

"Fans of the game will love this book ... a great read about a great game and how it all began." **RON BARASSI**

A GAME of OUR OWN

— The Origins of Australian Football —



Geoffrey Blainey

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Praise for *A Game of Our Own*

‘There are too few good footy history books around. So this new edition of Blainey’s excellent history of our winter sport is especially welcome. The beauty of Blainey’s book is not just his clear writing, but his ability to marry fine detail with broad and thematic sweeps. It’s an accessible and diverting picture of how football evolved ... He has assembled footy’s causes, origins, problems and solutions into such a coherent and credible whole that everything has a role to play in the evolution of our national game.’—*Herald Sun*

‘Geoffrey Blainey can really write and he has a nose for the forgotten details that make you sit up, such as early games being played on oblong grounds, sides of forty, goals rare and round balls.’—*The Age*

‘*A Game of Our Own* will bring rich enjoyment to readers with a deep interest in the history of Australian sport and popular culture.’—*JAS Review of Books*

‘ground-breaking, lucidly written’—*The Age*

‘a definitive work on the subject’—*Australian Book Review*

‘an enjoyable and informative read’—*The Mercury*

‘an exhilarating account’—*Australian Financial Review*

‘beautifully written’—*The West Australian*

A GAME *of* OUR OWN

The Origins of Australian Football

Preface

This book traces the origins and the early growth of the game of Australian football, alias Australian Rules. Some of the game's early history is lost in the mists of the past, but most of the salient landmarks and changes can be pieced together. Indeed, since the first edition of this book was published in 1990, some of the lost pieces of the jigsaw have come to light through the ransacking of old newspapers and the discovery of forgotten letters, diaries and notebooks. More evidence will be found, and new deductions drawn from that evidence, over the next twenty years.

The game is essentially an Australian invention. It arose in the late 1850s, when the various kinds of English football were still in flux, and at first it borrowed extensively from games played mainly in English public schools and especially at Rugby School. Almost at once it was a distinctive game. So quickly did it move in its own direction under its own momentum, and so often did it devise or adapt rules and tactics that, within twenty years, it was far removed from the older rugby and the new soccer, and was still changing. By the late 1870s, when for the first time a few Melbourne and Adelaide and Sydney clubs made the coastal voyage to play against each other, it had become a very distinctive code of football. The game probably changed even more over the next hundred years. It will continue to change.

On some of the features of the early game, the evidence is sparse. The game had few rules in its first years, and many important matters, such as the shape of the playing field, were not even mentioned. Thus, until the first edition of this book appeared, it was assumed that originally the game must have been played on an oval-shaped playing field. It is easy to see how this idea gained credence because the evidence was meagre. I did not find clues that Australian football was commenced on a rectangular field until – nearly a year after I had begun my research – I came across a description of a match played between Melbourne and Carlton on 9 June 1877. That day, they were allowed the privilege of playing on the Melbourne Cricket Ground, and the sporting reporter noted their difficulty in adjusting to the wide wings of a circular arena. About the same time I found a diagram of a playing field in the 1877 edition of the annual Victorian magazine *The Footballer*; the field was oblong. Other clues favour the hypothesis that Australian football began on a rectangular ground and then, when it moved to the various cricket grounds, adapted itself to their round or oval arena.

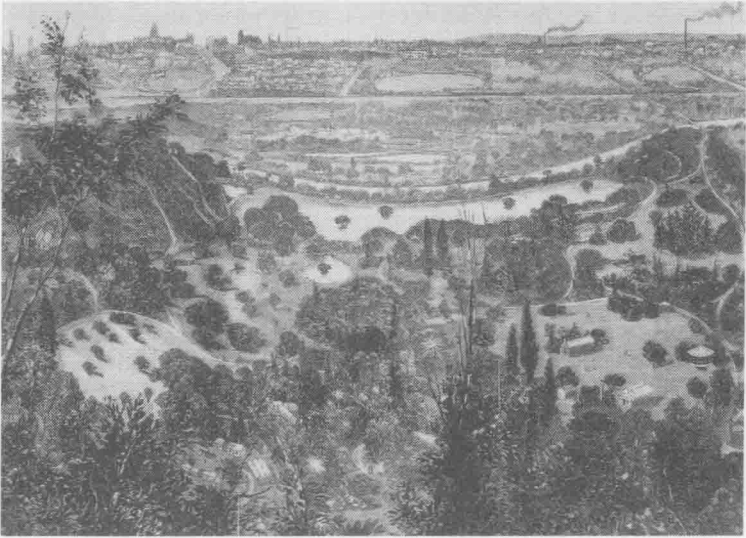
As it is not easy to investigate a question as elementary as the shape of the early arenas, we cannot be fully confident about several other important facets of the early game. One of the crucial questions is why Australian football did not adopt a sending-off rule. As the arena was huge and as the play sometimes moved with high speed from one end of the arena to the other, it was very difficult for an umpire. There were acts of violence which an umpire could not see: they took place behind the play or were too far ahead of him to be seen clearly. By 1900 violence was all too frequent in Melbourne matches. Other major football codes permitted an umpire or referee to ban an offending player from the field for the remainder of the game, but Australian football refused to adopt that harsh form of discipline. Why it refused is not clear. Only in

recent years has Australian football, at its senior level, adopted a policy of appointing two – and now three – central umpires. That policy of course leads to inconsistencies, for the game has a cavalcade of rules, some of which depend heavily on personal judgement rather than simple facts.

The first edition of this book ended the story in or around 1880 – soon after the forming of the Victorian Football Association, and soon after the playing of the first matches against teams from other colonies. The second edition extended the story for twenty or more years and added new sections to the old while also, here and there, making verbal alterations for the sake of accuracy, clarity or pithiness. Furthermore the early Victorian, South Australian and Gaelic rules printed at the end of the book were augmented by additional rules, as indicators of how the game evolved.

Before and after the first edition of this book appeared, the idea was widespread that Australian football was simply an offshoot of Gaelic football, a rather similar game played in Ireland. Indeed, this book was initially sponsored by the National Australian Football Council and its general manager, Ed Biggs, partly to investigate whether that Gaelic theory was valid. The theory seemed plausible because the two games had much in common. On the other hand, several earlier historians of the Australian game had pointed out that they could find little or no direct evidence in favour of a Gaelic origin. Their conclusions tended to be ignored. Eventually I realised that it was not enough to point to the lack of concrete evidence in favour of the Gaelic interpretation. It was vital to produce evidence positively refuting a Gaelic interpretation. Slowly that evidence came to hand, and it can be found in Chapter 11 of this edition.

In the last twenty years the Gaelic theory has declined dramatically in popularity, only to be challenged by another. There is now support, especially in some academic and football circles and a section of the media, for the theory that Australian football is really an



An artist stood in the Botanical Gardens in 1889 and sketched, taking a few liberties, the football grounds on the other side of the Yarra. Towards the horizon can be seen, from left to right, the East Melbourne ground (with the Exhibition Building above it), the Melbourne Cricket Ground and the Richmond ground. The arena nearest the river was the Friendly Societies' Gardens (The Australasian Sketcher, 26 December 1889).

old Aboriginal game, adopted in the 1850s by white newcomers to Melbourne. So far there is even less evidence, actual or circumstantial, for the Aboriginal theory than for the Gaelic theory.

At present the evidence is overwhelming that the Australian game in its first years was a deliberately chosen mixture of English rules, to which were added a stream of Australian innovations. The innovations, now nation-wide in origin, continue at such a fast pace that the present game would not be recognisable to the players of 1860.

The Australian Football League, the present guardian of the game, has become a good friend to Aboriginal footballers, and they have more than repaid the debt. They are one of the ornaments of the game: perhaps nothing has done more to enrich football in the last half-century than the increasing role of Aboriginal champions.

But the idea that they invented the game seems to be fanciful. Two recent investigators – Greg de Moore and Gillian Hibbins – having surveyed the wide range of evidence from the 1850s, wrote books which affirmed without hesitation that the theory of an Aboriginal origin is weak or even ‘ludicrous’. Unfortunately the Australian Football League prefers to support or tolerate the Aboriginal theory rather than to investigate it seriously.

In telling this story, I had to make decisions about time and distance. In describing past games, I prefer yards and feet and the old imperial measurements. If a footballer in the 1870s was said by a newspaper to have kicked the ball 60 yards, it is unwise to translate this, as we might do now, into 60 metres. A yard is not a metre: such a translation inflates unduly the length of a long kick. To convert ‘60 yards’ precisely into 54.9 metres (or even 55) is to convey an impression of accuracy which the original newspaper account did not really intend. Likewise, when the early rule-makers decided to define a ground as not more than 200 yards in length, we would be silly to write, without an explanation, that they fixed the maximum length of a ground at no more than 182.88 metres or, say, 183 metres. Immediately we lose sight of the rough-and-ready but practical way in which the early rules were made and the early matches reported in the newspapers.

Time also creates a difficulty. In 1895 all clocks in Victoria were permanently advanced by twenty minutes and six seconds in order to create the present Australian Eastern Standard Time. This means that a Melbourne football match which was reported to have commenced at, say, 3.00 pm on a Saturday before 1895 really began at about 3.20 pm, if translated into modern time. This was a very late start, especially in mid-winter, but the late start was unavoidable because most players and spectators worked on Saturday morning. As matches often came to an end towards 5.30 or 6.00 pm by the old Victorian time, or some twenty minutes later by our time, we

glimpse the darkness in which many games must have ended. I have retained the old measurement of time in the narrative.

In describing the development of the game, I usually prefer the newer phrase 'Australian football'. Originally it was just called football. Later it was usually called 'Victorian Rules', especially from the late 1870s. Later came 'Australian Rules' and 'Aussie Rules'.

Geoffrey Blainey

Melbourne

June 2010

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CHAPTER ONE

The Man in the Zingari Stripe

In the parkland outside the Melbourne Cricket Ground stand three old and ghost-like gum trees. Though two have been dead for decades, they are protected by fences made of iron pickets. A long and neat scar in the trunk of the trees is still visible, and a plaque near the foot of one tree proclaims that long ago it was scarred by Aboriginals when they cut away the bark with their stone axes to make a simple canoe or other receptacle. Those spectators who park their cars near these trees in the football season scarcely notice them, let alone their significance. But the football they come to watch was largely invented in that parkland, and some of the first matches were played around those trees when they were flourishing in the 1850s.

The parkland was then dotted with large redgums, and occasionally the football was kicked into the upper branches while underneath the players waited, ready to grab the ball after it fell. The trees were an accepted obstacle in those first experimental years and we have the report of one match in which the ball, kicked by a player, hit the trunk of a tree and was then deflected

between the goalposts. The goal was actually allowed. The rules of this new game were not only very different from those of today, but were also different from those of any other football game in the world. The game was, from the start, a new recipe with old ingredients.

Of the main codes of football played in the world, Australian Rules is one of the oldest. By the normal definition of age, it is older than American football or gridiron, older than Rugby League, older than the modern version of Gaelic football from which it is widely said to have been descended, a little older than Association football or soccer, but younger than Rugby.

In Britain are very old Rugby clubs and teams. Football at the Rugby School began to take on its distinctive form in 1823. In London the still-active Guy's and St Thomas' Hospitals Rugby Football Club, on one line of descent, goes back to 1843. But Rugby Union, in view of its proud amateur tradition, did not attract large crowds during its early decades. Its clubs did not attract a band of followers as large as those watching the famous English soccer and Australian football teams.

Few of the senior football clubs in the world, irrespective of the specific code they play, can be as old as the senior Australian football clubs. No famous soccer club is as old as the senior football clubs in Victoria. When I tried to place the football clubs in the Australian Football League and the English Football League in order of seniority, I assumed that the list would be led by English teams such as Manchester United or Blackburn Rovers or another famous long-standing club. It surprised me to discover that even the English Football League, the oldest of all the national leagues in the dominant international code of soccer, has no club that matches the antiquity of the early Victorian clubs. According to my investigations, that combined list of old senior clubs in the two codes runs in this sequence:

1858 Melbourne

1859 Geelong

1862 Notts County

1863 Stoke City

1864 Carlton

1865 Nottingham Forest

Essendon and St Kilda and some of the middle-aged clubs in the Australian Football League have a longer history than the oldest senior clubs in such famous football nations as Germany and Argentina. Even Collingwood, which is a young club by Australian standards, being founded in 1892, is as old as the oldest of the senior Italian clubs, Genoa. Similarly, Port Adelaide, founded in 1870, goes back much further than the oldest senior club in that wonderful footballing nation Brazil.

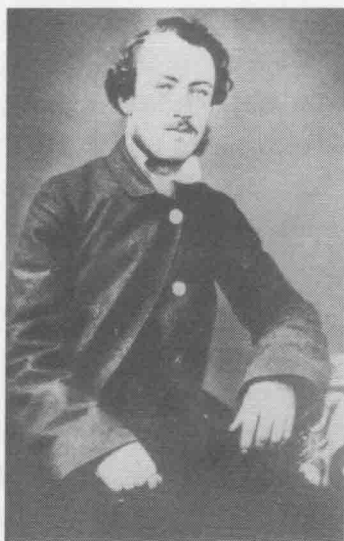
The Australian brand of football, though old, is sometimes seen as young and even as an imported game in those Australian cities in which today it has an immense following. How it arose, and how it was shaped, is a strange story.

The new game was influenced not only by those who sat on committees and drew up rules, but by those who actually played. Thomas Wills filled all roles. He played, captained, umpired and helped to shape the rules of the new game that soon attracted spectators to the parklands only a mile from the heart of goldrush Melbourne. Sometimes he even claimed that he had initiated it. He once recalled that 'this manly game was first introduced into the Colony by the writer in 1857, but it was not taken too kindly until the following year'. His assertion cannot be accepted literally but he did as much as anybody in the first years to make it an attractive sport, though, when he ceased playing, it was still far from the game we know.

Tom Wills was brought up with a silver spoon in his mouth: his father was a rich sheepowner. He was also brought up with a spoon

of vinegar, the bitter taste of which he was careful to conceal. His grandfather, Edward Wills, was an English criminal who at Kingston on Thames had been sentenced to death for highway robbery, the sentence being commuted to transportation for life. Reaching Sydney in 1799 this convict and his free wife eventually began to do well as the owners of a general store and tavern. Tom Wills' father, Horatio Spencer Wills, was born in Sydney and eventually became a printer and publisher. He also took up land on the

Thomas Wentworth Wills, who did more than any other man to sponsor the new game. This photo (from the T Wills Cooke collection) was probably taken after Wills returned from school in England. Dapper and sensitive here, he wears a 'couldn't care less' look in photos of fifteen years later.



Molonglo Plains, not too far from the present Canberra, and involved himself in that remarkable overland movement of sheep and cattle which occupied the vast areas of the Port Phillip District, later to become the Colony of Victoria. Tom Wills, the earliest hero of Australian football, was born on 19 August 1835. He was aged four when in April 1840 he set out with his parents from the upper Murrumbidgee on that long journey, camping each night beside a large fire, travelling each day with the straggling flock, and crossing the wider rivers – for there were no

bridges – on the body of a cart or dray which, modified, served as a slow-moving boat. The family eventually settled at Lexington, near the present Ararat in western Victoria, where they built a slab hut and then a substantial homestead far from the nearest church, police station and shop. Aboriginals were still living in the district, their numbers cut down by disease, and young Tom Wills played with them. One of his cousins once recalled that, to the delight of the local Aboriginals, Tom learned to speak their language with some fluency. He was also ‘very clever at picking up their songs, which he delivered with a very amusing imitation of their voice and gestures’.

The family longed for the precious items of the cities and eventually bought a cottage piano which was carried by sailing ship from London and by dray from Port Phillip Bay. They also believed in educating their children. Tom, at about the age of ten, went to Melbourne, to Brickwood’s Academy, where he won a little notice at a cricket match on Batman’s Hill, near Spencer Street and the Yarra River. He made two ‘ducks’, or spectacles as they were then called, and also suffered one black eye when he missed a catch.

When he was about fourteen Tom made the long voyage by sailing ship past Cape Horn and across the Atlantic to England where he was enrolled at the Rugby School in the Midlands. The venture was a triumph for the grandson of a convict. The Rugby School might have viewed it as less of a triumph had it known of the new boy’s background, for the biblical phrase that the sins of the fathers were visited on the children generation after generation was held in high regard as a kind of mixed law of morality and genetics, meaning that ‘bad blood’ was not easily changed. The English boarding school at first must have been a lonely and dislocating experience. Though Tom was initially behind most boys in his studies, he compensated in sport, and in a letter to his father in August 1851 he recounted not only the sermons he heard in