

**Rob Hess, Matthew Nicholson, Bob Stewart & George de Moore,  
*A National Game – The History of Australian Rules Football,*  
Melbourne: Viking (Penguin), 2008.  
ISBN: 9780670070893 (HB)**

**James Watson (ed.), *The Australian Game of Football Since 1858,*  
Melbourne: Geoff Slattery Publications Books, 2008.  
ISBN: 9780980346664 (HB)**

The season is over, Hawthorn supporters are still crowing, Geelong supporters still can't believe what happened, and the only thing on most fans' minds is: 'I can't wait until footy starts again!' It will be a long few months, punctuated only by a brief hybrid series against Ireland and periodic media coverage of the trading and drafting of new players, or Wayne Carey's various court appearances; so what better way to anticipate the future of the great Australian game than by looking back at its past?

The year 2008 was Australian football's 150th anniversary year, and among the host of commemorations, two books stand out as enduring monuments to the game: the scholarly and deeply interesting *A National Game – The History of Australian Rules Football*, and the rather over-the-top coffee table production, *The Australian Game of Football Since 1858*. In many ways, the volumes conform to those greatest of Aussie Rules stereotypes, with Watson's volume playing the part of the flashy forward, overconfident, unpredictable (and a little bit thick) like Fevola or Brereton; while Hess et al., have given us the quieter strength and greater solidity of a big backman, like Archer or Doull. In the game of Australian football, allowing a forward free reign creates an uninteresting and lopsided product; and so too dominance by an overly-stifling backman also makes for a boring contest. Therefore, these books are best read in tandem, with the strengths of one combating the weaknesses of the other, and together creating a valuable insight into the game as it *was*, and as it *is*.

Haydn Bunton Senior (1911-1955), resplendent in his 'Big V' Victorian State-of-Origin guernsey, glides across the cover of *A National Game*. This is a most appropriate image for what is the best comprehensive history of the *national* game to

appear, for Bunton was born in New South Wales; was Champion of the Colony (of Victoria) in 1932; won three Brownlow Medals with Fitzroy (1931, 1932, 1935); before moving to Subiaco, Western Australia, where he won a further three Sandover Medals (1938, 1939, 1941); and finally coaching North Adelaide for two seasons (1947, 1948). Bunton truly was a national hero of the game, and the greatest strength of this work is its fair treatment of the game's development across the Australian continent.

Boasting the expertise of Rob Hess, Matthew Nicholson, Bob Stewart and Greg de Moore (all of whom are recognised in the forefront of sports history in Australia) *A National Game* tells the now well-known story of how groups of schoolboys and cricketers in the 1850s first experimented with varieties of football – 'the great English game' – in the lightly-wooded reserves of Yarra Park in and around the Melbourne Cricket Ground. From muddled beginnings, in which rules (and teams) were decided in *ad hoc* fashion, the version of football eventually developed was first codified as early as 17 May 1859, and Hess and Co. present the detail of this formative period as the epoch in world sport that it truly was, without ever losing sight of just how far the game had to travel before it became recognisably similar to that which now dominates Saturday-night viewing in Melbourne. Nor do Hess and Co. dwell on the 'Melbourne Rules' (as they were originally published), but take due and diligent care to explore the origins of similar footballing movements in all the other British Australasian colonies, including New Zealand (where Victorian expats conducted competitions during the Gold Rush and Maori Wars of the 1860-70s). The sheer complexity, and large degree of chance, which resulted in the Victorian game being taken up by Western Australia, South Australia, and Tasmania, but saw the Rugby game gain prominence in New South Wales, Queensland and New Zealand, will fascinate those who are largely unaware of the course of this significant historical development.

That the 'Barassi Line' (dividing Australian Rules from Rugby territory) has always been far more permeable than even the foremost scholars have imagined, is a key plank in the argument of *A National Game*. The persistence of Australian Rules in the Northern States points to a feature of the game's history seldom before given the credence it deserves: the vital role played by the Australasian Football Council (later

the National Football League) in ensuring the game lived on even as Rugby came to dominate the consciousness of NSW and QLD sportsmen from the 1880s. It was the work of this peak body that made the Sydney and Brisbane experiments (of 1982 and 1987 respectively) possible for a Victorian Football League which had traditionally shunned any involvement in football beyond the Murray River (and possibly the Riverina). It was likewise through the energy and sheer love of the game exhibited by the South Australian and West Australian state leagues (not to mention the Tasmanians, still ‘disenfranchised’ as they are in senior football terms) which allowed Aussie Rules to emerge in the 1980s and 1990s as the vibrant national competition it undoubtedly is; that this was a bumpy road, and not always certain, Hess and Co. emphasise with admirable clarity. Likewise, the contribution of the Victorian Football Association as a powerful, well-governed body of pivotal importance to the continued story of Australian Rules is never subsumed by the ultimately more popular and powerful narrative of the Victorian Football League. The split of 1896-7, which saw the foundation of the latter, is not seen as some teleological end-point, but yet another twist in the game’s rich history.

The richness of that history is further highlighted through the attention given to the ‘minority’ stories of Australian Rules, from the ‘Chinese Connection’ and recent efforts to export Australian Rules via an International Cup (played every three years since 2002, and so far won by Ireland, New Zealand and Papua New Guinea); to the essential role which women have always played in the development of the game. For Hess, whose scholarship on the *playing* of women’s football – and not merely their officially-designated roles as fans, mothers, sisters, journalists and support-staff – has recently taken some fascinating turns, this is a perfect opportunity to synthesise this rich vein of largely untold history into the broader context of the national narrative. The role of Indigenous Australians in the game is also here presented as a parallel narrative which did not intertwine with the mainstream until disturbingly recently. The ingrained racism of White Australia meant that this significant pool of talent and interest was actively discouraged and discriminated against, until as late as the 1990s. When the great influx of Indigenous Australians occurs in the narrative, roughly beginning in the 1960s and 1970s, it is handled without the tabloid-style hyperbole which is so often attached to such discussions. The shocking record of the Collingwood Football Club in the mid-1990s, and which led begrudgingly to the

AFL's Code of Conduct, is not glossed over or sanitised, but presented here for what it is, a tale of Indigenous Australians taking courageous individual (and often isolated) stands against the inertia of officialdom and effecting real change in the sport.

By way of a final note, it is worth highlighting how well this volume also gives full credit to the clubs of all leagues, and not merely those of the VFL/AFL, for their roles in 'growing the game'. Though I must declare a bias in this regard, it was enjoyable to read of the singular importance of the North Melbourne Football Club under the regime of Dr Allen Aylett, which altered radically the way football business was conducted in the 1970s. Though given my ambivalent attitude towards the subsequent transformation of football into another aspect of free-market economics – of which Aylett's North was arguably the prime mover – it was also helpful to see the continuity of 'football as a business' almost since its inception as a code. Football has never been insulated from issues of finance and 'marketability', and it is refreshing to see this treated in straightforward, interesting fashion throughout the book, which arguably comes closer than any such work to the title of 'definitive history' of Aussie Rules.

*A National Game's* counterpart, *The Australian Game of Football since 1858*, was rather foolishly hailed 'the definitive history' by AFL CEO Andrew Demetriou at its launch in 2008. It is certainly not that, and nor was it ever really intended to be. Rather, it is a hefty, lavishly-illustrated, tribute volume that offers its readers (or at least those looking at all the pictures) '*Herald-Sun* history' at its best. Granted, various (particular the earlier) sections of the book contain solid historical essays, written by some of the standout scholars of Australian football, but anyone expecting analysis on the same footing as *A National Game* will be disappointed. Instead, what one will find is the 'official version' of Aussie Rules, updated and well-crafted for the Demetriou era. This is the history of Aussie Rules reinterpreted as 'manifest destiny', produced by a league determined to dominate the Australian sporting landscape, but still not quite certain that it will succeed in fending off (or crushing) its rivals in the two Rugby games, and the round ball game most of the rest of the world calls 'football'.

Perhaps most tellingly in this era of football-as-business, the volume highlights the achievements of the national organisation at the expense of the football clubs from which it came. This is, after all, still an era in which clubs are secondary concerns to the central bureaucracy of football, and it was not so long ago that the ancient clubs of South Melbourne (founded 1874) and Fitzroy (1883) were 're-branded' to suit the whims of the league and the free market, and only recently has North Melbourne (1869) been forced to prove its 'viability' following a league-driven attempt to relocate it to the Gold Coast. Indeed the great football clubs of all states receive very little attention throughout, something which Robert Pascoe rightly noted as a great mistake in his review.<sup>1</sup> It is the colours and characters of 'the Hawks' (Hawthorn), 'the Falcons' (West Perth), 'the Magpies' (Glenorchy) and 'the Tigers' (Glenelg), that attract and maintain interest in any history of football, and it has been the clubs which have driven the development of Australian Rules: leagues or associations can change their names with impunity, but try to change a club name, and you will encounter not a small measure of resistance.

As if to counteract this significant flaw, there is a strong emphasis on the other aspect of the game, that fans and scholars alike love to examine and argue about: the great heroes of the game. All the great names feature prominently throughout, providing the more personal form of history which might otherwise get lost in such a sweeping survey as *The Australian Game of Football*. Even here, however, there are problems with the chosen format, for example, a rather arbitrary list of the 'Top 50' players of all time, provided by *Herald-Sun* columnist Mike Sheahan. The purpose of such a section is to generate controversy, not to provide a measured appreciation of the skills and personalities which have shaped the game on-field. In this sense it is worth noting that, in keeping with the populist character of the book, the list is not the 'best and fairest players of all time', thus making the positioning of Wayne Carey at number 1, and Leigh Matthews and Gary Ablett in the top 10 that much easier to defend (numbers 2 and 4 respectively). Indeed these are not so much 'the greatest players of all time', rather those of the last 30-50 years or so, as the majority of the players listed played in the decades since the post-war hero John Coleman dominated goalkicking (Coleman only manages 22nd place in Sheahan's list).

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<sup>1</sup> Robert Pascoe, *The Age*, 19 April 2008.

Other essays and sections of the book are stronger, and are penned by those with perhaps more claims to expertise than Mr Sheahan. Trevor Grant and John Harms detail the contribution of fans of all eras to the development of the game, and bravely attempt to distil the true meaning of being a fan of Aussie Rules. David Nadel provides an insightful commentary on the politics of the game in the 1980s and 1990s, when the neo-liberal economic rationalism of the wider Australian political context permeated the way football business was conducted, transforming the national game into ‘the national competition’. Gillian Hibbins’ pieces on the origins of the game tell us little that Hess and Co., or Geoffrey Blainey did not (in 1990’s *A Game of Our Own*, the bulk of research for which was completed by Rob Hess, then a budding postgrad).<sup>2</sup> In one respect, however, these are the most important essays in the whole volume, as they generated the ‘Battle of Wills’ between Hibbins and the likes of Martin Flanagan in the pages of the Melbourne press, the latest symptom of Australia’s ‘History Wars’. I agree with Hibbins (and Blainey, and others of that school) who identify the origins of Australian football in the cult of ‘muscular Christianity’ inculcated through the resurgent English public school system in the middle of the nineteenth century. The primary influence of such a milieu is impossible to contradict, especially given Tom Wills’ presence at the Rugby School in the wake of Thomas Arnold’s great reforms (though even Wills’ status as the game’s ‘Father’ is rightly in some dispute). I also agree that seeking the origins of Australian Rules in the indigenous ‘Marn Grook’ game is a ‘Seductive Myth’ (as Hibbins entitled her key essay). But Hibbins was too loud in her refusal to accept any Indigenous Australian influence in Australia’s indigenous game of football – ‘there is no evidence, therefore it cannot have happened’ – and went to the ridiculous extreme of accusing Adam Goodes (the double Brownlow Medallist and author of another essay in this book) of being a ‘racist’ for claiming his Aboriginal heritage gave him a natural affiliation with the game as it is played today. That Martin Flanagan responded with too determined a challenge to Hibbins’ claims did not help matters, and the substance of this debate speaks volumes about the ideological construction of *The Australian Game of Football*. The unwillingness to allow for alternative readings of history, save for the ‘definitive’, ‘authorised’ version presented

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<sup>2</sup> Geoffrey Blainey, *A Game of Our Own: The Origins of Australian Football*, Melbourne, Information Australia, 1990.

by an AFL which presents itself as supremely confident like the alpha-male stereotype it celebrates, but also feels threatened by even the most limited and reasoned challenge to its approach. Thus the pivotal roles played by the Victorian Football Association (now Victorian Football League), and the Australasian Football Council (in its various guises down to 1990) are unfairly sidelined in favour of the image of Victorian/Australian Football League as the bearer of the light to the sports fans of Australia (and one day... the world!).

I said at the beginning of this review that *A National Game* and *The Australian Game of Football since 1858* should ideally be read in tandem, and indeed this is the case. For, although the analysis provided by the Hess team is by far the superior, Watson's team delivers in terms of visuals. Australian Football is most notably a spectacular phenomenon, and though the images contained in *A National Game* are well-chosen and apposite to the themes of the text, in sheer numbers and quality, *The Australian Game of Football since 1858* has no equal. A full half of the book (by my rough estimation) consists of colour and black-and-white images of the high marks, long kicks, and finesse of the players in full-flight, and though biased in favour of the colourful images of the period since the 1970s, also give weight to the heroes of yesteryear. The art inspired by the game – both Indigenous and more mainstream – also finds its rightful place in what, for all its flaws, is quite possibly the best visual record of Australian Rules ever to be produced; and therefore qualifies as a superb collection of documents for use by professional and casual historians alike. Matching the faces and incidents contained in these to the sound narrative of *A National Game* is a rewarding exercise, and one which enhances the experience of both books.

Both *A National Game* and *The Australian Game of Football since 1858* have their flaws, and returning to the initial simile, one has to award the points to the 'backman' for a far more consistent performance. On the day, it was more thorough, displayed more hard work and 'did the one percenters'; while the 'forward' was too 'hungry', struggled to put together a coherent performance, and ultimately tried to do too much.

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