

PALGRAVE STUDIES IN SPORT  
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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

International Centre for Sports History

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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.<sup>1</sup> 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.<sup>2</sup> 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".<sup>3</sup> 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.<sup>4</sup>

### 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".<sup>5</sup> 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”.<sup>6</sup> 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”.<sup>7</sup> 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.<sup>8</sup>

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.<sup>9</sup> 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.<sup>10</sup>

### 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".<sup>11</sup>

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.<sup>12</sup>

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.<sup>13</sup> 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.<sup>14</sup> 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.

For many Australian workers the school of hard knocks had created a philosophy of life based around daily survival rather than the more abstract metaphysical notion of “God, King and Empire”. Many of these people supported football clubs representing suburbs where working-class values were paramount. The dislocation caused by the war in the conduct of football would create turmoil and schisms in many working-class communities.

### THE RISE OF THE PROFESSIONAL GAME

Social division in Australian cities was certainly relevant to the conduct of football at the time of the First World War and was, in part, responsible for the co-existence of two distinct attitudes about the meaning of sport. As cities became industrialised and as the working class became more involved with football, the game was increasingly seen as providing a cheap entertainment and recreation to be enjoyed outside of work. As workers became involved in the game, both as players and spectators, the game flourished. Large crowds increased profits, and monetary rewards and inducements became commonplace as clubs vied for the competitive edge. In the 1890s and the years immediately preceding the First World War, professionalism in sport had become an established fact, much to the dismay of the protectors of public morality. Player payments were officially sanctioned by the VFL in 1911. The game was not professional in the full sense of the word, as no player could survive on the payments from football alone, but it was certainly a most welcome supplement to their weekly wages.

Nevertheless, the tag “professional” came to represent any player in receipt of financial remuneration as well as intimating that the sporting philosophy of professional sportsmen was diametrically opposed to that of their amateur counterparts. It was no coincidence that when the VFL became professional, the leading junior competition, the Metropolitan Football Association (MFA), under the presidency of L.A. Adamson, inserted “amateur” into its name and became the Metropolitan Amateur Football Association (MAFA). The MFA had been an important feeder competition for the VFL and a number of its clubs were affiliated to League clubs and played curtain raisers to League games. University and Victorian Football Association (VFA) clubs, Brighton and Hawthorn, had all advanced from the amateur competition.<sup>15</sup> Adamson was also the



headmaster of Wesley College and would become an outspoken critic of professional footballers during the war.

The amateur view of sport stood markedly against the hedonistic nature of support for professional football. It was a somewhat quixotic view that was underpinned by a powerful ideology, generally referred to as “muscular Christianity” and later as “Newboltian theory” in deference to Sir Henry Newbolt’s contribution to education in Britain and his influence through the Empire. Essentially the notion of muscular Christianity was one enamoured of the most chivalrous of ideals. Man could enhance his moral character through physical endeavour. It was a fusion of ideas with notions of imperial duty, national identity, racial purity, Christian values and military imperatives combining to form a complex ideology. As team sports such as cricket and football developed, they were increasingly promoted in the nation’s private and public schools. Team sports were considered to foster essential characteristics of Christian manliness. Loyalty, courage, self-discipline and teamwork were all desirable attributes seen as being promoted on the playing fields in readiness for something higher. Implicit in this philosophy was an expectation that sportsmen would be among the first to heed the call of duty when war’s bugles sounded.<sup>16</sup>

It was through *Tom Brown’s Schooldays*, a semi-autobiographical work of fiction, set in the English school of Rugby and acknowledged as the bible of muscular Christianity, that thousands of impressionable young minds throughout the British Empire were allegedly introduced to the concept. Men such as L.A. Adamson acted as evangelists of the faith and preached it fervently in the Antipodes. Another was C.E.W. Bean, Australia’s most celebrated war historian and author of the first six volumes of the *Official History of Australia During the War of 1914–1918*. Bean, whose father had studied at Oxford’s Trinity College and later became headmaster of All Saints College in Bathurst, New South Wales, clearly believed a correlation existed between the Australian attitudes to sport and war.<sup>17</sup>

The amateur philosophy, with its reliance on sport as a metaphor of war, was championed in the private schools and churches. It was also subsumed into the wider educational stream with the introduction of state school curriculums and training schemes. In Victoria, L.A. Adamson was certainly one who was actively involved in the organisation of a teacher-training course in 1898, the only course of that kind in the state. He was also instrumental in forming the Association of Secondary

Teachers of Victoria as well as being influential in the passing of the Registration of Teachers and School Act of 1905 and one can be certain his views of amateurism in sport had found expression in Victorian educational circles.<sup>18</sup>

Editors of the daily press were also among those who vociferously extolled the virtues of amateurism while at the same time denouncing professionalism in sport, which they claimed created idlers and “added to the load of unproductive and useless humanity”.<sup>19</sup> Such attacks did nothing to arrest the increasing professionalism in football. Even the clubs representing the affluent middle-class suburbs, from where amateurism purportedly drew its strength, embraced the payment of players as a necessary means of remaining competitive. Similarly, the daily press, which generally bemoaned the existence of professionalism in football, realised the benefits to their circulation and reported the game in detail.<sup>20</sup>

#### CLASS-BASED ATTITUDES TO SPORT AND THE WAR EFFORT

On the eve of the First World War, Australian football had firmly established itself as a popular entertainment in Melbourne, Adelaide, Perth, and throughout Tasmania. It had done so chiefly through its appeal to working-class males but also through its attraction to a significant minority of women. Although a record crowd of nearly 60,000 attended the 1913 VFL Grand Final between Fitzroy and St. Kilda, a proof of the professional game’s popularity, debate over the merits of amateurism against professionalism still found expression in the daily press. The attendant associations of class and public morality had not dissipated and the advent of the war provided a new context in which to debate these issues.

Historian Michael McKernan contends that Australia’s working-class felt alienated by the way in which the middle-class dominated Australia’s patriotic response to the war and resented accusations that they were indifferent to the fate of the Empire. Consequently, when middle-class patriots moved to have spectator sports abandoned, their attempts were resisted by the working-class whom they had antagonised and who held a divergent view as to the meaning of sport.<sup>21</sup> This was certainly evident in the responses of many of the working-class based clubs to the demands that were made of them, demands that increased in intensity as the war’s severity and cost became impossible to ignore.

While it is difficult to categorically divide Australian cities along class lines, there is no doubt that certain suburbs characterised the sentiments one would associate with particular social groupings. In Melbourne, the Yarra River has traditionally been seen as marking the great class divide, a *cordon sanitaire*, with north of the river representing the industrialised and more densely populated suburbs of the working class, and the more spacious suburbs south of the river occupied by the more affluent of the city's populace. The port and industrial areas in Adelaide and Fremantle marked out similar lines. However exact or inexact such a labelling process may be, there can be no doubt that the clubs identified as working-class stood trenchantly together in their opposition to attacks on the game.

That Australians now found themselves at war meant adjustments would have to be made and the nation's public moralists were not backward in coming forward to make pronouncements of what those adjustments would need to be. Football was immediately placed in the cross-hairs of moralistic snipers. The *Bulletin*, which had abandoned its jingoistic pre-war brand of national egalitarianism for a more pro-Empire stand, signalled its expectations of football supporters: "Some day, unless the future is wonderfully kind, the thousands who watch Melbourne's hoofball [sic] on Saturdays will themselves be playing a sterner sort of game".<sup>22</sup> Ironically, the *Bulletin* had vehemently opposed Australia's involvement in the Boer War, a position that was interpreted by many as being anti-British and disloyal at the time.

#### THE INITIAL EFFECT OF THE WAR ON ATTENDANCES

The effect of the outbreak of war on the main domestic competitions was not immediately obvious due to games being suspended because of the carnival in Sydney. The carnival itself was rained-out, poorly attended and any momentum and traction the code had hoped to gain was lost in an avalanche of war news and speculation. When games resumed it was obvious that the war had had an immediate effect. In South Australia only a small crowd of 3000 people were reported as having attended a match at the Norwood oval between old rivals Norwood and North Adelaide.<sup>23</sup> Crowds attending West Australian games were also said to have diminished.<sup>24</sup> In Victoria, attendances at the VFA semi-finals were reported as having dropped by half.<sup>25</sup> Aggregate attendances at the VFL's finals also fell sharply and the effect of gate receipts was equally



**Fig. 1.1** Norwood footballers in uniform, 1914. Thomas Victor Storey (*left*), Philip De Quetteville Robin (*kneeling*), George Darling Beames, and Brunel John Nash (*right*). (State Library of South Australia, B 46130/286a)

severe.<sup>26</sup> The signs were ominous for those who cared to consider the likely impact of the war (Fig. 1.1).

In the initial excitement caused by war's outbreak the clubs immediately set about displaying an appropriate level of patriotism. St. Kilda pinned Union Jacks to its guernseys, which bore the black, red and white colours of Imperial Germany, and the VFL responded by setting up a patriotic fund, which it financed with a sixpence surcharge for admission to its finals matches.<sup>27</sup> Patriotic funds were a popular choice for clubs to demonstrate their support for the war. In South Australia the Kapunda

Football Club donated the gross total of its game day takings to the War Distress Fund thus contributing a modest £6.<sup>28</sup> Even more dramatic was the response of Geelong player, George Heinz, who changed his name to Haines to escape anti-German sentiment prevalent in the community.<sup>29</sup> In Launceston players sang *God Save the King* and *Rule Britannia* before and after the game.<sup>30</sup>

In some regions enlistments bit hard on local communities and subsequently football clubs in those areas. In Tasmania one of the mills at Geeveston was forced to close due to the loss of its workforce to enlistments and it was expected the other would follow suit. As a consequence, the Kermantie Football Club announced it would have to forfeit the remainder of its games. Others in the Huon Football Association argued they would have difficulty fielding teams. Nineteen of the Lovett Football Club's list had left the district due to the war. After much discussion delegates of the Association voted to abandon the season.<sup>31</sup>

The VFL, too, had to contend with struggling clubs. Adding to its end of season woes was the announcement that the University club, whose players were required to hold a matriculation certificate or higher degree, intended to withdraw permanently from the League.<sup>32</sup> That decision was hardly surprising given the club's lack of success—it had lost 51 consecutive games and the decision seems to have been based squarely on its lack of ability on the field. Expressing the great lament of the supporters of amateurism in sport, the *Argus* reported that the club had adhered to its policy of amateurism but had struggled against the professional might of other clubs, and stated: "Football as practised by other senior clubs is a business—stern, hard business".<sup>33</sup> The demise of University highlighted the diminished position of amateurism at the top level of football. More immediately it caused consternation within the VFA hierarchy when it was suggested that North Melbourne, the Association's premier side, be selected to fill the vacancy created by University's withdrawal.<sup>34</sup> Immediate fears were allayed following the VFL's split decision not to seek a replacement immediately. The vote to continue with nine teams was passed by the narrowest of margins, five to four. Essendon, which held the deciding vote, voted against introducing another side for parochial reasons, claiming that their club's area of recruitment would be adversely affected. Their decision was clearly framed around the likely scenario of Footscray or North Melbourne joining, both of whom constituted neighbouring suburbs. Collingwood, St

Kilda and Geelong voted in favour of a nine-club competition for one season only.<sup>35</sup>

Clubs within all the various competitions throughout Australia were conscious of the calls to abandon football for the war's duration and many looked to the example set in Britain. There the English Football League consulted with the War Office and finding no objection decided to continue with its programme of matches. The *Daily News* in Perth reported this under the somewhat jaundiced banner "Muddied Oafs: Go On Footballing".<sup>36</sup> Such news nevertheless gave heart to supporters of the Australian game. In fact, a similar debate was raging in Britain where individual clubs of the various codes were making decisions to abandon their seasons.<sup>37</sup>

As active operations in Europe gave way to the northern winter, the war seemed to lose its urgency as the Army General Staffs began planning their 1915 campaigns. Australia had quickly raised and equipped its first contingent of 20,000 men and, as a consequence, recruiting fell away. The summer months in Australia saw a renewed push for reinforcements but it was not until after the Gallipoli landing that an additional force of 50,000 men over and above required reinforcements was called for.<sup>38</sup> For the moment the war in France had stabilised, the German advance had been arrested and the British were involved in grim fighting about *Neuve-Chapelle*. While they fought, Australian troops trained in Egypt awaiting their summons to duty.

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## ‘King Football’

**Abstract** While the advent of war had adversely affected the close of the 1914 football season, the game’s organisers approached the 1915 season with few qualms. It was expected that the war, while an obvious inconvenience, would not significantly harm the status quo of the game and that it would continue unhindered. But, as this chapter shows, once Australia’s participation at Gallipoli became widely known and once losses began to accrue, football clubs began to feel the pinch, and against mounting criticism tried to find an appropriate level of patriotism that would assuage critics and allow the game to continue and not be curtailed as its opponents wanted.

**Keywords** Australian rules · Australian game · Gallipoli · ANZAC  
Soldier footballers · Sport and war

“‘King Football’ will from today hold sway and despite the retarding influences of war and drought, there is every prospect of as keen interest as ever being manifested in the forthcoming battles”, crowed the *Richmond Australian* one week prior to the opening of the 1915 Victorian Football League (VFL) season.<sup>1</sup> “Rover” of Perth’s *Daily News* waxed lyrical on the same theme:

Did you hear that thud? It was only the dull unmusical disturbance occasioned by the contact on an area of wind surrounded by leather with

prosaic earth – a missed mark. But it was a significant circumstance. It betokened the end of a long summer; it told of the approach of winter; it announced that the time had come for the unfolding of guernseys and the washing of knickers. And with it the breeze brought an aroma of eucalyptus, which tickled the nostrils and demanded that we make ready to receive a guest, it signalled the advent of King Football.<sup>2</sup>

## THE 1915 PRE-SEASON

Noting the depressing continuance of the war, “Rover” thought the best that could be done was to be “as cheerful as possible and to relieve monotony by play” knowing that “if occasion demands, we are prepared to abandon the oval for the trenches”.<sup>3</sup> Adelaide’s *Register* also pointed out the “necessity for reasonable relaxation is increased in periods of strain”. It vowed not to rail against the decision of football authorities to play on.<sup>4</sup>

The usual pre-season optimism was generally evident in all states, although less so in Tasmania, where it was admitted that interest would not reach the average due largely to the loss of so many good players from the competing clubs.<sup>5</sup> In Adelaide, newspapers devoted bountiful space to the discussion of the prospects of the teams for the upcoming season. Port Adelaide expected to field a “good” team. North Adelaide thought its prospects “very bright”. Sturt was “confident”. West Adelaide expected to field a “fine team” being in the fortunate position of having all its players of the previous season available, the bulk of whom were “young men with the whole of their football career before them”.<sup>6</sup>

The poor attendances which had afflicted the latter part of the previous season were attributed to the initial excitement of the war as well as, in the VFL, to the sixpence “war tax” that had been charged during the final series.<sup>7</sup> A similar disruption to the football season, as had occurred at the outbreak of war, does not seem to have been anticipated by the clubs. Those which had recorded losses in revenue simply pinned their hopes on the successful conduct of the upcoming season. Port Adelaide’s League delegate thought that player payments lay at the heart of the Victorian clubs’ financial woes, the game being more professional there than in other states.<sup>8</sup>

The Victorian Football Association (VFA) secretary anticipated a quiet season but believed “efficient club management” would ensure

a successful year.<sup>9</sup> The secretary of the Essendon VFA club thought that football would not suffer as much as some believed and he hoped to see the 1915 pennant flying from Essendon's proposed new grandstand.<sup>10</sup> The Essendon VFA side played at the council's ground, known to most modern day supporters as "Windy Hill", later the spiritual home of the Essendon VFL side, as it became on displacing the VFA side in 1922. Essendon is now an Australian Football League (AFL) club. During the First World War it played at the East Melbourne ground which it shared with University and which was later given up to the railways in October 1921. At that time the Essendon VFL club probably had a greater affinity with and drew the bulk of its supporters from East Melbourne rather than the suburb of Essendon.

Other clubs, too, were similarly engaged in undertaking ground improvements. Richmond had built a new stand and Fitzroy had erected platforms in front of the existing players' stand to afford members a better view.<sup>11</sup> Improving spectator comfort was an obvious strategy of the clubs to boost their membership and revenue but, with the separation of the members from the general public, it was also a visible reminder of the social barriers which existed in society as it is likely that club members were, in the main, the more affluent club supporters able to afford the initial expense of a season's membership ticket.

That football league administrators and the major clubs approached the 1915 season with but slightly dampened enthusiasm stands in stark contrast to the reactions of the amateur clubs and other codes in Britain where, as Kevin Blackburn has shown, "sports associations and clubs enthusiastically encouraged their players and members to enlist together to show their team spirit on the battlefield".<sup>12</sup> There is little evidence on hand to show that the semi-professional Australian Rules clubs actively encouraged their players to enlist. General statements abounded at the outbreak of war of the expectation that footballers would enlist and that they would make ideal soldiers, as was evident in comments, alluded to in the previous chapter, made by football officials at the Australasian Football Carnival in Sydney, but beyond that the clubs exerted no pressure on players to enlist.

Clubs were, nevertheless, still keen to demonstrate their patriotism as the new season approached. Improving on their previous season's effort, St. Kilda took the dramatic step of changing its club colours to the red, black and yellow of "gallant little Belgium" and earned themselves the temporary sobriquet of "the Belgians".<sup>13</sup> The plight of Belgium, invaded

and occupied by Germany, was often cited as a means of invoking public sympathy and building support for the war. In early April at the Eastern Oval in Ballarat a match between Carlton and Golden Point was arranged for the benefit of the Belgian Patriotic Fund. The game yielded £70, of which £12 was raised at a half-time auction featuring a sword from the Battle of Waterloo.<sup>14</sup> This artefact of British military triumph no doubt brought to mind Wellington's highly symbolic quotation that Waterloo had been won "on the playing fields of Eton". Aside from the obvious contributions to patriotic funds and opportunity for recruitment officers to work the crowd, such games were welcomed by the VFL, which was committed as a member of the Australasian Football Council to promote football within its state boundaries.<sup>15</sup>

The generally unifying effect of the war within communities at this early stage was not reflected in VFA/VFL relations, in which the scars of the great schism of 1896, when the VFA was torn apart by the defection of its most powerful clubs and the VFL formed, were still fresh and, in truth, never healed. A suggestion to hold a sports carnival involving the VFA and VFL to assist war relief funds was discussed at a conference between the two bodies but no definite scheme was agreed on.<sup>16</sup> Fitzroy proposed that a representative match be played against the Association for patriotic purposes but the proposal met with little support from League clubs. It was argued that the fixtures had already been drawn up and the clubs appeared reluctant to alter arrangements as they then stood. The VFL's preferred method of assistance was a donation from the receipts of the finals games as had occurred the previous season.<sup>17</sup> This did nothing to enhance the VFL's image with the public at large. It disappointed those who would have preferred a benefit match to raise patriotic funds as well as thousands of football supporters desirous of seeing an on-field confrontation between the two bodies.

### EARLY VOLUNTARY ENLISTMENT BY FOOTBALLERS

Clubs sensitive to accusations of not doing their bit sought to show otherwise. The enlistment of footballers was reported with pride by the various clubs as well as by the local press. VFA club Prahran reported that family ties were responsible for keeping some of its players at home but also that the stringent physical requirements for the armed services had caused the rejection of a few players.<sup>18</sup> Family commitments such as looking after aged parents were not considered by the Victorian

State Recruiting Committee as adequate reasons for not enlisting.<sup>19</sup> However, physical defects proved the undoing of many outwardly fit men. Carlton's wingman, George Challis, who was able to withstand the rigours of four quarters on the football field, was rejected by the military because he had a defective toe.<sup>20</sup> Two unnamed South Fremantle players who tried to volunteer were reported as having physical defects that prevented their enlistment.<sup>21</sup> Other prominent footballers also played with physical defects that may have precluded them from military service. Collingwood's champion goal-kicker, Dick Lee, played most of his illustrious career with an open wound on his shin, while St. Kilda full back, Harry Lever, played despite the loss of two fingers from a workplace accident.<sup>22</sup>

The rejection rate of men unfit for military service remained high during the war. The Director-General of Recruiting, Mr. Donald MacKinnon, thought that in excess of 50% of volunteers had been rejected.<sup>23</sup> It was an extraordinary amount of men and certainly some footballers were among them but it was a fact that was either unknown or given little consideration by critics of the game. The prevailing assumption from patriots was that footballers would be automatic selections if their services were offered. One popular reason put forward in the post-war period for footballers not enlisting was that "Most of the players were people on essential services and these included munitions workers, firemen and police".<sup>24</sup> This excuse is more relevant to the Second World War period when conscription was introduced and such occupations were deemed to be essential services and a valid form of exemption. During the First World War, Australia only had a small munitions industry and the voluntary system contained no exclusions beyond age and fitness.

On the eve of the 1915 football season only a minority of players had abandoned their clubs for the war. The carnage requiring Australian reinforcements had not yet begun and in the acceptance of the first volunteers, preference was given to single men and those with military experience. A few days out from the Gallipoli landing, 51 VFA and VFL players from the previous season were reported as having enlisted.<sup>25</sup> This represented nearly three complete football sides or a little over 13% of VFA/VFL players on the field on any given Saturday. This figure certainly compares unfavourably with the overall enlistment figures of 38.7% of eligible males between the ages of 18 and 44 who enlisted during the entire war.<sup>26</sup> However it is higher than the 6.4% of eligibles that had

enlisted by the end of 1914.<sup>27</sup> On that basis footballers could not be accused of not shouldering their share of the load.

Despite the loss of players to the armed forces, there was no shortage of footballers willing to play in Victoria. Collingwood issued 60 invitations to prospective players and expected to gather a fine side.<sup>28</sup> Similar optimism was expressed among the VFA clubs with Footscray trying out 62 players. Hawthorn were said to have had so many reserves from the previous season that they required few new players and Northcote boasted a number of new men, including some ex-VFL players, a point which the *Argus*' scribe, reflecting antagonisms between the rival bodies, felt compelled to warn as being an unwise policy.<sup>29</sup>

### WARTIME FOOTBALL: SUPPORT AND OPPOSITION

Although the outlook for the upcoming season looked healthy it was evident that considerable public antipathy existed to the playing of professional football in wartime. VFL delegates attempted to clarify the League's position at its annual general meeting with little success. The League's president, Alexander McCracken, expressed satisfaction at the £2257 contributed to patriotic funds but admitted that the responses of VFL footballers toward enlistment had been disappointing. He discounted claims that the £40 payment to some players was a deterrent to enlistment. In respect to that point it was clear that some division existed within the football world. A letter from the VFA, requesting a conference to discuss the reduction of player payments, prompted a lively discussion with the Association's motives being questioned by some delegates. Some sympathy with the Association's proposal was apparent, however, when Essendon's delegate flagged the possibility that his club's players might play for nothing with all money being donated to patriotic funds. Undoubtedly the boldest suggestion at the meeting emanated from Melbourne's Dr McClelland. He proposed that the season be abandoned, arguing that such a decision would have a profound effect on players and spectators and would stimulate enlistment. He was supported by Essendon's Alderman Crichton and a motion was moved to suspend the forthcoming season. South Melbourne's delegate argued against the motion and considered such a concession as showing weakness. The motion was defeated 13–4 and the VFL season went ahead.<sup>30</sup>

The VFA, at its annual meeting, justified commencing the season by referring to the fact that football (soccer) was still being played in

England and also pointed to Prime Minister Andrew Fisher's opinion that no alterations needed to be made to sporting arrangements.<sup>31</sup> None of the State governments or the Federal government had shown any inclination to target football for special attention. Aside from his declaration on sport, Fisher, whom the *Age* described as "a recent convert to the Australian game", attended a VFL match accompanied by Western Australia's premier and former footballer, John Scaddan. Both men displayed nothing but enthusiasm toward the players.<sup>32</sup> Furthermore, in one of the few times that football was raised as an issue in the Victorian Legislative Council, a government representative, the Hon. W.L. Baillieu, declared that it was not within the government's power to interfere with football.<sup>33</sup> Joseph Cook, leader of the Federal opposition, did, however, single out footballers and sportsmen, stating: "We should not forget that shells are ploughing the sports fields in our Allies' country every day, and our sportsmen here can help the sportsmen there to bundle them out of their grounds again".<sup>34</sup>

In the major football-playing cities, patriotic editors tilted at the game as the season approached. Perth's *Daily News* asked readers: "Why not kick football as a game into neutral ground, kick it out of bounds until this war is over?"<sup>35</sup> Even so, up until the eve of the opening round, opposition to playing the game had been kept to the periphery of public debate. In Melbourne, the publication of a speech by Wesley College's headmaster, L.A. Adamson, the champion and knight-errant of amateurism, changed the nature of the debate and helped galvanise the game's opponents. Adamson was the living embodiment of the theory of muscular Christianity. Schooled at Rugby he had absorbed the traditions and ideology espoused at that famous institution. As senior resident master of Wesley College he sought to fashion Wesley into a "Rugby in the Antipodes", introducing awards of colour and codes of privilege.<sup>36</sup> As headmaster he dominated the minds of his young boys. They were in awe of him and his patriotic fervour consumed them. He was their war-time leader and they his boy's brigade.<sup>37</sup> The content of his speech was tantamount to a declaration of war against professional football and its adherents.

In his speech Adamson assailed the poor contribution of professional football to enlistments while extolling the excellent record of amateur sports clubs. He argued that professional football was a deterrent to recruitment and pointed to the treasonable effect of the game, asserting that a patriotic German could make no greater gesture than to "support

our paid gladiators to perform in the League or Association Circus". He appealed to his students to resist their inclination to attend football matches, as the sixpence they paid for admittance was an indirect inducement for men to stay away from the war and "cheerful crucifixion".<sup>38</sup>

In the best traditions of the "old school tie", the *Argus*'s scribe, "Old Boy", greeted Adamson's speech with approbation. "Old Boy" was in fact R.E. Wilmot, the MAFA's vice-president, and he followed with an attack on the mercenary nature of professional football.<sup>39</sup> He argued that it did nothing to improve the calibre of man and did nothing to improve the sport and as such was of no value to the community.<sup>40</sup>

Adamson's speech was reported widely and not necessarily with approval. The sporting papers provided a counterpoint to the biases of patriotic editors of the mainstream press and a letter published in the *Sydney Sportsman* contemptuously assailed the Wesley headmaster, branding him a "wowsler schoolmaster" and accused him of being "one of a type – a class that is ever ready to fling a slur at anything Australian".<sup>41</sup>

"Pivot", the football writer for the *Age*, expressed a more balanced and sympathetic view of the predicament in which football was placed. He attributed the lack of volunteers from senior teams as being largely due to many of their players being married and considered the discussion of whether sport should be continued during war to have almost become "a hackneyed subject". Adamson's speech did nothing to alter "Pivot"'s view and he defended football as being good for the community by providing some relief between work and war.<sup>42</sup>

A Fitzroy player and former club captain, Harold McLennan, felt compelled to write and defend the position of professional footballers. He claimed that nine of Fitzroy's side were married and some others had equally binding ties. This was in marked contrast to amateur players whom he said were mostly single and who generally retired from the game once married.<sup>43</sup> The average age of the Beverley amateur side, for example, was 21 and most were undoubtedly single as McLennan suggested.<sup>44</sup> The volunteers of the AIF were overwhelmingly single with 82% registered as unmarried.<sup>45</sup>

McLennan suspected some of the criticism emanated from those already "antagonistic to the sport". While he sympathised with people's good intentions in stimulating recruitment he believed little was to be gained by abusing footballers and suggested that the Defence Department undertake a recruiting campaign. Posters and recruiting



sergeants could then be used to “bring home frequently the reality of war and call for volunteers”. He took exception to the fact that football was singled out ahead of other sports and believed that the 25 shillings match payment made to a player was a reasonable compensation for the training undergone for the public’s entertainment. As a gesture of his sincerity he donated his match payments to the relief of the Serbs.<sup>46</sup>

Football was indeed perceived by many of its supporters as being singled out ahead of other sports, horse-racing and cricket in particular. This was a source of great agitation and was constantly alluded to in the VFL’s *Football Record* throughout the war. Racing and cricket were regarded as sporting institutions most closely affiliated with the affluent middle-class and received scant criticism in the daily press, although in a reflection of class bias, race-goers were often dubbed as “slackers” while racing clubs escaped criticism.<sup>47</sup> Football supporters could hardly feel singled out by Adamson’s attack, however, as he also accused Victorian Sheffield Shield cricketers of cowardice for not enlisting.<sup>48</sup>

### THE INITIAL EFFECT OF GALLIPOLI

Adamson’s speech had hardly been digested when news of Australia’s baptism of fire at Gallipoli was reported throughout the nation’s newspapers. National pride was swelled as Australian soldiers were said to have performed heroically. The real shock of war began to filter through the various communities once the first casualty lists were published. If Adamson’s speech had touched a raw nerve, then the sacrifice of Australian soldiers succeeded in exposing it completely. Letters directed against playing professional football began to appear more regularly in the city press. Football supporters and race-goers were branded as “loafers” and the theme of sport and war was incorporated into some sermons.<sup>49</sup> The Reverend Canon Hughes appealed to supporters and players alike to take the Creator’s gift of “health, strength, vigour, and manhood” and defend the country, their reward being that “All might have, if they dared, a glorious life or grave”.<sup>50</sup>

Following the opening rounds, it became clear that the clubs would, once again, play before reduced crowds. Early indications had promised relatively undiminished support. A pre-season practice match at Collingwood’s Victoria Park drew a large crowd, and crowds for the opening VFL round were described “as quite as large as that at opening games in previous seasons”; in fact, aggregate receipts were higher.<sup>51</sup>

Any momentum that football may have picked up was certainly dashed by the fresh wave of war hysteria created by news of the Gallipoli landing with the first reports appearing in Australian newspapers in May. The reduced support in the grandstand for Geelong's opening home encounter was noticeable and a month after the season's commencement it was noted that there was "a perceptible falling off in the number of people who usually attend football matches".<sup>52</sup>

### REGIONAL VARIATION IN FOOTBALL ACTIVITY

As the demands of the war increased the war against football intensified. Newspaper editors clearly targeted the game, utilising their layouts to shackle the sport to the issue of recruitment. The enlistment of footballers was always considered newsworthy, whether the players were locals or from the country. The abandonment of country football competitions was also reported. The number of players that volunteered for the army was certainly significant throughout rural Australia and few country competitions survived the war's duration beyond the 1915 season. There were notable exceptions such as the Barrier Ranges Football Association in Broken Hill, which continued uninterrupted throughout the war, and the Port Augusta Football Association in South Australia, which, with the exception of the 1916 season, also continued to play. Both were competitions comprised of clubs that one would have assumed reflected strong working-class sentiment.

In Tasmania, the Northern Tasmanian Football Association (NTFA) and North-West Tasmanian Football Union (NWTU) competitions ceased in 1915 while the Tasmanian Football League (TFL) continued.<sup>53</sup> That the TFL was able to do so was due in part to the upgrading of players from the Southern Tasmanian Junior Football Association and the Suburban Junior Association, who were said to "have played some sterling games for the senior clubs".<sup>54</sup> In Sydney, where the code's enthusiasts maintained a healthy six-team competition, the game continued and was largely ignored, doubtless due to the lack of popular support it attracted compared to the rugby codes.

Letters or articles to do with the contentious issue of playing during wartime were invariably flagged with headings such as "Football and War" or "Sport and the War" and deliberately placed alongside or below the casualty lists and other war news. Negative comment from soldiers was considered especially worthy of publication. A letter from Sergeant

C.J. Egan was published, in which he wrote: "Thousands of robust young men are turning the deaf ear to the Empire's call for men who are able and willing to serve the nation by going to the front. Meanwhile, a large proportion still continue to indulge in piffle concerning football ... I cannot suppose that any normal mind will not hesitate to recognise that football and other sports should be put aside as superfluties and disregarded until the war is over".<sup>55</sup> A few days later he wrote again, suggesting football clubs field their juniors under military age to represent the clubs, arguing that it was unbecoming of players to "wrestle against one another over a puny football premiership, instead of 'playing the game' with the Empire team ... for 'the world's premiership'".<sup>56</sup> Something of this nature was actually arranged in Hobart when a substitute competition between cadets was organised. It failed to capture the public's imagination. The opening match was reported to have drawn only 17 spectators and the next game 23.

### THE GALLIPOLI EFFECT GAINS MOMENTUM

In June, "Old Boy" renewed his attack on professional football. Under normal circumstances, he held, the game had its place but not "when the flower of our land has gone to fight that we may live in peace". He lambasted football administrators for their recalcitrance in preferring the aggrandisement of football to national concerns. His message to the players was clear. "Which is more honourable—a premiership cap or a war medal? Who is the hero, the man who can follow for four quarters or the soldier, who leaping into the sea from the boat, dashed for the Turkish shore and stormed the foothills of Gallipoli?". It was his hope that both the VFA and VFL would rise to the occasion and abandon their seasons.<sup>57</sup> His concern was an extension of that expressed in the *Australasian's* Sportsmen supplement, which reported the "unhappy fact" that the idols of Melbourne's youth were still the professional footballers and not the Australian soldiers fighting and dying on Turkish ridges.<sup>58</sup>

Football found itself increasingly under attack. Perth's *Sunday Times* offered its candid opinion that "the horde of hulking leather-chasers are wasting time by playing football at all when their fellow Australians are up against it in Gallipoli ... To every unmarried stalwart of military age the battlefield is the field of honour. The football field is the field of dishonour".<sup>59</sup> East Perth continued to play but concentrated its attention

on raising funds for the war effort. A medal commemorating the Australian landing at Gallipoli was to be struck and sold at matches for sixpence. The club's ladies were also organising a grand gala to be held at the Town Hall. All proceeds raised were to be shared between various war funds. Five East Perth players had enlisted, including Tom Ibbotson, who was killed at Gallipoli.<sup>60</sup>

### DISPUTES OVER FUNDRAISING

As much as clubs tried to placate their detractors their efforts sometimes seemed only to attract further criticism. The VFA, in particular, found itself embedded in controversy, albeit inadvertently. With the VFL's refusal to enter into a combined show of patriotism, the Association set aside 26 June as the Association Footballers' Patriotic day with a view to stimulating enlistments among its footballers. Ground managers would be asked to provide the grounds free of charge and players, umpires and support staff would all provide their services free. All receipts from the regular fixture played that day would be donated to a special fund for players who enlisted. In addition, 10% of the net Grand Final proceeds would be added. The plan was passed unanimously.<sup>61</sup> Far from unanimous was the scheme's reception at the local councils responsible for the grounds to be used. The Mayor of Brunswick felt the scheme made "an invidious distinction in favour of footballers" and preferred the proceeds to be directed "to assist the sick and wounded soldiers at the front". He was supported by Councillor Phillips, who believed "people were not acting as loyally as they should" and that "they should be devoting their time to assisting the Empire instead of following football and other sports".<sup>62</sup> The Hawthorn Council was more savage in its denunciation and gave its sanction only on the condition that all proceeds be directed to an existing fund, the Central Red Cross Fund. The mayor considered the Association had acted unwisely in playing football during the war and considered the donation of the proceeds of one round as "a very small contribution" and added "The Association is not entitled to any congratulation".<sup>63</sup>

The opposition of the councils was discussed by the Association, with the end result being that all proceeds were directed to Lady Stanley's fund for sick and wounded soldiers.<sup>64</sup> The meeting also revealed an undercurrent of dissent with some clubs placing their own interests ahead of the Association. A claim was proffered by Prahran that they

were an amateur club and could not possibly contribute the required £15 minimum. It was a claim which eventually led an exasperated Williamstown official to muse on how “it was striking the number of teams which had become amateur during the past fortnight. It looked as if there was some scheme on”.<sup>65</sup>

A proposal by the VFL to set aside 10% of the gross takings of all games played from 26 June to 21 August seems to have been well received.<sup>66</sup> However, when the League reviewed its undertaking and decided to donate only the net takings, the *Age* considered them to have brought nothing but “ignominy and contempt” upon themselves and warned, “The League will certainly have to be more liberal, otherwise the public will revolt against its parsimony and have football closed down altogether”.<sup>67</sup>

### INCREASING PRESSURE TO ABANDON THE 1915 SEASON

By mid-season, moral and financial pressure was beginning to weaken the resolve of a number of Victorian clubs. South Melbourne, whose delegates had initially opposed abandoning the season, was now reported as advocating its abandonment and playing for sport alone.<sup>68</sup> St. Kilda players, in view of their club’s struggling financial position, agreed to play the remainder of the season on an amateur basis while Brighton players, under similar circumstances, “agreed cheerfully to receive pay on the lowest scale”.<sup>69</sup> In Ballarat so many men had enlisted that the local football competition was abandoned mid-season with a declaration from the League’s president, “Enough footballers had gone to play the premier-ship in Constantinople”.<sup>70</sup>

Given the constant beating of the war drum by patriotic zealots, the spirit of co-operation between football and military authorities rather outweighed any antagonisms between them. This was a victory for common sense in the face of vehement public opposition to the game in some quarters. The clubs and various leagues had contributed sizeable sums to patriotic funds, despite complaints to the contrary, and had always made themselves accessible for recruitment activities. The previous conflict between military duties and football during pre-war compulsory training had perhaps left its mark (discussed in Chap. 5). Rather than antagonise the football public, the military sought to accommodate them in their recruitment planning.

Football authorities did try and work with the war agencies. The South Australian Football League (SAFL) and other sporting bodies agreed to set aside certain Saturday afternoons so that the Military Department could, without distraction, conduct the requisite hours of drill for cadets as required by the Defence Act.<sup>71</sup> The SAFL also arranged a patriotic carnival to bolster the Wounded Soldiers' Fund with Governor and Lady Galway present. The day had originally been scheduled for an interstate game against Victoria but when the VFL advised they would not participate, an exhibition match was arranged using players from the SAFL.<sup>72</sup>

Similar patriotic days were arranged in other states to allow recruitment activities. Recruitment activities were permitted at games in all states. Recruitment displays manned by boy-scouts had been allowed within some of the Victorian grounds as well as the addresses by recruitment sergeants. Some clubs also participated in games against the military to assist war funds while the League donated hundreds of footballs to the soldiers at the front.<sup>73</sup> At the VFA's patriotic day the Lord Mayor, in an address to spectators, expressed his sorrow at Victoria's poor record of enlistments and stated: "It was not usual for Victoria to lag behind".<sup>74</sup> His lament was shared by the State Recruiting Committee, which began an intense recruitment drive in July. The drive was a massive success, snaring 21,698 enlistments in that month alone.<sup>75</sup> The undoubted feature of the campaign was a poster, showing a soldier standing over his dead mate looking to a vision of a football crowd, with the caption "Will they never come?". The poster was displayed widely, at 250 railway stations and on 400 hoardings throughout the city.<sup>76</sup> One Old Melburnian, serving overseas, wrote home describing the poster as "a good one" and criticised the VFL for its "stubbornness" as well as the mercenary nature of some clubs. He believed people should be told "to go [to the war], and hang football".<sup>77</sup> A 7th Battalion soldier posted in Alexandria also commented on the veracity of the poster, which was stuck to the Mess Hall wall at Mena Camp.<sup>78</sup> While the recruitment drive in which the poster featured was an outstanding success, the campaign organisers ran the risk of alienating a large section of society. The specific targets of the poster, footballers and barrackers, could easily have become embittered by such an attack and strengthened in their resolve to continue the game.

At the height of the recruitment drive the SAFL voted to curtail its season by a fortnight though this was to be achieved by asking

military authorities to waive the two drill dates set for 21 August and 5 September, meaning that no fixtures would be lost and so it allowed the Wounded Soldiers' Fund to benefit from the League's decision to donate 5% of net takings from all games.<sup>79</sup> All of these things pointed to the effectiveness of patriotic hysteria whipped up during the recruitment campaign in putting pressure on football bodies.

The success of the nationwide recruitment campaign that was run through July and August was an obvious fillip to the exhortations of middle-class patriots, and the opponents of professional football no doubt celebrated the VFA's unanimous adoption of a proposal to curtail their season by 5 weeks.<sup>80</sup> A similar motion before the VFL met with no success. Although a majority of clubs voted in favour they did not gain the required three-quarters majority and the motion was lost.<sup>81</sup> The *Australasian's* reporter was not inspired by the reasons offered for continuing and considered each club to be "playing for its own hand". The leading clubs, he claimed, sought to continue as a means of lessening their financial liabilities while the other clubs saw, in a shorter season, an opportunity to limit sinking "deeper into the financial mire".<sup>82</sup> It was this philosophy which may well have accounted for the VFA's decision. Because they drew fewer people to their matches than the VFL, their revenue base was more likely to be quickly eroded through a drop in attendances. The cynicism that greeted the League's decision to continue was hardly surprising, but football had at least one ally. The *Sporting Judge's* scribe, "Free Kick", who also wrote for the VFL's *Football Record*, defended the playing of football. He considered the League's decision sensible and described the daily press reaction as "maudlin" and pointed to the 10,000 spectators at the Fitzroy and South Melbourne clash as a yardstick for the general public's view of the game.<sup>83</sup>

The curtailment of the VFA's season presented its supporters with at least one bonus when the premier side, North Melbourne, challenged League side St. Kilda to a match with all proceeds directed to the Australian Wounded Soldiers' Fund. The match was agreed to, provided it was held at St. Kilda's ground and in accordance with Australasian Football Council rules, to which the League was bound. The main difference in the rules was the contentious "kicking in the ruck" which was not used in the Association. Enlistments, illness, accident and disqualification left North short of a full team so three "ring-ins" from other clubs were called upon. The VFA side won the match comfortably leading one local report to muse that they "were so manifestly the better

team that it is quite unlikely the League will ever again permit one of its teams to run the risk of defeat by an Association combination”.<sup>84</sup>

The greatest controversy though erupted in Western Australia. Late in the season, North Fremantle, sitting last with a solitary win, had declared it could no longer fulfil its engagements after Round 17 for the remainder of the season “as almost half the players had volunteered for the front”.<sup>85</sup> Match points for its last four games were awarded to the opposing clubs. With North Fremantle’s sudden demise, the Western Australian Football League (WAFL) voted to curtail the season and conclude it by having the four leading teams play two semi-finals with the winners meeting in the grand final. Perth and East Perth stridently opposed the idea and lodged the matter with the Supreme Court. Both were sitting just outside the final four and one can understand their chagrin with the proposed arrangement. However, rather than argue in a courtroom the other clubs decided to back down and let the *status quo* rule. East Perth and Perth would eventually meet in the first semi-final, with Perth prevailing and going on to be runners-up to Subiaco.<sup>86</sup>

The decision of Perth and East Perth to take the League to court was met with derision by the *Sunday Times*, which published a satirical poem about the incident, which read in part:

“Keep it on; Keep it on”  
 Keep the football season on!  
 Though there’s few who care to watch us  
 and the crowds to war have gone;  
 Though the public’s yelling “Chuck it”  
 We’re determined still to ruck it.  
 Till at last the premier laurels rest the  
 Winner’s brow upon.<sup>87</sup>

### THE GRAVITY OF THE WAR STARTS TO HIT HOME

The seriousness of the war was certainly beginning to be driven home as the 1915 season drew to a close. Footballers could hardly ignore the casualty lists and widespread effect of the war. Black armbands and



flags flying at half-mast became a standard sight at football grounds. Well known footballers were already part of the nation's honoured dead. Melbourne defender, "Joe" Pearce, was accorded the honour of being the first VFL player killed in the war.<sup>88</sup> Pearce, it should be noted, "played as a *bona fide* amateur, not even accepting expenses".<sup>89</sup> In counter argument to the patriotic critics, the *Football Record*, established in 1912 as the VFL's official publication, also embraced the notion of muscular Christianity and asserted that football in its current form provided the best training for soldiers and claimed it had stood many of the soldiers in good stead on the field of battle at Gallipoli. It counted "Joe" Pearce as one, and Collingwood's Allan Cordner as another, who had stood in good stead and died the "glorious death".<sup>90</sup> It may have added, had it known, the name of Norwood player Philip De Quetteville Robin, who was later said to have penetrated the farthest inland at Gallipoli alongside Victoria Cross winner, Captain Arthur Blackburn.<sup>91</sup>

The 1915 Victorian football season concluded with the VFL grand final, before the largest wartime crowd of 39,211, between Carlton and Collingwood. The game is famous for the fact that Collingwood's Paddy Rowan and "Doc" Seddon played after completing a 10-mile route march that morning while training with the army. The incident was reported with high indignation by the *Bulletin* (Fig. 2.1):

On the morning of the day when Carlton was to contest the football premiership with Collingwood, the Magpies were nearly knocked off their perch because two players, Rowan and Seddon, in camp at Broadmeadows, had been refused leave. The club secretary whirled out to camp in a motor car. What he said is not known but the military potentate who had failed to bow down to King Football relaxed his iron hand, and the two players ... were rushed back to town in time to take their places on the playing field ... Over in Gallipoli tired soldiers ... settled anew to repel a charge of ignorant heathens who had never heard of Collingwood and would probably burn it to the ground if they were given a chance to enter it.<sup>92</sup>

Perhaps one of the more ironic and prophetic endings to a football season, if names can mean anything, occurred in the Peninsula League in South Australia where the Turks Football Club was victorious by two points over the Wallaroos in the final match of the season.<sup>93</sup>

Football had taken a buffeting in 1915 and it was apparent that its opponents, despite having gained some inroads, would not relent in their



**Fig. 2.1** Action from the 1915 VFL grand final, Carlton v Collingwood. Note the ‘Will They Never Come?’ recruitment poster on the scoreboard (*Melbourne Leader*, 25 September 1915)

pressure while it continued to be played against the backdrop of war. Also, any notions of the war being a short one were being dispelled by reports from England that the war was nowhere near its end.<sup>94</sup> If the clubs had looked to the 1915 season with some optimism then the barbs they had endured during it, along with the increasingly grim results of the war, must surely have pointed to a more torrid repetition in 1916.

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## Football Under Siege

**Abstract** The escalation of the First World War in 1916 led to a serious manpower drain on the Australian home front. This chapter follows these events as many footballers and spectators began to enlist in the war and it became increasingly difficult for football clubs to maintain playing lists and to hold their fiscal bottom line. As clubs tried to juggle these concerns they were also subjected to increased claims of disloyalty to the Empire's cause. Many clubs and leagues went into recession due to the demands of the war but a hard core of devotees refused to buckle and the game continued, even if in a somewhat diminished stature.

**Keywords** Australian game · Patriotism · Western front · Sport and war Footballers

Australia's focus on the war shifted as the 1916 football season approached. With the disastrous Gallipoli campaign behind them the AIF was now *en route* to the major scene of operations—the Western Front. In the wake of the Gallipoli campaign the war had manifested itself as the defining influence in Australia's national psyche. The exploits of the Australians at Gallipoli had evinced a swell of nationalism but it was a brand of nationalism underpinned almost exclusively by military achievement. War against the Turks had always been considered secondary to war against the industrialised might of the real enemy, the hated “Hun”. If war against Germany was to be brought to a successful

conclusion, then the full resources of the British Empire were required and the most precious and immediate commodity Australia could provide was men. Patriots demanded that men eligible to enlist should do so. Such “eligibles” undeniably existed among footballers and football supporters, and because of the code’s high profile, football provided the ideal arena in which to appeal for reinforcements. As a consequence, football was destined to be exposed to greater scrutiny as the war in Europe intensified. In an article in the sports paper *Winner*, J.W. Harrison noted: “the clarion call of war cannot fail to play havoc, in a general sense, with football during the ensuing season”.<sup>1</sup>

### THE BIRTH OF THE SOUTH AUSTRALIAN PATRIOTIC FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION

The South Australian Football League (SAFL) became the first major competition casualty when it announced its intention not to arrange a program of games for 1916 “unless the war should terminate before or during the football season”.<sup>2</sup> However, resistance to the idea of not playing the game at all quickly manifested itself. The Railways Club (though not a SAFL club) provided the first dissenting voice when it wrote to the SAFL requesting its support of carnival matches to be played between the Sydney and Victorian Railways Clubs in Adelaide. The SAFL replied, reiterating its position of not playing the upcoming season while the Empire was at war, adding that it looked upon the Railways Club’s intention to play with “great disfavour”.<sup>3</sup>

As the time of the football season neared, agitation increased over the prospect of there being no games in Adelaide. Players from the Port Adelaide Football Club met and decided to form a new club called the Port Adelaide United Patriotic Football Club and resolved to try and form a Patriotic league. The South Australia Railways Club also expressed its interest and Port and Railways were soon joined in this venture by teams from Norwood, Prospect, West Adelaide and West Torrens—most being clubs from predominantly working-class suburbs.

The new competition was called the South Australian Patriotic Football Association (SAPFA). The games would be played trying to keep costs to a minimum and no honorariums were to be paid to players or officials, with net profits handed to the South Australian Wounded Soldiers’ Fund.<sup>4</sup> The newly constituted teams drew mostly from a blend of seasoned and junior players from the league clubs within their

districts. Prospect was effectively the North Adelaide club which used the name Prospect so that it could acquire the Prospect recreation ground for its home matches. A number of the South Australian Railways Club players joined it later in the season when the Railways side was forced to disband due to a lack of players. Some Sturt and South Adelaide league players joined the West Adelaide side.<sup>5</sup> The working-class tenor of the competition was symbolised by the fact that its constitution was drawn up by a sub-committee meeting held at the Adelaide Trades Hall.<sup>6</sup>

The whiff of class politics was evident in the decisions made toward football clubs. The archetypal conservative South Australian Cricket Association, which had a long-standing arrangement with the SAFL for the use of the Adelaide Oval, refused to accommodate the rebel competition, allowing only one game to be played as part of Australia Day celebrations on 28 July. A number of the councils in the SAFL club districts also refused to let their grounds. The SAPFA thus played wherever it could procure grounds. The Hindmarsh Oval was the most used with eight games taking place there. Other grounds used were the Prospect recreation ground, Alberton Oval (though initially denied), South Park Lands, East Park Lands and the Swansea Oval.<sup>7</sup> Despite these barriers the competition proved a successful one, played before good if somewhat reduced crowds. Port Adelaide proved the dominant side.

### ELSEWHERE IN AUSTRALIA

The New South Wales Football League (NSWFL) decided that it, too, would not play the upcoming season. When it was suggested that part of the reason for this lay in the small support the competition attracted, the League's secretary, Mr. J.E. Phelan felt compelled to write and point out that although the League faced "a long uphill fight to firmly plant the Australian rules game in Sydney" its finances were sound and the only motivation to stop playing was to bring the war to a "successful and speedy issue".<sup>8</sup> However, when the time for the football season neared, the new League delegates that met in April decided unanimously to continue playing with net profits being donated to patriotic funds. Expectations of a high standard of play were reported and the return of Magarey Medal winner, Jack Ashley, as captain of Balmain was seen as a cause for celebration. The NSWFL comprised seven teams: Balmain Districts (formerly Central Westerns for a time), East Sydney, Newtown, North Sydney, Paddington, South Sydney and Sydney.<sup>9</sup> North Sydney,



however, chose not to compete in the 1916 season. Again, these sides represented mostly inner-city working-class suburbs. As the season progressed it was reported that increasing crowds were in attendance. The Ex-Students Association or Junior League, as it was variously known, also continued to be played with the following sides: Burwood, Double Bay, East Sydney, Gardeners' Road, Redfern and HMAS Tingira.<sup>10</sup>

In Brisbane, the Queensland Football League reaffirmed its decision, made mid-season the previous year, not to play during wartime, while further north, free of the clamour of the patriotic press that was laying siege to the game, the Northern Territory devotees in Darwin were taking the first tentative steps to establish the code there. A rugby union match had been played on New Year's Day with the only known football in the town. The contest was said not to have aroused any great excitement, but the knowledge that there was a football in the territory inspired lovers of the Australian game working in various arms of the government to issue a challenge to play a civilian team in Darwin. Two matches were played. On 17 February, with the Territory's Administrator in attendance, the government side, "the blues", won by three points. Immediately after the game a Northern Territory Football Association was formed. A return game was organised and played enthusiastically before an excited crowd in which the "red and whites"—the Darwin or "Combined" team—was again defeated, this time by nine points. Due to the existence of only one ball in the whole of the territory, which was guarded jealously by the umpire, the two sides had to train without one. Players from all states were represented in the teams, including a number of indigenous players. Some 200 bemused Aboriginal tribesmen were reported as being in the crowd, having come to see the "Big White-feller coroboree". Further fixtures were arranged and on 4 March the Combined team ran out comfortable winners 7 goals 4 behinds to 2 goals 8 behinds. The evangelical enthusiasm for the Australian game was evident in the newspaper report which averred: "there is no doubt that our game has secured a firm foothold here, and has so advanced another thousand miles on its journey around the earth".<sup>11</sup>

In the West, the West Australian Football League (WAFL) held a spirited meeting in mid-February to discuss the upcoming season in which a range of ideas was advanced. Mr. Mansfield of the Subiaco club, the previous season's premiers, believed in a policy of "business as usual", provided expenses could be cut to the bone. East Perth's representative,

Mr. Bray, suggested that play could continue provided players were restricted to those aged 18 years and under. West Perth's Mr. Hanley supported Bray's idea, as did both of East Fremantle's delegates. Mansfield considered such a proposal to be "absolutely absurd" as nobody would attend and he noted that there were plenty of rejected men and older players to provide the backbone for teams which could be bolstered with juniors if need be. West Perth's Mr. Grief believed if football was to be played it should only be played by those who could not enlist. The meeting's chairman, Mr. Moffat, of the Perth club, believed no premierships football should be arranged but that a series of scratch matches could be organised. He did not believe football was an impediment to recruitment. Nor did the League's secretary, Mr. Orr, who suggested that the game be played by only married men and youths under 18, adding that he did not believe married men should be sent to the front while single men remained. It was Mansfield's belief that Midland Junction and West Perth should not compete, as a five-team competition would suffice in the current circumstances. The meeting was adjourned for 3 weeks to allow clubs to decide.<sup>12</sup> In the end the WAFL continued, leaving it to the individual clubs to determine what restrictions, if any, would be applied to their player lists. South Fremantle, which to that time had 17 former players on active service, passed a resolution that players were to be drawn only from "men who are not eligible for active service, those who had enlisted and returned and those men who are engaged by military authorities on home service".<sup>13</sup> Midland Junction expected to be able to call on some first-class players who were training with the 5th Reinforcements at Blackboy camp. The club took the opportunity of a bye in the first round to organise a game against the soldiers, which both fostered good relations with the military and public and provided welcome match practice.<sup>14</sup> Otherwise it was business as usual for the WAFL, as Subiaco's delegate had hoped, with the exception of North Fremantle, whose playing list had been savaged by loss of players to the war.

The *West Australian's* football scribe, "Boundary", admitted that the new season was not looked upon favourably in some quarters and cautioned that:

There were 'many footballers, like others in the community who feel that they have a paramount duty to those who are dependent upon them. Because a man goes out on a Saturday afternoon to play football for exercise and recreation, the deduction should not be drawn in every case that

he is a single man, without responsibilities. Others there are who have enlisted and have been rejected for various reasons, while there are still others of the league players—and they are large in number—who have gone into khaki.

He claimed there were few playing whose circumstances admitted them for enlistment and questioned whether men who had not enlisted due to family ties should be denied “an afternoon’s recreation”, adding that if football was to be closed the League could rightfully claim that so too should all other sports.<sup>15</sup>

As in South Australia, and as would occur in Victoria, some of the Western Australian local councils adopted what was perceived by WAFL delegates as a “veiled antagonism to the league”.<sup>16</sup> Of particular concern for the League was the City and Subiaco Councils’ demand for a 25% cut of the gate takings, a figure that almost doubled the previous year’s arrangement and which was considered unacceptable by the League given the straitened circumstances of the competition due to the war. The Midland Council and West Australian Cricket Association (WACA) were more accommodating and offered use of their grounds at a rate of 15%, which was gladly accepted by the League. The Fremantle Council, in contrast, had offered use of its grounds for free with the proviso that it had members placed on the gate to oversee takings and that the clubs’ and League’s books be open to scrutiny by the State War Council. There was a suspicion on the part of ground managements that the League could not be trusted with the management of its game day finances. This attitude was, of course, highly offensive to League officials but it was in part brought on by the contentious decision of the League to rescind a previous decision to debar clubs receiving 10% of the gate receipts, it being argued that the money would be pooled so that players had some recourse to compensation in case they were injured. This allocation of gate receipts to clubs was usually 50% in the regular season, and the League, too, had halved its portion of the gate receipts from 20 to 10%.<sup>17</sup>

The impasse with the councils continued into the League’s season, leaving only three grounds available for play: the Fremantle Oval, the WACA and Midland Junction’s ground.<sup>18</sup> So frustrated was East Perth that it wrote to the League requesting exemption from the upcoming season due to its homeless state, arguing that it would have difficulty finding players to make the journey to Fremantle or Midland Junction

every Saturday. As an alternative, the club urged that an arrangement it had discussed with the City Council be adopted by the League regarding the distribution of gate receipts. The League deferred further discussion on the matter until the City Council submitted a written proposal and criticised East Perth for its actions, declaring its reasons for opting out of the competition as being unsatisfactory. The club was asked to withdraw its request, which it did.<sup>19</sup>

The City Council was in discussion with the Subiaco Council, which adopted a similar offer to the WAFL. This amounted to 15% of total gate receipts going to the Council for use of the ground, after which £2 would be deducted to pay men selected by the Council to man the gate. As well, the Council would appoint an honorary gate manager who would have full control. The remainder of the gate takings was to be split evenly between the League and a war fund or funds approved by the Council.<sup>20</sup> A proposal was put forward at a meeting of the City Council on 31 May to rescind the previous demand on the league of 25% and allow them use of the Perth or Leederville Ovals and replace it with a 15% levy plus conditions regarding the manning of the gate, and with an even distribution of remaining monies to the League and war funds. Part of the rationale was that if football was not played rate payers would have to foot the bill for the upkeep of the grounds which had to be maintained whether football was played or not. Though a majority, eleven to six, voted in favour, the motion was lost because a two thirds majority was not achieved.<sup>21</sup> The matter was eventually resolved with both grounds being made available to the League.

### CONTINUING OBJECTIONS TO THE GAME

As Victorian clubs began to give serious thought to the 1916 football season, opponents of the game renewed their attacks. The *Age* editorial estimated that ten of every 15 professional footballers were fit for military service, and suggested those that did not enlist were either cowards or unpatriotic.<sup>22</sup> “Old Boy”, who had already demonstrated a penchant for rhetorical questions, asked “Which game will you play—football or war?”<sup>23</sup> The *Presbyterian Messenger*, which reflected the attitudes of the Presbyterian Church as well as the prevailing opinion among other denominations—including early Catholic opinion—deplored the playing of football, and its rhetoric attempted to shame offenders. It charged that there were “some men who would play football though their

mothers were dying” and, incorporating the words from a poem by one of the most emphatic supporters of the notion of Empire—Rudyard Kipling, asserted “men who are physically fit to be the ‘muddied oafs at the goal [s]’ are surely fit for the nobler, manlier game that is going on at the front”.<sup>24</sup> The metaphor of war was constantly invoked and reiterated the philosophy of sport being a form of mimic warfare and thus training for the real thing. Further, it was argued that if football was to be played then it ought only to be played and watched by “rejects”.<sup>25</sup> Fitzroy Football Club’s committee sought to head off such criticisms by promulgating the benefit of playing in regard to patriotic funds. The club president declared emphatically that: “a bucketful of sovereigns was preferable to a barrow-load of sympathy”.<sup>26</sup>

### A VARIETY OF RESPONSES AND DECISIONS

Not everyone was as violently opposed to the playing of football as the *Presbyterian Messenger* and church hierarchies. One ex-local footballer wrote with mixed emotions from the front that “at least 75% of the boys over here” were disappointed by the attacks on football and thought it “a great pity that a poor man’s sport should be singled out and crushed”. He also thought the army was better off without the calibre of man distracted from enlisting because of football.<sup>27</sup>

The belief that professional football acted as a deterrent to enlistment was founded on two arguments. The first was that money earned from football acted as an inducement for men not to enlist. The second was that the very act of playing distracted people from a full commitment to the war. Conscious of these accusations, the majority of VFL players agreed to forgo match payments and to receive pocket expenses only. In return, the clubs would donate any end-of-season profit to an appropriate war fund. The decision of the players to waive their match payments suggests that when all the trappings of the professional game were stripped down, the driving motive for playing football was clearly the sport not the money. Through this action both clubs and players sought to counter some of the criticisms directed at them. The most obvious way a player could avoid such criticism was to enlist and this was an option an increasing number of players exercised in the post-Gallipoli phase of the war. Of course, the primary motive of enlistment was inspired by something more substantial than the avoidance of public

criticism. The increased response of footballers to the call of duty did little to quell the games' antagonists.

Despite these concessions on the part of the clubs and players there still existed an element of doubt in the minds of people over the advisability of allowing the clubs to manage their own funds.<sup>28</sup> O.M. Williams, the VFL president, dismissed suggestions that monetary considerations—other than those for patriotic purposes—figured in the decision of the clubs and players. He considered football to be a “harmless and healthful recreation ... to thousands of people, the majority of whom are not eligible for enlistment”. Furthermore, he added, the VFL's position had been conveyed to those in authority (presumably the State War Council and State Recruiting Committee) and an undertaking had been given that if these people considered that football should be stopped then the league would comply willingly.<sup>29</sup>

The decision of the VFL to play rested entirely with the clubs and a meeting was held to decide the issue. Although a majority of clubs were against playing, the required three-fourths majority was not achieved, with Carlton, Collingwood, Fitzroy and Richmond in favour of continuing. It was a decision that “Onlooker” writing in Sydney's *Referee* considered to have been one of “calm courage” made in the face of “a storm of abuse from spoil-sports”.<sup>30</sup>

Despite the League's stated position, club finances do seem to have been the nub of some of the decisions. It is hardly surprising that Carlton, with the principal officers of the football and cricket club as guarantors to a bank debt of £1,650 voted to play when demands were made for a reduction in the outstanding amount. In contrast, South Melbourne had a healthy credit of £1,750 and was not constrained by financial hardship or demands from creditors, and voted against playing.<sup>31</sup> The club also took the extraordinary step of sending a letter to its members seeking their opinion as to whether to play or not. The collective response to that invitation and whether it supported the club's decision not to play is unknown.<sup>32</sup>

The League's decision to play was lauded by the *Sporting Judge*, an avowed supporter of football, which described the daily press protestations as “wailing and hypocritical” and considered the “maudlin matter dished up daily” as being almost entirely contrary to public opinion, which it described as “emphatic” in its conviction that the game should continue.<sup>33</sup> If the *Sporting Judge* was correct in its assessment, it

suggested that the views of community leaders such as those expressed in the *Presbyterian Messenger* were completely out of touch with those of the city's many working men and women.

If the decision of the VFL to continue playing was a disappointment to patriotic minded opponents of the game, they could at least draw some comfort from the decision of the Victorian Football Association (VFA) to suspend its competition for the 1916 season. In a unanimous decision, VFA clubs agreed not to play for the duration of the war. Club committees remained active, however, and where debts were outstanding, as was the case at Brunswick and Hawthorn, continued in their efforts to reduce liabilities.<sup>34</sup> If honours could not be won on the football field then at least satisfaction could be manifested in other areas. Hawthorn took pride in being the first Association club to signify its intention to suspend football. The club's stand was reported as having drawn appreciation from its members and leading citizens.<sup>35</sup>

The decision of the VFL to continue playing with only four teams resulted in a farcical season on and off the field. At a special meeting of the League a motion was put forward to relieve the non-playing clubs of their obligations for the upcoming season. The motion did not gain the necessary majority and was defeated, but the match arrangements committee had already excluded these clubs from the season's fixtures. Under VFL rules the non-playing clubs could have been expelled for non-compliance and Fitzroy suggested this possibility. The other clubs preferred to have the non-playing clubs remain as members, recognising the extraordinary nature of the times and thus avoided a conflict that could have potentially changed the face of the game in Victoria. The motion was a pointless exercise and emphasised the vacuum in which League affairs were being conducted.<sup>36</sup> Transfer and permit regulations were relaxed, too. Geelong allowed its players to play with whomever they wished during the club's temporary disbandment and a number of their players donned Richmond jumpers for the new season. Consequently, the "Tigers" were dubbed "Gee-Richmond" and, by virtue of the four-team competition, made the finals for the first time in its VFL history.<sup>37</sup> To add high farce to the season, Fitzroy—which had won only two of the 12 games and finished last to make the final four—won its final three games to carry off the premiership!

Interest in football during the war in Victoria reached its nadir in 1916. The monotony of the four-team competition no doubt contributed to this with clubs playing one another four times during the season. It was a season hardly likely to attract anyone other than ardent and

parochial club supporters.<sup>38</sup> Attendances at the finals fell well short of previous aggregates and were the lowest since the turn of the century.<sup>39</sup> It was noted that women at the football were conspicuous by their “almost complete absence”. Why? “They were probably making socks and other garments for the boys who played 2 years ago, many of whom, alas, will play this game no more” suggested the *Bulletin*.<sup>40</sup>

### THE IMPACT OF NEWS FROM THE SOMME

In the Australian winter of 1916 the grisly impact of war casualties transcended the Gallipoli experience of the previous year. Because the northern summer, and time of offensive operations in Europe, coincided with the Australian winter it was inescapable that important war news would arrive during the football season. The Somme offensive of July 1916 saw the Australians subjected to their most severe test of the war. The casualties were so horrendous that the Defence Department chose to release the casualty lists in 33 instalments rather than in their awful entirety.<sup>41</sup> Seven weeks of battle in France saw Australia lose more men than in the 8 months on the Gallipoli peninsula. “Cheerful Challis” of the Carlton Football Club, rejected initially because of a defective toe, was “blown to bits” and Collingwood’s “Paddy” Rowan, who had endured a ten-mile route March to play in the 1915 VFL grand final, was another of the thousands killed on the Somme. The random nature of Challis’ death, in particular, revealed the dubious nature of the claim that sporting prowess was of any meaningful assistance to a soldier.<sup>42</sup>

Footballers had responded in increasing numbers to their country’s call. Williamstown reported that thirteen players and one committeeman had enlisted, Hawthorn listed fifteen players and three committeemen as “answering loyally to the Grand Old Flag”, while a thousand members at South Melbourne’s Annual Meeting were told twelve regular players, eight former players, one committeeman and one trainer had answered the call in addition to some 700–800 members.<sup>43</sup> Losses in player personnel were generally made good by the elevation of the most promising junior footballers to senior ranks. In view of South Melbourne’s report, it was not surprising that total club memberships collapsed during the war.<sup>44</sup> Despite this, Richmond, as they, with others, had promised, had kept “the football flag flying” in 1916.<sup>45</sup>

While football supporters were thankful that the game was able to continue, its opponents begrudgingly accepted the game being played



while patriotic funds benefited. The expectation that conscription would be introduced helped to ease their frustration.<sup>46</sup> This fragile acquiescence on the part of football's opponents was compromised entirely by the VFL's position on the distribution of gate receipts. When it was announced that the League had drawn its usual 10% levy, amounting to £94 15s 10d, it seemed the doubts some critics had held were vindicated. A suggestion from Essendon that this money be refunded to the competing clubs for distribution to the patriotic funds was dismissed by the League's chairman, Mr. O.M. Williams, who stated somewhat arrogantly "the League can do what it likes with this money".<sup>47</sup> Such a response only served to undermine the position of the clubs and reinforced perceptions of the avaricious nature of professional football clubs and of the unpatriotic emphasis of club priorities.

As the football community looked to the new year, the war offered no prospects of an improved outlook and, indeed, the looming threat of conscription posed a seemingly impossible hurdle to overcome for those advocating the continuance of football. Yet within the general antagonistic atmosphere generated over the playing of football in wartime, the game was finding some unexpected and unlikely oases in which it was celebrated, namely in the playing of women's matches at home and through the game's popularity among soldiers at the front.

## NOTES

1. *Winner* (Melbourne), 19 January 1916.
2. *Referee* (Sydney), 26 January 1916.
3. *Observer* (Adelaide), 4 March 1916. The Railways Club was a representative side that was drawn from Railway workers many of whom played for SAFL clubs. The Railways carnival was played in Sydney in early April.
4. *Advertiser* (Adelaide), 3 April 1916.
5. For a detailed overview of the SAPFA see Trevor Gyss, *The 1916 South Australian Patriotic Football Association* (Adelaide: Trevor Gyss, 2016), pp. 7–12.
6. *Advertiser* (Adelaide), 3 April 1916; *Chronicle* (Adelaide), 8 April 1916.
7. Gyss, *Patriotic Football Association*, p. 9.
8. *Referee* (Sydney), 16 February 1916.
9. *Saturday Referee and the Arrow* (Sydney), 15 April 1916.
10. *Sydney Sportsman*, 7 June 1916.
11. *Courier* (Brisbane), 22 April 1916; *Winner* (Melbourne), 10 May 1916; *Northern Territory Times and Gazette*, 16 March 1916.

12. *Daily News* (Perth), 17 February 1916.
13. *West Australian*, 6 May 1916.
14. *West Australian*, 6 May 1916.
15. *West Australian*, 6 May 1916.
16. *West Australian*, 4 May 1916.
17. *Daily News* (Perth), 20 April 1916; *West Australian*, 6 May 1916.
18. *West Australian*, 6 May 1916.
19. *West Australian*, 9 May 1916 and *West Australian*, 18 May 1916.
20. *West Australian*, 31 May 1916.
21. *West Australian*, 1 June 1916.
22. *Age* (Melbourne), 20 January 1916.
23. *Argus* (Melbourne), 21 January 1916.
24. Reported in the *Fitzroy City Press*, 4 March 1916. For an overview of church opinions see Michael McKernan, *Australian Churches at War: Attitudes and Activities of Major Churches 1914–1918* (Catholic Theological Faculty and Australian War Memorial, Sydney and Canberra, 1980). McKernan argues that the churches embraced the war enthusiastically and exploited it to improve on the marginal position that they held in Australian society. See also, Kipling's poem 'The Islanders'.
25. *Fitzroy City Press*, 4 March 1916.
26. *Fitzroy City Press*, 4 March 1916.
27. *Brunswick and Coburg Leader*, 2 June 1916.
28. *Sporting Judge* (Melbourne), 26 February 1916.
29. *Sporting Judge* (Melbourne), 26 March 1916. O.M. Williams was appointed as the VFL's second president after Alex McCracken, who had served as president since the League's inception, stood down due to ill-health in 1915. McCracken died at his home in Essendon on 25 August 1915.
30. *Referee* (Sydney), 13 September 1916.
31. *Bulletin* (Sydney), 2 March 1916.
32. A copy of the letter is produced in Peta Phillips and Trevor Ruddell, 'Conflict on the Home Front: Football in 1916—An Extraordinary Season', *The Yorker* (Spring 2015), p. 9.
33. *Sporting Judge* (Melbourne), 18 March 1916.
34. *Brunswick and Coburg Leader*, 7 April 1916.
35. *Hawthorn, Kew and Camberwell Citizen*, 2 June 1916.
36. *Australasian* (Melbourne), 25 March 1916. For a more detailed account of Fitzroy's stand, see Mike Sutherland, Rod Nicholson and Stewart Murrhly, *The First Hundred Seasons: Fitzroy Football Club 1883–1983* (Melbourne: Fitzroy Football Club, 1983), pp. 58–59.
37. Richmond Football Club, *32nd Annual Report and Balance Sheet, Season 1916*; Clonard (ed.), *In Picture and Story, Fifty Years 1885–1934*, p. 48.

38. *Essendon Gazette*, 13 July 1916.
39. VFL final attendances are given in Graeme Atkinson, *The Book of Australian Rules Finals* (Melbourne: Five Mile Press, 1981), pp. 10–56.
40. *Bulletin* (Sydney), 24 August 1916.
41. Mentioned in Robin S. Corfield, *Hold Hard Cobbers: The Story of the 57th and 60th and 57/60th Australian Infantry Battalions 1912–1990*, vol. 1, 1912–1930 (Glenhuntly: 57/60th Battalion [AIF] Association, 1992), pp. 39–40.
42. Challis' death is mentioned in a soldier's diary, David Doyle, dated 16 July 1916 and cited in Corfield, *Hold Hard Cobbers*, p. 29. Military details for both Challis and Rowan (real name Percy Rowe) are found in their service records in the National Archives. The phrase 'cheerful Challis' is given in a match report in the *Sporting Judge* (Melbourne), 29 May 1915.
43. *Footscray Chronicle*, 27 May 1916; *Hawthorn, Kew and Camberwell Citizen*, 2 June 1916; *Sporting Judge* (Melbourne), 26 February 1916.
44. Richmond's annual report for 1917 compares the 1914 and 1917 membership totals for most VFL clubs. The reductions were indeed dramatic, especially in percentage terms.
45. Richmond Football Club, *32nd Annual Report and Balance Sheet, Season 1916*.
46. *Brunswick and Coburg Star*, 2 June 1916.
47. *Argus* (Melbourne), 23 September 1916.

## Women, War and Football

**Abstract** This chapter traces the origins and diffusion of competitive women’s football, from its birthplace in Western Australia in 1915 to its subsequent flowering in South Australia and then Victoria. In most cases, these games, with proceeds directed to such patriotic charities as “Comforts for the Anzacs”, attracted sizeable crowds; some were played under the patronage of state governors, civic officials, members of parliament, and senior military officers. As news of these unusual matches was disseminated, it seems highly likely that it was in fact the legitimacy of the games as patriotic fundraising events that sustained them. The advent of war undoubtedly helped to create an opportunity, which had previously not been provided or adequately supported, to allow women to play football.

**Keywords** Women · Women footballers · Lucas company  
Commonwealth clothing company · Patriotic funds

One of the impacts of the First World War was the disruption and disorientation that prevailed on the domestic front, despite the vast physical distance between Australia and the theatres of battle in Turkey and Europe. One obvious disjuncture was caused by the loss of manpower in various industries, as men of eligible recruitment age left their places of employment and signed-up with the AIF. But this loss of manpower was also acutely felt in other countries, especially as

the conflict dragged on and a seemingly endless supply of men were called upon to leave their jobs and their families in support of the war effort.

While some women directly participated in the war, principally as nurses, the experiences, reactions and responses of females on the “home front” during the First World War deserves to be explored in more depth.<sup>1</sup> As the website of the British National Archives explains: “The response of women to the outbreak of war in August 1914 was mixed. A small number adopted a staunch anti-war position and later worked with the conscientious objectors’ movement. A much larger minority threw their patriotic weight behind the Allied cause”. However, in general, the majority of British women “...fell somewhere between these two extremes, viewing the war as an inevitability for which they now had to make sacrifices”.<sup>2</sup> While some material has focused on the experiences of Australian women, particularly in terms of their altered role in the workforce or in volunteer organisations,<sup>3</sup> there are very few works that consider the changed sporting practices of women in Australia during the period of the First World War.<sup>4</sup> This is partly due to the perception (and not so much the reality) that considerable sporting activity during the war years was curtailed, with many male teams and competitions decimated by the large number of young men who voluntarily enlisted. However, it was exactly these circumstances that helped to provide opportunities for women to participate as players in a football code that they had supported in disproportionately large numbers ever since the game was invented in Melbourne during the middle of the nineteenth century.<sup>5</sup>

Murray Phillips contends that sport at this time was “a popular vehicle to inculcate masculinity, manliness and manhood”, and was part of the propagation of a “complex web of ideals to the wider British Empire”.<sup>6</sup> It is this consideration, says Phillips, which helps to explain “the vitriolic debate over the continuation of male sporting activities and the absence of consternation over female sport”.<sup>7</sup> In particular, Phillips notes that while some women were thrust into conflicting positions, especially concerning the divisive issue of conscription, their general prohibition from active military service meant that they had little choice but to take on traditional “feminine” compassionate roles. Thus they assembled themselves into organisations such as the Red Cross Society and the Australian Comforts Fund.<sup>8</sup> It is against this background that female participation in Australian Rules football during the First World War can be

understood. Three case studies across three different states help to illustrate the relationship between women, war and football.

### THE FIRST WOMEN'S MATCHES

Previous work has highlighted that women first played a competitive match of Australian Rules football in Perth in 1915, just a few months after Australian troops participated in the campaign at Gallipoli. This period in Australian history was marked by significant pressure on sporting organisations in general and football clubs in particular to cease their activities so that the war effort could be fully supported. Peter Burke explores the emergence of women's football in Perth at this time against a backdrop of class tensions created by conscription debates, and in the general context of the development of workplace sport, particularly football teams. He notes that there were points of distinction with the British wartime economy, highlighting that "Australian women were not drafted into traditionally male sections of the workforce, nor into any positions where they could make a more direct and meaningful contribution to the war effort".<sup>9</sup> This observation is important because, as outlined below, nearly all of the women's teams that played football during the course of the First World War appear to be associated with specific workplaces. Moreover, employers almost invariably sided with imperialists in British military conflicts, and Burke suggests it was not long before business owners realised that women's football could be "a promotional vehicle for companies to display their patriotism", with female charity matches closely aligned to recruitment drives.<sup>10</sup> He explains that throughout 1915 many of the usual annual, informal and friendly workplace football matches continued, but the government and most employers were united against the continuation of semi-professional forms of sport.<sup>11</sup> As the war dragged on, however, suspending various forms of workplace sport became an additional and tangible means for employers to mark their forceful support for the war, and many workplace teams and competitions were disbanded.<sup>12</sup> There were, though, situations where employers encouraged football as a means of building patriotism, so workplace football matches, held in conjunction with fundraising efforts, became one way that companies could display their patriotism.<sup>13</sup>

### PATRIOTISM, PUBLIC RELATIONS AND POLITICS

Patriotic fervour, the need to provide socially acceptable forms of entertainment for an increasingly war-conscious society, and amenable employers supportive of the benefits of workplace sport therefore underpinned the beginnings of women's football in Perth.<sup>14</sup> It is important to note the defining characteristics of the original teams involved. In the two known matches that took place in 1915, the opposing teams consisted of shop assistants and factory employees from a large retailing firm, Foy and Gibson. Subsequent photographic evidence and oral testimony indicates that the women played in long skirts and caps, and were coached by men, with not insignificant sums raised for various charities.<sup>15</sup> In summary, Burke claims that "There was an immense public relations value for the department stores in their association with women's football" and it is not surprising that many large Western Australian retailing firms followed this example and organised football teams comprising female employees.<sup>16</sup> He continues by explaining that in 1916 other Perth stores such as "Boans, Economic and Bon Marche, as well as the retail trade in the port town of Fremantle, were represented in the competition", and records that there was a further expansion in 1917 when a team organised by retailers from the country town of Kalgoorlie, tested Foy and Gibson, the unofficial premier of the Perth competition.<sup>17</sup> It is clear from the rather limited evidence that these games were relatively well attended and achieved their aim of raising funds for a number of war-related charitable organisations.

As noted elsewhere, the participation of employees of the Boan Brothers department store in some of the above women's matches is instructive.<sup>18</sup> The firm's founder, Henry "Harry" Boan, who arrived in Perth in 1895, was strictly anti-unionist, and his firm soon became synonymous with the employment of women.<sup>19</sup> He was also a generous corporate citizen, had close business links with Britain, gave generously to the Patriotic Fund and other charities, and he was an active supporter of the conscription campaigns of 1916 and 1917.<sup>20</sup> In a period of political turbulence and department store rivalry, Boan encouraged the women in his store to participate in football matches for ostensibly charitable purposes. However, it seems apparent that female teams in general, and the Boans' team in particular, were perhaps also used as weapons in the public debate over the continuation of male sport, and were, deliberately or not, associated with support of the conscription



THE GIRLS' FOOTBALL MATCH.

**Fig. 4.1** The first women to play competitive matches of Australian Rules football during the Great War were part of workplace teams from Perth, Western Australia. They participated with the support of their patriotic employers. (*Western Mail* [Perth], 26 October 1917)

referenda. In this context, the scattered press reports of the matches are revealing. In October 1917, the *Western Mail* featured a photograph of “The winners of the ladies’ fancy dress football match played on the Subiaco oval on Saturday last”. The image shows 20 women in three rows in an outdoor setting, with the umpire, Harry Crapp, standing to the side. The accompanying text indicates that “The game was arranged by the employees of Boan Bros. to forward the interests of Miss G. Howlett’s candidature in the popular lady competition in aid of the Children’s Home”. Boan, elected unopposed as a Member of Parliament just a few months earlier, is recorded as having “set the ball in motion” in front of “a good attendance”, and although the reporter considered that “As a game of football it was a failure”, it was admitted that the majority of players, who were “picturesquely attired”, participated “with vigour” (Fig. 4.1).<sup>21</sup>



The reference to striking apparel is worthy of comment, because even though the contest was promoted as a “fancy dress” football match it seems that the women’s uniform consisted of caps, scarves, long dresses, stockings and boots. Thus, even though described as “fancy dress” football, the wartime games were quite distinct from other burlesque contests where varied costumes were often meant to be grotesque or to parody fictional or historical characters. In this sense, the identical long dresses and other accoutrements worn by the women, restrictive though they must have been for any form of sport, signified that their contests were perhaps more legitimate than those played by participants in clown costumes or animal masks.

### WOMEN’S FOOTBALL AS A NOVELTY

In the case of South Australia, it is instructive to note that the official history of the South Australian National Football League makes no mention of women’s football, and only a few pages are devoted to the impact of the First World War on the senior men’s competition in Adelaide. In this context, it is relatively easy for early developments in women’s football in South Australia to go undetected, with an assumption that females took up the game much later. However, it is possible to sketch something of a framework for the origins and growth of the women’s code in South Australia, which helps to confirm that the transmission of the women’s game seemed to occur in a west-to-east direction across the nation.<sup>22</sup>

Some of the earliest accounts related to women’s football in South Australia are somewhat short on detail and open to conjecture as to the type of game being played, the identity of the participants, and the amount of organisational or public support. By 1916, however, the First World War was providing a setting for a particular type of women’s football game. Novelty football matches involving females, with funds raised to be forwarded to such charities as the “Soldiers’ Fund” began to be reported in a number of newspapers.<sup>23</sup> Unlike the contests in Perth, though, where most games were played by women in uniform with scores and best players sometimes recorded in a loosely based competitive structure, a “ladies’ football match” in Adelaide, played at the University Oval on Friday, 28 July 1916, was a costume match organised by Miss N. McCartney. In this case:

The players were picked promiscuously from all parts of the city and suburbs, and were attired in various grotesque costumes. Some represented Indians, negroes, and clowns, while others appeared in neat costumes which facilitated a quick run on the wing or an effective dash through the centre line.<sup>24</sup>

In many ways it was perhaps the “absurdity of the situation” that appealed to the spectators, reflecting that not only did the novelty of women playing football have appeal, but the “fancy dress” nature of the contest added to the spectacle of the occasion and helped to attract interested spectators. These less-than-serious contests were, in fact, part of a long line of sporting activities where both males and females camouflaged in fancy dress costumes in a carnival-type environment signified not so much the desire to play sport, but the desire to suspend accepted social hierarchies for a limited time, ostensibly for entertainment or fund-raising purposes.

By 1917, with the war still in full swing, matches featuring women continued to take place in Adelaide, with some games now under the auspices of the Young Men’s Christian Association,<sup>25</sup> while in the following year, reports of games in country towns such as Gawler, north of Adelaide, were reported, featuring evening practice sessions and supported by claims that “[r]ecognized football colours” would be worn.<sup>26</sup> In the latter case, on the day of the match, “Each player was designated with the ‘pet’ name of her brother who had shown prowess in the football field before the days of the war, most of them now being away serving the colours”, and all 36 players, divided into the “Excelsiors” and the “Bing Girls”, were listed by name in the press.<sup>27</sup> However, it was not always initially clear to the crowd what sort of contest they were going to witness at such matches. In this instance, according to the press, even while the players were “distributed to their respective places in the field ... the spectators treated the whole as a burlesque, and created much merriment by addressing the fair ones, adorned in Jerseys, short skirts and bloomers, by their new titles of Jerry, Dinny, Chook, Squash, etc.”.<sup>28</sup> While the first quarter was seen as “highly amusing”, and the crowd was often “in roars of laughter”, it did not take long for the barracking to become characterised by encouragement rather than shouts of derision. As the reporter noted, “the girls settled down to play” and the spectators became “surprised with the skill that was exhibited”.<sup>29</sup>

Four quarters of 15 minutes each were played, notably on a full-length ground, “the girls disdaining a shorter course”.<sup>30</sup>

The above discussion implies that there was a type of linear progression in football games involving women. From impetuous, non-descript scratch games played as part of picnics or social gatherings, to fancy dress matches where women (and also sometimes men) donned theatrical costumes (emphasising the absurdity of their contest) in order to provide novelty entertainment for a crowd, to more serious competitions, where the participants were perhaps part of a workplace or other social grouping and practised beforehand, were usually coached by men, and often surprised onlookers with their skill and determination on the field of play. While on the surface this represents a tempting pattern for the development of women’s football, it is too simplistic and does not take adequate account of the diversity of contests that were occurring. That is, there were several types of football competition, involving women versus women, and men versus women (not to mention men dressed as women), that co-existed, both during the First World War and afterwards.

### THE ROLE PLAYED BY THE RED CROSS SOCIETY

Amongst this mixture of football games involving women was also the high-profile, officially sanctioned, overtly patriotic fund-raising event, usually staged on a much grander scale. The prime example of this is the heavily promoted match between North Adelaide and South Adelaide at the Jubilee Oval on Saturday, 21 September 1918. The advertisement for this game highlights “the distinguished patronage” for the event, which included luminaries such as the governor and his wife, the mayor and his wife, a brigadier-general and an army captain. The patriotic purpose behind the “Girls’ Football Carnival” was also explicit, as the event was staged “By permission of the Department of Repatriation” and with the “sanction of the Red Cross Society”. All proceeds were to “provide comforts for the Anzacs” and the potential audience were assured that they would be “helping our soldiers by coming to the carnival”.<sup>31</sup> Worthy of note is that the game was not played between workplace teams, as most similar matches in Western Australia at this time seem to have been. Also notable is the fact that the Red Cross Society was directly involved in endorsing the contest. While this organisation was involved in supporting other wartime football games elsewhere in Australia, the fact that

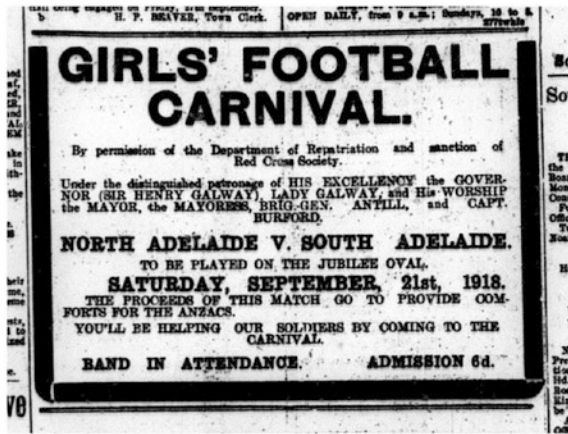


Fig. 4.2 A women’s match between North Adelaide and South Adelaide in 1918 was played under the patronage of the governor, the mayor and military officers, and raised funds to provide ‘comforts for the Anzacs’. (*Register* [Adelaide], 20 September 1918)

the Adelaide contest was officially “sanctioned” by the Society sets this match apart (Fig. 4.2).

According to a recent centenary history, the Australian Red Cross Society was officially formed 9 days after the outbreak of the war, although it was initially mooted in Adelaide in 1909, and had the support of leading citizens, including the mayor of the city. However, it was Lady Helen Munro Ferguson, the wife of recently appointed Australian governor-general Ronald Munro Ferguson, based in Melbourne where the national parliament was located, who was the catalyst for the formation of a network of independent “state divisions” of the Red Cross.<sup>32</sup> In Adelaide, the South Australian division was formed at a meeting convened jointly by Lady Marie Galway, the wife of the state’s governor, and Mrs. A.A. Simpson, the wife of the mayor. Galway was part German, and in Melanie Oppenheimer’s view this “cultured, intelligent, charming” woman went out of her way to make sure that the conveniently located Government House was open to the cause of the Society.<sup>33</sup> To add further context to the involvement of these two women as patrons of the “Girls’ Football Carnival”, it should be noted that the Australian Red Cross raised money in a variety of ways. While Oppenheimer mentions

church collections, dances, socials, gymkhanas, race meetings, raffles, art unions, carnivals and fairs as charitable events, she also specifically adds “football matches” to her list and notes that “Having vice-regal patronage certainly assisted [the] Australian Red Cross in their fundraising”.<sup>34</sup> While no specific football matches are mentioned in her book, the role of Galway and Simpson in fostering the women’s football match in Adelaide must have been an exemplar of this type of activity.

Following the match, Adelaide’s *Daily Herald* provided a comprehensive report of the game, including a list of all participants, goal-kickers and best players. It was a positive report, including such descriptive phrases as “Moments of intense excitement were frequent, and many of the onlookers were enthusiastic in their encouragement”. There were no derogatory asides in the report and there was no crowd misbehaviour worthy of mention, with special reference of the military band that “rendered selections” throughout the afternoon.<sup>35</sup> In a male football landscape decimated by the war, a heavily promoted, well-patronised women’s game, held for a patriotic cause on one of the city’s main ovals, was clearly favourably received by the press, and as a contest it stands apart from some of the other games that were staged in South Australia during the First World War.

#### THE WOMEN’S GAME USED TO PROMOTE COMMERCE AND COMPANY LOYALTY

Space does not permit a discussion of all the examples of women playing football in South Australia during the First World War. However, several other matches are worth mentioning in terms of an embryonic typology. Although participants in the Jubilee Oval game from 21 September 1918 were not demarcated as being affiliated with workplace teams, there were several contests where female players were associated with Adelaide companies, similar to the situation in Western Australia. For instance, on 12 August 1918, a report, titled “Feminine Football. A Jolly Exhibition by Women” appeared in the *Register*. It described a “Women’s Patriotic Football Match” at the Jubilee Oval, and the two teams represented, respectively, James Marshall and Company and Charles Moore and Company. Players were listed by name, and the uniforms (“jerseys, bloomers, and short pleated skirts”) were described as purple and white (Marshall), and two blues with a scarlet monogram (Moore). The report

noted that “Both players and public contributed to the feast of mirth”, with squeals by the players that “delighted the crowd”, and the barracking itself said to be entertaining.<sup>36</sup> Importantly, the presence of a “cinema operator” and “several photographers” was noted. A return match between the same teams was reported in the *Advertiser* on 9 September 1918, although this time the game was played at the Adelaide Oval in the presence of “about 3000 people”. Players were again listed by name and scores were recorded. On this occasion the umpire was nominated as Mr. Black and funds from the match were donated to the Red Cross Society.<sup>37</sup> Significantly, in between the two matches, the “Wondergraph”, a “Splendid Moving Picture” of the August game between the teams representing the firms of James Marshall and Charles Moore was screened, and widely advertised in the press.<sup>38</sup> The James Marshall company was a major store in Adelaide, selling footwear, linen, wallpaper and furniture, while the Charles Moore company lauded itself as “The Premier Store”, specialising in “Tempting Manchester Bargains”.<sup>39</sup> Both companies would have benefitted commercially from the exposure garnered from the football games themselves, not to mention the subsequent cinematic coverage. This suggests that, as in Perth, support for women’s football may not have been altogether altruistic and that matches featuring workplace teams were an important part of the commercial, social and sporting environment during the war years in particular.

Victoria’s capital city, Melbourne, is the acknowledged point of origin for the code itself, and hence it had a more well-developed football culture than other Australian cities.<sup>40</sup> While it is likely that women may have participated in carnivalesque-type matches in Victoria during the late 1880s and 1890s,<sup>41</sup> the first well-documented evidence of a match between two female teams in Victoria relates to a contest between the “Lucas’ Girls” and the “Khaki Girls” in Ballarat on 28 September 1918. This game was similar to the matches in Perth, in that it was played between two workplace teams for patriotic charity purposes. In this instance, the “Khaki Girls” from the Commonwealth Clothing Factory in South Melbourne and the “Lucas Girls” from a textile and clothing company in Ballarat played an exhibition game in front of several thousand spectators in order to raise funds for the building of an Arch of Victory, with money from the day’s afternoon tea set aside for the Ballarat East Red Cross and the Trenches’ Fund. The game was extensively covered in the press, and on a wind-swept oval the home team

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**AMUSEMENTS.**

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**AVENUE OF HONOR. AVENUE OF HONOR.**  
 SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 28th,  
 EASTERN OVAL.

**KHAKI GIRLS AND LUCAS' GIRLS:**

PROGRAMME.

2.45 p.m.—GRAND PROCESSION, leaving Doveton street, halting at Soldiers' Statue. Short Address by Major Baird, M.L.A. GIRLS' BUGLE BAND will sound "THE LAST POST." CITY BAND will lead Procession to Eastern Oval.

3.15 p.m.—"God Save the King," by City Band. KHAKI GIRLS' Physical Culture Display.

3.30 p.m.—UNIQUE-FOOTBALL MATCH—KHAKI GIRLS V LUCAS'. Quarter-time.—KHAKI GIRLS (DANCING SQUAD), Half-time.—Display by KHAKI GIRLS (BUGLE BAND). Selection by CITY BAND. Threequarter-time.—Unique Performance by GIRLS' RIFLE SQUAD.

Proceeds for Entrance for the Avenue of Honor. Admission—1/; Grandstand, 6d. extra. Children halfeprice.  
 AFTERNOON TEA, etc., in aid of Ballarat East Red Cross and Trenches Fund.

**Fig. 4.3** Employees of the Lucas Company and the visiting Commonwealth Clothing Factory played a football match to raise money for Ballarat's Arch of Victory. (*Ballarat Star*, 27 September 1918)

prevailed, with the entire day hailed as a great success.<sup>42</sup> Ballarat, one of Victoria's major rural towns, was renowned for its support of the war effort, and in May 1917 Mrs. W.D. 'Tillie' Thompson, a director of E. Lucas & Company, began implementing the idea that trees should be planted in honour of each Ballarat citizen who had enlisted in the AIF. This suggestion was enthusiastically taken up by the employees of the company, and within a month approximately 500 staff, who became known locally as the "Lucas Girls" (or "Lucas' Girls"), began to plant trees along an avenue leading into the town (Fig. 4.3).<sup>43</sup>

The company history makes it clear that in a business eventually employing many hundreds of young girls, "comradeship in work and shared belief in community service" were the formula that ensured sound relations between management and labour.<sup>44</sup> Thus the Lucas employees were not only instrumental in fund-raising for the Arch and the Avenue, but they were allowed to leave their machines, for instance, to welcome and bid farewell to Anzac troops, distributing gifts and singing choruses at the local train station.<sup>45</sup> As labour historian Raelene Frances notes, the purpose of such sanctioned activities was not just to encourage patriotism in the Lucas Girls, but to also encourage loyalty

to the firm and its values, thus providing a bulwark against any potential industrial action on the factory floor.<sup>46</sup> Importantly, the Lucas company history reveals that some of the like-minded paternalistic customers of the firm included Henry Boan (who was born near Dunnolly, not far from Ballarat, in 1860), as well as other businessmen involved in promoting women's football in Perth during this period. It is therefore not unreasonable to surmise that the match in Ballarat was inspired by Eleanor Lucas' close associations with commercial partners in Perth, especially the potential linkman, Boan.<sup>47</sup>

### JUST A WARTIME PHENOMENON?

While connections with businesses that fielded women's workplace football teams in Western Australia appear to underpin the reasons why the Lucas company staged a match in Ballarat, it does not adequately explain the involvement of their opposing team. The employees of the Commonwealth Clothing Factory, nearly all single women, were responsible for making uniforms for the troops, hence the nickname "Khaki Girls", but they enthusiastically devoted their time and contributed financial resources from their limited wages to the war effort. As Bruce Scates and Raelene Frances emphasise, it was not unusual for women in many female-dominated workplaces to bear heavy workloads, and the formation of special after-hours working-bees to raise money and make comforts for the troops was a common scenario. However, the efforts of the Khaki Girls attracted special attention.<sup>48</sup> According to Scates and Frances, they were officially formed in 1918 and organised themselves into three branches—a Bugle Band, a Physical Culture Squad, and a Rifle Squad—each with a distinctive uniform, strongly paramilitary in nature. These groups spent their time drilling and performing with the express purpose of raising funds and assisting AIF recruiting campaigns. Moreover, they travelled to distant regional towns such as Geelong, Echuca, Shepparton and Ballarat, where they took part in parades and militaristic displays.<sup>49</sup> A later interview with the leader of the Bugle Band, Lyla Barnard, reveals that it was the Rifle Squad who played in the football match against the Lucas Girls, but it was usual for the entire group of Khaki Girls to march at other venues, even though the notion of women wearing military uniforms was somewhat controversial at this time.<sup>50</sup>



The precise impact of females playing competitive games of Australian Rules football for the first time during a period when established gender roles were under some strain due to the social ructions of the First World War is not altogether clear. However, it was obviously the war itself that helped to create an opportunity that had previously not been provided or adequately supported. As news of these unique matches was disseminated, it seems highly likely that it was in fact the legitimacy of the games as patriotic fundraising events that sustained them. In an environment where the playing of football by young men was under attack, the contemporaneous birth and flowering of women's football remains a fascinating phenomenon. The women's code did, however, suffer from an almost nationwide immediate hiatus as soon as the war ended, and it was largely the advent of the post-war "modern girl", buoyed by the effervescent mood of the 1920s, that helped to foster a new generation of female footballers.<sup>51</sup>

## NOTES

1. See, for example Kate Adie, *Fighting on the Home Front: The Legacy of Women in World War One* (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 2013).
2. British National Archives, 'Women and the First World War', [http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/firstworldwar/document\\_packs/women.htm](http://www.nationalarchives.gov.uk/pathways/firstworldwar/document_packs/women.htm).
3. See, for example, Raelene Frances, *The Politics of Work: Gender and Labour in Victoria, 1880–1939* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1993), and Melanie Oppenheimer, *The Power of Humanity: 100 Years of the Red Cross, 1914–2014* (Sydney: HarperCollins, 2014).
4. The most comprehensive book on Australian women and sport contains only fleeting references to women's physical activities in the 1914–1918 period. See M.K. Stell, *Half the Race: A History of Australian Women in Sport* (North Ryde: Angus and Robertson, 1991).
5. Rob Hess, "'Ladies are Specially Invited': Women and the Culture of Australian Rules Football", *International Journal of the History of Sport* 17, nos 2–3 (2000), pp. 111–141.
6. M.G. Phillips, 'Sport, War and Gender Images: The Australian Sportsmen's Battalions and the First World War', *International Journal of the History of Sport* 14, no. 1 (1997), pp. 78–96.
7. Phillips, 'Sport, War and Gender Images', p. 84.
8. The Australian Red Cross was established on 13 August 1914, with women comprising 80% of its members. The Australian Comforts Fund,

also heavily reliant on women, was an umbrella body for most of the voluntary organisations set up after the outbreak of the war. See Peter Dennis et al., *The Oxford Companion to Australian Military History*, Second Edition (South Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 59, 67.

9. Peter Burke, 'Patriot Games: Women's Football during the First World War in Australia', *Football Studies* 8, no. 2 (2005), 5–19.
10. Burke, 'Patriot Games', p. 11.
11. Burke, 'Patriot Games', p. 9.
12. Burke, 'Patriot Games', pp. 11–12.
13. Burke, 'Patriot Games', p. 13.
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15. Burke, 'Patriot Games', pp. 13–16.
16. Burke, 'Patriot Games', p. 13.
17. Burke, 'Patriot Games', p. 5.
18. Rob Hess, 'Playing with "Patriotic Fire": Women and Football in the Antipodes during the Great War', *International Journal of the History of Sport* 28, no. 10 (2011), pp. 1394–1397.
19. David Hough, *Boans for Service: The Story of a Department Store, 1895–1986* (Claremont: Estate of F.T. Boan, 2009), p. 23.
20. Hough, *Boans for Service*, pp. 26–28.
21. *Western Mail* (Perth), 5 October 1917.
22. For a fuller exposition of this framework, see Rob Hess, 'Missing in Action? New Perspectives on the Origins and Diffusion of Women's Football in Australia during the Great War', *International Journal of the History of Sport* 31, no. 18 (2014), 2326–2344.
23. 'Ladies' Football Match', *Daily Herald* (Adelaide), 28 July 1916.
24. 'Ladies at Football', *Daily Herald* (Adelaide), 29 July 1916.
25. 'The Red Triangle: Splendid YMCA Effort', *Daily Herald* (Adelaide), 1 September 1917.
26. 'Ladies' Football Match', *Bunyip*, 19 July 1918.
27. 'Ladies at Football', *Bunyip*, 23 August 1918.
28. 'Ladies at Football', *Bunyip*, 23 August 1918.
29. 'Ladies at Football', *Bunyip*, 23 August 1918.
30. 'Ladies at Football', *Bunyip*, 23 August 1918.
31. *Register* (Adelaide), 20 September 1918.
32. Oppenheimer, *The Power of Humanity*, pp. 13, 15.
33. Oppenheimer, *The Power of Humanity*, p. 23.
34. Oppenheimer, *The Power of Humanity*, p. 33.
35. *Daily Herald* (Adelaide), 23 September 1918.
36. 'Feminine Football', *Register* (Adelaide), 12 August 1918.
37. 'Patriotic Girls' Football', *Advertiser* (Adelaide), 9 September 1918.

38. See an example of an advertisement for the screening of the 'Ladies' Football Match' in the *Register* (Adelaide), 3 September 1918.
39. See examples of advertisements from both companies in the *Register* (Adelaide), 3 September 1918.
40. See Rob Hess, Matthew Nicholson, Bob Stewart and Gregory de Moore, *A National Game: The History of Australian Rules Football* (Camberwell: Penguin/Viking, 2008), 1–19.
41. For examples, see the *Williamstown Chronicle*, 17 July 1886, the *Richmond Australian*, 8 May 1889, and the *Illustrated Australian News*, 1 August 1894.
42. *Ballarat Courier*, 30 September 1918.
43. 'The Ballarat Arch of Victory and Avenue of Honour', Heritage Information Guide, no date.
44. Mollie White, *The Golden Thread: The Story of a Fashion House*, E. Lucas & Co. Pty. Ltd, 1888–1963 (Melbourne: E. Lucas & Co., 1963), pp. 15, 22.
45. White, *The Golden Thread*, p. 17.
46. Frances, *The Politics of Work*, pp. 97, 194.
47. Hess, 'Missing in Action?', p. 2332.
48. Bruce Scates and Raelene Francis, *Women and the Great War* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), p. 56.
49. Scates and Frances, *Women and the Great War*, p. 56.
50. Jan Bassett 'Lyla Barnard: Khaki Girl', in Marilyn Lake and Farley Kelly (eds), *Double Time: Women in Victoria—150 Years* (Ringwood: Penguin Books, 1985), pp. 268–75.
51. The national history of women's Australian Rules football is explored in a recently published book. See Brunette Lenkić and Rob Hess, *Play On! The Hidden History of Women's Australian Rules Football* (Richmond: Echo Publishing, 2016). For discussion of cross-code influences on women's football in the context of the 'modern' world that emerged during the 1920s, see Katherine Haines, 'The 1921 Peak and Turning Point in Women's Football History: An Australasian, Cross-Code Perspective', *International Journal of the History of Sport* 33, no. 8 (2016), 828–846.

## Football and the Military

**Abstract** From its earliest beginnings football had enjoyed the support of military authorities due largely to the “games ethos” extolled throughout the Empire. When a compulsory youth training scheme was introduced in Australia in 1911 it created immediate tension as the attraction to football often distracted boys from attending drills. While the merits of playing football became the subject of an intense public debate, the military, as this chapter explains, adopted a much more pragmatic view. For the army, particularly, the playing of football formed multiple purposes for breaking boredom, fostering good relations both within and without the military, and also keeping men fit for active duty. The game was enthusiastically embraced by the soldiers both at home and overseas and those obsessed with it promoted it almost evangelically.

**Keywords** Australian Imperial Force (AIF) · Games ethos · Duntroon  
Australian football · Compulsory training · Exhibition match

One of the great ironies regarding the playing of football during the First World War was that while the anti-football patriots on the home front set their sights on bringing the game down, the military actually embraced the playing of the game for recreational, training and recruitment purposes. While winning “the greater game” (as the war was sportingly dubbed), was the main focus of Australia’s military, a pragmatic view was adopted toward football. The military authorities were far

more interested in using football to advance the cause of the army than expending energy trying to shut the game down. The reasons for this were partly historic.

### IMPERIAL ORIGINS OF SPORT IN THE MILITARY

The military in Australia, and other parts of the British Empire, had a long tradition of involvement in sport and the different football codes. Tony Mason has suggested that along with exercising and drilling, sport was one of the few other activities for British troops posted in far-flung colonial settlements, such as Australia and India. As a consequence, the army patronised sport in many ways—creating facilities and ovals, organising regimental teams and competitions—because sport enhanced fitness, boosted morale, provided a physical outlet and countered boredom.<sup>1</sup> Military involvement thus played a role in the emergence of many sports, including horseracing and the various football codes. The matches between British garrison regiments and local Victorian teams in the 1860s were an important feature of the early development of Australian Rules football, or Victorian Rules, as the local Melbourne version was then known.<sup>2</sup> As Robin Grow has pointed out, the participation of the Royal Irish Regiment (14th Regiment of Foot) in early games contributed to how the game was perceived publicly with military metaphors colouring early match reports.<sup>3</sup>

More broadly, J.D. Campbell has argued that it was officers from public schools in Britain who were at the forefront of integrating sport into military training throughout the British army and thus instilling a principle that training for sport was, indeed, training for war, and so extolling the muscular Christian view and further embedding it in conservative thought.<sup>4</sup> However, Riedi and Mason have suggested that sport held far more pragmatic benefits to military authorities in that “it could increase fitness, decrease drunkenness, help build regimental identity, enhance relations between officers and other ranks, and between the army and civil society, and improve morale”.<sup>5</sup> These factors certainly appeared to be the guiding principles of the AIF’s embrace of Australian Rules football and other team sports during the war, although the more quixotic view of sport was again lauded after the war’s end. Recognising the important role which sport could play, the organisers of the British Expeditionary Forces sports scheme in 1919 issued specific guidelines for the conduct of the sports and attempted to elevate the purpose of

play by including ideals which were borrowed from amateurism. One of its objectives was to “instill the root principle of true sport, viz: ‘Play for your side and not for yourself’”; this was to be achieved by the abolition of money prizes, the provision of individual winners with trophies of “little intrinsic value” and by the presentation of team trophies.<sup>6</sup> This idea was also embraced, at the war’s conclusion, by the organisers of the AIF sports programs, whose task was to provide sport and recreation opportunities for the thousands of soldiers in England awaiting transport ships to return them home to Australia.

Such a view was unsurprising and was also reflected by the military masters at the fledgling Royal Australian Military College, Duntroon (founded in 1911), who embraced the amateur ideal of sport although they showed a marked preference for the game of Rugby Union for its cadets. The selection of Rugby over Australian Rules was considered by the editors of the *Referee* an understandable one as it was an Empire-building game and one that could be played throughout the mother country and dominions, thus fostering imperial ties which the parochial nature of the Australian game did not allow. The merits of the Australian code were lauded by one reader, however, who considered the decision misguided and named a number of Australian footballers who had won military honours and pointed out that they had the “brains and ability to invent and carry on a game they believe is better than any other game of football”.<sup>7</sup> For many supporters of Australian Rules football the growth and status of the game as a distinct expression of nationalistic traits went hand in hand with Federation (Fig. 5.1).

### CLASHING WITH THE UNIVERSAL TRAINING SCHEME

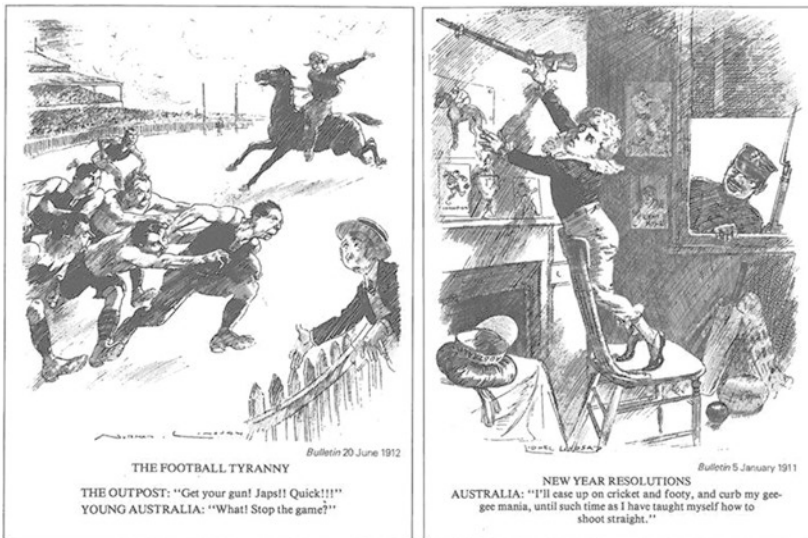
The approach of Federation in 1901 had coincided with a rapid growth in football’s popularity. This period was also marked by an increased commitment to Australia’s defence, and an associated roll-out of a national defence program led to an awkwardness between military authorities and the various football bodies. Under the universal training scheme introduced in 1911, youths between the ages of 14 and 20 (senior cadets) were required to undertake compulsory military training. By the time of its introduction, large crowds were regularly attending games throughout the major cities. A problem occurred because Saturday afternoon was generally the nominated day for drill but was also the day on which football was played. From the outset, absenteeism plagued the



**Fig. 5.1** Australian football side from the Royal Military College, Duntroon, 1916. Rugby, however, became the institution's preferred football code. (Australian War Memorial, H12629)

scription scheme with football undoubtedly contributing to some of the scheme's problems. A former Victorian trainee, who was eventually sentenced to fourteen days' detention at Fort Queenscliff, recalled finding it "hard to pass the Collingwood football ground".<sup>8</sup> Labour heavyweight Frank Tudor, Federal Member for Yarra and Richmond Football Club President, was approached by several youths and a father of one of them urged him to convey their disenchantment with the scheme, which clashed with the only day on which they could "enjoy football". Tudor took up the issue with the Minister of Defence, Senator Pearce, who in turn raised the matter with the Adjutant-General, Colonel Chauvel, who dismissed this complaint. Chauvel contended that senior cadets generally had two Saturdays a month free to themselves, which allowed ample opportunity to watch football.<sup>9</sup>

Football players were also affected by the universal training scheme. Arthur Roy Leech, who played for St. Kilda in the post-war period, was fined £1 for being absent from military duty. He had fallen 57 hours behind in his drill attendance because he was playing for a VFA club at the time. It was from he carried into the army as his service, once he had volunteered, was plagued by absences without leave.<sup>10</sup> Percy Ellingsen,



Source: *Bulletin*, 20 June 1912. Reproduced in John Barrett, *Falling In: Australians and 'Boy Conscription' 1911-1915*, p.150.

Source: *Bulletin*, 5 January 1911. Reproduced in John Barrett, *Falling In: Australians and 'Boy Conscription' 1911-1915*, p.71.

**Fig. 5.2** Cartoons depicting pre-war tension between the playing and supporting of football and national defence training. (Melbourne Cricket Club library collection)

who started his VFL career with Richmond at the age of sixteen, was a constant defaulter and achieved some notoriety with his flagrant forfeiting of his military training. He preferred to play football on Saturdays (Fig. 5.2).<sup>11</sup>

### MATCHES FEATURING MILITARY TEAMS DURING THE WAR

Conflict between the army and football interests did not prove intractable and in many instances there was a compromise on both sides. An agreement was struck up, for instance, between the SAFL and military authorities in that state. It was agreed to devote one Saturday each month to the military so that football demands would not conflict with the cadets' drill. The military agreed, in return, not to conduct training in districts hosting football matches. This compromise was planned to take effect in 1915 but its adoption was overtaken by the outbreak of war.<sup>12</sup>



While there was considerable divisiveness associated with playing football at home in wartime, there were no qualms about the value of games within the army. The relationship between the military and sport appeared a natural and convenient one. Football, and sport in general, was seen as providing the troops with recreation as well as keeping them fit for active service. The comparative merits of the regimens pertaining to military physical fitness and that of professional footballers may be called into question given the descriptions provided of some players overseas. In early 1917 Collingwood champion Dan Minogue was described as being “somewhat fatter and shorter of condition than of yore”.<sup>13</sup>

Games of football were embarked on almost as soon as the volunteers went into camp. The fact that the declaration of war occurred during the football season meant that it was one of the first sports that would be embraced by the soldiers. Its popularity would not wane throughout the course of the war. In Tasmania an expeditionary football side was selected from the soldiers in camp at Claremont in Hobart, many of whom were prominent Tasmanian footballers, whose presence generated a great sense of excitement about the upcoming games. This side was pitted against a representative side from the Tasmanian Football League (TFL) in two games at the Hobart Oval. Proceeds garnered from the games were donated to three charity funds—the relief of distressed soldiers of the 6th Military District, the returned wounded soldiers of Tasmania, and the Consumptives’ Sanatorium. The first match ended in a draw and the second was approached with serious intent, with the expeditionary side reported as “leaving no stone unturned to be in the pink of condition”. The military side was dubbed the “fighting eighteen”. Military pomp and ceremony would mark the occasion with a march from the camp to the ground of some 1500–2000 volunteers led by the camp’s military band.<sup>14</sup> The expeditionary side triumphed in the return match by four points in what had been a close-fought contest all day. Some 4500–5000 spectators attended the game, almost half of whom were men in uniform. In between the two matches the expeditionary side travelled to Launceston by train to play another match. They arrived on the morning of 28 August accompanied by the military camp band and 250 soldier supporters. The military team proved too strong for the Northern Tasmanian Football Association (NTFA) combination.<sup>15</sup>

Of particular note was the half-time address at the second game at the Hobart oval by Captain J.P. Clark who delivered a “stirring” recruitment speech, which resulted in 26 men volunteering. Only 18 were accepted,

the other eight presumably being unfit or underage.<sup>16</sup> This snapshot is consistent with the more general rates of rejection throughout the war and reveals one of the inconvenient truths about enlistment that the patriots generally refused to acknowledge, that being, that a high percentage of men, including footballers, did not meet the physical military standards of the day.

Matches by clubs against military combinations continued to be played throughout the war. In Western Australia a mid-season commitment was made for the 1916 premiers, whoever that may be, to play a team of soldiers in camp with monies raised being donated to the local Red Cross.<sup>17</sup> In New South Wales plans were fashioned for a combined metropolitan side to travel to Bathurst for an end-of-season match against the soldiers in camp in that town. The proposal won the approval of the *Referee's* football writer "Coo-ee" who thought it a most appropriate opportunity to showcase the Australian game in a city imbued with "such national proclivities", it being the place where the first Federal Convention had been held.<sup>18</sup>

#### AUSTRALIAN RULES AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

It is not surprising that football was enthusiastically played and supported by the soldiers overseas. Apart from the obvious relief from the rigours of frontline service, the game provided a tangible link with home through the memories it evoked in homesick soldiers. For soldiers from the southern and western states, the unique nature of the Australian game might also have further underscored their view of themselves as distinct from the soldiers of other nations. In this sense they may have been displaying a form of "cultural nationalism" a term that Liam O'Callaghan has used to describe the Gaelic Athletic Association's (GAA) pursuit of homegrown Irish sports during the war. Of course, the political sub-text of the GAA's stance as a counterpoint to the patriotic advocacy of the Irish Rugby Football Union and to British Rule generally is not comparable to the Australian experience.<sup>19</sup> Nonetheless, Australians prior to the war were exposed to a nascent nationalism celebrating Australian distinctiveness, and participation in the Australian game may have contributed to such sentiment. This point of reflection was suggested in a report in the *Sydney Morning Herald*, which commented that even if not "ardent missionary spirits" of the game, even Rugbeians, being so far away from home, were able to enjoy the national flavour the game brought them.<sup>20</sup>

Kevin Blackburn has argued that the “games ethic” that was upheld throughout the British and Dominion armies developed a distinct edge in the Australian context through the playing of games on Anzac Day, which saw the development of a marked celebration of the ideal of the soldier-sportsman. As such, sport was used, particularly when international representation was involved, to promote the worth and skill of Australia’s soldier-sportsmen.<sup>21</sup> Prominent footballers and other sportsmen serving overseas were certainly seen as being part of a special fraternity.<sup>22</sup> When these men added further lustre to their reputations through the winning of military awards, their deeds on the football field and battlefield were remarked on in detail. Such was the case with Alec Clarke, a former player with the Perth Football Club who was reported as recommended for a Victoria Cross (he was awarded a Military Cross) at Gallipoli with the 10th Light Horse Regiment. His deed of carrying two wounded mates to safety while sustaining wounds to his legs received equal editorial space as a pre-war anecdote of abandoning his militia scouting post and riding fourteen miles to play a game against East Perth before returning to his military duties. A regimental comrade was Hugo Throssell, who won a Victoria Cross and who was also proudly acknowledged as a former West Australian footballer.<sup>23</sup> In similar vein, the *Sydney Sportsman* reported on the enlistment of Australian Rules players, with special mention of Les Mitchell and Victor Hedger, who had carried off military honours thus “keeping up their records as good sports”.<sup>24</sup> It also followed its summary of the challenge final between Paddington and Balmain with an account on the fate and doings of a number of Sydney footballers.<sup>25</sup>

Lieutenant G.H. Goddard, of the 59th Battalion, commented on the enthusiasm of the troops for football: “It was possible to make a good guess at the State from which a certain man hailed by the vehemence with which he supported a certain brand of football ... The patronizing manner in which a supporter of one particular game would ask another to ‘come and see a real football match’ was quite amusing”.<sup>26</sup> Former New South Wales cricketer and Sydney Football Club player Albert Vincent, while stationed near Cairo, avowed to having participated in many noisy and heated debates about the merits of the Australian game over Rugby.<sup>27</sup>

### PLAYING THE GAME ON FOREIGN SOIL

The open space afforded by the desert in Egypt and Palestine lent itself admirably to the playing of football within comparable dimensions to grounds at home. VFL umpire, Harry Nugent, officiated in a game

played partly on the battlefield of Romani between the 3rd Light Horse Field Ambulance and the 10th Light Horse Regiment. The game was described as a semi-final, showing that significant competitions were being played amongst the troops whenever idle and also showing that the games allowed umpires as well as players to indulge in their passion.<sup>28</sup>

A popular portrayal of the game as played during the war is contained in Peter Weir's film *Gallipoli*, which includes a scene in which a game of Australian football is played in the shadows of the Great Pyramids. The incongruity of the game's setting, as well as the men's passion, was highlighted by a conversation between one of the heroes, Frank, and his mate Bill. Gazing at the pyramids, Bill is drawn to the magnitude of the attempts of the Pharaohs to beat death. His observation was lost on Frank, who remonstrated: "Thanks Professor, look, can you get your mind back on the game, let's think about the West Australians' first attempts to beat the bloody Vics".

Despite the fictitious side of Weir's cinematic depiction, there was no doubt that state rivalries were replicated in the AIF's pursuit of sport. A more genuine example is provided in a letter from Keith Eltham, a well-known Tasmanian cricketer, who wrote home and gave a detailed account of a football match played between the West Australian 9th Battery and the Tasmanian 8th Battery in Cairo. Not surprisingly, the game was played in warm conditions on sandy and stony ground. During the Egyptian summer, games were played before breakfast or after tea when the heat was not as severe. Some improvisation was necessary. Poles from military wagons were used as goal posts and the boundary line was marked by banks of sand. Eltham's account reads like a report of game back in Australia. The team is named and quarter-by-quarter descriptions with scores and important moments and contributions are recorded. The Tasmanians were referred to as the "Tassies" or "Islanders" and the West Australians as the "Swans" in reference to that state's black swan emblem. The Tasmanians proved victorious coming from behind to win after Richardson of the Launceston Football Club goaled from two sensational marks.<sup>29</sup> The detail of Eltham's account was an indication of how seriously such games were embraced and of the void they filled in the soldiers' time away.

The passion many soldiers held for football resulted in games in some strange settings. Even the confines of the position at Gallipoli could not dampen the men's enthusiasm for the game. T.J. Richards, who was a member of the 1st Battalion (NSW) and a former Rugby international for Australia, later recalled one of his army sporting experiences:

“Football matches were out of the question at Anzac; yet, one afternoon when I came over from Brown[s] Dip towards White’s Gully I was surprised at seeing a football floating through the air. I set off down into the blind valley, and joined in with a number of Victorians who had brought the ball from Egypt with them”.<sup>30</sup>

Troops *en route* to England via South Africa also played the game overseas. A description of two matches played in Durban by two teams, one a combine representing the Eastern States and the other representing Western Australia, was reprinted in the *Mount Magnet Miner and Lennonville Leader*. The games were played at the Lord’s ground and the “West’s” were victorious in both winning the first, 7 goals 4 behinds (32 points) to 2 goals 4 behinds (16) and triumphing in the second by five points, 5 goals 6 behinds (36) to 4 goals 7 behinds (31). The game was considered to be a fusion of soccer and rugby and the absence of the offside rule and scrums were commented on as contributing to the high scoring and fast pace of the game. The Western Australians were reported as being a more cohesive outfit owing to six players being from the same club side, although the particular club side was not revealed. In keeping with the pressing patriotism of the times the game ended with both sides coming to attention as they ran off the ground when the band struck up “God Save the King”.<sup>31</sup>

Salisbury Plain, in England, where thousands of Australians were in camp training became home to many games of football often organised by the Young Men’s Christian Association (YMCA). One such game between South Australian and Victorian battalions, in which the South Australians prevailed by a point, was considered as being rightly termed an interstate match due to the large number of former league players that participated.<sup>32</sup> Several sides were said to have formed at Salisbury to play the game in the soldiers’ spare time. There was said to be no dearth of supporters ready to declare the inadequacy of “soccer” and “rugger” and to show the locals the “surpassing excellence” of the local game as what football ought to be.<sup>33</sup>

### THE LONDON EXHIBITION GAME

Undoubtedly the showcase of Australian Rules football overseas was a match held in at the Queen’s Club, West Kensington, before a crowd of 3000 Australian soldiers, most of whom were in London on leave. The match was promoted as the “Pioneer Exhibition Game of Australian

Football in London". It was played on 28 October, the day Australians were being asked to vote for or against conscription, and purportedly in the presence of the (then) Prince of Wales (later King Edward VIII), and the deposed and exiled King Manuel II of Portugal, neither of whom were present according to Nick Richardson's research into the game. The prince was in France and the Portuguese king's whereabouts are unknown. The match was organised by the former Olympic champion swimmer and the later Lord Mayor of Melbourne, Lieutenant Frank Beaurepaire and played in London at the behest of John Monash, commander of the Australian 3rd Division, who clearly saw the potential of the game as a showpiece event. The match was played on a somewhat reduced field of play being slightly shorter (by 10 m) and rather narrower (by 25 m) than most grounds in Australia, but it was certainly not enough to reduce the players' and spectators' enthusiasm for the game (Fig. 5.3).<sup>34</sup>

The members of the competing teams, Australian Training Units and the Third Australian Divisional Team, were all highly skilled footballers, the majority of whom had already played senior football in their respective states. As such, it rates as one of the most extraordinary representative games ever played in the annals of the game. The quality of the match, in windy conditions, was commented on favourably in a number of accounts. The two sides wore distinctive guernseys—one red with a Kangaroo emblem and the other blue with a map of Australia. The game was notable for the many star players on both sides and in terms of ability on display would have rated as the equal of a match between any of the leading football states. Padre C.J. Perry, vice-captain of Norwood (South Australia) led the Training team and Bruce Sloss, a South Melbourne star and 1911 Champion of the Colony, captained the 3rd Division team. It was one of the last games of football Sloss played, as on 4 January 1917 he was killed instantly when a German shell exploded at his feet while he was seeking shelter in a storeroom near his unit's headquarters just behind the main line.<sup>35</sup>

The London match, won by the 3rd Division team, 6 goals 16 behinds (52 points) to 4 goals 12 behinds (36 points), was widely reported in Australia where keen interest was expressed over whether the national game had made an impression with foreign observers. The response of the English press was deemed as important, if not more so than any actual account of the game itself. West Australians were told that the Londoners were delighted by the exhibition match and Sydneysiders that

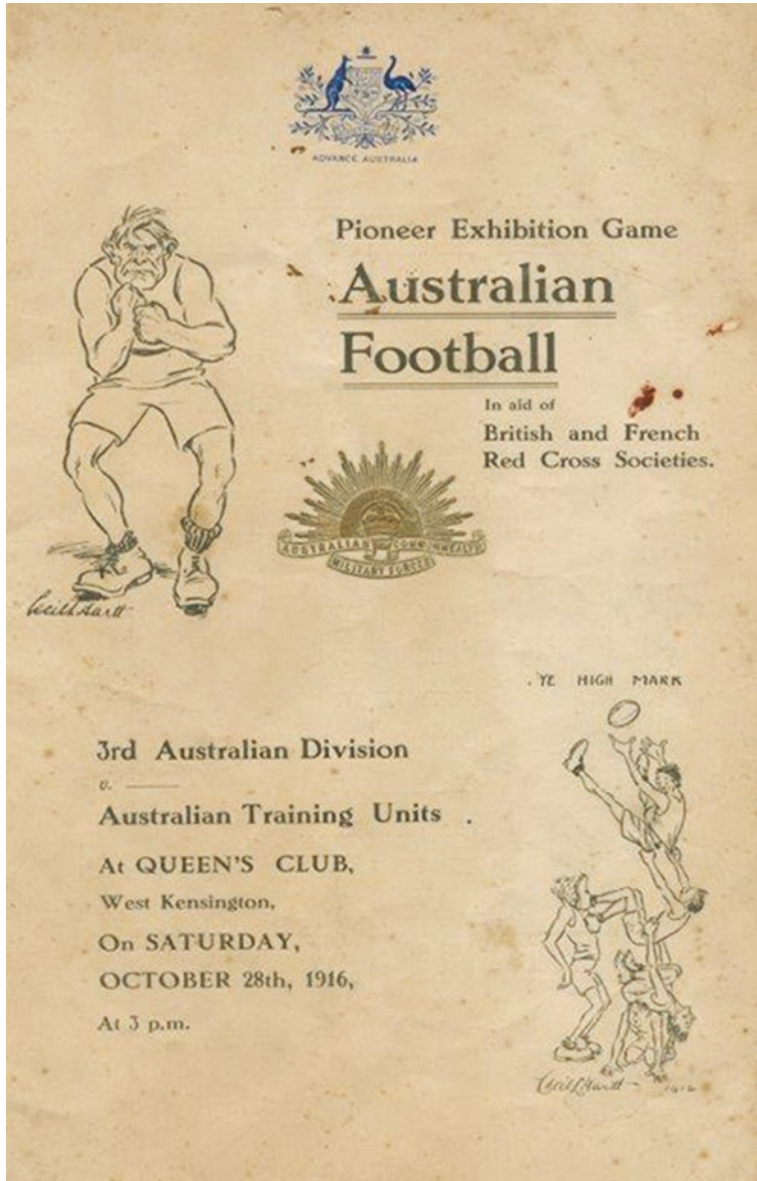


Fig. 5.3 Cover of the program for the London exhibition match on 28 October 1916. (Courtesy of John Sloss, private collection)

the game had won praise in England.<sup>36</sup> In Melbourne, former Fitzroy captain Gerald Brosnan, provided a lengthy description of the match and noted the favourable impression of the game among English observers. He stated the likelihood that never again would such a “galaxy of talent” assemble in the one place during the war and hoped others would follow the lead and arrange further exhibition matches “in order to give the British public a truer insight into the merits of our great Australian game”, adding “the more often they see it the better will they understand it and to understand it is to become enamored by it” (Fig. 5.4).<sup>37</sup>

The London match was undoubtedly a display of “cultural nationalism”, one understood by officers and men and seen, as Richardson suggests:

from Monash down through the ranks ... [as] an important exhibition of something that was unique to Australia and the Diggers. There was pride in showing it off to those people who had never seen it. Here was an opportunity to reveal a new game, a truly indigenous sport that no one in the Mother Country would find anywhere else in the world. The Exhibition match was a piece of proud nationalism, built on the Australians’ growing confidence of their role in the Empire’s war.<sup>38</sup>

Though hardly seduced by the game, British reporters continued to be drawn to it as a curiosity. The *Adelaide Journal* reprinted an account from the *London Sportsman* that described a wind-affected match between sides drawn from the Victorian Training Battalion and Australian Headquarters Staff. The Victorians had emerged as the champions of a training camps competition and included in its ranks former Geelong rover, Alex Eason, and proved too strong. The game was seen as more comparable to rugby rather than soccer and the long drop-kicking and high-marking were considered noteworthy features even though spoiled by the windy conditions.<sup>39</sup>

### PLAYING WITHIN EARSHOT OF ARTILLERY

The majority of games played overseas were played under vastly different circumstances to the London match. The lack of proper playing fields, particularly of sufficient size required for a game of Australian Rules football, was always a problem in built-up areas and the confines of the Western Front. The 40th Battalion, a Western Australian unit, resolved the problem by devising their own game, which they called “mobbing”. It was played with a hessian bag filled with straw, and had no rules other



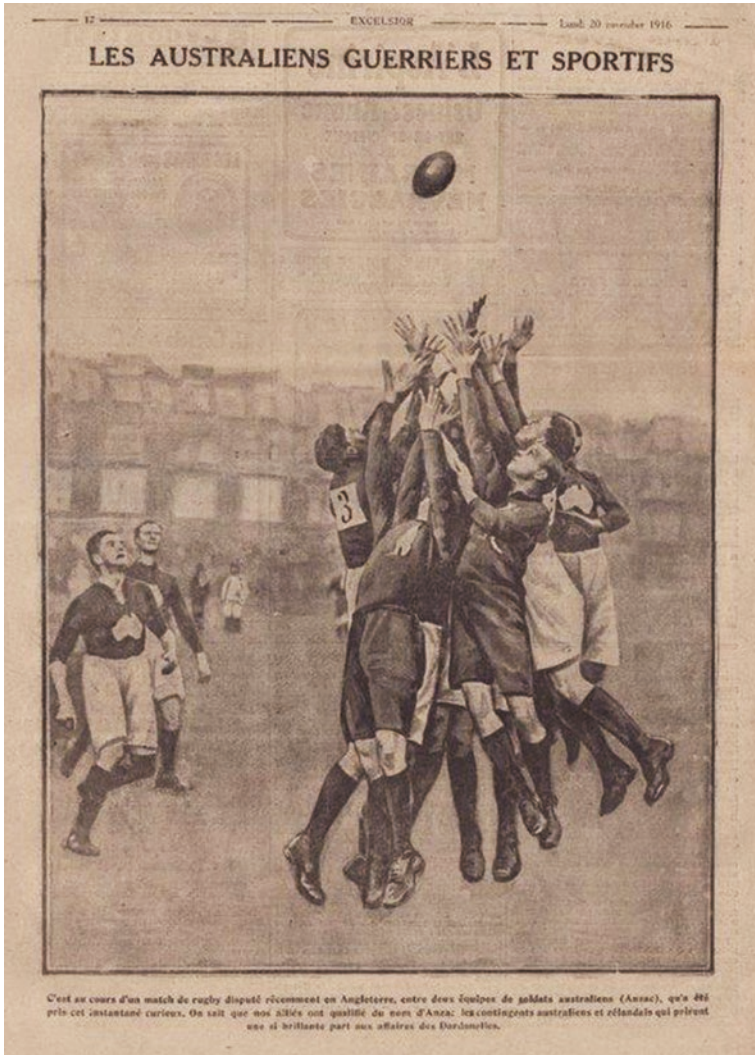


Fig. 5.4 French artist's impression of the AIF exhibition game. (*Excelsior*, 20 November 1916)

than it could not be kicked. The basic object of the game was to force or throw the bag through the opposition's goal. The beauty of the game was that it could be played "on any old ground".<sup>40</sup>

While Australian Rules football could also be played on any old ground, and was, it was not always to the advantage of the game as former University player and later South Melbourne captain and participant in the London match, Carl Bleakley Willis, attested. He described two matches in which he played. The games featured a number of League and Association players such as Collingwood's Dan Minogue, Richmond's "Harry" James (mistakenly reported as H. Jones) and South Melbourne's, Edwin Alley and D. Jones from the Essendon VFA club. Association umpire D. Farmer was also noted as having played as well as several prominent South and Western Australian players whose names Willis could not remember. It was common for games played close to the front, in the absence of proper sporting kit, that one side would wear shirts and the other the sheepskin cardigans or jackets that had been issued to Australian troops. This was commented on by both Willis and also South Melbourne's Wal Laidlaw in an account of another game.<sup>41</sup>

The matches Willis described were played on a soccer pitch in the centre of one of the French villages during March 1917 and his description is instructive in the effect this had on the game as well as the peculiarities evident in a match played so close to the front line. It also suggested his memories of the game would be forever changed:

Try to imagine for yourself a small rectangular patch of unoccupied ground in the heart of the town, 120 yards by about 90 yards bounded on the sides by a street, and on the sides by high brick walls. The boundary line was an imaginary one judged by the umpire in an endeavor to make the rectangle into an oval. The goal posts were those used for the British Association football ... (if the ball hit the cross bar it was counted as a goal). The behind posts were empty army biscuit tins ... The "pavilion" was in one corner of the ground and had most evidently been a stable until the concussion or shell had settled the tiles on the roof ... As the ground had only the afternoon showed after a couple of days of frost, it was not in the best of condition ... Of the actual football one cannot say much. None of the players had studs in their boots and consequently there was any amount of crawling in the mud and add to this the fact that there were 36 players playing on a ground about half the size it should have been, you can understand it was not the spectacular display one is supposed to associate with playing Australian football ... Even the most impressionable person there must have thought to himself (there were no herselfs there to think) how remarkable it was that two sides should throw themselves with vigor into a football game with an interested and enthusiastic crowd of spectators on foreign soil and with our trenches only about 1000 yards away (as the crow flies). It is not your idea at all of going to the war when

you enlist. The shells of our heavy artillery could be plainly heard humming away over our heads and getting fainter and fainter as they proceeded on their journey to Fritz's lines. Later in the afternoon three of our planes made their way over the enemy lines and came under the fire of his anti-aircraft guns. This effectually put a finishing touch to the unreality of the whole thing. I remember in the past when the League finals were played at the Melbourne Cricket Ground balloons were liberated with advertisements hanging on to them. If I ever in the future see those again at a league final I shall forever think of this game with the real things flying over us and captive observation balloons plainly visible though some distance away ... I won't trouble to say how we felt after the games, anyone who hasn't played for some time and starts again knows what it is. Personally I could hardly move for the next few days. However, we were all glad to have had the opportunity to have a run after the ball again, and thoroughly enjoyed the games and the meeting old rivals who a few years ago would have all thought it a great joke had you told them you would be playing against them in military uniform in France; all now, however, playing in the main thing for the same side; but as they say here with the inimitable shrug of the shoulders *c'est la guerre*.<sup>42</sup>

A description of an encounter on the Somme between the 27th and 28th Battalions, near the village of La Boisselle in Northern France, further indicated the conditions endured by not only the soldier footballers but also the spectators:

The ground was situated amidst the heavy system of entrenchments that had constituted the German front line ... Practically surrounded by trenches, the ground frozen and strewn with pieces of barbed wire and fragments of shells. Sheltering from the cold wind, the spectators viewed the game from the trenches, their heads just visible above the ground. A few plucky volunteers held the goal posts in position during the game.<sup>43</sup>

The danger of games played close to the front was conveyed by Frank Doyle, a former steward with the VFL, in a letter to the Carlton Football Club vice-president, Mr. James Stewart. The letter was published in the Sydney *Sun* under the headline "Football Among Shrapnel".

Above the roar of shouting and cheering could be heard the booming of the big guns along the front. It is a funny sensation to hear guns going at a football match. During another game, the other evening, shells were coming fairly close at times. One burst over the ground while the game was on

and five of the players were wounded by shrapnel. They are still looking for the ball. You may guess how abruptly the game ended.<sup>44</sup>

The poignancy of football at the front was captured by Lieutenant L.G. Shout, a former staff member of the *Argus*, who wrote home giving an account of a match played upon a pock-marked field within shell range of the main firing line. The match was one between officers and NCOs in which sheepskin jerkins and cardigans were worn as playing shirts. “But the saddest and most realistic touch of all”, wrote Shout, “lay behind the goal-posts on the southern end. It was a small heap of earth - the grave of dead soldiers - with the simple but sublime superscription, ‘To unknown British Heroes’”. The war could never be forgotten. Nevertheless, Shout felt that the game had given the men fresh heart for it “had carried their thoughts vividly back to those happy days when football was played in certain Melbourne suburbs they had called ‘home’”.<sup>45</sup>

At home, even after three years of war, the reportage of the death of prominent soldier footballers was still swathed in patriotic jingoism. When South Melbourne’s Hugh Callan was killed, readers were told that he had joined the “thousands who had gone forth to die for the Empire as cheerfully as ever they pulled on a Guernsey in the mimic battle of football”.<sup>46</sup> The death of Bruce Sloss, a teammate of Callan’s, was keenly felt, especially as he had featured so prominently as one of the captains in the much-feted London match. What was incontrovertible about the deaths of these soldier footballers was that their sporting prowess had little to do with their ability to survive the war. As was noted in a report about St. Kilda player Harry Cumberland’s wounding only eight hours after his first stint in the front line, “Luck, in war as in everything else, is a precious asset”.<sup>47</sup>

While there were occasional differences between the army and the organisers and players of football, there was rather more co-operation than conflict, particularly on the front line. Given the appalling circumstances of life behind the trenches and the lack of entertainment, sport was seized upon by both the military organisers and ranks as a means of maintaining morale and/or providing a degree of normality. Playing even the most primitive games was a reminder of home and helped allay feelings of homesickness that intruded into the soldiers’ lives. Since sport was such an integral element of Australian culture, playing it in the most inhospitable circumstances was a way of asserting identity on the war

front. For soldiers from Australian Rules-playing states, participating in the Australian game while overseas contributed to an assertion of their national and state identity. Whether this contributed to a broader public view of a distinct Anzac identity of soldier sportsmen as Kevin Blackburn suggests is open to question but there is no doubt that Australian soldiers exhibited a zeal for playing the game overseas. For the most part this represented a hedonistic pleasure for simply just playing the game. For many of the players, though, an added incentive was that it represented an opportunity to showcase the game to a foreign audience and in this regard the ardour for the game overseas reflected the pre-war expansionist vision of the code's official custodians, with the players consciously acting as disciples of the faith.

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## Conscription

**Abstract** The prospect of the introduction of conscription posed a major threat to the ability of football clubs to maintain playing lists in order to enable their continuance in competitions around the country. Many prominent football leaders campaigned openly against conscription, and examination of the enlistment rates of single men reveals that the much-maligned poor response of footballers and eligible men was largely without foundation. In this chapter it can be seen how the voting patterns for the conscription referenda of 1916 and 1917 provide a useful barometer for the sentiment in many suburbs, and it is apparent that many of the clubs that continued playing were situated in anti-conscription areas – in suburbs that might be classified as distinctly working-class.

**Keywords** Conscription · 1916 Referendum · 1917 Referendum  
Conscription referenda · Enlistment · Australian Football · Shirkers

One thing that both football and the army shared was a reliance on young men to fill their ranks. For clubs already struggling with the loss of so many players to the war effort, the prospect of the introduction of conscription was one that almost certainly would signal the end of playing football in wartime. The conscription debates and referenda virtually book-ended the 1917 season, occurring on 28 October 1916 and 20 December 1917. Due to the referenda being conducted sometime after the conclusion of both the 1916 and 1917 seasons, football would be

spared the white-heat periods of the campaigns, but the 1917 season was nonetheless played under the darkened cloud that both brought to the nation, from the bitter fall out of the first, to, and through, the expectation of a second referendum. The antecedent for conscription had been the introduction of universal training throughout Australia in 1911.

As discussed in earlier chapters, following the outbreak of the First World War, a vigorous debate over the merits of participation in sport ensued. The playing of football in wartime was at the centre of these arguments, but that did not prevent military authorities pursuing or agreeing to the arrangement of exhibition matches between the established clubs and military combinations drawn from volunteers in the training encampments. Such games were good for soldier morale and provided a useful forum for recruitment activities. Richmond had undertaken a game against the Pioneers as part of their preparation for the 1916 season and a fortnight after the previous year's grand final, Carlton played a military combination at the Melbourne Cricket Ground. Attired in Collingwood colours, the military side, which comprised a number of League players, among whom were several of Carlton's premiership side, eventually lost to the "Blues" after a close contest. Such games, which attracted large crowds, provided a convenient forum for recruitment officers, who were able to address the assembled spectators.<sup>1</sup>

### THE INFLUENCE OF WOMEN IN ENLISTMENT

The attitude of women to football and to conscription during this period is worth noting. Match reports prior to, during, and after the war often noted the presence of women in the crowds and indicate that women's patronage of the game was considered a positive thing. This would suggest that administrators and reporters of the game saw a role for women beyond that of the average spectator. Women may well have been seen as having a calming effect on the rowdy behaviour of some football supporters. Nevertheless, the fact that the absence of women was noticed gives some indication that their presence was that of a significant minority. It was a minority, which, if the report of the *Bulletin* was correct, certainly had the power to detrimentally affect football attendances, if indeed they had not already done so.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, it was through women's roles as mothers, wives and sweethearts that the government and war agencies hoped to exert pressure on eligible men to enlist. Certainly in the lead up to the 1916 Conscription Referendum in October, women



were being increasingly asked to prevail upon their menfolk to enlist. The most effective tactic available to women was the social ostracising of men and this form of social and moral pressure was consistently advocated throughout the war.<sup>3</sup> Murray Phillips has revealed how women in New South Wales were appealed to in an attempt to galvanise sportsmen into enlisting in the Sportsmen's Battalion in 1917, especially through the agency of the New South Wales Sportswomen Union (NSWSU). Any member of the NSWSU successful in coercing a man to enlist received a specially designed diploma featuring a picture of a sportsman discarding his sports gear to don a soldier's uniform.<sup>4</sup>

It is impossible to gauge the extent to which the influence of women figured in the decisions of those men who did enlist and, conversely, those who did not. Irrespective of this, the possibility that women had some appreciable influence on the decisions of footballers and male spectators cannot be dismissed. Women were certainly at the forefront in the raising of patriotic funds and comforts for the troops overseas. Michael McKernan has suggested that the apparent enthusiasm for such work lay partly in the absence of opportunities to participate directly in the war.<sup>5</sup> Australia, unlike Britain, had no large-scale munitions industry requiring female labour as a substitute for men absent on war duty. Nursing provided a limited opportunity for some women but as with the organisation of patriotic bodies, these were monopolised by middle-class women.<sup>6</sup> This same class of women, in all likelihood, were also those able to afford football club membership. In regard to conscription, it is probable that the overall women's vote favoured its adoption.<sup>7</sup>

### THE FIRST REFERENDUM

While Australia's footballers and soldiers battled on different fields, the Australian Labor Party had become involved in its own sanguinary tussle. The issue of conscription had become a point of contention within the party. In 1915, prior to becoming Labor leader and prime minister, William M. Hughes had declared that: "In no circumstances would I agree to send men out of this country against their will".<sup>8</sup> But Hughes had changed his mind. He had spent six months overseas and had returned to Australia in late July 1916, midway through the football season, committed to the preservation of the British Empire and the destruction of Germany. He attempted to persuade his party and the labour movement that conscription was a necessary evil in the attainment

of victory. They remained unconvinced and a bitter fight ensued with the New South Wales executive voting to expel Hughes from the party. Hughes ignored them and sought to gain the approval of Australians with a referendum on conscription.<sup>9</sup>

With the conclusion of the football season, the Federal government took a dramatic step prior to the 28 October referendum to try and encourage enlistments. With dubious legality, the government implemented provisions within the Defence Act that allowed for the compulsory call-up of all men of military age for home defence. The Defence Act allowed for compulsory home defence only in the event of a state of war existing and stipulated that such a measure was applicable only in the actual or apprehended invasion or attack on the Commonwealth or its Territories. This was hardly applicable to the situation faced by Australia in late 1916. From the beginning of October those who were eligible under the call-up were required to enrol and enter military encampments, which they did in large numbers. Had this scheme continued for the war's duration, football clubs would have found it difficult to field competitive teams. The narrow defeat of conscription in the referendum saw the withdrawal of these provisions and those men still in camp were allowed to return home and the prospective threat to football evaporated.<sup>10</sup>

The criticism of footballers and the general pressure that was exerted on young single men to enlist represented one of the most calculated and shameful attacks on any one particular group in Australian society to that time. The attacks against football and footballers need to be considered against the broader public debate concerning conscription along with an understanding of the patterns of voluntary enlistment.

### HOW MANY WERE ELIGIBLE FOR CONSCRIPTION?

Examination of known figures of eligible men reveals that the response of single men, the group to which most footballers belonged, was exceptional and quite the contrary to the claims of the pro-conscriptionists. Surprisingly the figure of just how many eligible men were available is somewhat elusive. Bill Gammage settled on a figure of "roughly 820,000".<sup>11</sup> The figure held good "approximately" for Eric Andrews nearly twenty years later in his book *The Anzac Illusion*.<sup>12</sup> Currently, on the Anzac Day Commemorative Committee's website, the figure of 416,809 is cited as being the total of those who enlisted in the AIF

and Australian Flying Corps. It claims that this represents 13.43% of the white male population and that this figure was “probably about half the eligible men”.<sup>13</sup> This figure would place the male population at over three million, which is half a million too high, and places the figure for eligible males at about 832,000. How and why modern day scholars and researchers have arrived at these approximations is mystifying given the figures supplied by the official war historian previously.

The Official Histories of Australia in the First World War placed the number of eligible males at over a million. The 416,809 men who were accepted into the AIF represented 38.7% of all eligible males between the ages of 18 and 44.<sup>14</sup> These figures therefore place the total of eligible men at 1,077,026. Exactly how this figure was arrived at remains unexplained but it is certainly closer to the mark than the latter-day figures. Examination of the 1911 census shows that there were 920,346 men of eligible age (18–44 years of age). The 1915 Yearbook estimates an increase in the Australian population of nearly half a million 4,445,005 to 4,940,952, an increase of 11.34%. If one accepts that this increase represented an even spread over gender and age groups, then the number of eligible males in 1914 was 1,015,470. This figure could be as high as 1,141,200 over the course of the war if the 125,730 youths aged between 14 and 17 recorded in the 1911 census are added. However, as the majority of recruitment occurred within the first two years, the lower figure is preferred but with the caveat that the numbers available could have been slightly higher.

Having settled on a figure of 1,015,470 Australian men of eligible age at the time war was declared in 1914 it is possible to analyse other known figures against it. The Official History tells us that 589,947 men volunteered, which means that 58.1% of eligible men stepped forward to enlist for the war, which leaves a sizeable figure of 41.9% who did not. Of that 58.1%, 178,800 men were rejected, which represents 30.3% of all who volunteered and who were medically examined.<sup>15</sup> The fact that 41.9% of eligible males did not volunteer for war service is hardly indicative of a patriotic response. However, when one applies a distinction between married and single men, a much different impression is formed.

It is known that of those who did enlist in the AIF, 81.62% were single and 17.38% were married, with the marital status of 1.00% unknown.<sup>16</sup> By applying the known percentages of marital status revealed in the 1911 census and factoring in the population growth to 1914, it is revealed that of those one million eligible men, 456,961

were married and 558,509 were single. By applying the percentage of the known marital status of AIF enlistees to the sum of those who volunteered to enlist (81.62% of 589,947) it can be deduced that 481,515 single men presented for service. When this figure is placed against the 558,509 single eligible males it is found that 86.21% of single men as opposed to only 22.43% of married men volunteered for war service. We might also suppose that among the 13.79% of single men that did not volunteer there would have been a proportion of men who were so patently unfit for war service that they did not bother to step forward, which makes the response of single, supposedly able-bodied men even more impressive. One caution in regard to these figures is that it is not known how many of those rejected men might have re-enlisted, but there is no reason to believe they were so high as to significantly affect the figures generally. Richmond's Ted Derrick was purportedly rejected six times due to a hammer toe.<sup>17</sup> Whether each of these rejections, if true, was officially recorded is unknown but such cases would likely have been atypical rather than the norm.

There were also trends in the enlistment rates that meant footballers thinking about volunteering had some time on their side before making a decision, especially throughout 1915 and leading into the 1916 season. When the recruitment figures for the AIF are examined, four distinct spikes in enlistment are detected, which reveals that volunteers were clearly responding to public overtures and/or war news.<sup>18</sup> Footballers and their football clubs were responding to these exhortations and events.

The first was the declaration of war. It seems this event brought men flooding to the recruitment stations when they were opened, and newspaper reports give testimony to this apparent surge of volunteers.<sup>19</sup> By year's end, 52,561 volunteers, or 5.17% of all eligible males, had enlisted. Eric Andrews argued some years ago in *The Anzac Illusion* that this hardly represented an enthusiastic response to the war.<sup>20</sup> It must be remembered though that initially only 20,000 men were called for and that physical requirements were quite stringent.<sup>21</sup> Many men were not therefore motivated to go to war immediately as there was no apparent need, as the 20,000 quota was easily met and no sense of crisis was being conveyed by the government at that time.

The next discernible spike occurred in July and August 1915 when the government embarked on a well-orchestrated recruitment campaign following the Gallipoli landing. In many instances, this campaign tried

to shame men into enlisting, particularly targeting sportsmen and spectators.<sup>22</sup> It was during this period that the call for a sportsmen's thousand was strongest, and when the "Will They Never Come?" poster was released, featuring a wounded soldier at Gallipoli standing over his dead mate and looking to a picture of a football crowd. The rise in volunteer numbers suggests that this campaign was highly effective in motivating young men to enlist, with 21,000 doing so in Victoria during July and 20,000 enlisting in New South Wales over July/August of 1915. By the end of 1915 over 50% of the total of volunteers accepted for the AIF had enlisted.

The start of 1916 saw another spike as news of the Gallipoli evacuation reached home and as a further call for volunteers to expand the AIF by 50,000 men was made. By the end of July 1916, before any news of the carnage of the Western Front battles had reached Australia, 73.88% of all enlistees had already come forward.

Another spike, the smallest of the four, occurred in October 1916 in response to the conscription referendum and Hughes' tactic of calling up eligible men to a military encampment. By year's end 82.24% of those accepted into the AIF had already enlisted. This fact lays bare the misguided intent of the conscription campaigns, certainly the second in December 1917, to dragoon eligible single men into military service. By the end of 1916 Australia had virtually exhausted its manpower stocks in regard to single men but certainly not married men.

This failure on the part of married men to enlist actually carried little social stigma. It was claimed in football's defence that married men made up a good portion of the players of professional sides, and a study of the marital status of players in the war years would therefore prove instructive. Nevertheless, there existed an unwritten social code that war was the province of fit, single men and was not for men with family responsibilities. Under the provisions of part IV of the Defence Act, single men were to be conscripted to home service before married men. The propaganda of the recruitment campaigns almost invariably targeted single men. Soldiers who wrote home often qualified their sentiments about the need for reinforcements with statements such as "the time has come for every able-bodied man without ties to go and help".<sup>23</sup> The intimation was that "ties"—one assumes it to be family ties—were considered binding and a legitimate reason for not enlisting. This undoubtedly reflected a community value that recognised the far reaching consequences to families should they be denied their main provider through

service abroad or through death and injury. In 1917 the government, in fact, promised to exempt married men from being conscripted should the referendum for conscription prove successful. It also promised to set the eligible age between 20 and 44, thus excluding eighteen- and nineteen-year-olds, who were entitled to enlist under the voluntary system.<sup>24</sup> The exemption of married men flew in the face of numeric logic, given the government's own estimation by mid-1917 that there were 280,000 married men of eligible age and 140,000 single men still unenlisted.<sup>25</sup>

### POLITICS AND FOOTBALL AFTER THE FIRST REFERENDUM DEFEAT

Following the 28 October 1916 referendum defeat, Hughes quit the Australian Labor Party and with his supporters formed a minority government under the banner of "National Labor". To survive, Hughes formed a coalition with some of Labor's traditional enemies. This new "National" party adopted a "Win the War" platform in which sport was specifically targeted. Part of their manifesto decreed that professional sport would be curtailed. One week prior to the opening of the 1917 football season, Hughes's party won a crushing victory over Labor in the federal election on 5 May. While Labor had been delivered a humiliating defeat nationally, they had managed to comfortably hold six of the nine Melbourne seats, located in football's heartland, and were only narrowly defeated in one of the other three.<sup>26</sup>

The mandate given to Hughes in the election posed a threat to football and sport in general. The government's plan was denounced in parliament by Hughes's embittered opposition. Senator Albert Gardiner, Labor's sole senate survivor and one-time Rugby Union player for New South Wales, argued that Australia's sportsmen had "played their part manfully" in the war and that curtailing sport would only injure the whole community. He accused the government plan as being mean, contemptible and underhanded and called on them to adopt a legitimate and straightforward attitude.<sup>27</sup>

Despite its rhetoric, it was clear that the government did not regard the curtailment of sport as one of its most pressing priorities and was content to leave such action to the various State War Councils, which were empowered to curtail or stop any activities deemed to be interfering with the war effort. Those bodies showed no inclination to stop football and the game continued to be played in Melbourne,

Perth, Sydney and Adelaide (courtesy of the continuance of the South Australian Patriotic Football Association) in 1917.

In Victoria, clubs from strong working-class areas such as Collingwood, Richmond and Association club, Brunswick, all had Labor politicians among their committees. Labor heavyweights, Frank Tudor and Frank Anstey were both presidents of their respective clubs, Richmond and Brunswick. Anstey campaigned publicly against conscription and denounced Haig's appeal for more Australian reinforcements as being an unnecessary demand. He seized upon a newspaper report about football's popularity among the troops overseas as ammunition for his argument as to why more men were not needed, asking "Why the Australians soldiers in England are forming football teams to teach the Australian game ... if they are wanted in the trenches?"<sup>28</sup>

Labor politicians, Maurice Blackburn and James Fenton, were two of the three presidents of Essendon (VFA). Both were anti-conscriptionists and such was the nature of Blackburn's advocacy that he was seen by many as being unpatriotic. As a consequence, Blackburn lost his seat in the 1917 state election.<sup>29</sup> South Melbourne, too, had a Labor politician as president, George Elmslie. Unlike some of his colleagues, Elmslie was a staunch supporter of the Empire's war aims as well as keen supporter of local sports.<sup>30</sup> It is impossible, on the evidence available, to assess the extent to which his patriotism may have figured in the South Melbourne Football Club's decision not to play in 1916, or conversely, the extent to which his commitment to local sport may have contributed to the club's decision to resume the following year.

Like some of the clubs situated in entrenched working-class suburbs, the patriotic stand adopted by Melbourne was hardly surprising given the background of its committee, some of whom were members of the exclusive Melbourne Club and the Melbourne Cricket Club. Political and social dogmas did not, however, always translate into readily identifiable attitudes on sport and war. Professor Walter Spencer, who became a prominent figure in the football world, was a case in point. Spencer had been instrumental in securing University's entry into the League (a club committed to the amateur ideal). Following University's demise, he served on Melbourne's general committee in 1915. After Melbourne decided not to play in 1916, he then transferred his allegiance to Carlton (one of the instigators of professionalism in football), before becoming the VFL president in 1919.<sup>31</sup> A similar but perhaps more striking example is that of John Wren. Wren, a prominent—if not notorious—sporting

promoter, campaigned openly for conscription and promoted the idea of a “Sportsmen’s Thousand”, yet still maintained his close affiliation with the Collingwood Football Club, despite that club’s emphatic stand to continue playing football. His campaign, apparently, received little support from the football club.<sup>32</sup>

## THE SECOND REFERENDUM

Opponents of the game, who had seen conscription as the only measure by which footballers could be induced to go to war, had received a rebuff when the nation returned a “NO” vote against compulsory service in the 1916 referendum. A second conscription referendum was inevitable after the close result of the first. Not unreasonably, the government and its supporters believed that a passionate appeal might swing the balance in their favour. Equal in their resolve were the anti-conscriptionists. What resulted was another bitter campaign which polarised sections of the community. Prime Minister “Billy” Hughes and Melbourne’s Catholic Archbishop, Dr Daniel Mannix, waged a vitriolic personal war, which saw the ugly spectre of sectarianism debase the debate. However, close examination of the available football literature of the time and of the Catholic newspaper, the *Advocate*, revealed no evidence to suggest that sectarianism, in any guise, manifested itself in the football world. Again it was the “NO” vote that prevailed, this time moderately increasing its majority. As was the case in 1916, the Labor heartland, in which the majority of clubs resided, voted against conscription. Voting patterns virtually mirrored the results of the first referendum with only a few variations. Interestingly, in Victoria, the most significant shifts of public opinion occurred in suburbs represented by VFA and VFL clubs. In the Division of Corio, all three sub-divisions of Geelong had returned a “YES” vote in 1916 but in the 1917 referendum two of the three swung across to the “NO” vote. Williamstown, a town surrounded by working-class suburbs in the Division of Melbourne Ports, also saw a shift from the “YES” vote to the negative. South Melbourne and Prahran, which were sub-divisions of the Division of Fawkner, were consistent in their anti-conscription stance in both referenda. That division had voted in favour of conscription in 1916 but embraced the “NO” vote in the second referendum. Whether these shifts in opinion were perceptible prior



to the referendum and figured in the determination of Geelong and South Melbourne to resume in 1917 and Prahran in 1918, can only be guessed at.<sup>33</sup>

### CLUB DECISIONS AS A REFLECTION OF REFERENDA VOTING PATTERNS

The voting patterns for the conscription referenda do provide a useful, if not completely reliable, barometer for the sentiment within various towns and suburbs throughout the nation. It was clear that the most trenchant working-class suburbs, as dictated by their political affiliation through elected representatives, voted against conscription. It can be reasonably assumed that the anti-football patriots voted for conscription. That is not to say the working-class was not patriotic, and the emphatic victory of the Nationals with their "win the war" platform was indicative of substantial support for Australia's participation in the war. That said, the referenda voting patterns do suggest, generally, that decisions of football clubs to play or not to play were reflective of sentiment in their communities toward the issue of conscription. In Victoria, the Federal electoral sub-divisions of the four clubs that continued playing in 1916 (Carlton, Collingwood, Fitzroy and Richmond) all voted strongly against conscription with the exception of the small sub-division of Richmond South. South Melbourne voted against conscription in both referenda and its decision to stand out in 1916 may have been due to the influence of George Elmslie who, it has been noted, was an active pro-conscriptionist. Nevertheless, South Melbourne returned to the competition in 1917. The sub-divisions of Geelong, as already explained, swung from a majority in favour of conscription in 1916 to against in 1917, although the Division of Corio as a whole voted for conscription in both referenda. Geelong did not play in 1916 but did in 1917. Essendon and St. Kilda, who both stood out in 1916 and 1917, were both located in pro-conscription electoral divisions and sub-divisions. Melbourne Football Club, as a bastion of conservatism, refused to budge from its patriotic stand.

The majority of VFA sides also operated in anti-conscription electoral divisions and sub-divisions, the exceptions being Brighton, Essendon and Hawthorn. Williamstown moved from a pro-conscription vote in 1916 to an anti-conscription vote in 1917. As stated previously, the Association's decision not to play was bound more by economic considerations than patriotic reasons. Hawthorn had, as already noted, publicly

lauded the club's patriotic stance. When the VFA resumed in 1918 it was the six clubs, Brunswick, Footscray, North Melbourne, Northcote, Port Melbourne and Prahran, all operating in anti-conscription areas, that chose to play. In New South Wales the voting patterns of the club districts were profoundly anti-conscription, the one exception being North Sydney and they, not surprisingly, chose not to play for the war's duration. South Sydney, inexplicably, stood out for the 1917 season but returned the following year.

In Adelaide and Perth similar comparisons are evident though they are not quite so compelling. Of the six teams that formed the SAPFA, Port Adelaide, Prospect, West Adelaide and West Torrens (Hindmarsh) were located in sub-divisions that voted against conscription. The Railways side was staunchly working-class with its players drawn from that state employer, while Norwood voted marginally in favour of conscription. Of the four sides that were added to the competition in 1918, only Mitcham was located in an anti-conscription sub-division, while Sturt (Unley) was located in a marginally pro-conscription sub-division. Attributing any particular alignment to Kennilworth and the South Australian Police side is somewhat problematic.

Western Australia stands in stark contrast to the other states. If trends about conscription sentiment were in evidence as a contributing factor in the decisions of football clubs or of the easing of their consciences it was not the case in the west. As a state, Western Australia voted overwhelmingly in favour of conscription by more than a two-to-one majority in both referenda and all the football clubs were located in pro-conscriptionist areas, though the vote was not as pronounced in Fremantle as Perth, with the "YES" vote prevailing by a single vote in the sub-division of South Fremantle. Why Western Australia was so in favour of conscription remains elusive. A number of reasons have been posited to explain the "YES" vote in Western Australia, such as there being a higher percentage of British-born voters in the population, that there had been fewer industrial strikes in the west and that the Catholic archbishop, Dr Patrick Clune, was a pro-conscriptionist and thus appealed to the Catholic conscience.<sup>34</sup> The fact that the Minister for Defence, Senator Pearce, was a West Australian has also been suggested as influential, although Bobbie Oliver has challenged this assertion pointing to much evidence of unpopular feeling toward Pearce within the labour movement. He also argues that the conscription issue was every bit as divisive to the Western Australian labour movement as it was in the east,

although why this was not reflected in the popular vote remains largely unexplained.<sup>35</sup>

As for the AIF, which many footballers were a part of, it voted in favour of conscription on both occasions. The result was not as emphatic as the government had hoped. Australia's official war historian, C.E.W. Bean, contended somewhat mischievously that the troops at the front had voted against, and those behind the lines in favour.<sup>36</sup> While it was true that headquarter-bound soldiers did vote overwhelmingly in favour, their numbers were so small as to be relatively inconsequential given that the bulk of the AIF's soldiers were frontline troops. Former South Melbourne footballer, Herbert "Boxer" Milne, another who would not survive the war, was certainly one who opposed conscription. He wrote home and declared somewhat erroneously: "All the boys are dead against it".<sup>37</sup> By contrast, one who most certainly voted in favour of conscription was Sergeant J.T. Dear, who penned a letter to the *Geelong Advertiser* with the clear intention of trying to influence readers to vote "YES". In his letter, which railed against cowards who had not heeded the call to arms and advocated the sending of both unfit and fit men to the front, he took specific aim at football and racegoers declaring, "Its seems a pity that some of the aeroplanes that have been doing such deadly work over London in the past could not find their way over some of our football stadiums and racecourses for a few moments".<sup>38</sup>

The two defeats of the conscription proposals denied the patriots their most potent tool for inducing a higher sacrifice by Australian men. If their public antipathy toward football had ever really resonated it was even less likely to after each referendum defeat, especially given they were berating an increasingly war-weary public, one confronted by increased working-class agitation. As the 1917 and 1918 football seasons were played out, the patriot protestations were met by an increasingly disinterested audience.

## NOTES

1. *Essendon Gazette*, 2 May 1916; *Sporting Judge* (Melbourne), 2 October 1915.
2. Examination of Richmond Football Club's 1912 and 1913 membership lists shows that women comprised 15.23% and 15.78%, respectively, of the total membership. The 1912 list comprised 801 names, of which 122

- were female (54.91% married and 45.09% single). The 1913 list comprised 665 names of which 105 were female (50.47% married and 49.53% single).
3. For examples of such advocacy, see *Geelong Advertiser*, 5 July 1916; *Age* (Melbourne), 3 October 1916; *Age* (Melbourne), 4 October 1916; *Argus* (Melbourne), 23 March 1918.
  4. Murray G. Phillips, 'Sport, War and Gender Images: The Australian Sportsmen's Battalions and the First World War', *International Journal of the History of Sport* 14, no. 1 (1997), pp. 89–91.
  5. McKernan, *The Australian People and the Great War*, Chapter 4, pp. 65–93.
  6. For a useful discussion and historiography of middle-class women's roles in recruitment and in supporting the war effort, see Joan Beaumont, 'Whatever Happened to Patriotic Women, 1914–1918?', *Australian Historical Studies* 31, no. 115 (2000), pp. 273–286.
  7. Glenn Withers, 'The 1916–1917 Conscription Referenda: A Cliometric Re-Appraisal', *Historical Studies* 20, no. 78 (1982), pp. 36–46.
  8. Donald Horne, *The Little Digger: A Biography of Billy Hughes* (South Melbourne: Macmillan, 1983 [1979]), p. 75.
  9. Scott, *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918*, pp. 356–357.
  10. Scott, *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918*, pp. 356–357.
  11. Bill Gammage, *The Broken Years: Australian Soldiers in the Great War* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1974), p. 7.
  12. Andrews, *The Anzac Illusion*, p. 45.
  13. Anzac Day Commemorative Committee, <http://www.anzacday.org.au/history/ww1/anecdotes/stats01.html>.
  14. Scott, *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918*, p. 874; Butler, *Official History of the Australian Army Medical Services in the War of 1914–1918*, p. 890.
  15. Butler, *Official History of the Australian Army Medical Services in the War of 1914–1918*, p. 882.
  16. Joan Beaumont (ed.), *Australian Defence: Sources and Statistics, The Australian Centenary History of Defence*, vol. VI (South Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 2001), p. 116.
  17. Richardson, *The Game of Their Lives*, p. 84.
  18. Refer to the graph in Scott, *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918*, Appendix 4, p. 873; Monthly recruitment tables are also provided in Beaumont, *Australian Defence*, pp. 108–109.
  19. For examples see, *Sydney Morning Herald*, 10 August 1914; *Mail* (Adelaide), 10 August 1914.

20. Andrews, *The Anzac Illusion*, p. 45. Andrews puts the percentage at 6.4%. He, like Gammage, uses the estimate of 820,000 available eligible men.
21. C.E.W. Bean, *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918: The Story of Anzac*, vol. I (Sydney: Angus & Robertson, 1921), pp. 28–29, 59–60.
22. L.L. Robson, *The First AIF: A Study of its Recruitment* (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1970), p. 36; Joan Beaumont, *Broken Nation: Australians in the Great War* (Crows Nest: Allen & Unwin, 2013), p. 375; Gammage, *The Broken Years*, p. 20.
23. Cited in Gammage, *The Broken Years*, p. 13.
24. Scott, *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918*, p. 413.
25. Scott, *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918*, p. 408.
26. The seat they lost narrowly was Fawkner. It had been previously held by Labor but was won by the Nationals and included the sub-divisions of South Melbourne and Prahran.
27. Commonwealth of Australia, *Parliamentary Debates*, VIII, vol. 82 (Senate, 11 July 1917), pp. 28–29; *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 8, 1891–1939 (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1981), p. 617.
28. *Western Star and Roma Advertiser*, 15 November 1916.
29. *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 7, 1891–1939 (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1979), pp. 310–311.
30. *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 8, pp. 434–435.
31. *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, vol. 12, 1891–1939 (Carlton: Melbourne University Press, 1990), pp. 33–36. Spencer was VFL president from 1919–26 *Age* (Melbourne), 26 March 1915.
32. Richard Stremski, *Kill for Collingwood* (Sydney: Allen & Unwin, 1986), pp. 57–61.
33. For a breakdown of voting patterns in Melbourne for the two referenda, see, Dale Blair, “‘Will They Never Come?’: A Study of Professional Football in Melbourne During the Great War, 1914–1918”, (Honours thesis: Department of History, La Trobe University, 1993) pp. 76–78.
34. F.B. Smith, *The Conscription Plebiscites in Australia, 1916–17* (Melbourne: Victorian Historical Association, 1966), p. 19.
35. Bobbie Oliver, “‘Rats’, ‘Scabs’, ‘Soolers’ and ‘Sinn-Feiners’: A Re-Assessment of the Role of the Labour Movement in the Conscription Crisis in Western Australia, 1916–17”, *Labour History* (1990), pp. 48–64.
36. C.E.W. Bean, *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918: The Australian Imperial Force in France, 1916*, vol. III (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1982), p. 892; and C.E.W. Bean, *The Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918: The Australian*

*Imperial Force in France during the Main German Offensive, 1918*, vol. V (St Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 1983), p. 22; Scott, *Official History of Australia in the War of 1914–1918*, vol. XI, p. 352, fn. 46. Some discussion of the reasons for the soldiers' vote is contained in Robson, *The First AIF*, pp. 119–120.

37. *South Melbourne Record*, 23 February 1918.

38. *Geelong Advertiser*, 11 December 1917.

## “Like Old Times”

**Abstract** As the war continued into 1917, when casualties increased to unimagined levels, and as the military situation worsened in March 1918, with the German breakthrough, patriots continued to challenge football clubs, players and supporters over the morality of the game’s continuance in wartime. This chapter traces how, despite this negative situation, the game began to slowly resurrect itself. The defeat of conscription undoubtedly relieved some pressure on football as did the government’s ambivalence toward it, but above all the war had become a normal, if highly objectionable, part of peoples’ lives and football offered itself as quite a logical and normal pastime to pursue despite the pressures of the global conflict.

**Keywords** Australian game · Patriotism · Western front · Sport and war  
Soldier footballers · Armistice · German breakthrough

The doom and gloom that had pervaded Australian society since the heady days of the Gallipoli landing showed no immediate signs of dissipating in 1917. The bitter and bruising conscription debate had exposed marked divisions within society, divisions that, in truth, simply widened pre-existing fault lines. To add to the turmoil, the Trade Union movement, whose members made up a significant proportion of the army

overseas and whose members were also prominent throughout the nation's many sporting clubs, was in no mood to see its agenda put on hold because of the war.<sup>1</sup> Historian Joan Beaumont has described the nation as 'broken', a label based on the tumultuous combination of the divisiveness caused by the conscription debates and the attendant disillusionment with the war.<sup>2</sup> Broken may be too drastic a term but the divisions exposed were real enough and no more realised than in the football world.

As the 1917 football season was due to start, Field-Marshal Douglas Haig reaffirmed his commitment to his war of attrition, trusting "the wearing out process" would erode the German Army's capacity to offer prolonged resistance.<sup>3</sup> During April and May at Bullecourt, Australian soldiers bore dying testament to the other side of the wearing out process as they added another ten thousand names to the casualty lists. One among them was Geelong Football Club champion, Joseph Henry Slater, whose death—occurring on the same day that Haig wrote the aforementioned entry in his diary—was reported along with recognition of his athleticism as an amateur runner and cricketer.<sup>4</sup> Yet despite these grim tidings football continued in the mainland states and, at least in Victoria, began to show signs of regeneration.

The South Australian football public would again be served by the continuance of the SAPFA, while in Western Australia the WAFL would continue playing though in somewhat straitened circumstances. The League's revenue was noted as being £1272 13s 3d in arrears of the previous year, and it congratulated itself and its clubs on the fact that they had been able to continue with compromised playing lists and much reduced attendances. Tellingly, they were satisfied with the knowledge that the small amount of monies raised was going to appropriate war funds.<sup>5</sup> One welcome aspect was the absence of rancour between the League and ground management committees, which finally offered the grounds at the same rates as had been fixed the previous season.<sup>6</sup>

In New South Wales a push by delegates to abandon the season was mounted, only to be quashed when the president of the New South Wales Football League (NSWFL) broke a deadlock by casting his vote in favour of playing. The *Bulletin* condemned the decision, stating: "The Australian game seems determined to commit suicide. You can't have much respect for a crowd which persists in running a competition that is more disgraceful to win than to lose".<sup>7</sup> The season would



continue but with only five sides as South Sydney had opted out for the season. It was the lowest number of teams in the competition since the inauguration of the League in 1903. Balmain, East Sydney, Newtown, Paddington and Sydney would continue to fly the flag for the game. The scribe "Waratah" in the *Arrow* was at a loss to explain why sides from the populated districts of North and South Sydney, even owing to heavy enlistments in some areas, were not represented in the competition and put the reason down to a wide margin between "active and apathetic officialdom" of the competing and non-competing clubs. This added to the League's woes and followed on from an earlier controversy when the North Sydney Council refused the League permission to use the No. 1 oval at St. Leonard's Park, stating it would not let the ground to any sporting bodies whose activities it considered acted as a deterrent to recruiting.<sup>8</sup> The junior league would continue with the same six teams as the previous season though the age limit was set at 19.<sup>9</sup>

In Victoria, the VFA had reaffirmed its decision of the previous season not to play, while the VFL would continue, strengthened by the return of two clubs, Geelong and South Melbourne. As they had done the previous year, Geelong delegates sat firmly on the fence at the annual meeting of the League, declaring that they would fall in with the majority. When South Melbourne decided to resume, its decision carried Geelong with it.<sup>10</sup> South Melbourne delegates had initially declared that the club was unlikely to play, as it was doubted whether they would be able to raise a side.<sup>11</sup> It was later reported, in the *Geelong Times*, that Geelong had re-entered to assist recruiting because its committee had formed the opinion that more recruits for the army had been acquired while football was in full swing than when it was played only by a few clubs.<sup>12</sup> South Melbourne's reason for resuming depended not so much on its concern for the position of football but rather for the South Melbourne Cricket Club. Financially the cricket club was in dire straits. The football club had already come to its aid by way of a sporting carnival in 1916, but in 1917 the cricket club saw its salvation only in the resumption of football and the ground management fees they could collect through it.<sup>13</sup>

Both the football and cricket club came under censure from one irate cricket club member, whose patriotic sensibilities were clearly provoked, and who felt compelled to write to the *Argus* to complain of the "blackguardly conduct" of the clubs.<sup>14</sup> The attitude of the *South Melbourne Record* stood in marked contrast. It greeted the opening of the 1917 season with relief. No longer would the streets be filled with the dejected

faces of thousands of football enthusiasts on a Saturday afternoon. The paper likened them to “homeless waifs” and questioned the wisdom of having denied them their Saturday entertainment in the first instance.<sup>15</sup>

The *South Melbourne Record* provides a remarkable record of the times. It was patriotic, in that it always maintained a visible support for the soldiers at the front, but it also reflected a strong community pride in the performance of its local football club. The regular publication of letters from South Melbourne’s soldier footballers ensured that both the war and football club maintained a high profile. Stan Wooten, Wal Laidlaw and Les Turner were regular contributors and kept readers informed of the welfare of other locals “over there”. As well, these players expressed their hopes of success for the football club and followed the club’s fortunes keenly at the front. While the sad loss of champions such as Bruce Sloss and Hugh Callan was conveyed with regret, their sacrifice did not compromise the position of players who remained at home. On the contrary the sacrifice of these men for the “Empire” probably enhanced the reputation of the club. They had been football heroes before they had become war heroes and their glory was bestowed, in part, on the club. The affirmation of support by soldier footballers to the progress of their home team undermined the protestations of the anti-football commentators. Clearly some communities, if not all, were capable of supporting both the war and sport.

Aside from the decision of Geelong and South Melbourne to resume, there were signs of a softening in attitude by some of the non-playing clubs. Both Essendon and Melbourne expressed a willingness to resume playing if all receipts from games were pooled and donated to patriotic funds. This would, in the words of the *Australasian*, allow “the League to put itself right with the public by playing the game fairly and squarely, and open and above-board”.<sup>16</sup> Financial arrangements remained unchanged, however, and Essendon, Melbourne and St. Kilda remained on the sidelines.

Fitzroy had sought to put pressure on the non-playing clubs at the annual meeting by questioning the legitimacy of their decisions if they had not been made in consultation with their players. Carlton supported them and proposed a motion to the effect that the non-playing clubs be compelled to reconsider their position by consulting with players and supporters. The League, however, sidestepped the issue and referred the playing of football for the upcoming 1917 season to a special meeting of delegates, to which Melbourne and St. Kilda declined to send

representatives. In not participating, both Melbourne and St. Kilda gave credence to the charge that their stand was being driven by the attitudes of the respective committees and, perhaps, contrary to the real interests of the players and supporters.<sup>17</sup>

The extent to which club executives and committees reflected the attitude of their supporters is difficult to assess. For the most part club committees appear to have been comprised of leading local citizens such as politicians and councillors, as well as local businessmen, and therefore reflected existing community hierarchies. The necessary administrative skills required to run a large organisation such as a semi-professional football club were certainly to be found among those people. Committee positions were usually honorary but, given the prominence of the football clubs within their local communities, carried obvious benefits to the businesses and personal stature of nominated office-bearers.

As the 1917 season commenced the VFL was subject to further accusations of avarice. The cause for this was the release of figures detailing the League's contribution to patriotic funds. Total player "out of pocket" expenses from the four competing clubs amounted to £799 and total general expenses came to £1749 while the contribution to patriotic funds was £282. The state's premier, Sir Alexander Peacock, read the figures with astonishment and hoped that the matter would be reviewed, declaring "such a spirit as revealed by the published statement should not be exhibited in times like these".<sup>18</sup> The chief offender in perpetrating this perceived lack of patriotic spirit was Carlton. From a total revenue of £884, the highest amount of the four clubs, they contributed nothing to patriotic funds, choosing instead to reduce their outstanding debt of the previous season, though it has been suggested that Carlton's indiscretion was overstated and that they had been quite generous in supporting patriotic fundraisers.<sup>19</sup> Nevertheless, the unfair assertion was that all players were being paid undeclared sums at the expense of the patriotic funds. One of the League's scribes, "Chatterer", admitted to this being the case in regard to a handful of players but stressed they were in the minority.<sup>20</sup> One disgruntled reader wrote to the *Argus* branding the affair "a calamity with but slight disguise" and one full of "humbug and hypocrisy".<sup>21</sup> Rarely mentioned was the fact that the Melbourne Cricket Club (MCC), which ran the Melbourne Football Club (the first club to withdraw from the competition), continued to hire the MCC ground to the VFL for its finals games.<sup>22</sup> The pretence of humbug and hypocrisy were not, it appears, exclusive to any one group!

The VFL showed no inclination to take action to appease the critics and Carlton was merely called upon to explain its actions to the League's finance committee.<sup>23</sup> A comparison of wartime and pre-war balance sheets of the Collingwood Football Club suggests that it, at least, was operating within the spirit of their undertaking even if Carlton was not.<sup>24</sup> The State War Council was less accommodating and ruled that future declarations of contributions to patriotic funds could not be made without the clubs first submitting their balance sheets to the Council for review.<sup>25</sup> In addition, because the League had announced its intention to contribute to patriotic funds, it would be required to apply to the Council for permission to play its matches.<sup>26</sup>

The week following the release of the club balance sheets the League became embroiled in further controversy when recruiting officers representing the State Recruiting Committee were said to have received hostile receptions from supporters at various grounds. At Fitzroy, Lieutenant R.H. Maskell, reported that he and his staff were forced to leave the ground after being "attacked by many men and women". At Collingwood's Victoria Park, Sergeant W.H. Durand also abandoned his attempt to speak to his hostile audience. Similar treatment was meted out to Sergeant Kilpatrick at the South Melbourne ground and he claimed that he was forced to leave under threat with the crowd arguing that he had no right to be there spoiling their sport.<sup>27</sup> Outrage and cries of "Shame!" were the prevailing response of those who sent letters of protest about the treatment of the recruiting officers to the daily press. They called for the government to put a stop to football. In the words of one, "It was time to throw toys on the scrapheap and play the man".<sup>28</sup>

In what the *Argus* described as a "war session", the League met to discuss the incidents involving the recruiting officers and a report on Carlton's balance sheet. The meeting opened with the resignation of the League's president, O.M. Williams. No reason appears to have been given for his decision but in view of its timing, and given his previous outspokenness in regard to League finances, the possibility of Williams being a victim of the pressures of the moment must be considered. Coe and Kennedy have suggested that the imbroglio over the League's finances placed Williams in an invidious position as he was a respected banker who was associated with a number of patriotic funds. He also had two sons at the front.<sup>29</sup> A mild censure was issued against Carlton for their actions but no measures were introduced to prevent any recurrence. The League trusted the club to set the matter right.

The incidents involving the recruitment officers were played down with the suggestion that the reports were not entirely correct. Both Fitzroy's and South Melbourne's representatives thought the officers had good receptions, and Mr. E.W. Copeland (Collingwood) noted wryly: "The peculiar thing is that there was no reference in the daily press. The reporters do not miss anything like that".<sup>30</sup> The alleged incidents were only reported by the daily press following the release of the reports. Such incidents, if witnessed, were hardly likely to escape the notice of reporters, particular those engaged in accusing spectators of being unpatriotic. Either the reporters did not see the incidents at any of the three games or, if not manufactured, the incidents were blown out of proportion.

Also discussed at this meeting was the stand taken by the State War Council toward football. It was agreed that some misapprehension had arisen and a special deputation was organised to lay the League's real position before the Council.<sup>31</sup> Having asserted itself, the War Council placed no further impediments in the path of the game. The formalisation of the conditions outlined by the War Council may well have been seen as legitimising the League's position. Playing was defensible given the Council's sanction and some of the clubs may have felt more comfortable with any future decisions in favour of playing. The League happily reported on an increase in the number of women attending matches as well as large numbers of soldiers (who were granted free admission), all of which indicated a renewed interest and broadening in acceptance of the games.<sup>32</sup>

The VFL had certainly been guilty of antagonising its opponents on occasions—through its arrogance, on one hand, and its bad judgement on the other—but it was by and large committed to fostering good relations with the various war agencies. In fact, late in the 1917 season the League postponed an entire round as it was thought the football might interfere with a planned recruitment drive.<sup>33</sup> This decision begs the question: If football could interfere with recruitment on that week, then surely it was logical that it had a detrimental effect in any other week.

### WAR-WEARINESS AND A SOFTENING OF ATTITUDES

A certain degree of war-weariness had gripped the nation by late 1917. The war had become such a constant in Australian society that the image of Australian soldiers appeared regularly in advertisements to promote businesses and their products. Moreover, in a reversal of emphasis, war

had now become a metaphor for sport. Headlines such as “Machine Gun Goal Kicking by South” and “South Melb. Carries Out a Great Stunt Brilliantly”, were not uncommon.<sup>34</sup> By virtue of these events, football clubs found themselves operating in a less antagonistic environment as the 1918 season approached.

As the football clubs set about the serious business of organising for the new season, disastrous news was conveyed from the front. In a last desperate attempt to finish the war before American manpower turned the balance, the Kaiser pitched his armies at the British lines, which stretched from Ypres to St. Quentin, on 21 March 1918. The initial attack was a smashing success and the British line collapsed. A catastrophe seemed imminent and news of the extent of the disaster was sketchy. Amid this uncertainty, the Richmond Football Club conducted its annual meeting. Long applause greeted the announcement that former club captain, Hugh James, had won the Military Cross. He was one of 43 past and present Richmond players in uniform. It was also noted that since war’s commencement, 133 footballers had enlisted from the six clubs that had played the previous season. News on the welfare of other Richmond players was conveyed and hope expressed that the war would be concluded before another season was entered.<sup>35</sup>

While the prospects of a successful outcome to the war for the Allies was shrouded in doubt, the successful conduct of the new football season seemed assured. In Western Australia and New South Wales, the football season would continue as it had done the previous season with the welcome return of South Sydney. However, in Western Australia, Midland Junction, which had been rendered especially uncompetitive by the loss of players and had lost all of its matches the previous season, decided to go into recess for the season.<sup>36</sup> The club never formed again.

The SAPFA would also continue following the success of its previous two seasons, success garnered despite it being largely ignored by the mainstream press.<sup>37</sup> In fact it was strengthened by the addition of four new teams, Sturt, Kennilworth (which included a number of Norwood SAFL players), Mitcham and South Australian Police, bringing the total number of teams to nine with Prospect (North Adelaide), Port Adelaide, South Adelaide, West Adelaide and West Torrens again fielding teams. Two more ovals, Unley and Hawthorn, were also acquired on which to play matches.<sup>38</sup> The inclusion of a police side undoubtedly gave the Association a measure of legitimacy. Sides accorded a bye in the fixture sometimes participated in

other matches for the benefit of patriotic purposes. For example, in July, the West Adelaide side played West Broken Hill in one such match.<sup>39</sup>

The SAPFA's existence still rankled some patriots whose attitude against playing football in wartime was not diminished by war weariness as this facetious article, published under the banner "Fighting Footballers", indicates:

Judging by the account of the "offensive" in the South Park-lands on Saturday, there is still a good deal of combative energy running to waste on the football fields around Adelaide. What a pity this militant material ... cannot be diverted to the battlefields of France where the Australian battalions are vanishing from a lack of reinforcements, and where the "strafing" spirit displayed would be appreciated! Here are young men, many of them apparently eligible and all of them certainly patriotic as do they not belong to the "Patriotic" Football Association? – kicking footballs around the green parks and occasionally punching one another's heads, while overseas the fate of the world is being decided ... It is a queer notion of patriotism ... Such fracas prove at any rate that the fighting spirit is not dead in the "sports" who battle on the home front. It will be a bad look-out for those Germans if they come out here interfering with the sacred game.<sup>40</sup>

A letter penned earlier in the season by SAPFA's chairman, F.F. Ward, had clearly not penetrated such hidebound opinions. In response to criticisms of the patriotic competition, Ward had pointed out the fact that it had been instigated by the players who had been denied the opportunity to play by the SAFL, which had not consulted with them, and which he said showed a lack of courage as the SAFL had been afraid to ask the players to play at their own expense, which they had chosen to do for the SAPFA. He asserted that those playing the game were mostly married men or single men with equal responsibilities or were the last of large families or were underage. He further added the view that it was surely not fair to deny returned soldiers an opportunity to participate in "healthful recreations" as players or spectators.<sup>41</sup>

### A GRADUAL RETURN TO NORMAL SERVICE

In Victoria the game was showing clear signs of resurrection. The VFL was strengthened by the decision of both Essendon and St. Kilda to resume playing. Their decisions were seen as a vindication of the stand

taken by the clubs that had refused to stop playing. Only the Melbourne Football Club remained on the sidelines in the 1918 VFL season. Melbourne's decision does not seem to have reflected a uniform club opinion, with some of its members reportedly questioning the merit of their committee's decision to stand alone.<sup>42</sup>

The VFA, too, was set to resume. After 2 years in the wilderness, six clubs, Brunswick, Footscray, North Melbourne, Northcote, Port Melbourne and Prahran had decided the Association game must go on. All represented suburbs with large working-class populations. As had been the case in the VFL, those that had adopted the "patriotic standpoint" were the clubs from the more affluent suburbs—in the Association's case, Brighton, Essendon, Hawthorn and Williamstown. The unanimity with which the Association's decision not to play in 1916 had been carried was no longer the case. Brunswick's annual meeting revealed a determined push to resume playing. The view was expressed that the game should never have been stopped and that if the Association did not heed the view of the majority of clubs then it ran the risk of those clubs forming an alternative competition. In a show of working-class and pro-football solidarity, Richmond club vice-president and member of the State's Legislature, Ted Cotter, spoke in support of resuming. The principal reason proffered by Brunswick for resuming was that football assisted recruiting. The poor response to the Sportsmen's Thousand, a special unit to be raised exclusively from sportsmen representing various sports, was cited as proof of this. It had taken 10 months to recruit 956 men and it was argued that this number would have been much improved had football been played rather than curtailed.<sup>43</sup>

A greater imperative than aiding recruitment was suggested by some as underpinning the decision of the VFA clubs to resume. The permit regulations that prevented Association and VFL players transferring unless a clearance was obtained were due to expire in 1918. If the Association did not resume, its players would be free to cross to League ranks if they so desired.<sup>44</sup> It had certainly been a source of agitation to League supporters that the Association had not relaxed its hold on players while they abstained from playing.<sup>45</sup> The League, however, had expressed a desire that the existing regulations not be disturbed and their renewal be given consideration.<sup>46</sup> When the matter of resuming was put before the Association, delegates voted 10 to 5 in favour of playing with all profits being allocated to patriotic funds. VFA vice-president, Mr. A. Turner, pleaded with the clubs not to play, arguing that in asking "200 young, hefty, healthy, eligible men" to play they must necessarily



be deterring recruitment and undermining the efforts of those fighting overseas.<sup>47</sup>

Whatever the reasons given by the clubs, their decisions for continuing or resuming were made easier by changes in the political climate and by the public's increased weariness of the war. The latter part of 1917 had been a severe trial for the nation. In Belgium the AIF had struggled for eight weeks knee-deep in the bog holes at Passchendaele before being withdrawn for the winter. They had suffered a further 38,000 casualties.<sup>48</sup> By the time the 1918 football season was due to start, Australian losses totalled nearly 164,000 with an additional 68,000 listed as sick.<sup>49</sup> At home, grieving families had been subjected to shortages and stoppages caused by a national wave of militancy instigated by key trade unions in the latter half of 1917. It was, however, the consequences stemming from the second conscription referendum—held 20 December 1917—which finally broke the resolve of the outspoken anti-football lobby. On that same day news of the Russian and German armistice was reported. The immediate balance of power appeared to have swung back in Germany's favour and the war seemed destined to drag on interminably. Despite this, the football season kicked off to the usual charges of disloyalty, but the vexatious anti-football protestations noticeably diminished as the season progressed. The final defeat of conscription and the obvious ambivalence, or even implicit support, of the Federal government and war agencies for football rendered objection a pointless exercise. Throughout the course of the 1918 season the odd angry shot would be fired but, unlike the earlier days in the war, criticism had become desultory.

Even though the public antagonisms toward football were not as pronounced at the start of the new season compared to previous years, football administrations were nonetheless mindful of paying due respect to the memory of the contribution of Australia's soldiers. In Perth it was decided that a planned match between West and East Perth on the Anzac Day weekend of 27–28 April, Anzac Day having fallen on a Thursday, would be deferred until the following Saturday so that it did not interfere with Anzac celebrations.<sup>50</sup>

The football clubs welcomed the political peace overtures that marked the start of the season and in Victoria crowds at VFL matches showed substantial increases. Neither Essendon nor St. Kilda showed any dramatic loss of competitiveness as a result of their 2-year absence and performed creditably, with St. Kilda reaching the finals. The football

crowds, which had been described as subdued in the previous years, were exhibiting distinct signs of increased excitement. When two barrackers were removed to hospital after a bottle hurling confrontation between Collingwood and Richmond larrikins the *Bulletin* reported, "It was like old times".<sup>51</sup>

The VFA was finding the new season nothing like old times. With the exception of North Melbourne, which mustered a side comparable to its premiership sides of 1914 and 1915, the Association sides struggled. Port Melbourne illustrated the depths to which the stocks of some clubs had sunk, as well as the widening gap between the quality of League and Association clubs, when it wrote to its League neighbour, South Melbourne, with the request: "If, after starting your players for the season you have any players who are no good at all, please send them on to us".<sup>52</sup> Naturally the request, once made public, was a source of great merriment to the other clubs, but when Port's combination thrashed Footscray, adding to a succession of defeats, the *Footscray Advertiser's* scribe took solace in the view that it was preferable to field a team of easy beats at a time when the most worthy men were those in France fighting to save civilisation.<sup>53</sup> Fortunately for Footscray, the VFA season was mercifully short, only ten weeks then the finals. North Melbourne, as expected, dominated the competition and won their third consecutive premiership.

#### SOLDIER FOOTBALLERS RETURN AS THE ENLISTMENT DRIVE CONTINUES

As the war had progressed club lists had naturally been depleted by the loss of footballers volunteering to go to the war. Conversely, as casualties mounted so too did the number of soldiers returned from the front who began to repopulate the playing lists. Richmond's Edward Keggins had returned to play in 1917 and against Collingwood kicked the last goal of the game that tied the match. In Western Australia the return of East Fremantle's John Webb to the game for the 1918 season and his unbounded enthusiasm for it was reported with relish, "How the Anzacs love the game. 'Monkey' Webb, invalided back from France, descended the troopship's gangway and made a beeline for the oval where he amply demonstrated that his sojourn in the trenches had not impaired his reputation as a brilliant high mark, although he suffers the disadvantage of

a badly damaged left hand".<sup>54</sup> Webb had suffered a compound fracture to his third metacarpal bone as a result of a gunshot wound to his hand, which led to the amputation of his middle finger.<sup>55</sup> In a later report he was described as a "marvel" being "just as keen on the back line as he lately was in frustrating Hun attacks". East Fremantle had only been able to field 15 players in that particular match against Perth, perhaps indicating that shortages of players due to the war were still severely intruding on the clubs.<sup>56</sup>

From a patriotic standpoint nothing much had changed in 1918. The good enlistment figures of May had proved to be an aberration. The need for reinforcements was still as great and the resumption of football on a wider scale had made no appreciable difference. The chief writers in the VFL's *Football Record* and League officials continually urged eligible men to enlist and the Sportsmen's Thousand was regularly promoted.<sup>57</sup> Certainly, manpower shortages within the AIF had reached a critical stage by mid-1918 with a number of battalions disbanded to compensate for the attrition rate. Furthermore, after months of unbroken assignment in the frontline, the majority of AIF formations had fallen well below regulation strength. Even with this knowledge a general ambivalence to both the war and the playing of football persisted. Apart from the reasons already outlined, a belief in inevitable victory was beginning to filter through and with it the sense of urgency, which had characterised the earlier debate on football, began to evaporate. This belief was not without some foundation. The great German offensive had been blunted and the AIF had figured prominently in the desperate fighting near Amiens. On Anzac Day, a memorable victory was achieved at Villers-Bretonneux. Moreover, The USA's promised legions were finally reaching the front in large numbers, numbers which Germany could not hope to counter.

### BIGGER CROWDS AS THE WAR APPROACHES ITS END

By midway through the 1918 football season the war had turned appreciably in favour of the Allies. Real and less bloody gains were beginning to be reported. On 4 July the Australians won an impressive victory at Hamel and a month later, in the final stages of the football season, the British armies, with the Australians and Canadians in the vanguard, smashed through the German lines on a 12-mile front. It was Germany's blackest day of the war, *der schwarze Tag* as Ludendorff had termed it. At last the long-awaited victory seemed within reach.

As exhausted Australian soldiers battled through the barbed wire and machine-gun defences of the Hindenburg line in pursuit of final victory, 35,855 people watched South Melbourne and Carlton contest the VFL's second semi-final. A week later 39,168 people attended the Grand Final between South Melbourne and Collingwood. Among South Melbourne's premiership winning side was returned soldier, Les Turner. These figures were a marked improvement on those of the previous two seasons and indicated a renewed wartime support for the game.

A month after the Grand Final, the bulk of Australian troops were withdrawn from the frontline for a well-earned rest. On 11 November 1918 the Armistice was signed and the war ended. Football had survived, but some of its most illustrious players and loyal supporters were among the 60,000 Australians who had not.

## NOTES

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18. *Argus* (Melbourne), 12 May 1917.

19. *Argus* (Melbourne), 11 May 1917; *Argus* (Melbourne), 12 May 1917. For a broader discussion of Carlton’s guilt or not, see Coe and Kennedy, *No Umpires In This Game*, pp. 79–80.
20. *Football Record*, (Melbourne) vol. 6, no. 1, 12 May 1917, p. 4.
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27. *Argus* (Melbourne), 19 May 1917.
28. *Argus* (Melbourne), 21 May 1917.
29. Coe and Kennedy, p. 79.
30. *Argus* (Melbourne), 26 May 1917.
31. *Argus* (Melbourne), 26 May 1917.
32. *Football Record* (Melbourne), vol. 5 no. 2, 13 May 1917, p. 10; *Football Record* (Melbourne), vol. 6, no. 4, 2 June 1917, p. 4; *Australasian* (Melbourne), 23 June 1917.
33. *South Melbourne Record*, 11 August 1917.
34. *Football Record* (Melbourne), vol. 6, no. 11, 1917, p. 3. Stunt was the term used by soldiers to describe a military raid or operation at the front.
35. *Richmond Guardian*, 6 April 1918.
36. *Referee* (Sydney), 1 May 1918.
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51. *Bulletin* (Sydney), 27 June 1918.
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## Conclusion

**Abstract** Football continued to be played throughout the war because it enjoyed solid working-class support at home and was also vital to the morale of soldiers serving overseas. This chapter concludes, not only did the game survive, it grew with the advent of women's football and its lustre arguably shone brighter through the deeds of soldier footballers. The arguments about playing football in wartime revealed a marked social and moral division in the nation, but one that largely followed pre-war antipathies toward the game. The survival of the game during wartime, when measured against the fevered claims against it and given the exaggerated accusations against single men's loyalty to the war effort, revealed that Australians could amply balance patriotism with the enjoyment of football for leisure's sake.

**Keywords** Australian game · Patriotism · Western Front · Sport and war  
Soldier footballers

Despite a vigorous and public campaign against it throughout the nation, semi-professional football continued to be played during the First World War. While the game did not survive the pressures of the manpower drain caused by the war in country regions, it did continue to be played in the more populated capital cities. In Victoria and South Australia this was due mainly, in the first instance, to the resolve of the more working-class clubs to refuse to buckle to the pressure being

applied by patriotic critics. In South Australia it was the clubs in the working-class heartland that refused to accept the verdict of the SAFL that teams should not play and in opposition formed a Patriotic Football Association to raise funds for the war effort. Similarly, in Victoria the four VFL clubs that represented some of the largest working-class areas in the city—Carlton, Collingwood, Fitzroy and Richmond—forged on with the game amid fierce criticism. The large support those clubs drew, along with the willingness of players to forgo match payments, enabled them to cope with the general downturn in attendances from which the bulk of club revenue was derived. The VFA clubs were not afforded such opportunity as their level of support was considerably less and, consequently, they were more vulnerable to any decrease in attendances. This was the most likely reason for the Association's decision to abandon football for the duration of the war. The disastrous attendances at their 1915 finals series had flagged that inevitability.

The pressure exerted by the patriotic and anti-football sections of society was considerable and certainly figured in the decision of some clubs not to play. That the anti-football campaign achieved such prominence was due to the fact that its argument was articulated by prominent citizens such as L.A. Adamson and was strongly supported by the mainstream daily press in all states. The debate was particularly unbalanced as those who supported football chose, for the most part, to ignore the criticism and responded with their continued attendance and playing of the game. The VFL certainly limited its discussion of the topic to the committee-room and to its own publication, the *Football Record*. Despite the protestations, the clubs, the players and their supporters were not unpatriotic and were involved in numerous displays of patriotism. The total contribution of semi-professional footballers was deliberately overlooked and underrated by the game's opponents.

The campaign against football broke down ultimately because it failed to appeal to the general football public in the major cities. Rather than woo this section of the community, the anti-football protagonists attempted to shame supporters and players by attacking their continued involvement in the game. Dubbing supporters and players as "slackers" and "loafers" possibly did more to alienate them rather than win them over. Attacks on football certainly appear to have exhibited some class bias as semi-professional football, with its large working-class following, was definitely targeted and, football supporters believed, ahead of other



sports such as cricket and horse-racing, though in reality those sports too received a fair amount of criticism at times.

It was ironic that members of the working-class were branded by middle-class patriots as unpatriotic and disloyal given that the majority of the AIF was comprised of working-class men. Such accusations were symptomatic of the different values that existed. Although striving for different ends, the basic values underpinning the two groups were, in essence, similar. The notions of fair play and of loyalty to Empire, which were an integral part of the doctrine of muscular Christianity that informed the patriotic view, were essentially the same as the codes of solidarity and mateship practised by trade unions and football clubs, and which also found strong expression in the AIF.

A fundamental element contributing to the failure of the anti-football campaign was the absence of any overt support from either the state or federal governments. In fact, both the Victorian and West Australian premiers and nation's prime minister, Andrew Fisher, had openly supported the playing of sport during wartime. While it was true "Billy" Hughes's party campaigned to curtail sport, this proved little more than political rhetoric. The prospect of football being curtailed, while seemingly a real possibility, was rendered most unlikely by the good relations fostered by the various state football bodies with the various war agencies.

The most compelling factor that undermined the patriots' campaign was the war itself. By late 1916 the war had purged the public of much of the "Boys' Own" images of war and, as a consequence, calls for greater sacrifice for the Empire failed to elicit the same levels of enthusiasm as had occurred in 1914/1915. Loyalty to one's mates in the trenches and on the football field may have assumed greater significance for soldiers and footballers, as the war dragged on, and as the notion of Empire became an increasingly bloody one. Death was a frequent visitor to Australian homes, including those of footballers and football supporters, and as war weariness set in, football began to re-establish itself.

Social divisions within Adelaide, Melbourne and Sydney certainly appear to have been a contributing factor in the decisions of some clubs to continue playing. While it is impossible to determine exactly what principles prevailed among the various club committees, there can be no doubting the fact that it was the clubs from the recognised working-class areas that were at the forefront of the decisions to continue or to resume playing. This was consistent in the SAPFA, the NSWFL, the VFA and the VFL. Like the vote on conscription, which closely followed party

lines, so too did the decision of the football clubs reflect the political sentiment of their localities.

It would be incorrect to assume that the clubs acted ostensibly with political ideals in mind, although the political sentiment of an area certainly made particular courses of action more or less acceptable depending on the decisions of the clubs. Other factors, more closely associated with the competitive nature of the game, may well have come into play. In West Australia the challenge mounted by Perth and East Perth against the WAFL's decision to curtail the season appears to have been purely because it denied them a shot at a premiership. In Victoria, Carlton, which—leaving aside its massive debt—had won consecutive premierships in 1914/1915, may have been keen to play again given its good prospects of another premiership flag. Similarly, Collingwood, the beaten finalist in 1915, was on the verge of the ultimate football success and may have been reticent to forfeit its chance. Conversely, Brighton and St. Kilda, both representatives of affluent middle-class areas, who might arguably be said to have practised a bastardised amateur ideal, were both in financial difficulty prior to their decisions to abandon football.

The decisions of the clubs to play or not to play seemed to have been made exclusively by the club committees. Where the decision to play was made, the successful conclusion of that decision rested with the players and supporters. In view of the fact that players willingly gave up their match payments, their love of the game was certainly one factor that contributed significantly to their club's ability to continue. For the supporters, more pragmatic factors such as the necessity of some leisure and relaxation from work, and the need for some distraction from the war, were all genuine reasons that kept the game alive, a situation that the patriots failed to acknowledge as acceptable.

Despite the pressures the game was placed under it thrived in unexpected ways. On the home front, the first tentative steps for the game in the Northern Territory were begun. There is also no doubt that the war proved a vital catalyst for the first competitive football matches involving women. These games were not only perceived as legitimate means for supporting the war effort, but they also lay the foundations of opportunities for future female footballers once the war had concluded.

Overseas at the war front, football's importance to the military for recreation and training ensured it remained a focus for soldiers as both players and spectators. The irony of wartime football lay in the mock tragedy of the game against the genuine tragedy of war. While players

and spectators pondered the “what ifs” of near misses on the football field, near misses at the front had a sharper edge and constituted the fragile line between life and death in the trenches. To support football while supporting the soldiers at the front was not a contradiction to large sections of the community and not an act of disloyalty.

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