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**AUSTRALIAN
RULES FOOTBALL
DURING THE FIRST
WORLD WAR**

**Dale Blair and
Rob Hess**



Palgrave Studies in Sport and Politics

Series Editor

Martin Polley

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Dale Blair · Rob Hess

Australian Rules
Football During the
First World War

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PREFACE

This book has had a long germination. The core of the work began as an Honours thesis in 1993, exploring the correlation between voting patterns during the conscription referenda with the playing of Australian Rules football during the Great War in Melbourne. Since the thesis was produced, much has changed in the Australian sporting landscape, both on the playing field and in the academic world, where the task to explain and understand the social, cultural and political importance of sport is more complex than it ever was. As a consequence, there is a need to broaden research into the history of football during the First World War. The centenary of that conflict, therefore, makes this an ideal time to revisit the relevant subject matter. Where Melbourne in times past was seen as the unequivocal centre of Australia's football universe, the advent and growth of a truly national Australian football league since 1986 has reduced Melbourne's primacy, and any serious study of football during wartime needs to address the national perspective, particularly given the national endeavour involved in the war. Further to that, much worthy scholarship on sport and war has been undertaken over the past 30 years and historians such as Wray Vamplew, Kevin Blackburn and Martin Crotty, among others, need to be acknowledged for the fresh views they have introduced. A recent ground-breaking study of women's football also demands to be included in the narrative of the code's wartime history. Thanks are also extended to Nick Richardson, John Sloss and Trevor Ruddell (MCC library) for their assistance with the provision of some images used.

In particular, the authors would like to thank our colleagues at both Deakin University and Victoria University who have provided an ongoing sounding board for our thoughts on a subject about which we are passionate. Their influences have undoubtedly shaped our outlook. We would also like to thank those colleagues associated with the Australian Society for Sport History who have been equally influential at various forums over the years. Our final note of gratitude goes to all those involved at Palgrave Pivot who have assisted so capably with the timely publication of this work.

Melbourne, Australia

Dale Blair
Rob Hess

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War!

Abstract On the eve of the First World War, Australian Rules football was enthusiastically played and supported in all the southern and western states and its devotees spoke of it as “the Australian game” with high hopes that it would surpass rugby in popularity in the northern states and that it would achieve an international dimension. The professional game was particularly attractive to the working class, for whom it offered recreation and supplementary income. Public moralists, however, many of whom were supporters of the amateur ideal, saw it as a corruption of character. Chapter 1 explores these differences in opinion, as to the game’s purpose, which revealed a fault line that would become a markedly apparent social battle line as soon as war was declared.

Keywords Australian rules · Australian game · Sport and war · Games ethos · First World War · Muscular christianity

On Saturday, 25 April 1914, the football season opened in Melbourne and Perth. A year later the Australian landing at Gallipoli on that same date would assume epic proportions on a national scale. It would not only provide the seed for a new foundation myth for the nation, but it would be celebrated as part of football fixtures across the country for more than a century. However, as the 1914 season commenced Australians were too preoccupied with the pursuit of their regular Saturday sports to consider possible portents of the future. The leading

football competition in the country, the Victorian Football League (VFL), was hopeful of continuing the success of previous years and took pride in the remarkable fact that on any given Saturday one tenth of the city's population were spectators of the Australian game.¹ The code was enthusiastically supported in the continent's southern and western states with large portions of the populations of Adelaide, Perth, Launceston and Hobart turning out to watch games on the weekends. It was widely acknowledged as a popular domestic sport, and the game's custodians were hopeful of expanding it beyond Australia's national borders.

Under the stewardship of the Australasian Football Council, and inspired by a nascent nationalism, every opportunity and consideration was given to growing the game so that it would be cemented not only as the pre-eminent national sport but also as a game that would be played across the Tasman, where a number of competitions were thriving in New Zealand.² Mindful of the diluting effect the existence of rival codes could have on this vision, there was even a suggestion that Rugby League and Australian Rules should be merged, extracting the best features of both, to produce a single Australian football code. There had also been plans afoot to send two exhibition teams to play Australian Rules matches in America, and in Britain, France and other European countries. To the regret of "Coo-ee" the football writer for Sydney's *Sportsman* newspaper, the advent of the war robbed the game of a golden opportunity to promote itself and advance its growth in the "older countries of the world".³ The desire for the creation of such a hybrid game persisted throughout the war years and even into the post-bellum era it was thought that the development of an "Empire Rugby game" was far more valuable in the cultivation of imperial ties of kinship and friendship than parochial games such as rugby (league and union) and Australian Rules, that drew the multitudes in the capital cities.⁴

THE BRITISH EMPIRE TRADITION AND AMATEURISM

The outbreak of war signalled an opportunity for patriots to parrot their loyalty to the cause boldly and to berate those whom they saw as being recalcitrant in their duty to country and the Empire. Many of these patriots were imbued with what has been referred to as the "games ethic". This ethic, with its focus on the promotion of health and vigour, had taken root in education curriculums throughout the British Empire in the late Victorian and Edwardian period. Within this moral

code, field sports, such as the various football codes, were seen as providing essential training to ensure the fitness of the British race to hold its own against the endeavours of other nations. In playing team sports it was thought that essential Christian values of individual self-sacrifice for the greater good would be exemplified. The adherents of this philosophy saw its practice as having significant meaning, one that in time of national peril, such as war, could be drawn upon to defend the nation. This belief system had been paramount in the thinking of the founders of the Australian game but was one that had been challenged as the game became more popular. Purists believed that sport should be engaged in only for the sake of the game and for the inherent physical and spiritual elevation imparted through it. The introduction of match payments as an inducement and/or reward to play the game was viewed by these idealists as a moral obscenity, one that impugned men's character. If proof was wanted of the corrupting influence of monies, then critics only needed to point to the bribery scandal of 1910 in which two Carlton players were suspended for accepting payments to underperform, that is, to "play dead".⁵ In a broader context, the distinction between amateur and professional athletes in Australian sport continued to be murky and generated much public debate. This was nowhere more marked than in football's sphere and would provide an enduring battle line along which detractors of professional Australian Rules football would assail its integrity and worth during the First World War.

THE SYDNEY AUSTRALASIAN FOOTBALL CARNIVAL

As things stood in 1914, the game's officials, players and supporters contented themselves with the knowledge that "footy" was being played the length and breadth of the land, more so in the south, but all over nonetheless. Indeed, the beginning of August 1914 was to mark a special event of celebration for proponents of the Australian game with the scheduling of the Australasian Football Carnival in Sydney. It was the third carnival to have been held, the previous two having been staged in Melbourne (1908) and Adelaide (1911). For the Sydney carnival, representative sides from six states, New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia, Tasmania, Victoria and Western Australia were scheduled to meet in a round robin series to be played between 5 and 15 August at the Sydney Cricket Ground. In addition to the senior representative sides there were also state schoolboy sides and some club sides. Collingwood,

South Adelaide, Perth and Cananore Football Club from Hobart all passed through Sydney on their way to Brisbane to take part in a club championship arranged as a special exhibition of the Australian game in that city. It was a veritable footy *mardi gras*.

At a reception held at the Selberne Hotel, Adelaide, for the Perth club which had arrived by steamer as they made their way East while the war clouds gathered, Mr. T. Ryan, of the Sturt Football Club—who were to play an exhibition match against the West Australians—referred to the possibility of war and declared “Should any Australians take part they would not dishonour the flag they served ... [as] it was on the football fields that they learned the lessons of endurance, confidence, generosity and comradeship”.⁶ Mr. A.A. Moffatt responded for the West Australians and stated that in the event of war “footballers would be among the first to offer their services”.⁷ The New South Wales captain Ralph Robertson was one who immediately heard the call and enlisted during the carnival, the declaration of war falling on his thirty-second birthday.⁸

The carnival in Sydney was expected to provide a colourful addition to the city’s life for the eleven days of its duration. When the grim news that Britain had declared war on Germany became public knowledge it cast an immediate pall over the affair. The carnival proved a wash-out, being poorly attended and leaving the New South Wales Football League £500 in arrears.⁹ At an afternoon reception for the visiting footballers held at the Sydney Town Hall, the chairman of the New South Wales Football League, Mr. H.R. Denison, noted in his welcoming speech that “what should have been a festive gathering and joyous occasion was clouded over by the shadow of war”. He further noted, unconsciously touching on something that would become a point of public contention in the months and years to come, that he had “found that those who took a lively part in manly sports were foremost in defence”. The assumption inherent in this statement was that footballers would be among the first to heed the call to arms. A lusty rendition of the national anthem followed the speech.¹⁰

MOTIVES FOR ENLISTMENT

Within days of the war’s outbreak, footballers were targeted as obvious recruits. Tasmanian Peter Anderson wrote to the editor of the Launceston *Examiner*, expressing what would become a common refrain in regard to football and war: “our footballers would be doing a loyal

and praiseworthy act were they to close the present season and form a Volunteer Corps. This at a time of peril and stress for the Empire would be better than kicking a ball about perhaps at the very hour when their fellow Britons are fighting for national existence".¹¹

The war suddenly brought with it previously unforeseen and unknown dilemmas for both supporters and players. As part of the British Empire at war, what was the appropriate level of patriotism required of them? Could footballers, who were for the most part fit men of military age engaged in a game that, according to the literature and rhetoric of the time, paralleled war, divide their attention between the two? For some the answers to such questions were unequivocal.

The metaphor of sport and war and all its loadings of public duty and loyalty were no better illustrated than in Sir Henry Newbolt's famous poem, *Vitai Lampada*:

There's a breathless hush in the Close to-night –

Ten to make and the match to win –

A bumping pitch and blinding light,

An hour to play and the last man in.

And it's not for the sake of the ribboned coat,

Or the selfish hope of a season's fame,

But his Captain's hand on his shoulder smote

'Play up! Play up! And play the game!'

The sand of the desert is sodden red, –

Red with the wreck of a square that broke; –

The Gatling's jammed and the Colonel dead,

And the regiment blind with dust and smoke.

The river of death has brimmed his banks,

And England's far, and Honour a name,

But the voice of a schoolboy rallies the ranks:

'Play up! Play up! And play the game!'

This is the word that year by year,
 While in her place the school is set,
 Every one of her sons must hear,
 And none that hears it dare forget.
 This they all with a joyful mind
 Bear through life like a torch in flame,
 And falling fling to the host behind –
 ‘Play up! Play up! And play the game!’

Written in 1908, this poem encapsulated a decades-long expectation that was implanted in the minds of children throughout the British Empire. It was a constant in church services, public speeches and children’s literature. Also noteworthy is a vignette on football in Thomas Hughes’ best-selling and widely distributed *Tom Brown’s Schooldays*:

You say you don’t see much in it all; nothing but a struggling mass of boys, and a leather ball, which seems to excite them all to great fury, as a red rag does a bull. My dear sir, a battle would look much the same to you, except that the boys would be men, and the balls iron; but a battle would be worth your looking at for all that, and so is a football match.¹²

For people inculcated by such ideals, the call to “Play up! Play up! And play the game!” drew an automatic response. Others were not so sure.

Wray Vamplew has recently challenged the general acceptance of the power of this ideology. He states that: “Too many academics have simply bought into the athleticism story without considering whether the substance matched the rhetoric”. In regard to whether schoolboys were indoctrinated by this code, or whether they even believed in it, Vamplew asserts that we simply do not know.¹³ Richard White has similarly and previously posited, in his investigation of enlistment motives in the Australian Imperial Force (AIF), that working-class volunteers were not necessarily inspired to enlist by “publicly acceptable sentiments” that were extolled by the middle-class.¹⁴ The truth or not of the effectiveness of the dissemination of the sporting ethos was of little concern to the patriots. Their arrogance assumed it was, and if it was not, then it ought to be.