

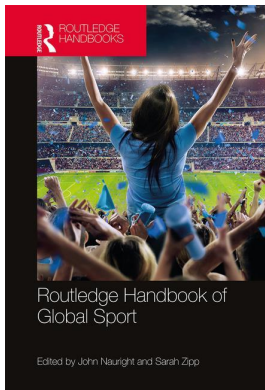
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Australian football

John Nauright

Origins

Melbourne was a city built on the riches of an 1850s gold rush. Forms of football playing occurred in the colony of Victoria in Australia from the 1840s. Australian football (commonly known as Australian rules football, or simply “Aussie rules”) first appeared in 1858 and provided local men with a sport to play in the off season of cricket. As with other areas of British settlement during the 19th century, cricket emerged as the primary summer sport. Concerned about off-season fitness, cricketer Thomas Wentworth Wills (1835–1980), who was born in Australia but educated at Rugby School in England – where he captained the cricket team and excelled in football – believed that a football club should be formed to keep his teammates fit during winter. The Melbourne Cricket Club agreed with Wills’s suggestion and, as there were no standardized football codes at that time, appointed a committee to devise a set of rules. The Melbourne and Geelong football clubs were established in 1858 and 1859, respectively, and are two of the oldest football clubs in the world. The rules agreed to by the committee on 17 May 1859, were a compromise between those of several English public schools, notably Winchester, Harrow, and Rugby. Players were allowed to handle the ball but not to run farther than necessary to kick it. In 1866 H.C.A. Harrison (1836–1929), a cousin of Wills, rewrote the rules. These rules imposed no limit on the number of players, though in the 1880s, 20 men per team became standard. Several works have explored the foundations of Australian football as there was much debate over the years as to whether the sport was descended from observations of Aboriginal Australian leisure practices, related to Gaelic football (which was only codified in 1884 many years after Australian football) and whether the over-abundance of Cambridge men in southern Australia as compared to New South Wales and New Zealand led to a sport very different from the dominant rugby union football that emerged there (Blainey, 2003; Collins, 2018; deMoore, 2008; Hess et al., 2008).

Concerned about the possibility of injury on the hard Australian grounds, players were reluctant to commit to the tackling and hacking (kicking or tripping an opponent) rules of the Rugby School game, and hacking was banned. Distinctive aspects of Australian football rapidly appeared. At the outset, a provision was made that players who caught (or “marked”) a ball cleanly in the air were allowed a free kick. Players could also retain possession of the ball while

running, but after some dispute it was agreed in 1865 that the player with the ball had touch or bounce it off the turf at least every 10 metres. Most crucial, and what makes Australian football unique compared other football sports, there was no offside rule, which meant that players from each team were located behind and in front of the ball during play. By 1874 players no longer scored by carrying the ball between goal posts but scored by kicking the ball through them (Hess & Stewart, 1998).

Australian football also developed a unique set of goalposts with two large goalposts flanked by two shorter “behind” posts. The centre bounce used by umpires to start games and to restart play after a goal was instituted in 1891 and also remains unique to Australian football. Goal umpires were first mentioned in 1874 in accounts of the game. The practice of the goal umpire’s waving a flag to signal a goal began in Tasmania in 1884 and was adopted in Victoria in 1886.

The game expanded rapidly during the 1870s and 1880s. In the 1870s, matches between the Melbourne and Carlton football clubs attracted as many as 10,000 spectators, who at that time watched for free. Spectators often spilled onto the playing surface, and this led to the enclosure of grounds for ease of play. The first facility built specifically for Australian football use appeared in 1876 on land leased by Carlton from Melbourne University. The first Carlton–Melbourne game at the ground attracted 5,000 spectators. By the mid-1880s crowds approaching 34,000 were attending matches between leading clubs (Hess & Stewart, 1998; Hess et al., 2008).

With clubs appearing across the region of southern Victoria, a league was needed to ensure regular competition. On 7 May 1877, representatives of the Albert Park, Carlton, East Melbourne, Essendon, Geelong, Hotham, Melbourne, and St Kilda football clubs met to form the Victorian Football Association (VFA). During the 1870s over 125 clubs appeared in Melbourne, and another 60 senior clubs were established elsewhere in Victoria. A regular schedule of matches was developed; additional grounds were enclosed; and VFA clubs were able to charge admission.

The game continued to spread throughout the Australian colonies. In 1877 the South Australian Football Association was formed in Adelaide. Tasmania accepted VFA rules in 1882, and in 1885 the Western Australian Football Association was established in Perth. Despite these successes, the game struggled to gain a foothold in the northeastern parts of Australia. The first game in Sydney took place in 1877, but rugby union, with its imperial connections, was favoured by the 1890s. A similar process occurred in Queensland and across the Tasman Sea in New Zealand. The great distances that separated colonies and the capital cities meant that regular competition between clubs from different areas was not possible, and indeed the first participation of an interstate team in the main Victorian competition did not occur until 1982. However, because road games between Victorian teams were often only a tram ride away, many fans could go to all of their team’s games in any given season at little expense and this helped solidify the sport in Melbourne.

The depression of 1893–1895 caused attendance at games in Melbourne to decline, and the VFA proposed a revenue-sharing scheme to assist struggling clubs. Leading clubs, which wanted more control over the game, opposed the scheme. In 1896 those eight leading clubs – Melbourne, Essendon, Geelong, Collingwood (Stremski, 1987), South Melbourne, Fitzroy, Carlton, and St Kilda – came together to form the Victorian Football League (VFL). The VFL allowed open payment of players and reduced the number of competitors on the field from 20 per side to 18. With economic improvement, VFL clubs were able to pay most players by 1899. A national body, the Australasian Football Council, was formed in 1906 to regulate interstate player movement and develop contests on the national level, though it remained under the control of the VFL. As the council’s name suggests, efforts to keep the game alive in New Zealand as well as in Australia were part of its mission.

While the VFL moved into the 20th century as the leading competition, the VFA remained nearly as strong into the 1920s. In 1925 the VFL added VFA clubs Footscray, Hawthorn, and North Melbourne, giving the league 12 teams and solidified the VFL as the premier football competition in Victoria (Hess & Stewart, 1998; Hess et al., 2008).

After South Melbourne football club relocated to Sydney in 1982, the VFL sought further national expansion, founding teams in Queensland, Western Australia and South Australia from the mid-1980s to the late 1990s. In 1990 the VFL changed its name to the Australian Football League (AFL) to reflect its new national focus. In 2005 the AFL comprised 16 teams: the Adelaide (South Australia) Crows, Brisbane (Queensland) Lions, Carlton Blues, Collingwood Magpies, Essendon Bombers, Fremantle (Western Australia) Dockers, Geelong Cats, Hawthorn Hawks, (North Melbourne) Kangaroos, Melbourne Demons, Port Adelaide (South Australia) Power, Richmond Tigers, St Kilda Saints, Sydney Swans, West Coast (Perth, Western Australia) Eagles, and Western (Footscray) Bulldogs. Two additional teams were added on the Gold Coast (Suns) in 2011 and in Western Sydney (Greater Western Sydney Giants) in 2012.

National expansion has not been easy, with large interstate clubs seen by Melbournians as a threat to their clubs and supporters of interstate teams arguing that the league is still too focused on Melbourne. Despite these problems, Australian football is the most popular spectator sport in Australia, and, with championships having been won by West Coast, Adelaide, and Brisbane by 2001, the AFL began the millennium its strongest ever. Australian football is also being played in leagues as far afield as Denmark, England, the Netherlands, and the United States, and AFL preseason matches have been played in Canada, New Zealand, and South Africa.

Women have a long history of playing Australian football (Lenkic & Hess, 2016). In recognition of this, the AFL undertook a national study of the game in 2013 with a view of possibly sponsoring a competition. In February 2017 the Australian Football League began a competition for women linked to existing men's team brands. By 2020, fourteen clubs will have teams in the League. The first Grand Final was won by the Adelaide Crows.

Football and its fans

Australian football is woven deeply into the fabric of Australian society, particularly outside the rugby zones in the states of New South Wales and Queensland. Until 1983 competitions remained state-based, with clubs largely forming in suburban areas that matched parliamentary electorates. Unlike American professional sports franchises, AFL teams are (and always have been) membership-based clubs rather than private franchises, which means that members ostensibly control their club. When clubs have been threatened with mergers, as Footscray and Hawthorn were in 1989 and 1995, respectively, members were able to save their clubs from amalgamation. Melbourne-based club Fitzroy chose to merge with Brisbane to create a strong and sustainable fan base in two cities rather than see Fitzroy die. A brief flirtation with private ownership in the 1980s failed. In 1995, in order to prevent hostile takeovers, which had occurred in rugby league that year, the AFL amended its constitution to ban any one interest from controlling more than 5 per cent of a club.

Early VFL teams developed loyal fans, known as "barrackers", many of whom were club members. Unique among football sports, Australian football has always had a large number of female supporters who attend matches, and by 1900 women formed one-third or more of audiences. By the 1930s each team had theme songs, some derived from popular American tunes.

The league's championship, known as the Grand Final, began in 1898 and starting in 1904 was held at the Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG), the spiritual home of Aussie Rules. It

became, after the Melbourne Cup horse race, the most significant sporting and cultural event on Victoria's annual calendar. The league's popularity continued to rise, particularly with the advent of radio broadcasts of matches in 1925. Live broadcasts of Grand Finals began only in 1946, owing to reluctance of the cricket officials, who controlled the MCG, to allow them. After the Second World War, radio coverage expanded, and live match attendance also boomed as nearly all workers were given Saturday afternoons free by 1946. With the arrival of television coverage in 1957, radio stations intensified their range of broadcasts in order to compete. Seven stations covered matches that season. For many years television coverage was allowed for only the final quarter of a game or on delay as the VFL felt it would hurt attendance if full game broadcasts were allowed. Today all AFL games can be seen via pay or free to air television or streamed online, though for many years the coverage of Friday night games were shown in the small hours of the morning in Queensland and New South Wales where rugby codes have been more popular (Nauright, 1997).

In 1957 a record 2.5 million fans attended VFL matches (Melbourne's population at the time was only 1.7 million), and 100,324 fans attended the Grand Final between Melbourne and Essendon. Final attendance peaked in 1970, when 121,696 fans showed up at the MCG to see Carlton defeat Collingwood. Concerns over the Melbourne Cricket Club's control of the main stadium, the MCG, however, had led the VFL to buy land for its own ground in 1962. The league built a 70,000-seat stadium (an original plan called for 157,000 seats) in central Melbourne, which opened as VFL Park in 1970. The stadium proved unpopular with fans and was abandoned by 2001 for a new inner-city stadium. While most teams played at their own grounds before the mid-1960s, between 1965 and 2001 a process of stadium rationalization took place, with all games in Melbourne eventually held at two stadiums, the MCG and the Telstra Dome (Hess & Stewart, 1998; Hess et al., 2008).

A striking feature of the AFL is every team has a team theme or fight song reminiscent of US College football. Many of the songs of Melbourne teams and the Sydney Swans show links to US songs popular in the 1920s and 1930s. The Sydney Swans song is to the same tune as the Notre Dame University fight song. The St Kilda Saints song is, not surprisingly, "When the Saints Go Marching in." Melbourne Demons chose "It's a Grand Ole Flag". Geelong chose a more high culture route with its song written to the tune of the main chorus in Bizet's opera "Carmen".

In 2017 the AFL launched a women's competition with 10 clubs linked to AFL men's clubs building on the dramatic growth of female participation in the sport over the past two decades. The first match was played on 3 February 2017 at Princes Park in Melbourne. The match was watched by a capacity crowd of 24,568 with many spectators turned away. The game was televised as well attracting a national TV audience estimated at 896,000. Adelaide defeated Brisbane to win the first title in March 2017.

Rules of play

Australian football is played with an oval ball that weighs between 450 and 480 grams (16 and 17 ounces) and has a short circumference of 545–555 mm (21.5–22 inches) and a wide one of 720–730 mm (28–29 inches). Australian football is one of the few field sports that does not use a uniform-sized ground; it is played on an oval field that can vary in width between 110 and 155 metres (120 and 170 yards) and in length between 135 and 185 metres (145 and 200 yards). Two goalposts not less than 6 metres (20 feet) in height are placed 6.4 metres (21 feet) apart at each end of the ground. Two shorter posts, called behind posts, rise to a minimum height of 3 metres (10 feet), with each one placed at the side of a goalpost at a distance of 6.4 metres. The

line between the goalposts is called the goal line, and this line's extension from each goalpost to its behind post is called the behind line.

A team consists of 18 players on the field. Players may run with the ball but must bounce or touch it on the ground at least once every 15 metres, a change from the sport's early rules, which required the ball to be bounced once every 10 metres. A player may hold the ball and run with it until he is held by an opponent, when which he must dispose of the ball immediately. Players pass the ball to teammates either by punt-kicking it or by handballing, the latter in which a player holds the ball in one hand and hits it with the clenched fist of the other hand. Throwing the ball is illegal, and there is no offside rule.

A major difference from other types of football is the awarding of a set kick, or mark, when a player manages to catch the ball directly from the kick of another player who is not less than 15 metres away. The player who makes the mark is allowed a free kick at the goal from anywhere behind where he marked. The game's finest spectacle is the high mark, in which three or four competing players leap, sometimes riding on the back or shoulder of an opponent, in order to catch the ball and receive the resultant mark.

Each match is controlled by one field umpire, a goal umpire at each end, and boundary umpires on each side. The game begins with the field umpire bouncing the football in the centre of the field and players leaping in order to knock it down to a teammate. After a goal, the ball is bounced again at the centre of the playing field. After a behind is scored, the scored-upon team kicks the ball into play from its own goal area. A match consists of four 20-minute quarters.

Australian football entails more body contact than association football (soccer) but less than rugby, American or Canadian football. A player may be "shepherded", or checked, by an opponent by the use of a hip, shoulder, chest, arms, or open hand, provided the ball is not more than 5 metres away. Players who tackle opponents above the shoulders, below the knees, or in the back are penalized with opponents winning a free kick. Free kicks are also awarded to the defending team when an attacking player is deemed by the umpire to have held the ball too long or to have run with the ball without bouncing or touching it on the ground. Dissent or flagrant offenses are penalized with the opposition gaining 50 metres plus a free kick.

A goal is scored when the ball is kicked clearly through the goalposts by a member of the attacking team; a goal registers 6 points. A "behind" is scored when the ball crosses a behind line in any event or when the ball crosses the goal line without meeting all the required conditions for a goal to be scored (e.g., when the ball touches a goalpost). A behind is worth one point. The four posts are distinctive of Australian football. Scores are written in the format of goals followed by behinds followed by total points; for example, 20.11.131.

Academic study and popular culture

There is now a robust literature on Australian football primarily from sports studies scholars based in Australia particularly those based in the primary Aussie Rules playing states of Victoria, South Australia, Western Australia and Tasmania. Some thirty articles have appeared since the late 1980s in the journal *Sporting Traditions*, the journal of the Australian Society for Sports History. Many of these articles can be found online via the LA 84 Library collection. The *International Journal of the History of Sport* has also published several articles on the sport, while key academic books on the origins and history of the game have also appeared over the past 25 years.

In 1977, playwright David Williamson's play *The Club* was first staged in Melbourne, later made into a movie starring Jack Thompson and directed by Bruce Beresford. Williamson also wrote the screenplay for *Gallipoli*. In 1979, Mike Brady's song "Up There Cazaly", memorializing 1910s and 1920s legend Roy Cazaly, became the modern anthem for the sport, originally

written for the Channel 7 television coverage. “Up There Cazaly” was also a battle cry for Australian troops during the Second World War and the phrase captured Cazaly’s reputation for taking high-flying marks during his career which ended in 1927. Brady was still performing the song to audiences across Australia in 2018 including a live performance in front of 100,000 spectators at the AFL Grand Final between the West Coast Eagles and the Collingwood Magpies. *The Footy Show* began weekly analysis of the sport in 1994 hosted through 2018 by journalist Eddie Maguire, former player Sam Newman and comedian Trevor Marmalade (Brooks, 2000). *The Footy Show* theme song “More Than a Game” added to the musical lexicon of the game and is also the title of the first wide ranging history of the sport by historians Rob Hess and Bob Stewart, also former VFA (Victorian Football Association) and VFL players respectively published in 1998.

Though only a truly national competition since the later 1980s, the Australian Football League’s competition is the most watched by live and television viewers in Australia. While the sport lags behind soccer in total national participation, it has remained resilient in the face of global sporting challenges and competitions. The AFL has sponsored competitions in other countries where the sport retains a small, but committed following. Aussie Rules remains the single sport that defines Australian uniqueness and is a key component of contemporary national and regional identities. When other sports such as rugby league and rugby union faced turmoil in the 1990s as media interests invaded ownership structures, the AFL banned any entity from owning more than a five per cent stake in a club. To 2020, Australian football clubs are membership driven entities where those who buy memberships in their club have a direct voice in major club decisions. Fan groups of Footscray (now Western Bulldogs) and Hawthorne successfully prevented mergers of their clubs in 1989 and 1996 respectively through voting down the propositions at their annual general meeting (Nauright & Phillips, 1997; Phillips & Nauright, 1999). Unlike many sports today, where identities are more and more malleable and younger fans often follow star players, AFL fans in cities like Melbourne, Adelaide and Perth will tell you that there are two rules to a successful life there: first, you must have a footy team; and second, you never change your footy team. The club remains the most significant form of identity in Australian football and the sport continues to hold a strong place in Australia, while growing around the world since the 1980s with competitions affiliated with the AFL in 20 countries (Alomes, 1997). The Australian Football International Cup is played every three years and is the pinnacle of international amateur competition in the sport. There have been close links to Ireland over the years as skill sets useful in Gaelic football and Australian football are similar. An International Rules competition which modifies the rules of each sport has been played between teams from Australia and Ireland. While Australian football is growing globally, it remains uniquely and identifiably Australian every bit as much as gridiron or American football is identified with the United States of America.

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