience which allows him to reside in a distant suburb away from the closeness and smoky atmosphere of the city.<sup>83</sup>

Thus the popularity of the urban machine was enhanced by its ability to transport workers away from urban surrounds. This not only reflected an anti-modernist tendency which accentuated the social benefits of participation above the spectator appeal of sporting events, but it was also one means by which the yearning for bucolic surroundings could be satisfied, and the increasingly sharp divide between country and city life mollified, at least in a symbolic way. As explained previously, while the bicycle itself had broad appeal, it is clear that many cycling enthusiasts, both male and female, were formerly keen followers of Australian Rules football who were now attracted to a leisure activity that enhanced their lifestyle and gave them a new sense of freedom.

### Conclusions

It needs to be re-iterated that the relationship between cycling and football in colonial Melbourne had a number of dimensions. At one level it can be suggested that the more modernist features of cycling presented little threat to the popularity of football. Cycling as a mode of transport to football venues, the decoration of bicycles in club colours, the staging of cycling carnivals for the entertainment of football patrons, and the leasing out of football grounds for cycling activities, could all be seen as conducive to the survival of the game as a commercial venture during the depression of the 1890s. However, it has been demonstrated that the more anti-modernist aspects of cycling culture did have a notable influence on the sporting milieu in which football developed in Melbourne, particularly during the peak of the cycling boom in 1895 and 1896. The desire of cyclists to escape urban life, to enjoy invigorating exercise instead of passive spectatorship, and the manifold attractions of the bicycle for women, who had traditionally made up a significant proportion of crowds at Australian Rules football, not only undermined the economic viability of football in troubled times, but acted as important signifiers of changing social paradigms.

Australian Rules football was certainly undergoing a number of significant transitions during this period, and competition from other leisure activities such as cycling, and later on sports such as lacrosse and

rugby, which had a direct impact on the popularity of the game and the numbers of spectators attending, must have been of concern to football administrators, as the press reports make clear. How these threats were dealt with is, therefore, an important aspect of how Australian Rules football developed, particularly given that the split between the VFA and the VFL occurred at the absolute peak of the cycling craze. If these wider social forces are ignored and the focus is too narrowly applied to the internal workings of one sport, or one code, then historians will miss some important opportunities for a better understanding not only of sport in general, but of society as a whole.

#### NOTES:

- 1 Both these papers were subsequently published in R Cashman and M McKernan, eds, *Sport in History*, UQP, Brisbane, 1979.
- 2 This paper was subsequently published. See C Simpson, 'The Development of Women's Cycling in Late Nineteenth Century New Zealand', in J Nauright, ed., *Sport, Power and Society in New Zealand: Historical and Contemporary Perspectives*, ASSH, Sydney, 1995, pp. 21-45.
- 3 See J Fitzpatrick, *The Bicycle and the Bush: Man and Machine in Rural Australia*, OUP, Melbourne, 1980, and G Blainey, *Jumping Over the Wheel*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, 1993.
- 4 P Russell, 'Recycling Femininity: Old Ladies and New Women', *Australian Cultural History*, no. 13, 1994, pp. 31-51.
- 5 An earlier draft of this paper was presented at 'Sporting Traditions XI', the biennial conference of ASSH held in Perth, July 1997. The author would like to acknowledge the helpful suggestions made by ASSH members at the conference. Dr Bill Murray, Dr Richard Baka, Dr Dennis Hemphill and Robin Grow also offered comments on the penultimate draft of the paper.
- 6 K Dunstan, *Sports*, Sun Books, Melbourne, 1981, p. 205. The Melbourne Velocipede Club was formed on 3 July 1869. See *Australasian*, 3 July 1869.
- 7 *Australasian*, 4 Sept. 1869, cited in R Grow, Untitled manuscript dealing with sport in colonial Melbourne, c 1996.
- 8 For details of the first football match on the MCG, see H C A Harrison's account in A Mancini and G M Hibbins, eds, *Running With the Ball*, Lynedoch Publications, Melbourne, 1987, p. 125.
- 9 For discussion of this point, and information on how posters were used to advertise bicycles, see J Rennert, *100 Years of Bicycle Posters*, Harper and Row, New York, 1973, p. 3.
- 10 Dunstan, *Sports*, p. 206. A brief history of the Melbourne Bicycle Club is provided in *Australian Cycling Annual*, vol. I, no. 1, 1897, pp. 180-90. For information on the early development of cycling in New South Wales, where the Sydney Bicycle Club was inaugurated in September 1879, see the *Australian Cycling Annual*, vol. I, no. 1, 1897, pp. 78-101. The author would like to thank the staff of the Melbourne Cricket Club library for providing access to nineteenth century cycling material used in research for this article.
- 11 *Australian Cycling Annual*, vol. I, no. 1, 1897, p. 149.
- 12 Dunstan, *Sports*, p. 212. See also, K Dunstan, *The Paddock That Grew: The Story of the Melbourne Cricket Club*, Hutchinson Australia, Surry Hills, 1988, pp. 82-3. Recent evidence suggests that the race received its official title only in 1887. See

- Donna Rae Szalinski, 'Austral Wheelrace', in W Vamplew, K Moore, J O'Hara, R Cashman and I Jobling, eds, *Oxford Companion to Australian Sport*, OUP, Melbourne, 2nd ed., 1994, p. 27.
- 13 According to one specialist cycling magazine, 'the betting indulged in was a perfect disgrace, and competitors were harassed on their way from the dressing rooms to the track by bookmakers, some of whose characters can be questioned'. *Australian Cyclist*, vol. I, no. 13, 30 Nov. 1893, pp. 1-2. See also Dunstan, *Sports*, p. 212, and Jim Fitzpatrick, 'The Spectrum of Australian Bicycle Racing: 1890-1900', in Cashman and McKernan, *Sport in History*, pp. 332-5, for comments on the impact of gambling on bicycle races. The financial success of the Austral Wheel Race also prompted later calls for the Melbourne Bicycle Club 'to secure a suitable piece of ground and lay down a proper three-lap track', since the MCG did not have suitable embankments or a lengthy straight for cycling races. *Illustrated Australian News*, 1 Jan. 1896.
  - 14 *Geelong Grammar School Quarterly*, July 1881, cited in Dunstan, *Sports*, p. 203.
  - 15 M Crotty, 'Waxing Lyrical: Poetry and Song and the Public School Ideology of Sport in Late Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Australia', in S Creak *et al.*, *Polemics, Poetics and Play: Essays in Nineteenth and Early Twentieth Century Sporting History*, Department of History, University of Melbourne, Melbourne, 1997, p. 118.
  - 16 Dunstan, *Sports*, p. 209. The first safety bicycle was imported from England to Australia in 1886. See Fitzpatrick, 'Spectrum', p. 326. For the best account of the invention and development of the pneumatic tyre, see Blainey, *Jumping Over the Wheel*, ch. 1.
  - 17 Blainey, *Jumping Over the Wheel*, pp. 12-13.
  - 18 *Australian Cyclist*, vol. II, no. 50, 15 Aug. 1895, p. 13.
  - 19 For cycling advertisements and the price range for safety bicycles at this time, see, for example, *Australian Cyclist*, vol. II, no. 48, 1 Aug. 1895, p. 15.
  - 20 *Australian Cyclist*, vol. II, no. 48, 1 Aug. 1895, p. 1.
  - 21 *Melbourne Punch*, 13 Aug. 1896. For details of the aims and objectives of the League, see their Constitution, as published in *Australian Cycling Annual*, vol. I, no. 1, 1897, pp. 306-60.
  - 22 In a rather striking design, the traditional faunal emblems of kangaroo and emu stand either side of a pneumatic tyre, while a safety bicycle is silhouetted against a rising sun. The words 'Advance Australia' are inscribed at the foot of the illustration. See *Melbourne Punch*, 2 Jan. 1896.
  - 23 See, for example, 'My Bicycle', composed by Joseph Gee. The words and music to this 'Humorous Song for Ladies and Gentlemen' were published in *Melbourne Punch*, 21 May 1896.
  - 24 *Australian Cyclist*, vol. I, no. 1, 7 Sept. 1893, pp. 1-2.
  - 25 Dunstan, *Sports*, p. 204.
  - 26 See, for example, *Melbourne Punch*, 23 July 1896.
  - 27 *Melbourne Punch*, 6 Aug. 1896. Lord and Lady Brassey had just completed a nine day cycling tour of Tasmania. *Age*, 6 Jan. 1896. As Davis McCaughey *et al.* note, when Lord Brassey took office at age fifty-nine in 1895, he was one of the oldest Governors of Victoria ever appointed in the colonial period. He was also extremely wealthy and financed many of his social activities from personal riches. See D McCaughey, N Perkins and A Trumble, *Victoria's Colonial Governors, 1839-1900*, Miegunyah Press, Carlton, 1993, p. 285.
  - 28 *Illustrated Australian News*, 2 Dec. 1895.
  - 29 See, for example, P Dodge, *The Bicycle*, Flammarion, Paris, 1996, pp. 122-6, and J Hargreaves, *Sporting Females: Critical Issues in the History and Sociology of Women's Sports*, Routledge, London, 1994, pp. 91-5.

- 30 Hargreaves, *Sporting Females*, p. 95.
- 31 Russell, 'Recycling Femininity', pp. 34-5.
- 32 *Australian Cycling Annual*, vol. I, no. 1, 1897, pp. 97-8. Maddock was also the writer of the Ladies' Page in the *New South Wales Cycling Gazette*. Russell, 'Recycling Femininity', p. 37.
- 33 *Illustrated Australian News*, 1 Apr. 1896.
- 34 *Australian Cyclist*, vol. II, no. 28, 14 Mar. 1895, p. 6.
- 35 *Australian Cyclist*, vol. II, no. 29, 21 Mar. 1895, p. 1.
- 36 Dodge, *The Bicycle*, pp. 122-4. For a discussion on how the bicycle influenced interaction between the sexes, particularly in the matter of courtship, see Russell, 'Recycling Femininity', pp. 46-8.
- 37 See, for example, J Bale, *Sport and Place*, Hurst, London, 1982, and J Bale, *Sports Geography*, E & F N Spon, London, 1989.
- 38 *Herald*, 18 Apr. 1896.
- 39 *Sportsman*, 22 Sept. 1896.
- 40 *Sportsman*, 29 June 1897.
- 41 *Melbourne Punch*, 6 Aug. 1896.
- 42 *Melbourne Punch*, 23 July 1896.
- 43 *Australian Cyclist*, vol. I, no. 50, 16 Aug. 1894, p. 6.
- 44 *Australian Cyclist*, vol. II, no. 52, 29 Aug. 1895, p. 10. Cycling clubs in Fitzroy and Hawthorn also held football matches in 1895. See *Australian Cyclist*, vol. II, no. 51, 22 Aug. 1895, p. 14, and *Australian Cyclist*, vol. II, no. 52, 29 Aug. 1895, p. 11.
- 45 *Sportsman*, 29 Sept. 1896.
- 46 *Melbourne Punch*, 21 May 1896.
- 47 *Melbourne Punch*, 6 Aug. 1896.
- 48 *Sportsman*, 11 May 1897.
- 49 *Sportsman*, 18 May 1897.
- 50 See for example, *Sportsman*, 18 May 1897.
- 51 *Melbourne Punch*, 6 Aug. 1896.
- 52 *Sportsman*, 8 June 1897.
- 53 R H T Stephens, *The Road to Kardinia: The Story of the Geelong Football Club*, Playright Publishing, Sydney, 1997, pp. 47-9.
- 54 *Sportsman*, 4 May 1897.
- 55 *Sportsman*, 18 May 1897. See also R Pascoe, *The Winter Game: The Complete History of Australian Football*, Reed Books, Melbourne, 1995, p. 78.
- 56 Leader, cited in M Maplestone, *Flying Higher: The History of the Essendon Football Club, 1872-1994*, Essendon Football Club, Melbourne, 1994, p. 53.
- 57 R Cashman, 'Ave a Go, Yer Mug! Australian Cricket Crowds From Larrikin to Ocker', Collins, Sydney, 1984, p. 56.
- 58 K Sjöblom, 'From Parkways to the Velodrome: The Spatial Development of Competitive Cycling in Helsinki, 1860s-1900s', *Sports Historian*, no. 17, 2, Nov. 1997, pp. 54-62.
- 59 See, for example, Pascoe, *The Winter Game*, ch. 5; R Holmesby and J Main, *This Football Century*, Wilkinson Books Melbourne, 1996, ch. 1, and J. Ross, ed., *100 Years of Australian football, 1897-1996*, Viking, Ringwood, 1996, pp. 32-4.
- 60 See, for example, reports of a match between North Melbourne and Collingwood in *Melbourne Punch*, 30 July 1896, and *Argus*, 27 July 1896, cited in R Cashman, D Headon and G Kinross-Smith, eds, *The Oxford Book of Australian Sporting Anecdotes*, OUP, Melbourne, 1994, p. 53.
- 61 Collingwood Football Club, *Annual Report*, 1895.
- 62 R Stremski, *Kill for Collingwood*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1986, p. 308.
- 63 See *Australian Cyclist*, vol. III, no. 25, 20 Feb. 1896, pp. 27-31. See also *Age*, 17 Feb. 1896.

- 64 See *Australian Cyclist*, vol. II, no. 4, 27 Sept. 1894, p. 5, and vol. II, no. 5, 4 Oct. 1894, p. 6. See also Stremski, *Kill for Collingwood*, p. 308.
- 65 See *Australian Cyclist*, vol. I, no. 28, 15 Mar. 1894, p. 4, and vol. I, no. 30, 30 Mar. 1894, p. 3.
- 66 *Herald*, 4 Apr. 1896.
- 67 *Australian Cyclist*, vol. I, no. 5, 5 Oct. 1893, p. 2.
- 68 *Australian Cyclist*, vol. II, no. 47, 25 July 1895, p. 11.
- 69 J Feldmann and R Holmesby, *The Point of It All: The Story of the St Kilda Football Club*, Playright Publishing, Melbourne, 1992, p. 29.
- 70 *Australian Cycling Annual*, vol. I, no. 1, 1897, p. 200. The asphalt track eventually became part of the embankment for spectators in 1907. See Feldmann and Holmesby, *The Point of it All*, p. 43.
- 71 Fitzpatrick, 'Spectrum', p. 328.
- 72 *Sportsman*, 18 Aug. 1896.
- 73 R Harmond, 'Progress and Flight: An Interpretation of the American Cycle Craze of the 1890s', in P J Zingg, ed., *The Sporting Image: Readings in American Sport History*, University Press of America, Lanham, 1988, pp. 227-46. The supposed paradox is also discussed in R M Hess, 'A Social History of Cycling in Edmonton, 1890-1897'. University of Alberta, Edmonton, 1991, unpub. Masters thesis, pp. 137-43.
- 74 See, especially, Fitzpatrick, *The Bicycle and the Bush*, pp. 225-38.
- 75 *Australian Cyclist*, vol. II, no. 7, 18 Oct. 1894, pp. 1-2.
- 76 *Australian Cyclist*, vol. II, no. 7, 18 Oct. 1894, pp. 1-2.
- 77 *Australian Cyclist*, vol. II, no. 21, 24 Jan. 1895, p. 2.
- 78 R Cashman, *Paradise of Sport*, OUP, Melbourne, 1995, p. 88.
- 79 Fitzpatrick, 'Spectrum', p. 337.
- 80 Russell, 'Recycling Femininity', p. 44.
- 81 *Australian Cyclist*, vol. I, no. 24, 15 Feb. 1894, p. 8.
- 82 Cited in *Australian Cyclist*, vol. I, no. 46, 19 July 1894, p. 3.
- 83 *Australian Cyclist*, vol. III, no. 5, 3 Oct. 1895, p. 2.