

Chapter Seven:

TICKET RAGE

In earlier chapters, I have likened the reaction of football followers to the transformation of 'their' Game to a process of grief and mourning, much like Elizabeth Kübler-Ross's paradigm of denial, anger, bargaining, depression and acceptance. In the late 1970s and early 1980s, as at other times, the depth of grief varied from one barracker to the next. An important factor helping to determine which of Kübler-Ross's stages a barracker had reached was the individual barracker's level of commitment. Casual followers paying week-by-week admission may well have maintained denial until their club made a Grand Final. When this happened their inability to obtain a ticket would have made their lack of power glaringly obvious, provoking reactions ranging from anger to acceptance, depending on the temperament of the individual in question. Some may have even experienced depression. It is to be expected that wide variations would have existed in the extent and duration of the various stages, some experiencing little or no anger or depression, consoled by the apparent inevitability of live television coverage.

Those with spare funds had the option of indulging in some bargaining by purchasing or attempting to purchase tickets on the black market. Perceptive hagglers would have interpreted the exorbitant price of tickets bought in this way as evidence that, at Grand final time, the week-by-week supporter was priced out of the market. Market forces

at this time of the year were distorted by a distinctly uneven playing field on which people unable to obtain tickets at the official price were seriously disadvantaged in their dealings with those who could.

Although the V.F.L. could claim no royalty from the black marketeer's profit margin, its control over the distribution of such a widely sought commodity enabled it to get away with hefty annual increases in the official price. The clubs also benefited from the acute scarcity of Grand Final tickets. A more dedicated category of barracker would not make the transition to acceptance as easily as the casual fan. Club membership, which offered the die-hard a guarantee of immunity from black market exploitation, would in time become a form of exploitation in its own right. From 1968 until the mid-1980s, however, it offered committed supporters a lower-priced alternative to weekly cash admission and an effective insurance policy against the excessive demands of finals ticket profiteers. At the same time it provided a guaranteed income for the clubs.

Effectively, the purchase of a club membership was an exercise in bargaining. Just as Kübler-Ross's dying patients attempted to negotiate a postponement of the inevitable by promising God that they would change their behaviour in some way for their remaining days,¹ the die-hard barracker agreed to commit an annual lump sum to the club in return for privileges denied to non-members. While these privileges may have helped club members to preserve a sense of ownership of their clubs and of the Game, changing conditions in the last decade and a half of

the century would make the fleeting nature of these privileges apparent.

Press reports pertaining to the sale of tickets in the week leading up to the 1997 Grand Final indicated how far the bargaining position of football club members had deteriorated since the mid-1980s. On the Friday night of Preliminary Final weekend the St.Kilda Football Club qualified for its first Grand Final for 26 years by defeating North Melbourne. Queues which had been forming at Moorabbin even before the Preliminary Final quickly grew in anticipation of Grand Final tickets going on sale the following Monday.

On the Saturday afternoon the Western Bulldogs and Adelaide met to determine St.Kilda's opponent. At three-quarter time, with the Bulldogs well in control of the match, Bulldog supporters began to leave in order to join the queues at the various ticket outlets. One of them, Frank Vetrone, a schoolteacher from East Keilor, listened to the final quarter on his Walkman radio. By the time he reached the ticket outlet the complexion of the game had changed. In a stirring finish the Crows stole a Grand Final berth from the devastated Bulldogs. Frank Vetrone's quest for a Grand Final ticket, organised with military precision, was in vain. He and his fellow Bulldog devotees left the queues to be replaced shortly afterwards by elated Adelaide supporters on the same quest.²

In little more than a decade, committed football club supporters had gone from being guaranteed the

¹ Kübler-Ross, op.cit., pp.72-73.

² Sunday Herald Sun, 20 September 1998, Sport, p.11.

option to purchase a ticket if their club made the Grand Final to the absurdity of having to leave a Preliminary Final early in order to take a position in a queue. Had the Bulldogs managed to hold on for a narrow victory, Frank Vetrone would have been forced to experience his club's greatest triumph since the 1961 Preliminary Final through the headphones of a Walkman radio. The A.F.L.'s system of ticket allocation allowed only 19,600 seats out of the 98,400 seats available at the M.C.G. to be sold to ordinary members of the competing clubs. Of the remaining seats, 48,000 were allocated to members of the M.C.C. and the A.F.L. Another 12,800 seats had been allocated as part of finals series ticket packages distributed equally among all 16 A.F.L. clubs. Another 11,200 tickets, for the Grand Final only, had been similarly distributed among the 16 clubs. Customarily, clubs distributed these tickets through the corporate sector as part of special package deals, rather than make them available as basic match tickets for their members. The A.F.L. had also set aside a further 6,800 tickets for distribution to its own staff, tribunal members, umpires, sponsors, the media and other insiders. The 19,600 tickets allocated to the competing clubs included 300 to each official cheersquad and 1,000 to each club for in-house distribution. The remaining 17,000 were made available to season ticket holders from the competing clubs on the basis of a formula that allowed a minimum of 4,000 tickets for each club, with the remainder allocated on a pro-rata basis according to the number of members in each club.³ St.Kilda was allotted 6,400 tickets for

³ Age, 23 September 1997, p.B11.

sale to its 16,000 members, while Adelaide was allocated 10,600 tickets for 40,000 members.⁴

Articles and correspondence appearing in the popular press during the build-up to the match explored issues relating to Grand Final ticket allocation. The strongest theme emerging was that of the injustice of a system which snubbed the overwhelming majority of a football club's regular supporters when that club was successful enough to be involved in the most important match of the season. The Age reported that angry fans at Moorabbin felt they had been 'taken for mugs'. Heather Colley, a 38-year-old life-long Saints supporter, did not think that the club or the A.F.L. cared about hard core supporters.

We're the mugs who went to [the] Save Our Saints campaign and kept the club afloat and we can't even go and see them in a grand final.⁵

Another 38-year-old supporter, Les King, complained that although clubs constantly stressed the importance of club membership there was no reward for the loyalty of those who did become members. To him it appeared that while many tickets were 'given away' to corporate supporters, St.Kilda members received no more than a newsletter from the club telling them how valuable they were.⁶

St.Kilda Football Club's chief executive officer, Don Hanly, defended the corporate sector's ticket

⁴ Herald Sun, 23 September 1997, p.7.

⁵ Age, 23 September 1997, p.B11.

⁶ Ibid.

supply by explaining that business support had rescued many clubs from financial difficulties. He sought to shift the focus on to the M.C.C., whose members customarily did not fully utilise the 24,000 seats available to them. He felt that M.C.C. members should be required to book their seats for major events at the M.C.G. so that surplus seating in the Members' enclosure could be made available to others.⁷ Ken Rigby of Blackburn, in a letter to the Age, went further by demanding that the Government intervene to bring an end to the M.C.C.'s privileged position.

[The Government] should ask why the greatest arena in the land is not a genuine people's ground, but is basically a private club. It should ask what justification there is for a 19th century anachronism like the M.C.C. to dominate the sporting culture of this city in the way that it does.⁸

An M.C.C. member was guaranteed the right of admission to the Grand Final regardless of which teams were competing, while a football club member's right merely to queue for a ticket hinged on the club's ability to qualify for the match. Rigby's plea for justice was also directed against those people who had not seen a football match all season but who would be 'swanning into the M.C.G.' on Grand Final day because they had bought 'airline packages and other deals' or because they had the 'right corporate connections'.⁹ He felt

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ Age, 24 September 1997, p.A14.

⁹ Ibid.

that because the A.F.L. had done nothing to end the 'annual scandal of Grand Final ticket distribution,' State action was warranted.

[The Government] should ... ask why the system does not allow participating clubs in a Grand Final to guarantee a seat to every paid-up member ... instead of the deplorable situation we now have, where members have to line up days ahead in acute discomfort, only to be told, 'Sorry'. It might make for picturesque stories about the lifeblood of football, but what it really reveals is the patronising indifference and snobbery of football's decision-makers.¹⁰

Although the Melbourne press focussed on the injustices experienced by St.Kilda supporters, the ticket supply for Adelaide members was also pitifully inadequate, with only about a quarter of the club's membership able to buy tickets. The Age reported that Adelaide Football Club's chief executive officer, Bill Sanders, was considering the introduction of a new level of membership which would give priority access to finals tickets.¹¹ At Moorabbin, members of the Social Club were given priority. The Herald Sun reported that no St.Kilda Social Club members who wanted tickets missed out.¹²

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ Age, 23 September 1997, p.B11.

¹² Herald Sun, 23 September 1997, p.7.

A level of membership that provided a 100% guarantee of Grand Final ticket access must have, by implication, devalued non-priority membership. With a large portion of the already inadequate ticket supply allocated to priority members, the base-level membership, which represented the vast majority of a club's members, was left to battle for the leftovers. The odds against individual St.Kilda season ticket holders with no priority access receiving a ticket to the 1997 Grand Final were considerably worse than the allocation of 6,400 tickets to 16,000 members would have suggested. As the Adelaide chief clearly recognised, the declining value of the season ticket as a guarantee of Grand Final ticket access provided a window of opportunity for football club administrators to maximise revenue by exploiting the barracker's willingness to bargain.

Photographs in the Age on the Tuesday provided a stark contrast between the joy of those who succeeded and the despair of those who failed in the quest for a Grand Final ticket. One man, who had queued since the Saturday night was seen clutching his tickets with the sort of glee usually confined to winners of Tattsлото. On the same page an obviously unsuccessful couple on the verge of tears provided evidence of depression.¹³

On the same day the Herald Sun showed a young woman, dressed only in two strategically placed St.Kilda scarves, standing by the side of the Nepean Highway with a sign offering \$400 for two Grand Final tickets.¹⁴ Her offer, however, was well below the prevailing black market rate. It was customary during

¹³ Age, 23 September 1997, p.B11.

¹⁴ Herald Sun, 23 September 1997, p.9.

Grand Final week for the classified advertisement section of the Herald Sun to devote a section exclusively to advertisers wanting to buy or sell Grand Final tickets. On the Wednesday more than two columns of advertisements appeared. Most sellers' prices were not quoted, but the going rate among those who did elect to give a definite quote was between \$750 and \$1,200 per ticket.¹⁵ Elsewhere in the same edition, the Herald Sun reported that some profiteers were asking as much as \$2,500 for a ticket.¹⁶ The official Adult price for 1997 Grand Final tickets obtained through A.F.L.-approved channels had been \$70.¹⁷

Profiteering on the buying and selling of tickets to an event would appear to have been inevitable whenever demand was significantly in excess of supply. Grand Final week in Melbourne provided the occasion for the emergence of a mini-industry in which the privileged few attempted to capitalise at the expense of the desperate many. The Herald Sun classifieds contained advertisements in which seats in the A.F.L. Members' section, a non-transferable entitlement of A.F.L. membership,¹⁸ were brazenly offered for sale. Other abuses of privilege were apparent in offers of multiple tickets grouped together. One advertisement offered 10 prime seats together in a row. Another seller offered eight seats for \$8,000, but only on the condition that a single buyer purchase all eight.¹⁹ To

¹⁵ Herald Sun, 24 September 1997, p.63.

¹⁶ Herald Sun, 24 September 1997, p.5.

¹⁷ Herald Sun, 22 September 1997, p.89.
(advertisement)

¹⁸ 'A.F.L. Membership: the face of the future', information booklet, Australian Football League, 1998, pp.14-15.

¹⁹ Herald Sun, 24 September 1997, p.63.

have obtained these tickets in the first instance, the profiteer would have needed connections within either the A.F.L., one of the clubs or one of the corporate sponsors associated with either the League or a club.

Profiteering, or 'scalping' as it was commonly known, could be risky. Not all buyers were desperate life-long supporters of one of the competing clubs. Some were in fact scalpers themselves, merely holding possession of a ticket in the expectation that the black market price would rise. A poorly timed purchase or sale by a scalper could prove costly as one 'self-proclaimed king of the scalpers' found when he was forced to sell a ticket, which he had obtained for \$800, for \$650 on the morning of the match.²⁰ Prices customarily gathered momentum on the Monday or Tuesday, as soon as all competing club members' tickets had sold out. Panic buying forced the price to a peak later in the week. Profiteers still holding tickets on the morning of the match did not enjoy the same market advantage as those advertising in the mid-week classifieds. As the match drew closer, they became aware that their tickets were declining in value. The truly desperate had already succumbed to midweek extortion. Fans willing to forego the pre-match entertainment could sometimes obtain last-minute bargains. While the advertising of tickets in newspapers was not illegal, scalpers operating outside the M.C.G. on Grand Final day in 1997 risked fines of at least \$200 and the confiscation of their tickets under Melbourne City Council by-laws.²¹ Such risks tended to make sellers more willing to part with their wares quickly, thereby weakening their control of the

²⁰ Sunday Age, 28 September 1997, p.2.

²¹ Age, 27 September 1997, p.A4

market to an extent. Despite Council by-laws, the trade in tickets at the 1997 Grand Final continued outside the ground right up to the start of the match. The prevailing match day price was reported to have fluctuated between \$300 and \$400. However, one St.Kilda supporter determined not to pay over \$200 had refused two offers of tickets for \$220. Ten minutes after the start of the match the area outside the ground was almost devoid of hagglers.²²

The profiteering activities of scalpers '[took] the gloss off Grand Final week', according to St.Kilda president, Andrew Plympton, who accused them of 'bleeding the fans' and labelled them as 'repulsive'.²³ The State Opposition made what would have probably appeared a politically safe call for scalping to be stamped out.²⁴ The 'big grab', as the Herald Sun labelled scalpers' demands,²⁵ would have added further weight to Ken Rigby's argument that the Government should act to reform the inequitable ticket distribution system which created an environment in which ticket speculation could flourish. Rigby, however, would have received no comfort from Sports Minister, Tom Reynolds's rejection of the Opposition's call for a clampdown on scalping. The Minister argued that if people were willing to pay \$700 or \$1,000 for a ticket they were merely exercising their 'choice'.²⁶ This reply suggested that the Kennett Government saw the booming prices for Grand Final tickets as evidence of a thriving free enterprise economy, but there could be little argument against the proposition that some

²² Sunday Age, 28 September 1997, p.2.

²³ Herald Sun, 24 September 1997, p.5.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid.

citizens were more 'free' than others to engage in this 'enterprise'.

Unwilling to entertain the possibility that his League's system of ticket allocation was in any way responsible for what Rigby called the 'annual scandal', A.F.L. chief executive officer, Wayne Jackson, identified the M.C.C.'s seating arrangements as a potential area for reform. To support his view he recalled the sold-out Bledisloe Cup Rugby Test, which had been played at the M.C.G. for the first time in July that year. On this occasion approximately 10,000 M.C.C. Members' seats had remained vacant while many potential paying customers were left without tickets. He suggested that more public seating could be made available if the M.C.C. adopted a system whereby members had to book seats in advance. Under this system, surplus members' seating could be readily identified and offered for sale to members of the competing clubs. Jackson announced that a pre-booking system would apply in the A.F.L. Members' reserve for the 1998 Grand Final.²⁷ Although the tone of Wayne Jackson's appeal to the M.C.C. suggested pessimism at the prospect of change to hallowed M.C.C. tradition, a change of heart came earlier than expected. The following day the Herald Sun reported that the M.C.C. had made 816 seats available for sale to competing club members who had missed out previously.²⁸

The 816 seats were scarcely a windfall. That they represented a mere drop in the ocean was obvious when Ticketmaster, the agency handling the tickets, received a reported 100,000 inquiries.²⁹ Although the

²⁷ Herald Sun, 25 September 1997, p.84.

²⁸ Herald Sun, 26 September 1997, p.9.

²⁹ Sunday Herald Sun, 20 September 1998, Sport, p.11.

majority of these calls must have been from people who were not members of the competing clubs, these figures provide stark evidence of the gaping chasm between supply and demand where Grand Final tickets were concerned. It was this discrepancy that made some form of inequity inevitable. Any pre-booking system that involved ticketing was prone to scalping, with or without the Government's blessing. An alternative system of cash payment at the gates would have discriminated against persons who, either because of age, infirmity or any other reason, were unable to queue for long periods.

Finals ticket distribution was streamlined in the late 1970s when the League enlisted the services of the Statewide Building Society with its network of city and suburban branches.³⁰ The V.F.L.'s success in obtaining a greater degree of control over ticket distribution in 1971, along with its 1968 decision to give preferential treatment to members of the competing clubs, made Grand Final ticketing in the 1970s and early 1980s relatively trauma-free. The annual price hike would have, no doubt, caused the odd grumble and the allocation of most of the prime seating on the Northern wing to M.C.C. Members may have prompted some resentment in the Outer, particularly on those days when the glare of the afternoon sun was more extreme than usual. Compared to the situation which evolved from the mid-1980s and through the 1990s, however, it is fair to say that football club members of the 1970s and early 1980s who failed to obtain a ticket to the Grand Final when their club was playing had probably not tried very hard. The howling injustices of more recent times can be traced to 1984, when the League was forced to abandon plans to

move its ultimate event to Waverley.

Post-World War 2 demographic changes in metropolitan Melbourne and a long history of dispute between the League and the M.C.G. Trustees persuaded the V.F.L., in 1959, to plan its own stadium in the sprawling eastern suburbs. Free of the greed and tyranny of cricket-oriented ground managers, the League would enjoy the fruits of its own labours, presenting its product to comfortably seated crowds of a magnitude never seen in Australian sport before. In 1962 the League purchased 200 acres of land in the City of Waverley.³¹ Two years later the League obtained vacant possession of all houses and land at the site which, by now, was being referred to as 'V.F.L. Park'.³² The development of the new ground became an obsession for the V.F.L. during the 1960s, a deduction from gate takings at all V.F.L. matches being allocated directly to the project. In August 1967 the League's publication, Football Life, predicted 'the start of something big'. The stadium, the article said, would eventually hold 166,000 spectators, with parking for 25,000 cars.³³ An 'artist's impression' of the proposed stadium, which looks futuristic even from a 2000 perspective, accompanied the photograph.

Unlike the M.C.G., the new stadium would not be required to devote its prime seating, or indeed any of its seating, to members of the M.C.C. Instead the League developed a membership package for football fans wanting to reserve their rights and privileges at the

³⁰ V.F.L. Annual Report, Season 1980, p.21.

³¹ V.F.L. Annual Report, Season 1987, p.41, official chronology.

³² V.F.L. Annual Report, Season 1964, p.8.

³³ Football Life, August 1967, p.20.

new stadium. Membership numbers were strictly limited but the ceiling on numbers grew as the stadium grew. The League had no difficulty in obtaining subscribers as its commitment to the new project left little room for doubt that it saw V.F.L. Park as the future of football. In 1981 the League felt that the future had almost arrived. The board of directors voted to move the Grand Final from the M.C.G. to V.F.L. Park from 1984. The ground had been used for matches since 1970 and its capacity had reached 75,000. The new plan involved building works to extend the stadium's capacity to 104,000,³⁴ not quite the figure imagined 14 years earlier, but one which compared more than favourably to what remained of the M.C.G. after the Members had been accommodated. All that was needed was State Government approval for the extension works to go ahead. This did not prove to be as simple as anticipated.

The removal of the Grand Final from what was perceived by many as its traditional home to a distant outer suburb poorly serviced by transport infrastructure brought the V.F.L. into direct confrontation with a State Labor Government keen to champion what it interpreted as a popular cause. Although V.F.L. Park was closer to the demographic centre of metropolitan Melbourne than the M.C.G., its lack of train or tram facilities placed great strain on the road system in its vicinity. The central business district was still the hub of Melbourne's public transport network and the M.C.G. was well served by trams, trains and buses. The League's original decision to build its stadium at Waverley had been guided by assurances from the State Government of the time that

³⁴ V.F.L. Annual Report, Season 1981, p.6.

the area would be provided with transport facilities to match its status as a fast-growing residential area.³⁵ That and subsequent administrations had failed to deliver such facilities.

Early in 1982 the League's bid to move the Grand Final to Waverley was in jeopardy when the Cain Government refused to approve the extensions to spectator facilities at the Waverley ground.³⁶ Throughout 1983 the League was involved in heated negotiations with the Government, the M.C.G. Trustees and the M.C.C. to try to resolve the dispute. The League's Annual Report at the end of 1983 expressed concern at proposed legislation that would give the State Government the ultimate say in where the Grand Final was played.³⁷ The threatened legislation would have declared the Grand Final a 'major sporting event' and given the Government the right to intervene, through court injunction, in any move to have it played at what the Government regarded as an inappropriate venue.³⁸

The threat forced the V.F.L. into compromise. At the heart of the League's expressed concerns were the entitlements of its 33,000 V.F.L. Park members, whose subscriptions had been contributed on the understanding that the venue was to become League football's principal venue. The membership scheme had been instituted in 1966, four years before the venue had been opened for matches, and had grown steadily since then in anticipation of what appeared to be an inevitable move of football's centre of gravity. The League felt obliged to ensure that its subscribers'

³⁵ V.F.L. Annual Report, 1983, p.3.

³⁶ Ibid.

³⁷ Ibid.

entitlements at the M.C.G. were on par to those that they would have enjoyed had the game been played at Waverley.

When it became obvious that the Government was willing, if necessary, to coerce the League into keeping the Grand Final at the M.C.G., much of the fine tuning of the compromise agreement centred on the respective rights of M.C.C. and V.F.L. Park members to special seating areas on the day of the match. The League proposed a scheme under which it would lease the M.C.G. for the day of the match. V.F.L. Park members would have exclusive use of the area normally set aside for M.C.C. members. The latter would be given priority access to the purchase of tickets to reserved seating in the Olympic Stand. In November 1983 the M.C.C. submitted the League's proposal to a vote of its members. Not surprisingly, the M.C.C. members were not willing to relinquish what they regarded as an inalienable entitlement of M.C.C. membership. The eventual compromise, accepted by the League in February 1984, provided for a greatly enlarged members' enclosure, to be shared by M.C.C. and V.F.L. Park members.³⁹

The new arrangement was sufficiently acceptable to the League for it to agree to the 1984 Grand Final being played at the M.C.G. It included a provision under which the M.C.C. would have to compensate the League for shortfalls in revenue resulting from the allocation of what had previously been public seating to M.C.C. members. Although the League regarded this as adequate compensation for any financial disadvantage incurred on Grand Final day itself, it felt that there

³⁸ Age, 9 February 1984, p.28.

³⁹ V.F.L. Annual Report, Season 1984, p.9.

were larger issues at stake. In particular it was concerned that the continuation of the tradition of playing the Grand Final at the M.C.G. would impact unfavourably on its ability to retain subscribers to V.F.L. Park.⁴⁰ In November 1983, V.F.L. president, Dr. Allen Aylett, had sent a letter to all V.F.L. Park subscribers advising them that, regardless of the outcome of negotiations over the venue for the 1984 Grand Final, the League still hoped to play the Grand Final at Waverley from 1985 onwards. The letter was sent as part of a mail-out that included V.F.L. Park membership renewal notices.⁴¹ A cynical cartoon in the Age showed Aylett standing next to two large piles of letters, one labelled 'Letter to V.F.L. Park members' and the other labelled 'V.F.L. Park renewal notices'. Aylett was shown instructing his mailing clerk to send the letters to members before sending the renewal notices.⁴² Because of its ongoing desire to keep faith with its own subscribers, the V.F.L. was still not willing, in February 1984, to commit itself on the matter of the Grand Final venue beyond 1984.⁴³

The new arrangements for members' access meant that 18,000 fewer Grand Final seats would be available to persons without M.C.C. or V.F.L. Park medallions. The holders of finals series tickets to the Northern Stand would be entitled to a seat only at the lead-up finals. On Grand Final day they would be forced into standing room accommodation.⁴⁴

While the decision to allow M.C.C. and V.F.L. Park members to share an enlarged members' enclosure

⁴⁰ V.F.L. Annual Report, Season 1984, pp9-10.

⁴¹ Age, 17 November 1983, p.34.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Age, 9 February 1984, p.28.

⁴⁴ V.F.L. Annual Report, Season 1984, p.10.

safeguarded the entitlements of the members of both organisations, it effectively excluded non-members of those bodies from over 40% of the available seating. It also had the effect of making the size of Grand Final crowds less predictable than they had previously been because the enlarged reserve meant that a much larger area of the ground was given over to patrons who were free to attend at their own discretion on the day. When the crowd figure for the 1984 Grand Final reached only 92,685 it was the first time since 1962 that it had fallen below 100,000. A glaring 'bald spot'⁴⁵ on the top deck of the Northern Stand was a source of embarrassment for all parties to the agreement. Though the shame belonged to all, the blame was negotiable. Premier Cain was the most obvious target for League president, Dr. Aylett. His insistence on the match being played at the M.C.G. had led to the 'catastrophe' of 10,000 empty seats.⁴⁶ Opposition leader, Jeff Kennett, was similarly inclined to target his political adversary. Cain had interfered in what was essentially the League's business using the threat of legislation, thereby denying '8,000 to 10,000 Victorians' the chance to see the match.⁴⁷ Cain preferred to blame the V.F.L. for overestimating the requirements of V.F.L. Park members. He said that the area set aside for members had been based on a predicted attendance of 23,000 V.F.L. Park members and 16,000 M.C.C. members and had been determined on the basis of negotiations between the two bodies.⁴⁸ Although he chose to target the League, his vitriol could as easily have been directed

⁴⁵ M.C.C. News, No.71, February 1985. (pages not numbered)

⁴⁶ Age, 1 October 1984, p.1.

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Ibid.

at the M.C.C., whose secretary, John Lill, took the more diplomatic approach of blaming the weather.⁴⁹

The embarrassing spectacle of unoccupied seating in the Members' enclosure was not new, but the significant enlargement of the 'discretionary attendance sector'⁵⁰ since 1984 exacerbated the problem. The concentration of empty seats on the upper deck of the Northern Stand suggested that more 'traditional' members' areas were filled to capacity. John Lill felt that many M.C.C. members had been deterred from attending in 1984 by the prospect of a 'crowded and uncomfortable day, particularly in their traditional Pavilion areas'.⁵¹

In an article for the Age, Garrie Hutchinson observed that the crowd in the Members' reserve at the 1984 Grand Final was made up of two distinct categories of members, 'Real' and 'Other'. The Real members 'had been forced to share the privileges of the Smokers' Pavilion with the hordes from V.F.L. Park'.⁵² As Hutchinson saw it, the Other members were, by and large, oblivious to the traditions of the hallowed ground which they had been permitted to occupy for the day.

To most of the Other Members social niceties such as paying obeisance to an older culture, visiting something like the Long Room where you had to wear a 'visible tie or cravat' were beside the point. The point was

⁴⁹ M.C.C. News, No.71, February 1985. (pages not numbered)

⁵⁰ M.C.C. News, No.77, November 1987. (pages not numbered)

⁵¹ M.C.C. News, No.71, February 1985. (pages not numbered)

to watch the Bombers tear the feathers off those sportsmen, the Hawks.⁵³

The territorially strained relations between 'Real' and 'Other' members at Grand Finals from 1984 until 1990, in addition to the need for seating to be seen to be occupied, led to suggestions that a system of reserved seating be instituted in the Members' reserve. The M.C.C. committee, however, was not prepared to tamper with its members' entitlements to discretionary access. Prior to the 1987 season the M.C.C. News suggested that Grand Final seats would continue to be occupied on a 'first in, best dressed' basis and defended the situation by appealing to the self-interest of members.

A point to ponder: If reserved seats were allocated by lot, as would appear the only fair means, would you accept the luck of the draw if your seat was in the top deck of the Northern Stand.⁵⁴

By the end of the season, however, an arena-level section of the Northern Stand, comprising 3,400 seats equally divided between the V.F.L. and the M.C.C., had been set aside for reservation by members.⁵⁵

While members of the two bodies fussed over preferred location of seating, other members of the

⁵² Age, 1 October 1984, special liftout, p.7.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ M.C.C. News, No.75, March 1987. (pages not numbered)

⁵⁵ M.C.C. News No.77, November 1987. (pages not numbered)

sporting public were more concerned at whether or not they would be able to obtain admission to the Grand Final at all. From the promulgation of the first M.C.G. Act in 1933, the cricket club had been entrusted with the role of guardianship of the stadium 'in the interests of the general public'. The privileges of its members were enshrined as reward for that duty.⁵⁶ The M.C.C. Members Pavilion, built in 1927, survived long enough to achieve heritage status simply because major ground improvements, such as the building of the Olympic Stand in the mid-1950s and the Western Stand, later named the 'Ponsford Stand', in the mid-1960s, were geared towards increasing the accommodation capacity for the general public.⁵⁷ The M.C.G. Trustees' battle with the League, from 1957 to 1971, over control of ticket sales for the Grand Final had been fought on an assumption that the Trustees were looking after the interests of the general public. A change of emphasis occurred in the M.C.C. during the 1980s toward concern for the quality of accommodation at the ground, as distinct from (indeed at the expense of) quantity.⁵⁸

The V.F.L., on the other hand, had been primarily concerned, during its battle with the Trustees, to protect what it regarded as football's hard core supporters, the club members. Its 1968 decision to give the members of the competing clubs priority access to Grand Final tickets had ensured that a club's most loyal supporters would not be excluded from sharing in their clubs' most treasured moments. It also had the effect of making club membership increasingly attractive, particularly for supporters of consistently

⁵⁶ Ibid.

⁵⁷ Ibid.

⁵⁸ Ibid.

successful and popular clubs such as Carlton and Collingwood. By the mid-1980s, however, competing club membership no longer provided guaranteed access to a Grand Final seat. Public spectator capacity was shrinking as a result of the greater emphasis on comfort and the enlargement of the area set aside for discretionary access to M.C.C. and A.F.L. members. Club membership, increasingly perceived as essential for guaranteeing a fan's entitlements, was becoming more popular. These factors combined to produce serious shortfalls in the availability of Grand Final tickets for members of the competing clubs. At the same time, clubs were becoming more reliant on corporate sponsorship for meeting the escalating costs of putting their respective teams on the field. Tickets allotted to all clubs, previously sold to rank-and-file members of those clubs, were now beginning to be used to reward sponsors for their support.

The scalping industry was testimony to the fact that some recipients of tickets were willing to part with their coveted wares if the right price could be obtained. Scalping, however, was not a new phenomenon. It had been incurring the wrath of journalists, politicians and the football public ever since pre-booking of Grand Final seats began. Up to the mid-1980s most media criticism of Grand Final ticket injustice had concentrated on the profiteering activities of scalpers. In 1985 they were labelled as 'parasites' by the Minister for Consumer Affairs, Peter Spyker,⁵⁹ who waged an ultimately unsuccessful crusade against ticket profiteering for much of the decade.

While scalpers' exorbitant demands remained a popular subject of Grand Final week journalism for the

remainder of the century, there was increasing criticism levelled at the system of ticket distribution itself, and the resulting difficulty that devotees of competing Grand Finalists invariably experienced in obtaining tickets. This problem became serious enough to attract widespread media coverage in 1987, when members of the Carlton Football Club reacted angrily to ticket shortages at Princes Park on the Tuesday prior to the Grand Final. While much of the problem in 1987 was caused by poorly organised distribution of tickets between the various outlets catering for Carlton members, the root of the problem was that 12,000 members were trying to buy 7,500 tickets. The club's paltry allocation was sold out within an hour of going on sale, leading to what the Sun described as a 'near riot'. To appease the masses, Carlton's chief executive officer, Ian Collins, successfully approached the V.F.L. for the release of several hundred tickets for seats with restricted views normally sold only in an emergency.⁶⁰ Even so, many of the Carlton faithful were left without tickets.

The burden of the shortage fell most heavily on those members who had chosen to queue at Princes Park itself, rather than at other BASS outlets where tickets were being sold. A breakdown of the BASS computer at Princes Park resulted in members at other outlets being given a 40-minute head start over those queued at the club's home ground. To make matters worse for Carlton staff, buyers at other outlets were advised to go to Princes Park when ticket supplies at those outlets were depleted.⁶¹

⁵⁹ Herald, 26 September 1985, p.3.

⁶⁰ Sun, 23 September 1987, p.2.

⁶¹ Ibid.

The Carlton Football Club and Ian Collins were the obvious villains to many of the disappointed supporters denied access to tickets. Some claimed that the club had previously assured them that all season ticket or medallion holders would be able to get a ticket.⁶² Whether or not such an assurance was made is difficult to determine. It is possible that those making the claim may have misunderstood what they were told by the club. It is also possible that the assurance may have been made before the number of allocated tickets was known. It may well have been based on past experience and a perception that competing club members' rights to a Grand Final ticket were sacrosanct. Perception carried considerably more weight than reality to a club member denied a Grand Final ticket. Elizabeth Kübler-Ross reported that her patients, at the anger stage, were inclined to project their anger 'on to the environment almost at random'.⁶³ This tendency would appear to have been present among these Blues fans so rudely shaken from the denial apparent in the belief that they had an inalienable right to purchase a ticket. The Carlton Football Club was clearly not to blame for the ticket shortage. However, Ian Collins's reported reply to angry supporters that they should have purchased finals series tickets when they had gone on sale several weeks beforehand⁶⁴ would not have endeared him or the club to those supporters.

Scalpers, as usual, used the classified advertisement sections of daily newspapers to advertise their wares at prices generally three to six times the

⁶² Ibid.

⁶³ Kübler-Ross, op.cit., p.44.

⁶⁴ Sun, 23 September 1987, p.2.

official price.⁶⁵ A superficial attempt by the Herald to investigate the sources of ticket supply to the black market was hampered by a general reluctance on the part of ticket profiteers to reveal details of their activities. Most advertisers approached by Herald reporters hung up when asked where they had got their tickets. The few who were willing to reply said that they had obtained their tickets either through BASS, the football clubs or from Melbourne supporters who had decided that they no longer wanted to go.⁶⁶ Melbourne had lost the Preliminary Final to Hawthorn the previous weekend.

It was unclear, from the sketchy details revealed in the Herald, where the 'Melbourne supporters' referred to in the article had obtained their tickets. One possibility was that they were series ticket holders who had decided to ease the pain of their own club's failure to make the Grand Final with some financial compensation. When used in this way, a finals series ticket became an investment that could serve as an emotional insurance policy. If one's club made the Grand Final it could be regarded as money well spent in its own right. If the club failed to qualify it became an opportunity for easy profit.

Another possibility, arising from the specific reference to 'Melbourne supporters', was that some M.C.C. members were willing to transfer their officially non-transferable entitlements for profit. In this case the 'ticket' would have been made of metal rather than paper. The Melbourne Football Club has deep historical roots in the M.C.C. Until 1981 it was officially the 'M.C.C. Football Club'. In 1986 an

⁶⁵ Herald, 23 September 1987, p.2.

⁶⁶ Ibid.

article in the M.C.C. News asserted that although it was no longer a part of the cricket club, the Melbourne Football Club 'continued to enjoy [the M.C.C.'s] active support'.⁶⁷ As recently as 1993, a survey conducted by the M.C.C. revealed that Melbourne was still the favoured football club of 32% of its members, well ahead of its nearest rival, Essendon, supported by 11%.⁶⁸

The M.C.C.'s concern at the lending of membership medallions to non-members is well documented in the pages of the M.C.C. News. The club regularly appealed to its members not to abuse their privileges in this way. At the 1983 Grand Final the club conducted its own research to ascertain the extent of the abuse. Eight hundred members, chosen at random, were asked to sign their names against the numbers of their medallions. A subsequent check against club records revealed 50 suspect signatures, of which 25 were regarded as definite forgeries.⁶⁹ On those figures, it is fair to suggest that at least 3%, and possibly as many as 6% of the spectators in the M.C.C. members' reserve at the 1983 Grand Final were there on false pretences. A similar campaign of random signature checks at the 1984 finals led to the suspension of ten members, for periods ranging from one to three years, for misuse of medallions.⁷⁰ Despite these measures, the abuse of M.C.C. members' privileges continued. A decade later, 12 members were similarly suspended during the course

⁶⁷ M.C.C. News, No.73, February 1986. (pages not numbered)

⁶⁸ M.C.C. News, No.93, April 1993. (pages not numbered)

⁶⁹ M.C.C. News, No.69, February 1984. (pages not numbered)

⁷⁰ M.C.C. News No.71, February 1985. (pages not numbered)

of a financial year.⁷¹

Although impossible to ascertain, it was unlikely that M.C.C. medallion abuse was normally perpetrated for profit. The M.C.C. News, in 1984, warned members specifically against lending their badges to friends.⁷² It said nothing of the possibility that members would transfer their entitlements for profit. Simple logistics would have deterred such transactions, but would not have removed the possibility altogether. Members selling their badges to strangers would have forfeited their entitlements for the rest of the membership year. In doing so, such members would have relinquished their cricket entitlements for the duration of the season to come. Lending a medallion to a stranger for a price would have been risky for the lender because of the strong possibility that the medallion would not be returned. Lending to a friend, for a price, would have called into question the nature of the friendship. Nevertheless a potential existed for profit to be made from the illegal transfer of M.C.C. members' medallions and it is not unreasonable to suspect that some, albeit few, members may have done so from time to time.

Any consideration of the scalping industry would be incomplete if it did not recognise the influence of the discretionary attendance sector on the market. The extension of the Members' reserve in the 1980s to accommodate V.F.L. Park members effectively doubled the influence of this sector. It could be argued that the free loan of a medallion to a friend exerted the same inflationary pressures as a medallion sold for

⁷¹ Melbourne Cricket Club, Annual Report, 1994-95, p.12.

⁷² M.C.C. News, No.69, February 1984. (pages not

financial gain. Whether the corrupt member was paid in money, or simply in the satisfaction of having done a favour for a friend, the illegal presence of the non-member would have artificially inflated future expectations of members' accommodation requirements. The experience of the Northern Stand's 'bald spot' in 1984 provided evidence that an over-estimation of the number of members expected to attend could deprive other would-be spectators of accommodation. Medallion abuse at previous Grand Finals, reckoned by the M.C.C.'s 1983 research to account for between 3% and 6% of attendance within the enclosure, would have contributed to that over-estimation of the amount of space required. Reductions in the amount of space available to the pre-booking sector exerted inflationary pressure on black market prices, thus contributing further to the injustice experienced by competing club members unable to obtain tickets through officially sanctioned channels.

The long battle over where the Grand Final should be held was resolved in 1988 as the result of a proposal submitted by V.F.L. chief commissioner, Ross Oakley, which acknowledged the M.C.G. as football's principal venue. Part of the agreement between the M.C.C. and the V.F.L. was the provision of a separate enclosure for the League's subscribers in the new grandstand planned to replace the old Southern Stand.⁷³ At the time of the agreement it was envisaged that the creation of the Great Southern Stand would increase the stadium's capacity to 110,000 but this proved to be optimistic. The actual seating capacity at the M.C.G.

numbered)

⁷³ M.C.C. News, No.80, December 1988. (pages not numbered)

after the completion of the new grandstand in 1992 was approximately 98,000. With two separate members' enclosures for the M.C.C. and what later became the A.F.L., each holding approximately 24,000 people, the discretionary attendance sector at Grand Finals for most of the 1990s was just below 50%. The decline in the number of seats available to the pre-booking sector created an environment in which the scalping industry flourished as never before.

The scalper, as presented by the popular media, was an enigmatic character with a social standing somewhere between that of a drug dealer and a seller of used cars. Newspaper reports invariably placed much emphasis on the prices that scalpers demanded for tickets and the desperation of their customers. Those same newspapers that took the moral high ground in their reporting of ticket speculation also printed several columns of classified advertisements throughout Grand Final week for people wishing to buy or sell tickets.

The integrity of the mass media aside, its treatment of the scalper as neo-criminal, was on par with the shaming and marginalisation of medallion abusers in the pages of the M.C.C. News. Such attitudes provided a glaring illustration of double standards when seen in light of the existence of the scalping industry's more 'respectable' face, the 'package deal' available through readily identifiable commercial sources. In 1987 Peter Spyker's crusade against ticket profiteering brought him into public disagreement with his party leader and Premier, John Cain. In 1987 V/Line offered country rail travellers a Grand Final ticket as part of a package which included a three-course meal on the train followed by drinks and entertainment under a

special marquee at the ground for \$220, more than eight times the official price of an undercover seat. The offer was condemned by Spyker as 'awfully expensive and elitist.' John Cain, however, defended V/Line, arguing that it was 'simply acting as a commercial operator'.⁷⁴ His comments, quoted in a report in the Herald headed 'V/Line not scalping seats - Cain', that his Government was not responsible for the manner in which football clubs disposed of their Grand Final tickets,⁷⁵ implied that V/Line's tickets were obtained through one of the V.F.L. clubs. Just exactly how V/Line's commercial activities differed from garden variety scalping was not made clear, either by Cain or the Herald reporter. While some forms of scalping may have had a veneer of respectability that other forms did not have, the impact on the overall availability and price of Grand Final tickets for committed supporters of competing Grand Finalists was the same. The effect was the same whether the scalpers were comically circumspect neo-criminal figures, advertising their wares through the corners of their mouths and selling them from the inside pockets of their black overcoats, or fashionably-suited travel agents offering five-star accommodation and champagne breakfasts.

In 1989 Spyker attempted to outlaw scalping by introducing legislation, supported by his party, which would have made it illegal to offer for re-sale a ticket for a 'proclaimed' event at more than the 'proclaimed' price. The Minister for Prices would be the person empowered to proclaim both the event and the price.⁷⁶ The legislation was expected to become law in

⁷⁴ Herald, 23 September 1987, p.2.

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Sunday Herald, 24 September 1989, p.34.

time for the 1989 Grand Final but was defeated in the Liberal-dominated Legislative Council. Similar legislation appeared during the 1990 finals series. On this occasion the Upper House President, Mr. Hunt, a Liberal Party Member, refused to allow the legislation to be debated because of its similarity to the previously rejected Bill. Premier Joan Kirner asserted that the Opposition had 'for some spurious arguments about free enterprise' prevented Victorians from getting a fair deal on the price of Grand Final tickets. The Opposition accused the Government of grandstanding on scalping by presenting a Bill that had no chance of being passed.⁷⁷ In light of the procedural futility of presenting similar bills to the Council within the life of the one Parliament and the timing of the two attempts to coincide with the finals series in two consecutive years, the charge of grandstanding should be taken as proven. Labor's attempt at price control was distinctly unfashionable in an era in which even Labor governments were removing regulatory constraints in other areas of business.

Legislation aside, an effective anti-scalping measure would have been to cut off the supply of tickets to the scalpers themselves. The League's practice of allocating tickets to the clubs effectively washed the League's hands of the matter of ensuring that Grand Final ticketing privileges were not abused. It also presented the opportunity for substantial revenue-raising, either for the clubs themselves or for the servants of those clubs entrusted with the responsibility of distributing those tickets. An air of secrecy, which the clubs themselves made little attempt to clear, hung over the Grand Final ticket distribution

⁷⁷ Herald, 2 October 1990, p.3.

activities of the clubs. Collingwood, in particular, attracted suspicion. Faced with allegations that hundreds of 1989 Grand Final tickets allocated to the Magpies had fallen into the hands of scalpers, club president, Allan McAlister attempted to declare the matter a 'dead issue'. He claimed that investigations had failed to produce any evidence of deliberate malpractice in Grand Final ticket distribution at Collingwood.⁷⁸

The club's activities came under greater scrutiny the following year, when Collingwood made its first Grand Final appearance since 1981. An A.F.L. advertisement for Grand Final tickets at the beginning of Grand Final week announced details for the sale of the 14,000 tickets being offered to competing club members. Essendon's allocation of 6,610 tickets included 2,500 for internal sale while Collingwood's 7,390 tickets included 3,000 internals. The definition of 'internal' differed noticeably, however, from one club to the other. Essendon regarded its Social Club members as internal whereas Collingwood did not. The 3,000 tickets that Collingwood allocated to club insiders catered for club staff, the cheersquad, players' families, sponsors, voluntary workers and coteries. Collingwood Social Club members received no priority over the rest of the club's season ticket holders in the purchase of the remaining 4,390 tickets.⁷⁹ An A.F.L. investigation earlier in the series resulted in Collingwood becoming the first club to be charged by the League with ticket scalping. The League's finance director, Greg Durham, acting on information received, bought \$2,000 worth of tickets

⁷⁸ Sun, 26 September 1989, p.2.

⁷⁹ Age, 1 October 1990, p.23. (advertisement)

from a scalper based in Lalor and, using the ticket numbers, traced them back to Collingwood. The club was fined \$50,000.⁸⁰

At the beginning of the twenty-first century, football entered a new era with the demise of the Waverley ground and the opening of the Colonial Stadium in Melbourne's Docklands precinct. Many of the Game's most enthusiastic and dedicated supporters became pessimistic about the possibility of being able to continue to support their clubs in the manner to which they had become accustomed. The prevailing mood was not unlike the reactive depression experienced by Elizabeth Kübler-Ross's patients who found that the treatment and hospitalisation that they required exerted a financial burden that left them unable to afford 'little luxuries at first and necessities later on'.⁸¹ Although the general admission price at home-and-away matches still compared favourably to most other alternative forms of popular entertainment, the trend towards smaller 'boutique' stadia was tending to make the pre-booking of reserved seats essential at many games. It made sound business sense for the A.F.L. to schedule matches at grounds with only barely enough capacity to hold the expected crowd. The closure of the Waverley, a venue rarely filled to capacity, would appear to have been a ploy by the A.F.L. to phase the general admission cash spectator out of physical presence at matches.

General admission spectators were excluded from the Grand Final after 1957. After 1977 they were appeased by the provision of 'live' television coverage

⁸⁰ Linnell, Gary, Football Ltd.: the inside story of the A.F.L. Sydney, Ironbark, 1995, pp.282-283.

⁸¹ Kübler-Ross, op.cit., p.75.

of the event. The increasing availability of this armchair option did much to induce a state of acceptance among fans who no longer found actual attendance at matches viable. It was clear from the A.F.L.'s embrace of the Colonial Stadium concept that it was willing to forego the direct patronage of this section of the market altogether, preferring to allow this group to make its contribution to football indirectly, through its willingness to be exposed to television advertising.

Football supporters of modest means, who chose to pay the additional amounts required to attend matches in the modern era, were faced with the prospect of armchair status if their team was good enough to make the Grand Final. Some bargained against this possibility by taking out priority membership, usually at more than double the price of standard season ticket membership. The prospect of this continuing to guarantee Grand Final ticket access depended on a ceiling being placed on the number of members allowed into these 'Social Club' or 'Gold Member' categories. Trends suggested that, in time, only members of higher-level coteries and those holding corporate sponsor status would be able to feel confident of being able to attend a Grand Final in which their favoured club was playing.

A more secure alternative to Social Club or Gold membership was A.F.L. or M.C.C. membership. Subscription rates to these organisations were considerably less than the financial commitment required for corporate sponsorship of a club or membership of most coterie groups. Joining the M.C.C. or the A.F.L., however, normally involved a long waiting period. In April 1990 the M.C.C. encouraged its

members to nominate their children or grandchildren for club membership at birth for a fee of \$10. There were over 73,000 people on the waiting list at the time and it was estimated that new nominees would have to wait 27 years to become full members.⁸² No waiting period applied, of course, on 15 November 1838, when five men paid one guinea each to subscribe to the club which they had just formed.⁸³ Tradition born of longevity and the privileges which go with membership of a club which enjoyed a pre-eminent position in Melbourne's sporting culture, made M.C.C. membership what the M.C.C. News, in no idle boast, described as 'the sporting world's most prized possession.'⁸⁴

A.F.L. membership had almost 130 years less to generate a waiting list, beginning, as it did, in 1966 with the V.F.L.'s subscription plan to help finance the building of V.F.L. Park. It wasted no time in catching up, however. In 1998 the A.F.L. had 34,505 full members. A further 17,442 enjoyed restricted membership status, with another 15,000 on the waiting list. A report in the Herald Sun in May 1999 estimated that new applicants would need to wait between 15 and 20 years to become full members.⁸⁵ On those figures, A.F.L. membership, like M.C.C. membership, would not appear to be an option for an individual wishing to guarantee access to Grand Final ticket sales in the short term. Estimation of waiting periods is naturally fraught with uncertainties. For example, if the M.C.G. suddenly ceased to be the Grand Final venue it is quite likely

⁸² M.C.C. News, No.84, April 1990. (pages not numbered)

⁸³ M.C.C. News, No.77, November 1987. (pages not numbered)

⁸⁴ M.C.C. News, No.89, November 1991. (pages not numbered)

that membership of the M.C.C. would fall away to a figure more befitting that of the district cricket club which Melbourne essentially is. The thought of a waiting list for membership of any district cricket club other than Melbourne would be laughable. It was only the club's occupancy of Melbourne's largest and most popular sporting venue that made membership a 'prized possession'.

In May 1999, the A.F.L. decided to allow 5,000 Colonial Stadium subscribers effectively to jump the queue into full A.F.L. membership, effective from Season 2000. No longer would the mere passage of time guarantee the option of A.F.L. membership to any person with either the patience to endure the long waiting period, or forebears with the foresight to have previously nominated them. The 'Medallion Club', as this initiative of the A.F.L. and Channel 7 was known, provided subscribers with prime seating at Colonial Stadium as well as access to matches at the M.C.G., including the Grand Final. Each member had to commit to an initial \$5,000, plus annual fees of up to \$5,000 for five years, a 'bargain' clearly beyond the reach of most football supporters. In announcing the decision, Wayne Jackson stressed that the 5,000 Grand Final seats would come out of the A.F.L. members' allocation rather than that of the A.F.L. clubs.⁸⁵ It seemed, however, that some club members did not hear his assurance. A group of Kangaroo supporters, members of the priority membership category, 'Pagan's Patrons', interviewed by the Herald Sun on the day of the announcement, feared that the League's decision had seriously reduced their chances of being able to buy tickets if their club were

⁸⁵ Herald Sun, 21 May 1999, p.118.

⁸⁶ Ibid.

to make the Grand Final.⁸⁷ Their fears, groundless though they were, were based on past experience of the A.F.L.'s elitism and a perception that such elitism would inevitably continue and get worse. As 'Pagan's Patrons' member, Colin Dickson, put it:

It's another example of the A.F.L. not looking after the ordinary supporter ... They're pushing for clubs to get more members but they're leaving us less and less tickets.⁸⁸

While Dickson's concerns were based on incorrect detail, they would certainly have struck a chord with the A.F.L.'s restricted members and people on the waiting list, who were the real victims of the decision. In any case, as stated earlier, perception was a stronger influence than fact in determining the attitude of a club member denied a Grand Final ticket. For a supporter such as Colin Dickson it was as if experience of past injustices had created the expectation that injustice would continue. This produced a 'preparatory depression' of the kind referred to by Kübler-Ross, whose terminally ill subjects entered just such an attitude in order to prepare themselves for their 'final separation from this world.'⁸⁹

The fanzine, Hot Pies, an unofficial monthly publication for Collingwood supporters which, by its own admission, was not 'burdened by truth or fact in

⁸⁷ Ibid. p.15.

⁸⁸ Ibid.

⁸⁹ Kübler-Ross, op.cit., p.76.

the compilation of any article',⁹⁰ was also free of the burden of both A.F.L. censorship and the bourgeois sensibilities of the Herald Sun or the Age. As such it provided the perfect vehicle for this perception-based outburst by one of its writers incensed by the A.F.L.'s Medallion Club decision. Its tone, however, suggested regression from the depression stage back into naked anger.

I wouldn't want to be the ticket girl at Lulie Street who tells me there aren't any tickets left after I've been sleeping outside the ground for three months. The thought of five thousand sushi-eating, hatchback-driving, apartment-living, homeware-buying yuppies and their chunky arsed girlfriends seeing Collingwood win next year's Flag instead of me is perverse. Docklands memberships are destined to become yet another wanky outer-directed status symbol carried by people who cheapen everything they touch. The prohibitive and restrictive realities of Docklands are about to slap real footy fans in the face.⁹¹

For die-hard supporters without the financial resources to commit thousands of dollars a year either to their particular club or to the League, basic club membership provided little or no chance of being able to attend the Grand Final. While priority membership still served as an insurance policy against Grand Final

⁹⁰ Hot Pies, Issue 3, July 1999, p.3.

⁹¹ Ibid. p.5.

ticket disappointment, the premiums were high, and claims were, of course, only payable when the particular club defied the seven-to-one odds against making the Grand Final in a 16-team competition. Considering these odds, buying a ticket from a moderately greedy scalper when one's club qualified for the Grand Final could have been regarded as a more astute act of bargaining than paying for Social Club membership year after year. In any case, the viability of the priority membership option as a guarantee of Grand Final ticket access appeared certain to be eroded as memberships of these categories continued to grow. With corporate coteries and elites such as the Medallion Club gradually taking a larger portion of the available seating, the future of the Social Club as a Grand Final ticket guarantee seemed limited.

Essentially the League's attitude at the turn of the millennium was the same as it had been during its battle, on behalf of club members, against the M.C.G. Trustees in the 1950s and 1960s. The League still considered grand finals to be primarily for 'insiders', not the general public. In 1968, 'insider' status could be bought for the price of a season ticket. In 2000 the cost was much higher and rising. A new schedule of membership categories and fees drawn up by the Collingwood Football Club for Season 2000 failed to provide Social Club members with any guarantee of access to a Grand Final ticket in the event of the club making the Grand Final. Only members prepared to commit to a reserved seating package covering 16 home-and-away matches in Melbourne for \$495, compared to the basic Social Club membership fee of \$255 for 11 matches or

\$310 for 16 matches, were guaranteed access.⁹²

Using the Ian Andrews framework, football's insiders could themselves be said to comprise a community. Such a community would fit the third understanding, its members' sense of belonging being based on a common feeling of having made an indispensable contribution to the ongoing viability either of a club or of the League itself. The right to attend the Grand Final could be seen as a badge of insider status, transferable as a corporate favour to people 'in the know' who were thereby granted honorary membership of the community for a day.

In view of the financially driven criteria for insider status, which a breakdown of Grand Final ticket allocation revealed, it seemed anomalous that the official cheersquads of the competing Grand Final clubs were each given access to 300 tickets. Cheersquad members paid an annual fee that varied from cheersquad to cheersquad. On 1998 prices, adult members of the St.K.C.S. paid \$15 for their first year's membership and \$10 per year thereafter. Club membership was optional, but a season ticket was required for access to the cheersquad's finals ticket supply.⁹³ The annual subscription to the Official Richmond Cheer Squad (O.R.C.S) was only \$5, but a season ticket was required for access to the squad's roped-off area at home-and-away matches.⁹⁴ Proceeds from cheersquad membership dues were revenue for the squads, not the clubs. While squads sometimes donated surplus funds back to their

⁹² 'Membership: loyalty, commitment, tradition, passion, strength forever', membership brochure, Collingwood Football Club, Season 2000.

⁹³ Research interview, Barry Ross, 20 August 1998, p.6.

⁹⁴ Research interview, David Norman, 30 September

clubs at the end of the season, most squads' expenses were either paid in full or subsidised by the club or its sponsors. The Essendon Cheer Squad, in 1998, received \$14,000 from the club to cover its expenses for the year.⁹⁵ Although it did not provide a fixed annual budget, the St.Kilda Football Club met all expenses for crepe paper and sticky tape used in the making of its cheersquad's weekly banners.⁹⁶ In net terms, most cheersquads were a financial liability to their respective clubs.

For most supporters, insider status was a reward for philanthropy, but those who joined cheersquads were regarded as insiders by virtue of an apparent loophole, which rewarded dedication rather than financial commitment. For most squads, 300 tickets were not enough to cover the entire membership. Squad leaders were therefore usually required to make decisions as to which squad members should be given access to tickets. Essendon Cheer Squad president, Shayne Honey, kept records during the year of those squad members who assisted in fund-raising and banner-making. He estimated that this would have accounted for approximately 50 of the 300 tickets. The remainder of the tickets would have gone to those members he recognised as having been regularly in attendance at matches during the home-and-away series.⁹⁷

The immunity which cheersquads enjoyed, and (at time of writing) still enjoyed, from what Ken Rigby described as the 'patronising indifference and snobbery

1998, p.15.

⁹⁵ Research interview, Shayne Honey, 24 July 1998, p.5.

⁹⁶ Pam Mawson interview, p.4.

⁹⁷ Shayne Honey interview, p.8.

of football's decision makers'⁹⁸ may well have been an anachronism destined for imminent correction. The persistence of this anachronism through the market-driven 1990s, however, made the cheersquad phenomenon of the last forty years of the twentieth century a compelling topic for detailed study. This will be taken up in the next two chapters.

The remainder of football's common herd became, in effect, a victim of its own emotional attachment. Elite Australian Football was as much a spectacle as a game. The spectacle was, to a large extent, a product of football's immense popularity. Competitive professionalism on the field could only be sustained by considerable financial input from the other side of the pickets. Since the 1970s popular support was not enough. Corporate support met the shortfall and fuelled further professionalism, widening the gap between the clubs' financial needs and the funds that could be derived from the non-corporate sector. Mindful of their reliance on business, football authorities courted the corporate sector at the expense of the public, possibly losing sight of the fact that it was as much the spectacle as the Game itself that made football attractive to sponsors. The ordinary supporter was welcome, space permitting, but space at Grand Finals was scarce and the League could afford to be choosy with its invitations. Naturally it favoured the business sector, from which it derived the bulk of its revenue. The result was a Grand Final ticketing system inadequate for the demands of the non-corporate sector. It was a system that enabled abuses such as scalping. Governments and Oppositions made occasional populist

⁹⁸ Age, 24 September 1997, p.A14.

gestures against scalping but were collectively loath to interfere with what were essentially exercises in speculative capitalism. The system also provided incentive for rank-and-file members willing and able to part with extra money to upgrade to priority memberships, while banishing the rest to the armchair. With many die-hard club supporters thus excluded from physical presence at the match, the Grand Final became a kind of corporate networking party with an atmosphere vastly different to that of a home-and-away match. For most members of the football public the Grand Final was an event to be watched on television and read about in newspapers. In recognition of the vastness of its audience, the electronic and print media gave the event a build-up rarely matched by its coverage of any other sporting or cultural event. Grand Final week brouhaha became a media-driven extension of the public's interest in football's ultimate event. The festivities, however, provided little solace for the club member unable to purchase a ticket to the match itself. Such victims needed to blame and few could understand that they were, in effect, victims of their own passion. So, they blamed the A.F.L., they blamed the M.C.C., they blamed the Government and they blamed their own clubs. Grand Final ticket rage thus provided a glaring annual illustration of the growing chasm between football and the public whose support made the corporate sector's transformation of the Game into an industry viable.