

*But Australian football **does** have rules – and who better to guide us through those vagaries than a native – and a fan?*

Dr. Craig Hilton

FOOTY

Australian Rules football, known as "Aussie Rules", "football" (no identifier needed) or "footy" (pronounced by slurring the 't' into a 'd'), a code considered emblematic of Australia, existed for a long time only in three of the six states: Victoria, South Australia and Western Australia. Each state had sets of teams in their own leagues, respectively the VFL, SAFL and WAFL. Although people followed the games in their own states, Victoria was the centre of gravity of Aussie footy, and Melbourne contained its heart and passionate tribal soul.

Then the Australian Football League or AFL was created. The VFL expanded, exported, included and colonised until there were 16 clubs around the country, and it came much closer to being truly the national sport, or at least the national winter contact field sport. So even though the people of New South Wales have always been far more heavily into rugby, they can still follow the progress of their team, the Sydney Swans in the AFL. 'Their' team, by the way, had spent most of its life as the South Melbourne Swans, and had been transplanted from city to city when the national league was created. In the same way, you won't find any more rugby-loving state than tropical Queensland. But the Brisbane Lions (initially the Fitzroy Lions from Melbourne) were proudly the top club for three years running and last year just missed out on making it a record four Premierships in a row.

The AFL comprises 16 teams, all the better to match up in the fixtures and ultimately whittle down to the two teams that will go head to head in the Grand Final. Also, by a system of management, salary caps, penalties and financial grants, the League tries to foster a parity that keeps the season's competition interesting. The aim is to avoid a 'Manchester United' situation of a colossus amongst lesser clubs, and it works. There have been a succession of Premiers, historically (the winning streak of the Lions a recent exception), and a constant turnover of both the top and bottom ends of the ladder.

People unused to Aussie Rules may find it hard to get used to, at first – "aerial ping-pong" is one term – but once they get the idea of the relatively simple rules, they can enjoy something that's fast and exciting. The ball goes from one end of the field to the other in a handful of seconds. The big men fly higher than you would think possible and pluck the ball from the sky. Score after score after score gets belted through. And there's one more thing in its favour. It's always been a family institution. Men, women and children barrack side by side, in contrast to, say, English soccer, which is very much a tradition of crowds of testosterone-fuelled (and some may say alcohol-fuelled) males. That doesn't make supporters of Aussie Rules any less spirited, but there isn't the air of hooliganism here as there is in other countries. It's fun, but it isn't dangerous fun.

The rules are as follows.

There is an oval playing field. There are four long, vertical posts at each end (no cross-bars, and literally no height limit), and in the four quarters of 25 minutes each, the goals alternate between the two teams. Kick the ball cleanly through the centre posts and you score

a goal, worth 6 points. Kick it between a centre and outer post on either side and you score a 'behind', worth one point. It's also one point if the ball hits the post as it goes through the middle, or is knocked or punched through or goes through from anything other than an attacking player's boot, or is kicked through by a defending player by accident. Therefore, scores will be of the type 10 goals 5; 65. k of the oval as being divided into a 5 by 3 grid. A team has 15 players for each of the positions, and 3 more without fixed positions. That makes a team of 18 on the field and 4 on the reserves bench – 22 in total.

You can pick the ball up, you can catch it, you can run with it a short way, and you can kick it. You can't throw it. You can kick it off the ground, but as it's an elongated shape and doesn't bounce very predictably, it's best to hold it in your hands, line up and punt. There's no limitation in the direction you can go - right up the field in the direction of the goal if you wish. A standard kick will get you about a quarter of the length of the field. The 50-metre-radius mark around the goal is about the equivalent of a good kick.

You can run with the ball for 10 metres. After that, you have to have disposed of the ball to someone else, or bounce the ball off the ground once and catch it again to continue. You are allowed to do that twice, so the most you could ever is 30 metres.

You can dispose of it either by a kick or a handpass, which is simply a punch. While you have the ball, an opponent may tackle you in a certain, permissible way. This is usually by grabbing you around the waist. He doesn't have to bring you to the ground, just hold you while you are still holding the ball to succeed. If he tackles you and you kick or handpass away, the game can proceed. If he tackles you and you don't have the ball, he is penalised. There are also a number of limitations against rough or potentially dangerous play.

If the ball goes out of bounds, a boundary umpire throws it back in. If a ball is kicked out of bounds on the full, a free kick is awarded to the opposite side.

If you catch a ball that was kicked, this is called a 'mark', and play stops while you take a free kick, immune from the prospect of being tackled. Free kicks are also awarded as penalties against transgressions such as throwing the ball, holding the man without the ball, disallowed tackles, running too far without bouncing, kicking out of bounds on the full, and also by means of returning the ball into play after the opposition has scored a behind. If you are clearly awarded a free kick, such as from taking a mark, and the momentum of events is to your team's advantage, you may choose to play on and forfeit the protection of a free kick.

If time runs out and the siren sounds, an awarded free kick can still be taken, even (or especially) if it may result in a score.

After a goal is scored, the ball is taken back to the centre of the field. If a ball gets bogged down in a pile of players, the umpire can choose to stop the play and restart it once people are ready again. Play is started and re-started usually with a bounce-down, in which

the umpire throws it hard onto the ground so that it bounces high into the air. The act of jumping up to reach it is called "going for the ruck," and is done by one of the wandering team members designated as the "ruck" or "ruckman." The other type of wandering player is the 'rover'. Sometimes there is a combination of these two talents, in a 'ruck/rover'.

There is one main umpire, a goal umpire at each end and a boundary umpire on either side. (I think.)

That's the dry bones of footy. The experience is much more visceral.



Visceral indeed!

When DUFF came our way, I remembered my encounter with Aussie football – and rejoiced. Now I could fulfill a dream, and observe the mayhem up close and personal. Enter Alan Stewart. In addition to editing *Thyme* and retrieving jetlagged Americans at the airport, Alan was a diehard fan of one of the local teams, the **Hawthorn Hawks**. At the MSFC meeting, he offered to fence me an extra ticket or two. Craig, obviously a footy fan, volunteered to join us. A good idea. Aussie football might be too much for a wimpy American, used to the prissy flounces and gesticulations of gridiron – and a doctor might come in handy.

Rosy went off with Julia to the Queen Victoria Markets. Craig and I hurried along leaf-shaded streets to the commuter trains – clean, comfortable, and crowded. Most on our train championed Hawthorn's rivals, the **Richmond Tigers**. Many sported yellow and black team scarves. After a short run, we joined the throngs on foot approaching the hilltop stadium. I remember one adolescent lad bouncing his own football. At the Melbourne Cricket Grounds I noted the sport's symbol, proudly displayed on a high tower, and a diner decorated with huge gaudy pics of Elvis Presley and Marilyn Monroe! Score another one for the *good* American footprint!

Stewart was where he promised to be, and we headed into the stadium, passing fans having their faces painted with team colors. Again I flashed on Mardi Gras. Then I saw the field and New Orleans was forgotten. The oval playing field was enormous – as big as a polo field, I was told. Through a gap in the stadium wall, Melbourne's distant skyline glimmered in the cool afternoon. We joined Alan's pals in our special seats, and the place went crazy with songs sung and flags waved and incoherent cheers as the Richmond Tigers and Hawthorn Hawks assumed the field.

To my surprise, I found had *no worries* – Australian phrase meaning "no problem" – following the contest. As Craig tells us, the players can kick the ball, carry it if they dribble, *mark* it by catching it on the fly, punch it to a teammate, and tackle, block or otherwise clobber an opponent who has the ball in hand. Scoring was frequent. One point was racked if the ball was kicked between the wider of four goalposts, an event so common the crowd barely bothered to react. But if the ball was punted between the two *inner* posts – well, wild the cheering, singing, and flag-waving when the umpire in his white fedora waved *his* flags.

Which happened, in those first two quarters, a lot more often on our side of the stadium than on t'other. Hawthorn scored and scored, racking up an enormous lead. (Possibly this was due to the heroic exhortations of the gent behind us, whose gentle encouragement echoed the sweet *tink* of the bell bird. "COME ON SAMMY!" he'd bellow, and "WOT'S THE DIFF'RENCE YA DENSE ARAB?!?" – this directed to the referee, no better beloved there than here, and no more Arabic.) At halftime Alan apologized for subjecting me to a dull massacre.

But they play *two* halves of a footy game ...

From website accounts of the game, many commentators have traced the result to a broken cheekbone suffered by Peter Everitt, a star Hawk[ins], in the second quarter. Hawthorn was then leading by 51 points. But I see an explanation further back – to 1974, and Muhammad Ali’s “Rumble in the Jungle” victory over George Foreman. Remember the *Rope-a-Dope*?

The Tigers had loafed in the first half – saving themselves for the second, when they ran the Hawks ragged. Winded, helpless, Hawthorn could do nothing to stop the fresh Richmond team. Time and again the cheers and flags and bursts of song emitted from the far side of the field, while the Hawks fans sat dumbstruck, except for two who got into fistfights near our seats and were printed out themselves.

And then it was over. Though I could scarcely appreciate it, I’d witnessed history – the greatest comeback ever made by the Richmond Tigers in league play. What I could appreciate, and did appreciate, and *still* appreciate ... the cool air, the beautiful cityscape, and the exultant anthem – which I can hear *now*.

“Row, row, row – on down the river – we will row, row, row – on down the river –”



So where does this Melbourne chapter of my DUFF account end? In true Tarantino fashion, we’ve jumped from the early middle over the late middle to the beginning – to the end.

On Sunday night, after Healesville and Orlinda, we joined the Hiltons, Stewart, and the great Aussie fans Bruce & Elayne Gillespie at Leo’s, an Italian place well known to local fandom. We supped splendidly and gossiped incorrigibly and the hours were wondrous. But the day was not yet done.

After dinner, Craig and Julia took us on a midnight tour of Melbourne. We were so groggy our eyes could barely focus, but the effort was worth it. Melbourne must be one of the most attractive and interesting burgs on Earth. Handsome historic buildings gleaming in spotlights. Dark parks where glow-eyed possums patrol the trees, in the niche occupied by squirrels on our side of the Pond. Lastly, we made a rapid jog through the amazing, mile-long Crown Casino, gaudy and glorious, on the banks of the Yarra. (Was it within sight of the river bridge resembling a whale? the gigantic sculpture like the prongs of Gulliver’s garden rake?) Theatres – bars – nightclubs – restaurants, of every class – shops – hotels (yes, plural) – and on the riverbank, every hour, fire fountains spouting geysers of flame. *Incredible. What a city.*

Eyebrows toasted, eyelids leaden, we bid the great day good night, and with the dawn, we bid Melbourne good-bye. But with the refrain in our brains – “2010 ... 2010 ... 2010 ...”

AFTERWORD

Among the websites dealing with topics mentioned in this article ...

Healesville – www.zoo.org.au

Platypodes – www.pbs.org/kratts/world/aust/plat

www.science-frontiers.com/sf075/sf075b08.htm

Bilbys – www.ozemail.com.au

www.enchantlearning.com/subjects/mammals

Bell birds – www.middlemiss.org/lit/authors/kendallh/poetry/bellbirds.html

“ ” sound – <http://members.tripod.com/Thryomanes/BirdSounds2.html>
MSFC – <http://home.vic.net.au/~msfc>
The footy game – <http://www.beckys-place.net/round5.html>
Melbourne – www.melbourne.com.au

Craig Hilton wants it known that his illustrations of footy players were taken from the *Herald Sun* website.

