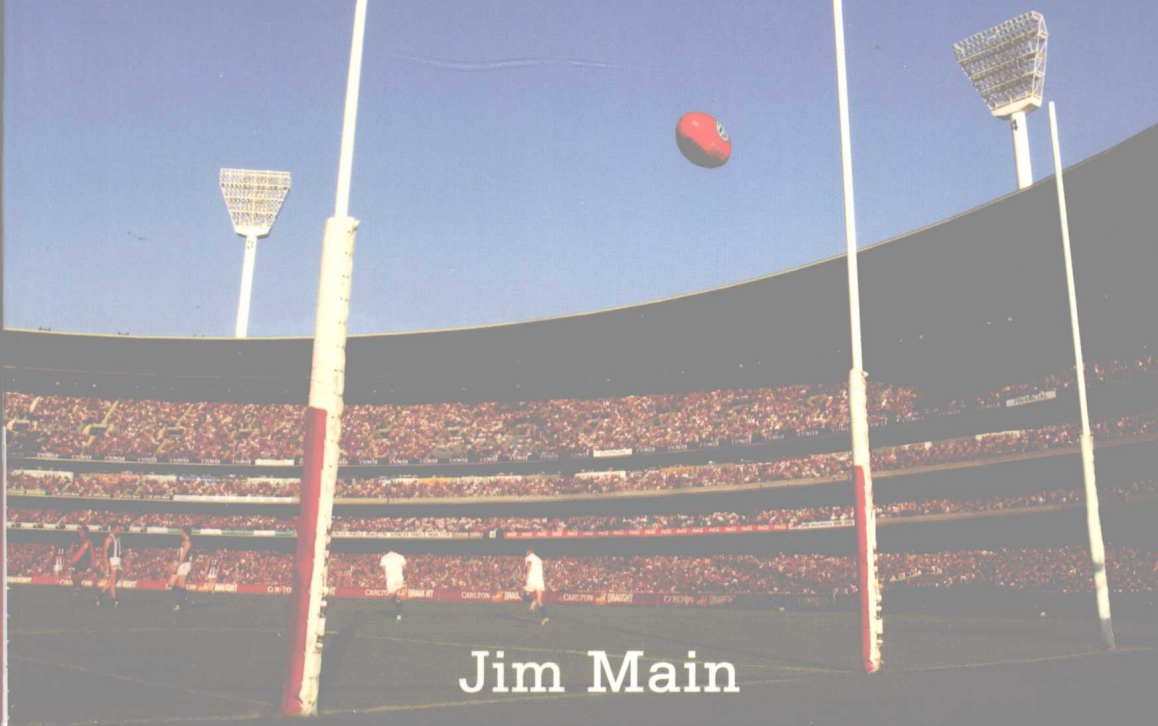


# Our Game

## Classic Aussie Rules stories



Jim Main

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Jim Main

Foreword by Dennis Cometti

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## VIKING

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## Our Game

Jim Main is one of Australia's best-known sports writers. He has reported on the VFL/AFL scene for almost forty years and has also covered Test cricket, tennis, three Commonwealth Games and the 1984 Los Angeles Olympics. He was *The Australian's* chief football writer for more than a decade, and is a winner of the Walkley Award – the most prestigious honour in Australian journalism. Inducted into the Melbourne Cricket Ground Media Hall of Fame in 2003, he has written more than sixty books on topics ranging from football to infamous Australian murder cases. His greatest moment in sport came not as a reporter but as a spectator – after a lifetime following South Melbourne/Sydney he saw his beloved Swans win the 2005 AFL premiership.

## Other books by Jim Main

*The Encyclopedia of AFL Footballers* (with Russell Holmesby)

*Honour the Names*

*Shake Down the Thunder*

*Pants: the Darren Millane Story* (with Eddie McGuire)

*Whatever It Takes* (with Jim Stynes)

*Fallen: the Ultimate Heroes* (with David Allen)

*When It Matters Most*

*Why Cricket Matters*

*EJ: the Ted Whitten Story*

*The Footy Show Screammers* (with Eddie McGuire)

*Carlton: the 100 Greatest Players*

## FOREWORD

During a game a couple of years ago, when there was a long break in play, I quipped, 'Jim Main could write a book in this time'. Of course, there was a huge slice of hyperbole in the statement, but the fact remains that Jim has probably written more on Australian football – our game – than anyone else. And, at the risk of mixing my sports, although I've never watched Jim at a keyboard, I'm betting it would be something akin to Adam Gilchrist in full flight!

In 2008 the game celebrates its 150th anniversary, and so much has happened. There have been countless games, and since 1897 more than 11000 players (a combination of abysmal form and savvy by the Footscray selection committee saw to it that I never threatened to become one of them!) have performed at the VFL/AFL's elite level. Each has a unique history, and many have been involved in unusual incidents or mired in controversy.

In *Our Game* Jim has flipped the rocks to expose what lies beneath, from the very beginning in 1858 to the new millennium – and what nuggets he has produced. For example, Australian Test cricket captain Warwick 'the Big Ship' Armstrong played in the South Melbourne side that went down to Fitzroy in the 1899 Grand Final. And in 1933, Laurie Nash made his VFL debut with South Melbourne *after* playing Test cricket for Australia.

The book covers all eras, and the saddest is undoubtedly

## FOREWORD

1914–18, the period of World War One. So many VFL stars made the supreme sacrifice; among them were a number from the University club, which played in the VFL from 1908 to 1914. Interestingly, St Kilda refused to wear the German colours of black, red and white during the war, using instead ‘brave little Belgium’s’ black, red and yellow.

Between the wars the VFL introduced Footscray, North Melbourne and Hawthorn to the competition. That was in 1925, just months after Footscray, the VFA premiers, defeated VFL premiers Essendon in a highly controversial charity match. Essendon’s star, Tom Fitzmaurice, was so disgusted by accusations that some of his team-mates had played dead that he crossed to Geelong. In the wake of its poor 2006 season, if Mark Thompson learns that Geelong was once the place to go if your conscience demanded a ‘red hot go’, he’s likely to need convincing it’s not April Fool’s Day!

Although most of us know that Hawthorn was formerly called the Mayblossoms, I never knew the club had wanted to be known as the Brown Bombers. Can you imagine if that happened today? Essendon would be demanding the AFL introduce alternate nicknames! But there it is, just another gem Jim Main has unearthed while trawling through old newspapers and magazines. He has also covered the modern era in as much detail: there’s even an explanation I finally understand – and I broadcast the game – of the hugely controversial St Kilda–Fremantle match at Launceston in 2006. Has there been a more bizarre ending to a VFL/AFL match?

This is an immensely interesting book, containing many little-known incidents forgotten for decades. And it is possible to trace the ever-changing face of the game. For example, Jim includes a tip from Collingwood legend Jock McHale, who advised youngsters of the 1930s to ‘avoid suet puddings’. Ah, that’s where I went wrong, even if I did only play with West Perth and Footscray reserves! Then

again, I consider myself a very lucky man. Just imagine if Jim's microscope had passed over my WAFL coaching career . . . you want the controversial and the bizarre?! As I've said many times before, the only people who feared me when I was coaching were 50 000 West Perth supporters.

Jim's an Aussie treasure. Read and enjoy!

**Dennis Cometti**

*Dennis Cometti's voice has launched a thousand football quips on Channel Nine and now Seven; he's scored more unique expressions than Sydney's Barry Hall has goals. A former West Perth player and coach, he played reserves football with Footscray, so has experienced the game from both sides of the boundary line. Dennis started broadcasting in Perth, with 6PR, 6KY and the ABC, and a nationwide legion of fans listen in awe to both his calling accuracy and quips as quick as a Nathan Buckley handpass.*



# INTRODUCTION

The *Macquarie Dictionary* has this to say about an anecdote: ‘anecdote, a short narrative of a particular incident or occurrence of an interesting nature’, while *Roget’s Thesaurus* opines: ‘anecdote, reminiscence, short story, sketch, story, tale, urban legend, yarn’. The anecdotes in this book are drawn from almost 150 years of football history – from 1858 to 2006 – and there are examples of just about all of these definitions.

Just imagine all that has occurred since the very first match was staged on 7 August 1958. It was between Melbourne Grammar School and Scotch College and played on a ground not far from where the MCG now towers. Countless games, at all levels, have been contested; in the AFL alone, 185 matches (including finals) are now scheduled every season. Although there were far fewer encounters when the VFL/AFL comprised just twelve clubs, there have been well over 1000 games since the inception of the VFL competition in 1897. Astonishingly, over 11 000 footballers have appeared at VFL/AFL level, and each has a tale to tell.

There have been blunders, blinders and blusters, cock-ups and catastrophes. At least one game was played in fog so thick that neither players nor fans could see the ball. And while there have been many joyous occasions, sadness has never been far away: the deaths of Carlton’s 23-year-old Les Witto as a result of a football injury,

## INTRODUCTION

of Hawthorn's 27-year-old captain-coach Fred 'Flop' Phillips before the start of the 1933 season, and of at least 127 players whose final, tragic playing fields were the land, sea or air combat zones of two world wars.

Across the almost one-and-a-half centuries of football there have been heroes and champions, players idolised for their skills, leadership and strength of character. Carlton's fans worshipped nineteenth-century champion George Coulthard just as fervently as today's Collingwood followers adore Nathan Buckley's consummate skills.

Many of the game's early heroes have passed on their thoughts about the great game: how to play it, improve and then excel. And much of their advice still rings true, although today's players might look askance at the suggestion that they bathe once a week, avoid physical exertion between matches, and only drink water!

Game after game, season after season, countless verbal gems of praise, insults and wisecracks are uttered, often in the most mangled English language. This book contains a fraction of this anecdotal tapestry.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

*Our Game* is an unusual book: there are no interviews or photographs. It's a book about historic events, incidents and anecdotes from almost a century-and-a-half of Australia's indigenous football code. I have spent dozens of hours in libraries, reading countless features, articles and news items, and so thanks are extended to the extremely diligent and courteous staff of the State Library of Victoria. They not only pointed me in the right direction but also helped me with the technicalities of transferring primary source material to print-outs via computer. Thanks are also extended to those whose anecdotes help form the fabric of the book, including a number of legendary footballers such as former Essendon champions Geoff Leek and Simon Madden. Thanks also to fellow football historians and writers Ben Collins and Russell Holmesby for their advice, suggestions and permission to quote from their books, and lastly to Channel Seven's master caller, Dennis Cometti, for his kindly worded foreword. *Our Game* reflects the development of football from a kick-to-kick in paddocks to its enormous popularity today. It truly is *our* game.

Also from Penguin

# The Greatest Game

Ken Piesse

*The Greatest Game* is a hilarious smorgasbord of tall stories and true, straight from the mouths of the greats of Aussie Rules – from players, coaches, umpires and commentators. Among them you'll find . . .

Ablett's 14 goals (for a loss!)

Bristling Barassi

Courageous decisions

Dicky knees

Excuses!

the Flying Doormat

the Galloping Gasometer

Huddo's mightiest goal

Injuries galore (ouch)

Jacko

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Merv Hughes the footballer

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Oops!

Prize scalps

Quotable quotes

Rocca, Mocca, Fokker and Blocker

Speckies

Ten Brownlow Medallists in one year

Underdogs triumph

Big V tales

Beer and sandwiches at Windy Hill

Trevor Barker's RX7

Yarning with Doc Baldock

Jez'Za's punishment

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# **1. THE EARLIEST ERA, 1858–96**

...let the game begin



## Thomas Wills' letter

It is generally conceded that the Australian code was born on 10 July 1858, with a letter published in the sporting newspaper *Bell's Life in Victoria*. Thomas Wentworth Wills was secretary of the Melbourne Cricket Club in 1857 and was frustrated at the lack of sports activity over the winter months. This frustration led him to pen his now-famous letter to *Bell's Life*. It read, in part:

*Dear Sir,*

*Now that cricket has been put aside for some months to come, and cricketers have assumed somewhat of the chrysalis nature (for the time being only, it is true), but at length again will burst forth in all their varied hues, rather than allow this state of torpor to creep over them and stifle their now supple limbs, why cannot they, I say, form a football club, and form a committee of three or more to draw up a code of law?*

*If a club of this sort was got up, it would be of vast benefit to any cricket ground to be trampled upon, and would make the turf firm and durable, besides which it would help those who are inclined to become stout and having their joints encased in useless super-abundant flesh.*

*If it were not possible to form a football club, why should these young men who have adopted this new country for their motherland – why, I say, do they not form themselves into a rifle club, so that at any date they may be some day called upon to aid their adopted land against a tyrant who may some day pop upon us when we least expect a foe at our own very doors. Surely our young cricketers are not afraid of a crack of a rifle when they face so courageously the leather sphere, and it would disgrace no one to learn in time to defend his country and his hearth.*

*A firm heart and a steady hand and a quick eye are all that are requisite, and with practice all these may be attained. Trusting that someone will take up the matter and form either of the above clubs, or at any rate some athletic games.*



## The life and death of Thomas Wills

Although Thomas Wills, along with his cousin H. C. A. Harrison, is regarded as one of the founding fathers of Australian football, he had both a tragic life and death. He was born in New South Wales in 1835, son of pastoralist Horatio Spencer Wills. The family moved to Victoria's Western District and Thomas, at 15 years of age, was sent to the famous English public school, Rugby, for the completion of his education. It was while at school in England that he played both football and cricket (indeed, he later developed into one of Victoria's best cricketers). He was obviously influenced by the football played at Rugby, and some historians argue that he was also influenced by Aborigines near his family's Victorian property, and that he had some contact with the game *marn grook*.

Wills became a heavy drinker and, eventually, an alcoholic. On 1 May 1880, he was taken to Melbourne Hospital after being found in an alcohol-induced coma. He discharged himself from hospital, went to his home in Heidelberg, and was heard debating with himself whether to murder his *de facto* wife Sarah Barbor. Because Wills was believed to be in a dangerous state of mind, friends and family kept a close watch over him. Despite this, he slipped away early the next morning and stabbed himself three times in the chest with a pair of scissors. An inquest found that he had 'committed suicide while of unsound mind from excessive drinking'.

## The 'wet' game

Australian football was in its infancy and far from a fully-developed code when the *Victorian Cricketer's Guide*, 1860 ran this view of the game, written by J. B. Thompson:

Football in and about Melbourne promises soon to be as much an institution of the wet as cricket is of the dry season.