

Chapter 11:

CONCLUSION

On Sunday, 28 May 2000 a crowd of 6,963 attended the round 12 A.F.L. match at the S.C.G. between the Kangaroos and Port Adelaide.¹ This was the fifth lowest crowd to attend an A.F.L. match in Sydney and the lowest at any A.F.L. match since the demise of the Fitzroy Football Club in 1996.² At the two clubs' previous home-and-away encounter at the M.C.G. in 1999 they drew 16,429.³ Despite the abysmal turnout for the 2000 clash, the club formerly known as North Melbourne was reported to be determined to continue its push to establish itself in the Sydney market.⁴ The club's on-field success in the 1990s failed to attract a large supporter base. In September 1998 the club reached an agreement with the A.F.L. to play four home matches, plus an away match against the Swans, in Sydney in 1999, with a similar arrangement to apply for the next four seasons after that. It was also reported that the club would be known simply as 'Kangaroos'.⁵ Of the six Kangaroos home matches at the S.C.G. to that time, the match against Port Adelaide attracted the smallest crowd. The average attendance at the six matches was

¹ Herald Sun, 29 May 2000, p.48.

² Ibid., p.47.

³ *Official Australian Football League Website: the official A.F.L. stats.* Internet site. Accessed 3 June 2000 at http://www.afl.com.au/results/matchresults_10382.htm

⁴ Herald Sun, 29 May 2000, p.47.

⁵ Herald Sun, 9 September 1998, p.77.

15,378. Even the 'derby' against the Swans seven weeks earlier had pulled a paltry 19,729.⁶

A list, published mid-season by the Herald Sun, of 2000 club membership figures in comparison to those of 1999 showed that the Kangaroos had improved their numbers by 13.22%. Only Essendon and Brisbane had done better in terms of percentage improvement.⁷ Hawthorn showed the sharpest decline in numbers, with figures down 16.33%, a result that the club attributed to the A.F.L.'s closure of Waverley. Chief executive, Michael Brown, said the move of home games to the M.C.G. had attracted 5,000 new members from the inner suburbs but had cost the club 9,000 of its old south-eastern suburban constituents. The Hawks' former co-tenant at Waverley, St.Kilda, had the smallest membership overall and the second largest percentage decrease from the previous season.⁸ They were one of three clubs that had opted to make Colonial Stadium their main home match venue. Of these, only Essendon, still unbeaten at the half-way mark of the season after narrowly missing a Grand Final berth the previous year, had recorded an increase. The Western Bulldogs, also languishing near the bottom in actual numbers, were also in decline with a 12.64% decrease. Collingwood, a club scheduled to play four home matches at Colonial Stadium despite being an M.C.G. tenant, had also shed 13.47% of its members from the previous season despite winning its first five games.⁹

The combination of a serious decrease in membership for the former Waverley tenants and similar results for two of the three major Colonial tenants,

⁶ Herald Sun, 29 May 2000, p.47.

⁷ Herald Sun, 2 June 2000, p.117.

⁸ Ibid.

supported to a lesser extent by the declining figures for Collingwood, lent very strong support to the belief that the A.F.L.'s embrace of Colonial Stadium at the expense of Waverley had cost it patronage. In addition, the Kangaroos' push into the Sydney market was reducing that club's actual match attendances despite its improving membership base. Something was seriously amiss. The Collingwood membership decline may have had as much to do with the devaluing of Social Club membership, with the introduction of newer and more expensive priority membership packages, as it did with the number of matches scheduled at the new stadium. Whatever the reason, however, it was clear that the fans were not happy with the League, their clubs or both.

Melbourne president, Joe Gutnick, dubbed Colonial Stadium a 'house of horrors' after ticketing problems at the round seven match between Melbourne and West Coast caused many fans to walk away in disgust and delayed the entry of many others.¹⁰ The Demons' chief executive, John Anderson, expressed the fear that thousands of Melbourne fans unable to get in would be lost to the Game forever. Melbourne, like St.Kilda, did not charge its members extra for seating at Colonial. Essendon and the Western Bulldogs, on the other hand, had membership packages that included the price of reserved seating for the full season. These packages enabled members to gain entry by just swiping their tickets at the turnstiles. It was not so simple, however, for members of the Demons and the Saints. They could not simply enter the ground and choose their seat. Instead they had to be issued with a

⁹ Ibid.

¹⁰ Herald Sun, 24 April 2000, p.1.

ticket for a specific seat on the day, which required them to wait in a queue.¹¹ On this particular occasion nearly half the crowd of only 20,774 was still waiting in the queues when the match started. Queues were reported, at one point, to have stretched for almost a kilometre with some fans said to have been waiting two hours to gain admission. Many were still queuing well into the second quarter.¹² A public relations exercise providing free admission to the round nine match between the Western Bulldogs and St.Kilda again had embarrassing consequences for the League when only 35,505 spectators took up the offer.¹³ This left the unedifying spectacle of about 17,000 unoccupied seats at a derby between two major tenant clubs, hardly a ringing endorsement for the boutique venue.

While public anger at the decision making of football administrators had become increasingly apparent in the last two or three decades of the twentieth century, falling attendance figures in 2000 and the tone of much of the dissatisfaction being publicly expressed by fans indicated that the public was losing interest in the idea of going to the football. The myth of the People's Game could no longer be reconciled with the reality of the League's indifference to a public disoriented by the accelerating rate of change being forced upon the Game by the same economic rationalism rampant in wider society.

¹¹ Ibid., p.39.

¹² Ibid., p.1.

¹³ *Official Australian Football League Website: the official A.F.L. stats.* Internet site. Updated and accessed 5 June 2000 at http://www.afl.com.au/results/matchresults_10536.htm

In her Hugo Wolfsohn Memorial Lecture, Judith Brett commented upon the impact of late twentieth century economic development on broader Australian society by noting that it was the speed of change, rather than change itself, that was undermining the attachments people felt for those familiar aspects of their lives under attack.

We keep being told we must adapt, be flexible, change with the times, make way for progress - for two centuries the mantra of the liberal faith in progress. Hence the globalisation cheer squad tells us that there's nothing new in people being expected to live with change. Perhaps, but it seems to many that the *pace* of the change is new.¹⁴

Brett was articulating the same disorientation experienced by football fans at the start of the twenty-first century. The escalation of change needed to develop the national competition had accentuated a sense of loss, producing a need for mourning parallel to the one Brett felt necessary to help Australians generally to deal with sudden changes affecting their lives. Using the Elizabeth Kübler-Ross model of the five stages of grieving, it could be observed that few non-corporate football followers were in denial any more. Although the anger and bargaining stages were still apparent in the long queues outside Colonial Stadium, the preponderance of empty seating inside suggested that many had come to regard the bargain as a swindle.

¹⁴ Brett, *op.cit.*, p.21.

It would be an over-statement to conclude, purely on the basis of falling attendances, that the public was losing interest in football altogether. Much can be said for the resilience and adaptability of football communities that had long been under attack from the forces of modernisation. The barracker of the 1950s and 1960s learned to value a communion based purely on love of club when the old localism crumbled beneath the weight of post-war demographic change. Embracing the motor car, the freeway and suburban affluence, the fan of the 1970s paid more and travelled further for the right to see League football. Faced with the national competition and the relocations of clubs, the fans of the 1980s and 1990s embraced live television coverage as a new way to experience football. Communion came to rely less on direct contact than a shared experience of cultural symbols circulated by mass media. The arrival of the internet provided avenues for a return to a more direct experience of community for those willing to make the effort to look beyond the standard consumerist fare offered by the League and the clubs. Football administrators, meanwhile, endeavoured to control and standardise the production and consumption of their product in order to milk every available cent from both the corporate and the non-corporate sectors of the football public.

From the moment that the Game's popularity began to demand commodification, conflict of interest between the barracker and the football administrator became the natural by-product of market forces. An industry grew, supported by the collective obsession of barrackers, whose respective club orientations were frequently at odds with the interests of the Game as a

whole, but whose patronage simultaneously enabled the Game to flourish, affording the barracker an illusory sense of ownership of the Game. As long as the Game was turnstile sufficient, the illusion would be enhanced by a pricing mechanism heavily in favour of the consumer. By the early 1960s an equilibrium in the power equation had produced an apparent *status quo* dignified by the epistemology of tradition. The legitimacy of this tradition rested upon the simple longevity of a localised twelve-team suburban competition. An uncritical ahistoricity pervaded the rhetoric that demonised any move to bring the iconography of the Game into line with new social conditions. An obsequious media, however, caught in the affluent optimism of the times, fawned over the Game and saw the actions of its more forward thinking administrators as an expression of progress. The notion that the Game belonged to the People was non-negotiable and not seen to be under threat.

Club allegiances in the very early years of the V.F.L. had been expressions of local patriotism arising naturally from Melbourne's pattern of suburban settlement. There was a sense, however, in which they could be seen as a forced response to a localism imposed from above. The electorate system of player recruitment, for example, was an administrative initiative providing artificial reinforcement and rigidity to whatever naturally occurring local loyalty might have already existed. If football clubs could be said to bind local communities together, the V.F.L.'s decision to impose localism on players in 1915, thereby setting the example that reinforced similar loyalties among the football-going public, must be seen as a form of

social engineering. The League's attitude that it was above the community that had made it a significant institution in Melbourne life was clearly illustrated in its annual reports as early as 1931. This attitude must then be seen to be traceable at least to World War 1 in this determination to actively shape its community rather than let it evolve naturally.

A system that effectively conscripted any footballer with aspirations of playing at the highest level to the service of his local V.F.L. club provided a situation where a football community could theoretically have been forged merely by a shared geographical locale. However, by the time the effects of the electorate system had trickled down to football spectators, community formation depended on more than mere place. Local social systems, transport networks in particular, had a significant bearing on people's ability to participate actively in football communities. Club allegiance also required a sense of belonging, which in turn hinged on a sense of connection with the club in question. To live in Richmond, for example, was not sufficient to be a Richmond supporter. One had firstly to be drawn to the Game itself, and then to a sense of communion shared with others drawn to the idea of a football club called 'Richmond'. While transport limitations might have limited choices to an extent, the League could not impose allegiances on spectators. It could merely play a role in helping to establish conditions that were conducive to the outcomes it desired.

Prior to the 1965 relocations, the twelve V.F.L. clubs were based at twelve different venues, each ground being local to its respective club's place of identity. The dispute with the ground managers

shattered this comfortable localism but the only victim apparent at the time was the V.F.A., whose dominion over the outer suburbs was significantly weakened. The League's conquest of the Association was completed 35 years later when the latter body, renamed the V.F.L. in 1997, was absorbed into a new hybrid league. This modified V.F.L. competition was comprised of a blend of amalgamated and stand-alone clubs, drawn from the old competition and what had formerly been the reserves teams of Melbourne-based A.F.L. clubs. Postings on the bulletin board at *Nick's Collingwood Page* suggested that some disaffected fans were coming to regard the V.F.L. as an alternative to the over-priced, corporatised elite competition. One correspondent, 'SPIDERGIRL', offered this colourful assessment.

It'll be mad to get back to the good old days of sitting at a game with a VB in the hand and be able to run on the ground at the quarter and half-time breaks but best of all no stingy AFL! [sic]¹⁵

It was perhaps fitting that a competition evolving out of the old V.F.A., itself a victim of the League's imperialism in the 1960s, should attract fans from among the casualties of A.F.L. need and greed at the turn of the century.

¹⁵ 'V.F.L. draw?' on *Nick's Collingwood Bulletin Board*. Internet site. Posted 8 February 2000. Accessed 5 June 2000 at <http://www.magpies.org.au/nick/ubb/Forum9/HTML/000026.html>

The metamorphosis of Footscray into the Western Bulldogs in 1996, in the face of futile opposition from the Footscray Forever Committee, signalled the end of any consideration of the will of the People in the business of elite football. By this time the forces of commercialisation had gathered a momentum of their own, sweeping all before them. Princes' Park had been renamed Optus Oval in 1994. Cheersquad banners were as much advertisements for club sponsors as messages of support for teams. The dissenting spirit of the squads themselves had been steadily regulated out of existence in the modern Game. The ball, the goalposts, club guernseys and every available metre of fencing were daubed with the legalised graffiti of the corporate sector. An editorial in the Sunday Age, written shortly after the completion of the Brisbane-Fitzroy merger, reflected upon the state of the Game at that time.

What began as an amateur game between rival localities has developed into a fully professional, highly commercialised nationwide sport, dominated not by rank-and-file supporters but by corporate sponsors, hierarchical officialdom and the demands of television ... It is worth remembering that, in many other countries, football and other spectator sports have always been professional and proprietorial, played for the people but not belonging to the people. That is the way of the world of which we are all a part.¹⁶

At the beginning of the twenty-first century the community that supported the Game entrusted to the A.F.L. was no longer bound by the social geography that helped to shape it. Its sense of communion was fostered by cultural images disseminated through revolutionary communication technologies. Imagined communities, spanning continents and hemispheres, met in chat rooms and on bulletin boards to discuss football and their respective clubs' fortunes. Free-to-air and pay-T.V. audiences enjoyed a more detailed, albeit mediated, view of the action than the crowds that had once stood in the rain at suburban ovals like Western Oval or Victoria Park. Meanwhile, at the new boutique venues, an increasingly corporate crowd enjoyed lavish facilities unheard of at League football in an earlier, more spartan era. The last four decades of the twentieth century were characterised by a gradual exclusion of the non-corporate barracker from physical attendance at matches. The comfortably familiar environment of the old suburban V.F.L. gave way to the economically driven and expensive innovation that was the hallmark of the A.F.L. The right to attend matches, once so inexpensive as to be mistaken as a birthright for all Melburnians, became a commodity that progressively higher socio-economic groups came to regard as unaffordable.

Just as grainy, black and white video-tapes of 1960s V.F.L. matches are among the historical artefacts of their time, so too the slickly produced graphics-laden footage of Channel 7's coverage of the 2000 season will, in due course, be part of the

¹⁶ Sunday Age, 7 July 1996, p.18.

public record of this troubled era in football's history. Where the 1960s footage showed the Outer grounds of suburban venues like Windy Hill and Moorabbin packed to capacity with standing spectators, the visual public record of the 2000 season will, more typically, show a half-empty Colonial Stadium. At matches such as the round four clash between Richmond and Fremantle, viewers will notice that the bottom level of seating was generally crowded, more so than the upper level, while the middle tier was almost completely empty. Even the video record of 'sell-out' matches such as the round five Western Bulldogs-Collingwood match will show some 'bald spots', particularly in the middle level.

Much of the empty seating in the middle tier at these matches belonged to members of the Medallion Club. Their prime seating was not accessible to the general public and sometimes remained unoccupied even when other sections of the ground were filled to capacity. Empty seats were less common on the bottom level, home of the bargainers, hard-core club members with seats reserved for the season. The upper deck contained a mixture of reserved and walk-up seating predominantly for the casual fans. These could include the 'theatre-goers' having a one-off night out at the football or former die-hards who still loved the Game but no longer felt obliged by a quasi-religious sense of duty to attend every week.

Beyond match venues, beyond physical space, was a greater football public, an imagined community drawn together by a shared experience of cultural texts and images. It included those physically present at matches but went well beyond them. It included the thoroughly regulated consumers of the

thoroughly regulated football product but also embraced the rebels. It met on web-sites, both official and unofficial, and formed cheersquads with or without the industry's sanction. It divided itself into 16 tribes, each identified by its own particular iconography. Multiple citizenship was possible but rare. Each tribe had a corporate entity that it worshipped and brand loyalty in the purchase of merchandise was remarkably strong. One's choice of tribe might be dictated by a stubbornly residual territorialism or it might be a simple choice of one brand over the other 15.

Among the corporate entities there were winners and losers, and their 16 tribes suffered and rejoiced accordingly. More important than winning or losing, however, was survival. In the last two decades of the twentieth century South Melbourne and Fitzroy had been two famous casualties. Anticipating Fitzroy's demise, Martin Flanagan, in 1996, pondered the ailing club's plight from a broader social context, delivering a sobering message for those social observers who regarded the machinations of the football industry as trivial.

The cultural elite of this country, or elements within it, are still sneering about sport and what it represents. They ought to think again. What happened to Fitzroy Football Club has been happening, with far less justification, to communities and working people all over this country for the past decade, possibly longer, as their livelihoods have been sacrificed on the altar of 'economic efficiency'. Sport is one

of the few areas of public life where people have enough information to have some idea of what is actually going on.¹⁷

The breakdown of locality-based football communities went hand-in-hand with the emergence of a corporate culture that alienated the barracker. Fans reared on an experience of football far removed from the consumer product available at the turn of the century found the modern commodity over-priced, inaccessible and ultimately unsatisfying. Where they had sought communion they found consumerism. Recognition of loss, long obscured beneath a denial afforded by popular mythology, gave impetus to an anger alleviated only by an ultimately unsustainable process of bargaining. The depressing truth, however, was that what had died could not be 'bought' back to life. Only the light of acceptance would provide the People with vision to look elsewhere for what the Game had once given them.

¹⁷ Age, 1 July 1996, SPORTSMODAYFOOTBALL, p.12.