

# The Bloodbath

The 1945 VFL Grand Final



IAN W. SHAW

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PO Box 523  
Carlton North, Victoria, Australia 3054  
Email: [info@scribepub.com.au](mailto:info@scribepub.com.au)

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‘In a combative world it is in the sporting arena that combat is most unabashed, most honest; least likely to be overlaid or disguised with claims that what it is occurring is something other than a clash of wills.’

–Margaret Lindley, ‘Her Beauty and Her Terror: Australian Football and the community’, in *All Part of the Game*, edited by Dennis Hemphill

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*Part One*

# **Football**



*Chapter One*  
**The Game and the Clubs**

**T**he story of the 1945 Victorian Football League grand final, known as soon as it was over and ever since as ‘the Bloodbath’, is, ultimately, a story about one football game and the players who took part in it. But it was not just any game. Whatever the circumstances, winning a grand final is the ultimate achievement at all levels on which the game of Australian Rules is played. The player who has epitomised the South Melbourne/Sydney Swans for half a century, the incomparable Bobby Skilton, has often said that he would have willingly sacrificed one of his three Brownlow Medals for a premiership. Brownlow Medals recognise individual skills and personal contributions, but premierships recognise the team ethos and commitment to the larger group—attributes highly valued throughout Australia.

Winning a premiership at the highest level at which the game is played represents the pinnacle of the sport. That it does so is witnessed by the near hysteria that grips Melbourne during grand final week. Nor is the hyperbole surrounding the event a recent product of the age of mass communications. A century and more ago, the VFL premiership—however it was determined—was seen as one of the notable achievements in Victorian sport. Along with the Melbourne Cup, the VFL competition and its ultimate



winner set benchmarks for all who would follow.

Why, then, does the 1945 grand final occupy a unique position in the annals of Australian sport? *The Oxford Companion to Australian Sport* states that the game was said to be the roughest ever played, but this is wrong. Every year somewhere in Australia a game is played that exceeds the Bloodbath in terms of on-field violence. The extent of such violence is occasionally featured on the nightly news or splashed across the pages of a capital-city daily. The Bloodbath may indeed have been the most violent grand final ever played, but it probably wasn't the most violent VFL game before or since. However, part of its notoriety rests particularly on the time and place in which it occurred. The time was thought to be the dawn of a new era, an age of peace following the mass destruction and mass casualties of the Second World War. The place was a suburban oval on the outskirts of the city of Melbourne, an oval set in larger parklands where spring buds and spring growth were on display. The contrast between the violence within and the tranquillity without could not have been greater.

A record number of players were reported for what they did on the field during the Bloodbath, as a result of which most of them were handed sentences that seem savage by contemporary standards. Umpires and players later admitted that more incidents went unreported than those that were noted by the umpires. Yet these same players also felt that the game was not exceptional in its violence. It was a grand final, they said, and things are different in grand finals. No pain, no gain. No guts, no glory. For several of those who played, it was their last game of VFL football. Some were forced out through their own indiscretions in the game, others were released by their clubs, and still others decided they no longer had whatever it took to play the game at that level.

Nineteen forty-five was seen as a watershed year for Australia. It opened with a sense of reasoned optimism. The war in Europe was going well, and Allied commanders were making confident predictions about an early end to hostilities there. The Pacific War was also going well; the American strategy of island-hopping towards Japan had brought the Japanese home islands within the range of shore-based American bombers, while the interdiction of Japan's sea-lanes was slowly strangling the enemy. No one doubted that the Japanese would defend their homeland to the last man, but that might not become one of Australia's problems. Most Australian troops in the Pacific Theatre were mopping up the Japanese garrisons that the American strategy had left behind. On New Year's Day 1945, it was reasonable to suppose that there would be world peace by the end of the year and that things would return to normal soon after.

When the end came, it came quickly. German resistance fell apart as the Allies pushed into Germany from the west while Soviet forces closed in on Berlin from the east. Hitler suicided and the war in Europe was over by early May, shortly after the 1945 VFL season commenced. In the Pacific, the massive firebombing raids on Japanese cities during the middle of the year were followed by the first use of atomic bombs as a weapon of war—a weapon that vaporised large parts of the cities of Nagasaki and Hiroshima in August. The Japanese surrendered within a week, and the Second World War was over.

The scenes of euphoria in Australian cities and towns were tempered somewhat by an appreciation of the cost that the nation had paid for its contribution to victory. The casualty lists had run to the tens of thousands; because this was a total war, all segments of society, large and small, had been called upon to make sacrifices. Society itself had been mobilised in ways that had not been necessary during the First World War—as seen by the role of women in the services and in industry, for instance—and it would prove to be a long time before normality returned.

Australian Rules football and Australian Rules footballers had done their part for the war effort. Football clubs throughout Victoria, like all other sporting clubs across Australia, added new names to their honour boards and named trophies after their former players who had fallen while playing the greater game. The VFL clubs' contributions to those rolls of honour was no greater and no less than that of the hundreds of suburban and country clubs whose players had signed up for the duration. But their players were the sport's elite. They were household names who were watched by thousands every time they played. Their loss was all the more keenly noted; their absence, all the more deeply felt.

The Melbourne Football Club contributed Keith 'Bluey' Truscott, one of the RAAF's first fighter aces, and Ron Barassi Senior, a utility player whose son would become one of the game's greatest figures. From South Melbourne came Len Thomas, whose skills and bravery on the football field would be mirrored in the jungles of New Guinea where he fought and fell as a commando. Carlton gave up Jim Park, whose sheer brilliance in the air and on the ground were matched by the universal acclaim his sportsmanship attracted.

Not all the casualties of the war had been killed or wounded. Among the emaciated and shattered survivors of the Japanese prisoner-of-war camps was the diminutive Wilfred 'Chicken' Smallhorn, Fitzroy's 1933 Brownlow medallist, whose footballing days ended on the stubbled playing fields of Changi Prison.

The 1945 grand final was to be Melbourne's first major sporting event since the end of the war. It would feature two teams, South Melbourne and Carlton, which had travelled very different paths that season, just as they had travelled different paths in the seventy-odd years of their existence. Both had lost players to the war and had been forced to play much of the previous five seasons with a mixture of servicemen on leave, young recruits who appeared up to the rigours of the game, and

a core of veterans who held the team together. Their grand final teams would include combat veterans playing alongside boys who were still too young to enlist—professionals and amateurs, players with ten or more years' experience alongside players in their first season. The game was advertised as 'The Victory Grand Final', the game that was to signal an end to global violence and bloodshed. It is ironic that those were to be the same two characteristics that would forever be associated with the game.

\* \* \*

Australian Rules football had come a long way in the ninety years since it began on the paddocks of Jolimont. Originally conceived by Tom Wills and some colleagues as a winter game to provide fitness and recreation for colonial cricketers, the game was a hybrid of the ball games that Wills had experienced growing up in rural Victoria and at the Rugby School in England, where he had boarded as a student. Played for the first time between two private schools, the game was soon taken up by all classes, and within a decade was governed by a set of rules and played regularly between teams composed mainly of work colleagues, graduates of the schools that had nurtured it, and groups of young men from neighbourhoods where there was both a suitable playing area and an organiser.

Two features of those early games—the oval ball and the oval playing field—have remained constant ever since, and have been responsible for many of the unique features of Australian Rules. Most of the rest have gone through a series of changes and developments. For its first twenty years, the game resembled nothing more than the rolling maul of rugby, as large numbers of players milled around the ball trying to force it forward to the two goal posts any way they could. There was little positional play, and the rules were designed to limit serious injury rather than to develop and enhance playing skills.

A series of rule changes gradually changed the shape of the game into something that even current-day spectators would recognise. The introduction of the 'mark' was one: if the ball was kicked in the air and caught before it hit the ground, a mark would be made on the ground where the ball was caught. The player who caught the ball and made the mark could then kick it without the opposing players interfering. This opened up the game, giving ascendancy to those who possessed kicking and catching skills. The pace of the game quickened, too, as running with the ball and running to position to take a mark eliminated most of the ugly scrimmages that had characterised early games. The introduction of certain forms of handpassing and positional play further quickened the game, making it a series of individual contests featuring ball-handling skills rather than just an exercise in brute strength and force.

Teams began to practise these skills, running with the ball as well as kicking and marking, while the development of positional play, and the specialised and general skills attached to these positions, revolutionised the game. Specific positions, and differential skills for playing those positions, allowed players and teams to develop game plans and particular styles of match play that made the best use of individual and team strengths. Within forty years of starting out as a semi-casual run in the park, teams were identified by their long-kicking or short-kicking games, and by their marking, pace, or physical strength in individual contests. The game had come a long way in a short time.

Accompanying and stimulating these on-field developments was an off-field revolution. Four men had drawn up the original rules of the game in a smoke-filled room in a Melbourne hotel at the height of the gold rushes. This was the only organisation necessary for the first few years, but the popularity of the game soon made necessary a more permanent and codified structure. Games played in the first five years were played as representative games; the Melbourne Football Club was formed in 1858, for

instance, but playing for a club appears to have been a matter of convenience rather than commitment. At various times, Tom Wills represented Melbourne, Geelong, and Richmond. Scheduling a game was equally haphazard. There was no fixture and no competition; games were arranged and played wherever and whenever there was sufficient interest in staging a match.

All this had changed within a decade. The players wanted to play games more regularly, so permanent team combinations were formed, based around a core of local players or a particular venue. To distinguish the teams on the field of play, each side wore different-coloured caps, but these were easily knocked off in the hurly-burly of play. Coloured playing uniforms proved superior. At first, these were merely plain-coloured pullovers in two or three basic colours, usually dark. When two teams in similarly coloured pullovers played, one would distinguish themselves by wearing a coloured sash—a tradition still evident in the Essendon and Richmond guernseys.

Teams proliferated and the competition grew. Most of the teams were inner suburban, based on or around a local institution—a cricket club, a particular park or playing field, or even a hotel. Some clubs and teams were short-lived, disappearing when players changed jobs or left the district. Others proved more enduring. Those based at their suburb's main sports arena were the most successful. They often had a permanent home ground with at least some facilities which they could use for training as well as for games. They were able to raise funds at those grounds, and they were able to attract local players to the central home ground.

As the first players found that age or injury made football's exertions too vigorous, some of those who ceased their on-field endeavours stayed in the game as unpaid organisers and administrators. It was this first generation of ex-players who took the game to the next level. By 1870, a regular competition of sorts had been established and a number of leading clubs had emerged.

These clubs had a home ground, a name, and a uniform. The home was a permanent playing field, often fenced to protect the surface, used by cricketers in summer and footballers in winter. Being the strongest team in the suburb also entitled them to take the suburb's name as their own. Thus, the Britannia Football Club ultimately became the Collingwood Football Club. Finally, an appropriate playing strip was chosen for the team. Most were based on the earlier and less formal colour identifications arranged in a design unique to the club. While teams might share colours, as Carlton and Geelong did, the designs were such that teams were clearly distinguishable when they played each other.

The final touch was the nickname given to the teams. Carlton were the Blues, the 'Old Dark Navy Blues', because of the predominant colour of their uniform, with Melbourne being called the Redlegs for the same reason. South Melbourne were the Bloods because of the visual impact provided by a blood-red sash against a snow-white background, while Collingwood were the Magpies because the team and the bird shared the same colouring. Others were less prosaic. Geelong were the Pivotonians, as their city was at a pivot point between Melbourne and Ballarat, equidistant from both. Port Melbourne was the Borough because it represented that borough; Fitzroy were the Maroons; and Essendon were the Same Olds, from a line in the club's theme song.

The individual club administrators at the larger and better-organised clubs had started to meet regularly by 1870 to give some shape and regularity to the games being played all over Melbourne on Saturday afternoons in winter. Their meetings and deliberations culminated in the formation of the Victorian Football Association (VFA) in 1877 after a couple of earlier attempts at formal organisation had failed. Melbourne's leading clubs, plus several provincial sides, were invited to join the VFA, which was able to schedule regular games each season from 1877 onwards. Those clubs not invited to join either melded into the

larger VFA clubs, folded up, or sought continuing competition with comparable clubs in their own and surrounding districts. Most suburban and country competitions date to the quarter-century following the establishment of the VFA.

The VFA was successful during the first decade of its existence. A regular competition meant that players and spectators alike could plan their winter's activities, and the fact that the more populous suburbs had teams representing the area against neighbouring suburbs meant that the type of tribalism still associated with Australian Rules was allowed full expression from the start of the formal competition. Crowds that had regularly numbered hundreds of spectators now numbered in the thousands, and the sale of season membership tickets and match-day admissions generated sufficient funds for the VFA clubs to begin investing in better facilities for their patrons. Permanent seating and grandstands for hundreds of spectators were built at many ovals, while clubs looked to employ ground staff to keep the playing surface in good condition and to help with the crowds on game days. The success of the competition was noted, too, by Melbourne's newspapers, which began to give increasing space to accounts of the games, as well as to report on the individual fortunes of the clubs and the players.

But the VFA's success came at a price. The stronger clubs increased their income from membership sales and gate-takings; the weaker clubs fell further behind. Soon, a number of the more successful clubs saw a two-tier competition developing, with the lower clubs struggling to make a contribution both on and off the field. Attempts to trim or modify the competition through the VFA itself were unsuccessful; the delegates from the weaker clubs were unwilling to change, and their voting power thwarted all such proposals. After some years of increasing rancour, the eight strongest clubs broke away and in 1897 formed the Victorian Football League (VFL). The ill-will between the two competitions never completely dissipated. For the next hundred



years, until the VFA was finally dismantled by the emergent Australian Football League, the relationship between them was one of an armed truce.

The VFL went from strength to strength. Two new teams, Richmond and University, were admitted a decade after the breakaway competition began, and North Melbourne, Footscray, and Hawthorn were admitted during the 1920s. The VFA continued as a viable competition, but it was very much a junior one. In the VFL's first forty years of existence, the best footballers in the VFA were eventually enticed to the VFL, rather than the other way around. The Melbourne public responded eagerly to the new competition, with record crowds paying record amounts of money to watch the best footballers the game had yet produced. The game itself had improved as a spectacle; players ran rather than jogged to contests, and long kicking and high marking were becoming characteristic features of the game.

The footballers whom the crowds came to watch in the years leading up to the First World War displayed skills and attitudes far removed from those who started the game. They were no longer cricketers looking to maintain a bit of condition between seasons; these players were first and foremost footballers. None worked full time at the game, and most were amateurs. However, since the formation of the VFL, an increasing number were being paid for their endeavours in the Saturday games and on the training track during the week. Their pay was less than they made from their day jobs, but it was a handy and substantial boost to their income. In return, they were expected to train and play hard. The studded boots that gradually became an important part of their playing kit helped, as did the appointment of club coaches.

The years leading up to the Great War saw the first full flowering of Australian Rules as guided by the VFL. Game-day attendances in excess of ten thousand were normal, with double and triple that attending matches between the leading clubs and in championship matches. The first superstars of the competition