

The Footy Almanac

2008

*The AFL season
one game at a time*



Edited by John Harms and Paul Daffey



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and Paul Daffey

*With a foreword by David Bridie
and a preface by Waleed Aly*

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THE FOOTY ALMANAC 2008

John Harms • Paul Daffey

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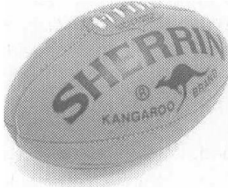
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Play On (omnibus)
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His books include:

Local Rites
Beyond the Big Sticks
Black and Blue
The Footy Almanac 2007



*a sealed bag full of air,
passed and kicked and thrown away,
on which rests the happiness of thousands*

Martin Smith THIS IS NOT SPAIN

A memory or two

UNTIL ABOUT FOUR YEARS AGO I used to go to the 'G with a good mate of mine. Then he just stopped going. Said he'd had enough of the AFL, he'd had enough of the media, and he'd had enough of the prices. He still loves the game, and often watches local matches in Brunswick.

He reckons the AFL was taking advantage of the obsessive loyalty of football fans. He was pissed off with the uneven draw, the pressure to merge clubs, the dumb-arsed commentary, the *Footy Show* schtick, the cost of food at the games, everything about Docklands, the trading of favourite players, and the ignoring of Tasmania and the Northern Territory. And in the end, he reckoned that footy took up too much time if you were going to follow it properly.

Then I bought him last year's *Almanac* as a present. After initial suspicion, he reckoned that this was *his* kind of football perspective, the broader view. I can understand where he is coming from. But I can't give up the habit. Yet. Books with perspective help. As do stories of people in footy as real people. And besides I'm still waiting for a Grand Final victory.

Yep, I barrack for the Demons. The Dees. The Redlegs. The Fuchsias. The Melbourne Footy Club. Not romantic, I know. Certainly not cool. Unfashionable, yes. And definitely not so successful in my time, although they have been thereabouts for the last decade. But they are the team my Dad barracks for (fave player: Geoff Tunbridge), the team I inherited (fave player: Andrew Obst), and the team my eldest daughter barracks for (fave player: Matty Whelan).

Dad was a Sydneysider. He came down to Melbourne for a weekend, got taken to a game, and chose Melbourne. He got to see five Grand Final wins in six years. I just cop it for barracking for a Tory football club.

I love the fact that I barrack for one of the oldest sporting clubs in the world.

I hate the fact that we are viewed as a Tory club, an Establishment club, especially when we are a club that has no money and a small supporter base (although the good thing about that is that you never have to book a ticket to a Melbourne game). What's the point of having links to the top-end of town if you are a pauper club! Besides, Melbourne has as many toothless, tattooed supporters as any team (and I ask you to name another club that has a president who refers to the IRA and Michael Collins in his autobiography).

My earliest memories revolve around going to the footy with the old man. Round 1, Glenferrie Oval, who knows what year. The suburban ground bathed in sunshine, the railway line impossibly close to the outer wing boundary line. Chockers. You could take eskies in to the football in those days. Standing room only at the eastern end of the ground.

I couldn't see a thing in the first quarter. I had to wait until Dad and his mates had put away enough Abbotts Lager cans for me to build a block that I could stand on. Tassie Johnson, Hassa Mann, Barry Bourke. We got thrashed. Peter Hudson had kicked eight goals to half-time before Barry Bourke hit him, hard but fair, and Huddo did his knee. I remember the murmur round the ground as he got carried off. He got one Brownlow vote for half a game of football that year.

Footy is about many things. One of them is memory. Footy provides so many memories. I'm not even sure they need to be accurate.

One of my fondest comes from my travels to New Guinea, a place which means a lot to me. In June 2000 I was with my mate Bob, a fellow Demons supporter, in a remote village called Tambanum on the Sepik River in the north-west. The Sepik is a mighty river, wide and fast-flowing, and those who have seen it say it rates up there with the Amazon and the Nile. Sepik villagers stand in their canoes, impossibly graceful and balanced, while plots of grassy land float on by at a remarkable rate to eventually arrive downstream at the ocean on the north coast of PNG between Madang and Wewak.

The Sepik is home to some of the most extraordinary carvers and artists. It is a place of *puri puri* (black magic), of superstitions and traditions that go way back. Their spirit houses, or Haus Tambarans, have ornate carvings built into them; the cornices and awnings are something to behold.

It is also a very hot mosquito-infested place. When the wind drops conditions become oppressive.

Melbourne were playing Collingwood: the Queen's Birthday fixture. Listening to a game of football on short-wave radio is novel: the crackle, the fading in and out, the fine motor skills required to chase the signal, a smidgen too far and you are at the Hong Kong stock exchange, or picking up Indonesian military radio from over the border in West Papua... come back to us, Tim Lane, come back.

Listening to Tim Lane on long drives (Easter Monday games come to mind) is a little bit like listening to Laurie Anderson records. Sometimes you didn't even focus on what he was saying, it was just a comforting voice in the background, the dulcet tones of Timothy Lane...

But I was in Tambanum. I sat with twenty of the villagers, for the whole game trying to explain the rules, and what was going on, and the rivalry between the two sides. I had persuaded them that my side, Melbourne, were the masalais (tok pidgen for devils) or the Tambarans (Sepik word for spirit) and they were the underdogs and Collingwood were successful. And we weren't. And we should all barrack for Melbourne.

Bob and I rode every momentum shift, every decision. The roar of the crowd sounded even better with a bit of white-noise crackle attached. And as with all Pies games the 'G was full. The game was tight, scores level at half-time. We were barracking and jumping in the air at goals and after quarter-time we had the twenty Tambanum people whooping it up as well, shouting "Go masalais" and pumping their fists.

It turned into a cracker of a match. Melbourne came from behind to beat the Pies. Jeffrey Farmer kicked nine.

I tried to describe Farmer to the locals. "Em I wanpela lik lik blak man stret na olsem long alfie langer, I wanpela aborigine, na I nambawan." (A little black football player, the best, similar to Alfie Langer, an Aborigine.) It was as great a game as I have ever experienced.

I love the idea that there are people in the far-flung places of the globe fulfilling their life's calling. I love that, come the weekend, their mind turns to home, to the MCG and Kardinia Park, and no matter what time it may be, of how they might get a score.

David Bridle

MELBOURNE • OCTOBER 2008

Richo!

THERE'S A THING ABOUT PEOPLE WHO NEED ONLY ONE NAME. Here, I do not mean people who achieve this by such relentless promotion that we are left with no choice but to submit (Moby, Flea, Seal, Jewel, Pink). I mean people whose singularity of name emerges from the singularity of their deeds. Their perfectly respectable full names become redundant in the colossal presence of their actions. Ghandi, Saladin, Caesar. Shakespeare, Chaucer, Dante. Maradona, Bradman, Pele. Each speaks of an unarguable distinctiveness, such that there can be only one.

For admission into this mononomial pantheon, I now submit Richo. Picasso, Michelangelo, Caravaggio... Richo. The continuity is as obvious as the case for his inclusion. Few people with a name so common have less need for it. And few figures so wholly embody the inimitability so essential for admission. Richo, I confess, is not the greatest footballer of all time. He is certainly not the most decorated. He need not be because he is, quite unwittingly, the game's greatest *character*. In the realm where sport really matters, that is far more important.

This doesn't mean Richo is not a champion. Simply put, 791 goals in 276 games, for someone who played consistently in terrible sides and rarely played from the goalsquare, is a performance of sustained, unequivocal brilliance. But that is not why he adorns the cover of this volume. It is not why this is being written. Rather, the magic of Richo is his unmitigated magnetism. For every moment of his odyssey, it has been simply hazardous to look away. Even Ablett, Carey and Hird permitted an occasional sideways glance – for example when kicking for goal from point-blank range. But with Richo, nothing is foregone. Nothing is predictable. Anything can happen. Anything. At any time.

Never before have we seen quite this combination: a footballer whose genius

is as plain as his foolishness. None can vacillate between the two so rapidly and extremely. So he kicks as accurately from the goalsquare as from outside fifty. As a whole, his goal-kicking accuracy is reasonably good. It's just that he achieves this in a maddening combination.

Then, of course, the familiar brain explosions: the decision to handball to a teammate under pressure having just taken a mark thirty metres from goal, or the times he gets caught between the options of kicking long or short and more or less waltzes into the tackle of a surprised opponent. Richo regularly makes the easy impossible, and the impossible mundane.

Such non-conventionality pervades every aspect of the Richo aesthetic. How does a man who has played most of his career as a power forward, dominating the league in contested marks – with all the jarring body clashes that entails – play well over 250 games? Brereton couldn't. Carey couldn't. How does a man of his size run as fast, and as far, as elite midfielders? And more unfathomably – how does he have possibly his best season at age 33, apparently having lost no pace and no power?

Clearly it is futile to seek to understand Richo. Instead, you simply *experience* him. He is intriguing precisely because he is the very embodiment of contradiction. He is simultaneously asset and liability (Richmond consistently plays better in his absence). By unanimous testimony, he is more committed to his team's cause than anyone and will do anything for success, yet he plays in a markedly selfish manner – leading to dead pockets with five opponents, then swearing at his teammates for failing to kick the ball to him. For over a decade he has been one of the game's very best, yet he could probably never have played in a premiership side. In this era, success is built on 'structures' and 'processes' and 'plans' and 'roles'. It is built on precision and discipline. Richo is an agent of chaos. He is unpredictable and destabilising. Typical of the paradoxes that surround this man, premierships might just be for lesser talents.

For a time – indeed at most times – all this confounded, frustrated, and bitterly divided fans. He gave them no simple answers. Some wanted to knight him; others to execute him. A shanked kick would draw Bronx cheers – even from Richmond fans. Yet today, Richo is universally loved. Why the change?

I think it's because we've finally come to accept him for what he is: a man of such astonishing, delightful contradictions that we cannot help but be seduced.

Yes, he lambastes his teammates, but not in the precious, self-absorbed manner of a prima donna. He does it because in his desperation, he has no filter. His thoughts express themselves on his body before he has a chance to edit them. To watch Richo play is to peer directly into his heart. He is the footballer at his most naked. There is no self-conscious appearance, no composure. He is real.

And yes, he plays selfishly, but not in any sinister way. He does not ignore his teammates for self-gratification. He simply does not see them. He is not so much selfish as solitary; completely absorbed in what he's doing. For Richo, there's not really a crowd watching on. There's just him and the ball. That is why, when he is forced to bring other players into the game, he gets so visibly confused. In this way his shortcomings are so unvarnished, so unpretentious, so innocent.

That, for me, is the brilliance of the cover painting. The pose is unmistakable. He's probably contemplating a kick gone wrong, oblivious to the world around him. In a second or two he'll snap out of it, look up, see a potential possession, then hunt it with the past entirely forgotten. No crowd, no teammates, completely solitary. A contradiction in a team game.

We need these figures in our lives. And today's increasingly scientific, automated game strives relentlessly to stamp them out. In this world, Richo gives us something spontaneous, unpredictable, and as flawed as ourselves. His majesty is rendered so much more enjoyable by his ordinariness. Yes, he performs feats we could never approach, but his blunders are from our everyday. He is both what we could be and what we are. Unlike most champions, he remains one of us.

His inexplicable errors are now simply part of the rich experience: the flawed genius at his most essential. So, the Bronx cheers have stopped. Richo is penning a story of triumph and tragedy we will never forget. And with retirement looming, perhaps we're just starting to recognise what we might be about to lose.

Waleed Aly

MELBOURNE • OCTOBER 2008

ROUND 12

smoke and fear

big game –
the stench of smoke
and fear

old rivals
the MCG fills
with howls

kickout
the huddle breaks
seagulls every which way

just the bones of trees –
the last line of defence
snapped off

night falling
unable to slow the spring
in Carlton's step

our backline scattered where Fevola left it

a free
in the goalsquare
to them, of course

darkness mounting
the goals we need
never come

blues flog pies
the same old dog cocks his leg
on the same old tree

Rob Scott

Rob Scott (Haiku Bob) is an ex-social worker whose unfathomable career includes four years at the International Criminal Tribunal for the former Yugoslavia in The Hague where he worked as a court administrator.

Rob has been writing haiku for about ten years, getting a good run in small press journals around the globe. He is big in Romania, by all accounts.

Footy haiku was borne out of necessity – he needs the practice and is bored with footy journalism. Rob has been sending his 'match reports' to fan sites on the web for the past few seasons. He is a mad Pies fan, and a key member of the Floreat Pica Society.

He likes to take it one haiku at a time.

Review

FOR ME, FOOTY IS ABOUT A LOT MORE than following your own club. It's about the game. And I've been wrapped up in the game since I was three.

I remember tucking a ball under my arm and leading the Riddell footy club onto the field with my father's No. 2 on my back. I couldn't have wanted more. Then, a couple of years later Dad took me to my first Richmond game. I still love Richmond, but really, for years now I've been absorbed by the game itself; by the players, by the people and by the events.

In that respect, this season was no different from any other.

Sometimes, however, I am surprised by what touches my footy heart. Take the third quarter of the Grand Final. There I was beside Jo in the M21 bay in the southern stand, looking across the wing, when I found myself becoming rather agitated. Jo barracks for Hawthorn. If anything, I might have had an interest in the Hawks, but as Dew and Rioli and others took control I became worked up.

I yelled when the Cats missed another goal. I groaned when they hesitated.

Jo wondered why I was barracking for the Hoops. I wondered myself. Throughout the season I'd relished Hawthorn's piratical daring. But as Cameron Mooney again jinked at the ball rather than kick through it (did he miss a lot of training nights in the under-fifteens?), I realised how desperately I wanted the Cats to win. I wanted them to achieve what Essendon (thankfully) couldn't do a few years ago. I wanted them to win successive premierships so they could be considered a Great Team.

Watching Chris Judd in the early rounds also affected me. When he was

at the Eagles, Judd had rockets in his boots. Early this year those rockets were down a Cape Canaveral or two because of his groin injury. He also had the burden of trying to lead an expectant Carlton back to glory. I resented his burden. I wanted his groin to get better. I wanted the old exhilaration of seeing Judd sprint from trouble like no one I'd ever seen.

I have feelings for a Carlton player? No wonder I am surprised. I still carry a distinct memory from the 1972 Grand Final when Jezza, Walls and Big Nick kicked all those goals to defeat the Tigers. My Auntie Joan (everyone's got an Auntie Joan) made an impression on me that day by crying as we left the ground.

"Those rotters!" she said of the hated Blues.

When Carlton defeated Richmond in the Tigers' centenary match this year, my first thought was of Joan. At the time she was in Prague, but she would have known the result. I liked the thought of fellow travellers putting a consoling hand on her forearm on the Charles Bridge. "Those rotters!"

All my in-laws are Hawthorn fans. Yet the most telling feeling I had all season came at the MCG in Round 7, after the Hawks defeated Collingwood. On that day I realised that Hawthorn is no longer a club just for polite fans from the leafy suburbs. Jeff Kennett's bogons (*go the Moths!*) from Melbourne's outer east, the ones who nurtured their Hawthorn habit when the club played at Waverley, grew more rabid with every goal. I was under cover in the southern stand. I hadn't heard such a noise for a long time. (Probably since Richmond beat Collingwood in the first round in 2004. Now that was portentous.)

In the first half Buddy kicked six behinds; in the second half he kicked six goals. Roughead also kicked six and Williams five. You could feel the bogons emerge from the chrysalis.

Every season has its big matches; I love the build-up, the way everyone talks about them, and then the moment when the ball is bounced. But every year they're different, and we remember them for different reasons. Another of my favourites this year was the Round-16 match between Geelong and the Bulldogs, a clash between first and third, at Kardinia Park. I'll say it again: *at Kardinia Park!*

Most of the Cats' big games are at the MCG, but one of the magnificent things about this year was that some of the stronger clubs were the smaller ones, those who get drawn to play at Geelong (and Launceston). It made me think of the days of top-of-the-ladder clashes down there and I wanted to read reports of the

Bulldogs stopping for a smoke and a stretch at Werribee *en route*.

The game itself was sold out. I listened on the radio. It sounded like a Saturday afternoon from my youth, when big crowds roared at muddy suburban grounds and winter squelched from the tranny. It was the middle of July and this match just *sounded* cold. The Cats won by ten goals.

The sun was out for the next big game at the Cattery, against North Melbourne in Round 21. I listened in the car (it sounded sunny) as we returned from a weekend at my Auntie Joan's farm near Wangaratta (the other Auntie Joan; I have two). North put up a fight for a while, and David Hale was superb with eight goals. But my main thought was of Mick Nolan.

The previous night, I'd been to a Wangaratta Rovers footy club function. Big Mick played for the Rovers before spending a pre-season at Geelong and then several seasons at North Melbourne. He played a great game in the ruck in the 1975 Grand Final when the Roos broke their premiership duck. This year Mick died before his time, aged 59, after a short battle with cancer. I was commissioned to write an obituary for *The Age* and during the interviews it became clear that he was one of the most loved blokes on the planet.

I heard stories from North Melbourne functions in the 1970s where fans would bypass Blight, Schimma and Dench so they could queue up and talk to Mick. In Brisbane more recently, he struggled to get out of a shopping centre because, again, everyone wanted to talk to Mick. It was Mick's sister, Toni Wilson, who got me up to Wangaratta for the Rovers' function. I was glad I went.

While I love the big games as much as any fan, I also like the random element of going to a small match that turns out to be a beauty. I made a last-minute decision to go to the Richmond-Geelong match at the MCG in Round 8 on a cold, wet day. I took my three-year-old along for his first match. We met my father and two brothers, one of whom was home from the States, under cover in the northern stand. Everyone enjoyed the match despite the wet conditions. In fact, I reckon I enjoyed it *because* of the conditions.

All players seemed to relish the ground-level battles. Geelong ignored the rules of wet-weather footy and moved the ball at their typical, audacious speed. Mostly, they did a good job of it, too. Ryan Gamble was lively up forward and I failed to see how anyone could beat the Cats if this was the calibre of a player who was struggling to keep his place in the side.