

Chapter 6:

THE GRAND FINAL

At first sight, club members' acceptance of the St.Kilda, North Melbourne and Richmond relocations of 1964 and 1965 suggested that popular sovereignty over League football, based on a combination of the barracker's clout as a consumer and the club member's power as a voter, remained unbroken. The V.F.L. and the clubs were forced to court public patronage by making the Game as universally accessible and attractive as possible. Their success or otherwise was readily measurable, week by week, in turnstile clicks. Every September, however, the dynamics of the market were apt to change.

For the dedicated supporter of a League football club, a football season was like an emotional roller-coaster as the club's fortunes rose and fell from week to week. A club's overall success could be measured each week by its position on the premiership ladder. For many supporters the ride ended when the home-and-away series ended. Supporters of clubs at the bottom end of the ladder had to put their hopes on hold during the spring and summer months to come. Some adopted another club temporarily during September. In 1990 for example, members of the Carlton, St.Kilda and North Melbourne cheersquads helped to bolster the numbers of the West Coast Cheer Squad during the Eagles' finals campaign.¹ Many other supporters of non-finalists turned their weekend attention to other things.

For the supporters of the more successful clubs, the last four weeks of the League football season represented the culmination of a year of fluctuating emotions. The quest for premiership success became intensified as the emotional stakes rose with each week that a club survived the finals. Under the final eight system, introduced in 1994 and modified prior to the 2000 season, each of the first three weeks of the finals series brought the premiership aspirations of two more clubs to an abrupt halt. Eventually only two clubs remained for the ultimate event. Previous finals systems differed in detail but all systems since 1931 have been based on the idea of the gradual elimination of teams until only two remained for a final showdown.

While casual football spectators were generally free to exercise their freedom as consumers by choosing whether or not to attend football week by week, many football followers could not be labelled 'casual'. Football clubs attracted a 'die-hard' element for whom attendance was almost a non-negotiable obligation. Only circumstances beyond their control would have kept them from their weekly observance. They tended to be season ticket holders because the season ticket was a less expensive option over a full season than week-by-week admission. Such people would not willingly have missed a single match played by their favourite club, let alone an appearance in a Grand Final. To watch the match on television would not have fulfilled their perceived obligation. Actual attendance was essential.

The Grand Final, however, was played in a stadium of finite capacity. Tickets were scarce relative to the demands of people, casual or

¹ Research interview, 'Teresa', 20 August 1998, p.1.

otherwise, wishing to attend. This scarcity became acute, particularly for football supporters of modest means, in the last decade and a half of the twentieth century. A media generated boom in the popularity of the Game raised demand for football. At the same time, the spectator capacity of the Grand Final venue decreased as a result of the replacement of standing areas with bucket seating and the provision of lavish facilities for the Game's corporate contributors. Outrage at the inability of season ticket holders from the competing clubs to gain access to Grand Final tickets became part of the annual Grand Final week ritual. The celebrations by supporters of the successful Preliminary Finalists frequently ended in despair on the following Monday when those clubs' ticket allotments were sold out. Long queues of empty-handed die-hards expressed futile rage at the A.F.L., their own clubs and those who had used their wealth or their corporate connections to obtain privileges beyond the reach of most people. A willingness to spend several days in a queue had once been sufficient test of a supporter's loyalty to ensure a ticket to the Game's ultimate event. However, the testimonies of disappointed supporters, which appeared annually in the popular press in the week leading up to the Grand Final, suggested that this was no longer the case.

Prior to 1957 a section of the M.C.G. was set aside during the finals series for seats which could be reserved. The remainder of the stadium, both seating and standing room, was available to the general public on a 'first come, first served' basis.² The practice whereby members of any V.F.L. club could

use their season ticket to gain admission to any finals match at no further charge was discontinued in 1926.³ Season ticket holders, however, received fluctuating degrees of priority in the purchase of finals tickets since the expansion of the pre-booking system for finals matches in 1957. Although membership of all League clubs increased significantly during the late 1980s and the 1990s, competing club members could still feel reasonably confident of obtaining access to Qualifying, Semi and Preliminary Final tickets, at least when the match was played at the M.C.G, during this period. The season ticket, however, became close to worthless for securing an option to purchase a Grand Final ticket by the end of the century. It was the League's control over the distribution of tickets to its ultimate event that would make the League's sovereignty over the Game more transparent. As a result, football barrackers, like Elizabeth Kübler-Ross's patients, would no longer be 'able to maintain a make-believe world'. Instead, their denial of any threat to their perceived sovereignty over the Game would be 'replaced by feelings of anger, rage, envy and resentment'.⁴

In 1933, after a then-record crowd of 75,754 had attended the Grand Final between South Melbourne and Richmond, the Trustees of the M.C.G. received permission from the State Government to increase the

² V.F.L. Annual Report, Season 1957, pp.5-6.

³ V.F.L. Annual Report, Season 1987, p.39. (taken from the section 'Progressive growth of Australian Football: 1858 to 1986', an official chronology of the Game's development up to that time, which was a regular feature in V.F.L. Annual Reports).

⁴ Kübler-Ross, op.cit., p.44.

capacity of the ground to 100,000.⁵ Already the public's enthusiasm for V.F.L. football was over-taxing the largest available Grand Final venue. Ian Harriss, in his comparative study of the cultural significance of cricket in England and Australia, described Melbourne's famous ground as 'remarkably democratic and egalitarian'. After the significant upgrading of facilities in the mid-1930s, the M.C.G. provided 'very large numbers of people [with] accommodation of a much higher standard than anything available to the general public in England.'⁶ The improved ground proved to be more than adequate to meet popular demand for cricket and the vast majority of football matches. These and further improvements to the ground over the next thirty years, however, served only to prove that the demand for finals football, particularly the Grand Final, would continue to increase to fill whatever space the M.C.G. Trustees made available.

The 1937 Grand Final provided the first occasion to put the newly improved stadium to the test. Although construction of the Southern Stand had increased the ground's capacity significantly, the availability of spectator accommodation fell well short of the 100,000 hoped for. A new crowd record was set when 88,540 (approximately one twelfth of the population of Melbourne) attended Geelong's victory over Collingwood. Demand clearly continued to exceed supply. An estimated 10,000 latecomers were turned away when the Department of Health ordered the closure of gates ten minutes prior to the start of the match. Facilities were still taxed beyond their limit. An

⁵ V.F.L. Annual Report, Season 1933, p.14.

⁶ Harriss, *op.cit.*, p.86.

'overflow of thousands' of spectators sat precariously on the grass between the fence and the boundary line.⁷ Officials managed to squeeze an extra 8,294 spectators into the ground the following year for the Carlton-Collingwood Grand Final, but people were still turned away when the gates were closed 15 minutes prior to the match.⁸

During the first half of the 1940s, attendances fell as many of the Game's greatest players and a significant portion of its potential paying public forsook club colours for khaki. The M.C.G. itself was taken over for military purposes from 1942 to 1945, forcing finals matches on to suburban venues incapable of accommodating the steadily growing crowds which had been attending finals football during the 1930s.

When the war ended, football entered an era of unprecedented popularity and prosperity. In the late 1940s and early 1950s, lockouts at Grand Finals became normal. There were, however, significant variations in the actual numbers of spectators admitted. In 1951 the attendance had reached only 85,795 before the Department of Health intervened.⁹ This was significantly lower than the 96,834 who were able to gain admission in 1938.¹⁰

There are several possible explanations for these variations. One is that Health Department officials may have been more zealous in their duties, or more generous in their estimation of the amount of space needed, per spectator, in some years than in others. Variations in the number of vacant seats in the M.C.C.

⁷ V.F.L. Annual Report, Season 1937, p.17.

⁸ V.F.L. Annual Report, Season 1938, p.6.

⁹ V.F.L. Annual Report, Season 1951, p.3.

¹⁰ Atkinson, Graeme, The complete book of A.F.L. finals, Melbourne, Five Mile Press, 1996.

members' reserve would also explain how a 'capacity' attendance could vary so noticeably from one year to the next. Another explanation, significant in the light of the subsequent development of a pre-booking system and the extension of reserved seating areas, could be that crowds made better use of the available space in some years than others. Under a first-come, general admission system, persons arriving early who chose to occupy aisle seating before the space in the middle of the seating bay had become occupied would have been in the way of those arriving later. This could have possibly provided a mild psychological disincentive for those newcomers to sit in that particular row. As a result some rows may have been more fully occupied than others depending on whether the earliest arrivals had chosen to sit mid-bay or on the aisle. What might have appeared to be a full house to Health Department officials could have contained many vacant seats not immediately apparent to a person making a cursory visual scan of the entire crowd.

In 1954, construction works in preparation for the 1956 Olympic Games exacerbated the inadequacy of available spectator space at the Grand Final. During construction of the Olympic Stand, a section normally used for reserved seating was unavailable.¹¹ As a result, a mere 80,897 people witnessed Footscray's win over Melbourne. Many of these were seated between the fence and the boundary line.¹² Faced with the loss of its reserved seat revenue, the V.F.L. successfully applied to the State Government for permission to make

¹¹ V.F.L. Annual Report, Season 1954, p.3.

¹² Lack, John McConville, Chris Small, Michael and Wright, Damien, A history of the Footscray Football Club: Unleashed, Melbourne, Aus-Sport Enterprises, 1996, p.183.

the Outer patrons foot the bill. Adult Outer admission prices were increased by 33.3% (from 3/- to 4/-). Even so, the gate receipts of £12,715/2/4 fell well short of the record established the previous year, when 89,060 spectators paid £14,537/1/10.¹³ A section of the partially built Olympic Stand was used as standing room for the 1955 finals series and the M.C.C. helped by making part of the Members' enclosure available to the general public.¹⁴

The following year non-members again gained access to the enclosure, but this time by force. The increased capacity of the stadium as a result of the completion of the Olympic Stand, had fuelled optimism that the M.C.G. could finally cope with the accommodation demands of a Grand Final crowd. However, a new record crowd of 115,802, the largest in Australian sporting history to that time, caused another lockout.¹⁵

Sporting Globe reporter, John Monks, suggested that the official crowd figure was thousands short of the real number. It did not count those who forced their way in by crashing through gates and climbing fences after gates were shut at 12.45 p.m. Crowds huddled 'within inches of death' 80 feet above the ground on concrete 'pill boxes' on top of the dangerously overcrowded Olympic Stand. Ambulance and Police staff were kept busy 'hand[ing] fainting men, women and children over the heads of the crowd to the arena' as the pressure of the crowd crushed people against fences. At 1.10 p.m., Police were powerless to stop the crowd from spilling over the fence to take up

¹³ V.F.L. Annual Reports, Season 1953, p.3 and Season 1954, p.3.

¹⁴ V.F.L. Annual Report, Season 1955, p.3.

vantage points between the fence and the boundary line. Meanwhile thousands of would-be patrons, denied access to the ground, were 'stalking from one closed gate to another', seeking entry. John Monks reported that a chant of 'Let's storm the Members' arose outside the ground, while patrons inside who wished to leave could not do so because of the locked gates. Men and women needing to use toilet facilities were faced with queues 100 yards long.¹⁶

With many empty seats remaining in the Members' enclosure, the members had been spared the chaos that was reigning in the Outer. This was to change, however, when the opening of a gate outside the ground to allow a military band to enter for the pre-match entertainment gave a mob of 'punching, kicking men' the opportunity to force entry. Hundreds more poured into the enclosure by scaling the fence of the bowling green. Before long the 'exclusive' enclosure was as crowded as the Outer and the elite were forced to endure a plebeian presence for the remainder of the afternoon.¹⁷

The 1956 Grand Final was the last Grand Final at which the option of cash admission was available to customers. Prior to the building of the Olympic Stand, reserved seating had been available in the area subsequently occupied by that stand. The reservation system was not used in 1954 and 1955, during which accommodation at the ground was restricted as a result of construction works. During 1956 the V.F.L. applied to the Trustees to have 13,000 seats set aside for reservation. The Olympic Games Organising Committee

¹⁵ V.F.L. Annual Report, Season 1956, p.3.

¹⁶ Sporting Globe, 15 September 1956, p.1.

¹⁷ Ibid.

had indicated to the League that it was willing to mark out the seats in accordance with the Olympic Games box plan in time for the football finals. The Trustees, however, would approve the setting aside of just 5,000 seats in the new stand for reservation.¹⁸ The chairman of the Trustees and subsequent Federal A.L.P. leader, Arthur Calwell, issued a press statement shortly before the finals denying that the Trustees had exercised a discretionary power in declining the League's offer to arrange the reserved seating in collaboration with the Games organisers. According to Calwell it was not possible for the Trustees to hand this responsibility to the League without the passing of a special Act of Parliament.¹⁹ Nevertheless the League's frustration with its relationship with the Trustees was apparent in its Annual Report, in which the League stressed that it could accept no responsibility for the decision to provide only 5,000 reserved seats instead of 13,000.²⁰

Under the terms of the occupancy agreement between the V.F.L., the M.C.C. and the M.C.G. Trustees, which applied for the 15 year period to the end of the 1956 finals series, the chairman of the Trustees had the ultimate say in any disputes concerning the V.F.L.'s use of the M.C.G.²¹ A new occupancy agreement, for the 15 year period commencing in 1957, gave that authority to an independent person nominated by the chairman of the Victorian Bar Council.²² An amendment to the Melbourne Cricket Ground Act that year provided for the V.F.L. president, along

¹⁸ V.F.L. Annual Report, Season 1956, p.3.

¹⁹ Age, 24 August 1956, p.19.

²⁰ V.F.L. Annual Report, Season 1956, p.3.

²¹ V.F.L. Annual Report, Season 1957, p.14.

²² Ibid.

with his V.C.A. counterpart, to be appointed as a Trustee.²³ The new agreement came about as the result of what the League described as 'long and, at times, difficult and frustrating discussions' between February and December 1957.²⁴

In the meantime, the success of the pre-booking system which applied during the Olympic Games, following closely on the heels of crowd chaos at the 1956 Grand Final, had convinced all responsible parties of the merits of the League's desire to provide as much reserved seating as possible at finals matches. With the approval of the M.C.C. and the Trustees, a new scale of admission charges was drawn up for the 1957 finals, providing for individual seating, block seating and standing room in both the Outer and Grandstand enclosures, all to be pre-sold. Despite general agreement as to the desirability of the new ticketing arrangements, ongoing disputes over the terms and conditions of the new occupancy agreement delayed the organisation of the new booking arrangements until less than two weeks prior to the commencement of the finals. Allans' Box Office was appointed as the agency for the distribution of tickets. The hastily arranged ticketing plan worked smoothly enough to convince the League that it had taken the right course of action.²⁵

The V.F.L. proposed to call all parties together early in the 1958 season to resolve problems involving the system of block reservations and the provision of an adequate supply of tickets for members of the

²³ Ibid. p15.

²⁴ V.F.L. Annual Report, Season 1957, p.14.

²⁵ V.F.L. Annual Report, Season 1957, p.5.

twelve V.F.L. clubs.²⁶ These problems were addressed, to an extent, the following year. Seating in what had been the block reservation areas was marked into individual seats for reservation. The League obtained a quota of tickets for distribution to football club members but reported that the number of tickets available for this purpose was insufficient to meet demand.²⁷ For the next several seasons the League and the Trustees would clash annually over the matter of who should actually decide to whom finals tickets were made available, the League arguing that members of its clubs should be given priority access over the general public.

Introduced ostensibly for the benefit of patrons as an antidote to problems of overcrowding and related disorder, pre-booking impacted on football culture in ways not immediately foreseeable. It is unlikely that scholars will ever find a reliable way to measure crowd 'atmosphere' at a sporting event. The historian is even more poorly placed in this regard, being forced to rely on the subjective recollections of eye-witnesses, or worse still, themselves, in trying to determine what it actually 'felt like' to be at a sporting event in a bygone era. Journalists, such as the Herald Sun's Ross Brundrett, have argued that modern developments have turned football fans into 'theatre-goers'. Pre-booking, along with related developments such as ground rationalisation, reserved bucket seating, corporate boxes and the influence of

²⁶ V.F.L. Annual Report, Season 1957, p.5.

²⁷ V.F.L. Annual Report, Season 1958, p.6.

television has allegedly taken much of the 'passion' out of football crowds.²⁸

Notions such as 'passion' or 'atmosphere' defy objective definition or measurement. However, comments made by Collingwood's 1958 premiership acting captain, Murray Weideman, in an article which appeared in the Sporting Globe in 1963, showed that at least one prominent football identity had come to the conclusion that pre-booking had killed the partisan atmosphere at Grand Finals. Weideman recalled Collingwood's previous premiership in 1953 and asserted that finals crowds had been more partisan in those days.²⁹ With a significant number of Grand Final tickets sold well before the two competing clubs had been determined, it seems likely that there would have been a greater number of neutral spectators at the match than there would have been if all spectator space were simply made available to those who arrived first on the day of the match. In order to ensure that more 'dyed-in-the-wool' supporters of the competing clubs attended, Weideman suggested that only the Olympic Stand and two bays of Southern Stand be pre-sold, the rest of the Outer being made available to first-comers.³⁰

Weideman's comments debunked a popular Australian sporting myth concerning Grand Final 'atmosphere'. During the 1990s the A.F.L. Grand Final received saturation coverage in all branches of the media. Since Weideman's day the pre-match entertainment had become progressively more extravagant. Tickets had become more expensive and harder to obtain. While popular mythology made it the most significant event

²⁸ Herald Sun, 28 October 1996, p.19.

²⁹ Sporting Globe, 2 November 1963, p.13.

³⁰ Ibid.

on the Australian sporting calendar, the occasion was over-rated according to St.Kilda Cheer Squad (St.K.C.S.) president, Pam Mawson. In a 1998 interview she remarked that the crowd atmosphere at the 1997 Grand Final had been 'as dead as a dodo'. The previous week she had attended St.Kilda's Preliminary Final win over North Melbourne. The raising of the cheersquad's run-through on that occasion had 'made the hair stand up on the back of [her] neck.'³¹ All St.Kilda and North Melbourne season ticket holders had been given the opportunity to purchase tickets prior to sales to the general public. As a result, a large percentage of the crowd held a strong emotional stake in the outcome of the match. The following week, however, Pam Mawson's feeling was completely different. The small St.K.C.S., only 120 of whom had been able to take up the option of the purchase of a ticket, was surrounded by a combination of Adelaide supporters and what Pam Mawson called the 'suited brigade', Melburnians who had used their corporate connections to obtain tickets to what she suggested was the only game of the year that many of them had attended. 'They weren't the St.Kilda supporters. They were people who go to the Grand Final', she explained. The passionate few who had been able to obtain the 6,400 tickets allocated to St.Kilda members were nearly all seated at the top of the Great Southern Stand. Although St.Kilda was competitive, leading for a significant portion of the match before succumbing to the Crows' onslaught, the St.K.C.S. had been unable to generate strong vocal support for their team at ground level.³²

³¹ Pam Mawson interview, pp.9-10.

³² Ibid.

The pre-selling of Grand Final tickets became a permanent feature since its introduction and the manner in which those tickets were allocated provided a fruitful source of outrage and controversy. Much of the sense of injustice sprang from a perception that the people who most wanted tickets were often least able to obtain them, and that many of the available tickets had been bought by people who were less than passionately concerned at the outcome. The 1960 Grand Final attendance provided evidence to support this contention. Although all tickets were sold out by the morning of the match, only 97,457 attended. The V.F.L. reported that 6,152 tickets were not presented on the day,³³ meaning that 6,152 people who may have wanted to attend the match missed out for the sake of people who did not bother to turn up. A similar sense of injustice arose when there were empty seats in the Members' enclosure.

In 1962 the V.F.L. asserted its support for the principle of pre-booking of finals seats. It argued, somewhat circularly, that the 'remarkable demand for tickets' was proof that the system was accepted by the public,³⁴ while failing to mention that the public had no other option if it wished to attend the matches.

Meanwhile the League continued its battle with the M.C.G. Trustees over the allocation of tickets for the exclusive sale to football club members. In 1962 there were 52,126 Adult and 21,881 Junior members divided among the twelve V.F.L. clubs. The League felt that these members should be given priority over the general public in the purchase of finals tickets. However, their attempts to have a more substantial

³³ V.F.L. Annual Report, Season 1960, p.5.

³⁴ V.F.L. Annual Report, Season 1962, p.6.

number of tickets set aside were thwarted by the M.C.G. Trustees who preferred to have as many tickets as possible for sale to the general public.³⁵ In 1957, when pre-booking began, the Trustees had allocated 36,000 tickets, out of the 85,000 tickets available for non-M.C.C. Members' accommodation, to the League for sale through the football clubs. These consisted of 19,000 tickets for seating and 17,000 for standing room. The allocation represented only about half of the total number of football club members.³⁶

From a 2000 perspective, the M.C.G. Trustees of the 1960s appeared quite generous in their allocation of tickets to football club members, certainly more generous than the A.F.L. appeared to be in the 1990s. From the same perspective, the League in the 1960s appeared to have been the champion of the rights of the die-hard football supporters over those of the casual patron. Through the 1990s, the A.F.L. was condemned by observers such as Dave Nadel for favouring corporate 'theatre-goers' over barrackers.³⁷ Conditions in the 1990s, however, were so different from those of thirty years earlier that simple comparison or contrast of the League's propensity to look after the 'real' fan can be misleading. By the end of the twentieth century the League had long since assumed control of the distribution of tickets to its own fixtures. Club memberships, however, had increased to such an extent that the League could not accommodate members of the competing clubs at the Grand Final, let alone the members of all clubs. The

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ V.F.L. Annual Report, Season 1957, p.5.

³⁷ Nadel, Dave, 'What is a football community?' in Occasional Papers in Football Studies, Vol.1, No.1, January 1998, p.66.

general public, whose rights the Trustees of the 1960s had upheld with such determination, was no longer part of the equation, while season tickets had become too common to guarantee their holders an invitation to the Grand Final.

The 1962 Grand Final was the first V.F.L. match televised in full. When all tickets had sold out, the League agreed to allow television stations to record the entire match on video-tape for subsequent screening. Previously, stations had been restricted to showing only half an hour of any one match.³⁸ Although live Grand Final telecasts were still 15 years away, this 1962 decision by the V.F.L. set an important precedent in the development of the Grand Final, and indeed of football generally, into an event for television. By the end of the century, watching the television coverage would be as close as most Australian Football fans would be able to get to seeing a Grand Final.

In 1963 the League opted to have ticket sales centralised at the one outlet, the M.C.G. itself, in preference to having several selling points around the city. Allen's Pty. Ltd. was still the selling agent³⁹ but its Collins Street box office would only see action if tickets remained unsold after the two days set aside for selling at the M.C.G. This system provided for one day of sales to football club members and another for the general public.

In 1965, Monday 16 August was the day allocated for sales to football club members. All tickets for seats were to be sold as a series covering the four finals matches. An allotment of 630 of these was made

³⁸ V.F.L. Annual Report, Season 1962, p.6.

³⁹ V.F.L. Annual Report, Season 1963, p.5.

available to each of the twelve clubs. Standing room series tickets were also available. Six entrance gates to the ground were designated as selling points, with two clubs sharing each selling point. Geelong members received special consideration. The Cats' allotment of tickets was split between Northern Stand entrance number 12, which it shared with Footscray, and a selling point at Kardinia Park. The following Wednesday, 18 August, was set aside for the sale of 16,000 series seating tickets to the general public. Standing room series tickets could also be purchased. Patrons were asked to queue at one of 13 selling booths, each covering the sale of tickets for seating in a particular area of the ground.⁴⁰

The system did not go close to satisfying the demand. Club members who missed out on the Monday were faced with the prospect of queuing again for the Wednesday sales. St.Kilda secretary, Ian Drake, echoed the sentiments of most League clubs by describing the system as a 'farce'. His South Melbourne counterpart, Alby Goodall, whose club used the same selling point as St.Kilda, told of a St.Kilda supporter who had spent 12 hours in the Saints' queue only to miss out. Melbourne secretary, Jim Cardwell, suggested that clubs actually competing in the finals should be given a greater allocation of series tickets than those not competing.⁴¹ The League already gave some priority to competing club members by making a special allotment of 1,000 tickets available to each competing club for the four individual finals matches.⁴² This would have

⁴⁰ Age, 3 August 1965, p.20.

⁴¹ Age, 17 August 1965, p.22.

⁴² Age, 3 August 1965, p.22.

still been inadequate, particularly for more popular clubs, such as Collingwood.

Spending long periods of time in queues was a regular part of the lifestyles of many dedicated football supporters in the 1960s. In 1965, queues for the Monday ticket sales to club members began forming on the preceding Friday. The Age reported that 1,500 people had spent the Sunday night queuing in steady rain. Some of the better-prepared enthusiasts had brought tents or tarpaulins to make their vigil a little more comfortable. Some even had beds.⁴³ Although many fans endured the night with a stoicism born of necessity, others found ways to make a virtue of the same necessity. Essendon Cheer Squad member, Margret McKee, interviewed in 1998, recalled such occasions with fondness.

You'd just be in this queue and people would bring their guitars and they'd be singing. It was just a real party thing. I mean, we just had the best times.⁴⁴

Not everybody shared Margret McKee's sense of fun. The V.F.L. wanted full control of ticket sales and approached the State Government for help. Acting Premier, Mr. Rylah, called upon the Under-Secretary, Mr. J.V. Dillon, to investigate whether the ticketing system could be improved.⁴⁵ When Dillon canvassed the public for suggestions, he received, instead, a barrage of complaints. There were reports of gangs of youths pushing in at the head of queues, in some cases

⁴³ Age, 16 August 1965, p.1.

⁴⁴ Research interview, Margret McKee, 29 July 1998, p.4.

doubling back into the queues after they had been served in order to buy more tickets. Other complainants mentioned poor hygiene resulting from inadequate toilet facilities outside the ground.⁴⁶

A meeting of representatives from the Police, the Melbourne City Council, the Health Department, the V.F.L. and the M.C.G. Trustees, called by the Under Secretary, expressed concern at the method of ticket distribution and the conditions under which people were queuing. The conference concluded by inviting the League to submit a proposal for an alternative system of selling tickets to the M.C.G. Trustees for consideration. The League used the opportunity to continue its push for an increased allotment to club members, suggesting also that many of the problems would be avoided if the majority of tickets were sold at the various League grounds rather than at the one centralised location.⁴⁷

Although the League's stand against the Trustees placed it, ostensibly, as the champion of the hard-core football supporter over the general public, the squabble between the two bodies needs to be seen in the context of larger ground management issues. The League, by now, was flexing its muscles and was determined to assume greater control over its own destiny. The League at this time saw the Waverley development as the future of football. Along with St.Kilda's breakaway from what it regarded as a poor deal at the Junction Oval, it had weakened cricket's control. Entrenched privilege, built upon the staid conservative traditions that characterised the summer

⁴⁵ Age, 19 August 1965, p.22.

⁴⁶ Age, 21 August 1965, p.18.

⁴⁷ V.F.L. Annual Report, Season 1963, p.5.

game, had maintained cricket's hegemony long after the populism of the sporting market place should have removed what Ken Rigby, much later, described as the 'nineteenth century anachronism' of cricket's control over Melbourne's sporting culture.⁴⁸ A progressively more assertive V.F.L. was demanding:

... that as the body presenting V.F.L. matches, it should enjoy the right to determine the manner in which tickets for its own fixtures are made available to the public.⁴⁹

The League's proposal, submitted in response to the conference called by the Chief Secretary in 1965, was that the League be responsible for the distribution and sale of all finals tickets, for both the general public and for football club members. The Trustees responded by granting the League control of only 55% of the available tickets, the other 45% remaining under the Trustees' control for sale at the M.C.G.⁵⁰ Despite regular submissions from the V.F.L. to have the League's quota increased, the Trustees refused to budge during the remainder of their contract with the League which expired in 1971.

Faced with the Trustees' intransigence, the League opted to make better use of the tickets available. In 1968 it decided to set aside, out of its allocation, a sufficient number of tickets for every finals match to ensure that every Adult and Junior member of the two competing clubs would have the opportunity to purchase

⁴⁸ Age, 24 September 1997, p.A14.

⁴⁹ V.F.L. Annual Report, Season 1966, p.5.

⁵⁰ Ibid.

a ticket.⁵¹ For the first time since the removal of finals entitlements from season tickets in 1926, club members had guaranteed access to their own club's finals engagements at standard prices.

By the time the occupancy agreement expired the Waverley project had progressed to the point that the V.F.L. was able to negotiate with the Trustees from a stronger position than previously. A new agreement for seasons 1972 and 1973 gave the V.F.L. control of the sale of tickets for all accommodation outside of the M.C.C. Members' enclosure, on the proviso that 25% of that seating be made available to the general public.⁵² In order to deter the speculative on-selling of tickets on the black market, the League in 1971 prepared a composite ticket covering all four finals matches, instead of separate tickets. The crowd at the two Semi Finals dipped below 100,000 for the first time since the 1968 1st Semi Final and the Preliminary Final crowd of 102,494 was 5,721 less than the previous year and the lowest since 1967.⁵³ The 1971 figures went against the trend of soaring attendances in the three seasons following the completion of the Western Stand in 1967. The League explained this slight drop in attendances at the first three matches of the 1971 finals by suggesting that ticket holders who did not wish to attend a particular lead-up final themselves were generally unwilling to part with a ticket that also entitled the holder to Grand Final admission.⁵⁴

The League's decision to change to a final five system in 1972 presented new challenges to the finals ticketing system. The new six-match finals format

⁵¹ V.F.L. Annual Report, Season 1968, p.1.

⁵² V.F.L. Annual Report, Season 1971, p.7.

⁵³ Atkinson, op.cit., pp.282-300.

involved simultaneous matches at the M.C.G. and Waverley on the first two Saturdays of the series. The most noticeable impact of the new system was to reduce the size of the crowds at the individual matches in the first two weeks of the series. Although the total attendance at the first week of the 1972 finals series (144,399) was well ahead of the all-time 1st Semi Final record of 104,239 in 1970,⁵⁵ the splitting of finals patronage into two crowds at separate venues meant that facilities at the two grounds were not fully taxed. At the M.C.G. under the old final four system, near capacity crowds had become commonplace at all finals matches. Both the 52,499 who attended the St.Kilda-Essendon Elimination Final at V.F.L. Park and the 91,900 who attended the Richmond-Collingwood Qualifying Final at the M.C.G. on the same day⁵⁶ were well within the capacities of the respective venues.

In 1975 the League noted that it was becoming more difficult to sell standing room tickets, particularly in the first two weeks of the finals.⁵⁷ The following year it reported that ticket supply to clubs was actually exceeding demand for some matches.⁵⁸ By extending finals participation to the club finishing fifth at the end of the home-and-away series, it could be argued that the League had unwittingly 'cheapened' finals football. Although total crowds were clearly higher with six games instead of four, significantly fewer people were attending individual finals matches. Crowds of over 100,000 at matches other than the Grand Final became a thing of the past when the final five

⁵⁴ V.F.L. Annual Report, Season 1971, p.3.

⁵⁵ Atkinson, op.cit., pp.295-306.

⁵⁶ Ibid., p.304.

⁵⁷ V.F.L. Annual Report, Season 1975, p.3.

⁵⁸ V.F.L. Annual Report, Season 1976, p.5.

system commenced. In the period from 1972 to 1983 inclusive, prior to the introduction of Sunday finals matches in 1984, the largest attendance at an Elimination, Qualifying or Semi Final was the 94,451 who saw Collingwood defeat Carlton in the 1980 1st Semi Final. Although crowd figures for the 1972 finals series were still in excess of 90,000 for all matches played at the M.C.G., this first year of operation of the new system proved to be the exception rather than the rule. Of the 44 finals matches played in the first two weeks of the finals series from 1973 to 1983, only two matches attracted in excess of 90,000 spectators. Both matches were between the two most popular clubs of the era, Carlton and Collingwood.⁵⁹

While these observations may seem unremarkable in light of the fact that simultaneous finals matches were being played on the Saturdays in question, Preliminary Final crowds dwindled during this period. After crowds of 92,272 and 98,652 in 1972 and 1973 respectively, crowds at the League season's penultimate fixture trended downwards. A significant factor was obviously the change of venue from the M.C.G. to V.F.L. Park from 1975. The 75,526 crowd at the Geelong-Collingwood clash in 1980 should be regarded as a capacity crowd, as could the crowds in excess of 70,000 in attendance at the Preliminary Finals at Waverley in 1975, 1978 and 1979. The other five Preliminary Final crowds show a clear downward trend. Five of the nine Preliminary Finals at V.F.L. Park from 1975 to 1983 inclusive failed to attract a benchmark figure of 70,000. This was in spite of there being no other V.F.L. fixture played on the same day.⁶⁰ This lends further support to

⁵⁹ Atkinson, *op.cit.*, pp.304-374.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*

the view that finals football was cheapened by the inclusion of the extra finalist.

Given that finals football was a major source of revenue for the League, it is not surprising that the V.F.L. opted for a system that would increase the quantity of finals football being played. Seen in this light, the introduction of the final five system would seem a sound economic move on the League's part. From another perspective, however, the resulting reduction in the number of sell-out finals matches, particularly in the first two weeks of the finals series, created a buyers' market on those weeks. In a situation where supply of spectator accommodation was well in excess of demand, football fans were given an opportunity to send a message to the League. In its 1977 Annual Report, the V.F.L. noted that patrons were tending to boycott standing room accommodation. The League took this as an indication that its public was demanding better facilities than had previously been provided. A V.F.L. Finals Tickets Sub-committee successfully lobbied the M.C.C. for the introduction of additional seating areas to replace some of the standing room accommodation.⁶¹

Finals crowd figures during the boom years of the 1960s can be misleading, affected as they were by a 'captive audience' phenomenon resulting from the emphasis on series ticket sales. Under this system, a large percentage of the patrons who obtained Grand Final tickets did so as part of a series covering all four finals matches. With tickets already paid for, there was a strong incentive for such fans to attend Semi and Preliminary Finals, whether or not their club of choice was involved. Alternatively, they could sell their ticket to someone who wanted to attend. As

booming Grand Final attendances trended towards the all-time high of 121,696 in 1970, crowds at the lead up finals matches were not far behind, never falling below 90,000 in the six years from 1966 to 1971 inclusive.⁶²

The significant drop in attendances at lead-up finals matches after the introduction of the final five was not matched by a similar drop in Grand Final attendances. From 1972 to 1983 inclusive there were 13 Grand Finals played, only 4 of which failed to attract more than 110,000 spectators. One of these was the 1977 replay, which was the only Grand Final in this period that failed to produce an attendance above 100,000.⁶³ The relative stability of Grand Final crowds in this era, compared to the significant fall in attendances at lead-up finals, illustrated the pre-eminence of the Grand Final in a way that it had not been illustrated before.

The Grand Final had been football's premier event since the introduction of the Page system of playing finals matches in 1931. This system guaranteed that a Grand Final would be played every year as the culmination of a finals system which provided incentive for all clubs competing in the finals to try to win all finals matches in which they were engaged. Under the previous system, the right of challenge granted to the minor premier reduced that club's incentive to play to the best of its ability in lead-up finals. A Grand Final, as such, did not exist. The premiership was awarded to the minor premier if it went on to win the 'Final'. Failing that, a 'Challenge Final' was played between the winner of the Final and the minor premier

⁶¹ V.F.L. Annual Report, Season 1977, p.13.

⁶² Atkinson, op.cit., pp.276-300.

⁶³ Ibid., pp.304-374.

to decide the premiership. The Page system provided a greater sense of drama. Although a club finishing first or second had the 'double chance', its route to the premiership was much easier if it won the 2nd Semi Final than if it lost it, a week's rest being clearly preferable to a bruising Preliminary Final encounter with the winning 1st Semi Finalist. A definite Grand Final to decide the premier had a greater sense of finality than a 'Final' which may or may not have been the ultimate final, depending on the result. The final five system gave the minor premier the privilege of guaranteed passage to the 2nd Semi Final but maintained the incentive for each club to try to win every match and continued to guarantee a definite Grand Final.

The success of two relatively unpopular clubs, Hawthorn and North Melbourne, in the middle to late 1970s is fortuitous for the historian in that it provides evidence of the establishment of a new level of pre-eminence for the Grand Final. The two clubs met in the 1974 Qualifying Final at the M.C.G., pulling a crowd of only 77,519, well below the 91,900 attendance at the inaugural Qualifying Final between Richmond and Collingwood in 1972 and the 86,386 at the Carlton-Richmond clash in 1973. The Hawks and Kangaroos met again in the Preliminary Final. Although the crowd of 88,262 was significantly higher than the Qualifying Final attendance, it was the lowest Preliminary Final crowd since 1964. A poor 2nd Semi Final crowd of 52,076 at V.F.L. Park in 1975 provided further evidence of the lack of popularity of the two clubs. Nevertheless the rematch in the Grand Final two weeks later pulled the quite respectable figure of 110,551. The 1976 and 1977 Qualifying Finals, both played at the M.C.G., saw the two clubs opposed again. The crowds of 64,148 and

64,052 respectively would have left plenty of empty space in Melbourne's premier sporting venue. The Preliminary Final crowd of 61,242, which attended V.F.L. Park to see yet another clash between the two clubs in 1977, was a respectable figure for the venue but still well short of capacity. The 1978 2nd Semi Final between the same clubs at the same venue pulled a paltry 48,716. Despite this easily illustrated lack of drawing power on the part of the Hawthorn and North Melbourne clubs, the 1976 and 1978 Grand Finals, which they also contested, pulled 110,143 and 101,704 respectively.⁶⁴ From these figures it is clear that it was the occasion itself which attracted crowds to the Grand Final rather than the competing clubs. It would seem reasonable to assume that crowds of 100,000 or more would have attended Grand Finals in this era regardless of which clubs were playing. The difference between Grand Final crowds attracted by popular clubs and unpopular clubs was marginal. Collingwood and Carlton attracted 113,545 in 1979 and 112,964 in 1981. The only clashes between the Magpies and the Blues in lead-up finals at the M.C.G. between 1972 and 1983 were the 1st Semi Finals in 1978 and 1980, which pulled 91,933 and 94,451 respectively.⁶⁵ Clearly attendances at lead-up finals between 1972 and 1983 were, to a significant extent, determined by the drawing power of the clubs competing. The Grand Final had become an event in its own right, which transcended the popularity of the competing clubs.

In 1977 the V.F.L. entered a new era in its presentation of the Game. This was particularly evident

⁶⁴ Ibid., pp.304-342.

⁶⁵ Ibid., pp.304-374.

in the build-up to the Grand Final, with a motorcade of the competing teams through city streets on the eve of the match.⁶⁶ The Grand Final parade became an annual event. In another innovation, the League invited popular Australian entertainer, Barry Crocker, to sing 'The Impossible Dream' and 'Advance Australia Fair' in a pre-match mini-concert.⁶⁷ Although some form of entertainment had been provided for Grand Final spectators previously, the Barry Crocker performance was the most ambitious and extravagant show undertaken at a Grand Final to this time. It set a precedent for what has since become a tradition of providing elaborate pre-match entertainment on Grand Final Day, with each year's effort appearing to be an attempt to outdo all previous efforts.

The 1977 Grand Final set another precedent by being the first Grand Final to be televised live in its entirety in Melbourne. With sell-outs virtually guaranteed, the idea of televising the Grand Final had been under consideration for several years but the stumbling block had always been negotiations over the price payable by the television networks to the League. In 1977 this was resolved and the result of the match could not have been better if it had been scripted. Indeed a cynic may well have suspected that the result had been pre-arranged when the famous Collingwood-North Melbourne draw provided not only riveting television but also the windfall of another sold-out Grand Final, and another 'live' telecast, the following week.

⁶⁶ V.F.L. Annual Report, Season 1977, p.2.

⁶⁷ Ibid.

The League's decision in the late 1990s to abandon its ground at Waverley, once hailed as football's new frontier, in favour of the significantly smaller Colonial Stadium in the near-city Docklands precinct was greeted with puzzled incredulity by those who realised that the new venture would make pre-booking of seats essential for many home-and-away matches. However, when seen as a logical extension to the pre-booking system for finals seats, introduced in 1957 in response to a serious excess demand for finals football, the League's motives are easier to understand. By gradually wresting control of finals ticket distribution away from the obstructive M.C.G. Trustees, the League laid claim to a site strategically essential to its sovereignty over the Game. The greater the disparity between supply and demand for Grand Final tickets the stronger the League's control of that site would become. The Docklands move was simply an extension of the same principle. A deliberate under-supply of seating through the home-and-away round would neutralise the public's week-to-week turnstile sovereignty, thereby reinforcing the notion that football was the A.F.L.'s Game.

At the end of the 1970s, however, a kind of equilibrium existed in the power struggle. While excess demand for Grand Final tickets was inevitable, the system of priority access for season ticket holders from the two competing clubs ensured that the die-hards would not be excluded from their clubs' most important matches. In turn, the possibility of a club making the Grand Final helped to sell memberships. Supporters who did not commit themselves

for the full season ran the risk of missing out when it mattered most.

Meanwhile, the Grand Final continued to grow in stature and pre-eminence, despite a general decline in football attendances during the 1970s and early 1980s. Although the V.F.L. was forced to court patronage for most of the season, its licence to exploit the Grand Final knew no bounds. Corporate forces would soon upset the equilibrium. The League's control of finals ticket distribution had set the precedent for a more savage exploitation in the last decade and a half of the century, when a surge in membership numbers and a growing reliance on corporate support would significantly devalue the season ticket. Pre-booking, originally introduced in the public's interest as the League's response to the mid-1950s crisis in Grand Final spectator accommodation, would become the League's most potent weapon for the subjugation of its public. The class privilege subverted by the storming of the Members' enclosure in 1956 would pale into insignificance in comparison to the chasm that would divide football's corporate and non-corporate sectors four decades later.