Hard Sell:
Australian Football in Sydney

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Abstract

Australian Rules football is the nation's most popular spectator sport. Few sporting activities can match the fanaticism, emotion and passion that the game generates. In Victoria, South Australia, Western Australia, and Tasmania, Australian Rules football plays a large part in the livelihood of millions of people. However, the game has had a somewhat weaker presence in the northern states, despite the fact that the expansion of Australian Rules football has long been on the agenda for administrators of the code.

This thesis examines the entry of Australian Rules football entry into the rugby-dominated domain of Sydney. It traces unsuccessful attempts made by the Victorian Football Association and the Victorian Football League to promote the code in Sydney during the 1880s and early part of the nineteenth century, the hiatus of the middle part of the 1900s when Australian Rules football seemed to wallow in obscurity, and the League's 'Sydney Experiment' in the 1970s. The thesis then goes on to examine the circumstances surrounding the relocation of the South Melbourne Football Club to Sydney in 1982, and the club's subsequent decades in the harbour city.

It is only in recent years that Australian Rules football appears to have finally made its mark in Sydney. The Sydney Football Club is attracting sizeable crowds to its home games at the Sydney Cricket Ground, many of the Swans players have a public presence in Sydney, and the game is receiving regular positive exposure in the media. The Australian Football League is also playing a role to ensure this most recent attempt to win over Sydney proves successful, promising millions of dollars to junior development. The next five to ten years remain critical in the history of the code. However, as this thesis demonstrates, professional management, visionary planning, astute marketing and an appropriate amount of additional infrastructure, has secured Australian Rules football a firm niche in the rugby stronghold of Sydney.

Declaration

I, Matthew Healy, declare that the Master by Research thesis entitled Hard Sell: Australian Football in Sydney', is no more than 60,000 words in length, exclusive of tables, figures, appendices, references and footnotes. This thesis contains no material that has been submitted previously, in whole or in part, for the award of any other academic degree or diploma. Except where otherwise indicated, this thesis is my own work.

Signature:  Date: 31 August 2002

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Abbreviations and Acronyms

AFF	Australian Football Foundation
AFL	Australian Football League
ANFC	Australian National Football Council
CAAFS	Committee for the Advancement of Australian Football in Sydney
FFC	Fitzroy Football Club
KSAS	Keep South at South
MBF	Medical Benefits Fund
MCG	Melbourne Cricket Ground
NFL	National Football League
NRL	National Rugby League
NSW	New South Wales
NSWFA	New South Wales Football Association
NSWFL	New South Wales Football League
NSWRU	New South Wales Rugby Union
SANFL	South Australian National Football League
SCG	Sydney Cricket Ground
SFC	Sydney Football Club
SFL	Sydney Football League
SMFC	South Melbourne Football Club
SRFU	Sydney Rugby Football Union
SWOT	Strengths Weaknesses Opportunities Threats
VFL	Victorian Football League
VFA	Victorian Football Association
WAFL	Western Australian Football League
YMCA	Young Men's Christian Association

Chapter 1

Introduction: Football Historiography

1.1 Introduction

Despite the popularity of physical activity in Australia, and the fascination that surrounds Australia's sporting traditions, the academic study of sport history has, until recent decades, been ignored as an appropriate research area. This lack of serious scholarly investigation into the sporting practices of the nation has meant that only a few aspects of Australian sport have been critically scrutinised. Moreover, sport has been mostly described in an optimistic and conservative fashion, and often not given a strong frame of reference or context. As Richard Cashman points out in *Paradise of Sport:* 'While politicians, business and many other leaders have been criticised, sport has been elevated and romanticised.'[1]

Australian Rules football, the most popular spectator sport in Australia, is but one example of a sport that has suffered in terms of the attention given to its history and cultural development. It is only in the last fifteen years that extensive scholarly analysis has taken place. This is surprising given that the game is unique to Australia, has a rich tradition, is an important part of popular culture, and has undergone a significant commercial transformation.

[1] R. Cashman, *Paradise of Sport*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1995, p. 208.

Australian Rules football is an important part of the nation's cultural fabric, but it has been, for the most part, played predominantly in Australia's southern states. The concept of the 'Barassi Line' was created in order to provide a visual representation of the regions that were dominated by Australian Rules football on one hand, and rugby, on the other. The reasons for this divide, and the ways in which it was perpetuated, have not been well explained.[2] Nor has it been fully explained why the governing bodies of Australian Rules football took so long to seriously promote the game in rugby-dominated New South Wales (NSW).

This thesis will explore the history of the diffusion of Australian Rules football into Sydney. By undertaking an 'episodic' exploration of the game's progress in Sydney, the social, economic and cultural factors that prevented Australian Rules football from establishing a strong presence in the 'harbour city' for so many years, will be exposed for analysis. At the same time, the thesis aims to document the history of Australian Rules football in Sydney prior to the relocation of the South Melbourne Football Club to Sydney in 1982, and to examine how the game was able to subsequently secure a prominent place in Sydney's sporting consciousness.

By drawing on archival material, including newspapers and annual reports, from the late colonial period, and the memories and recollections of some of

[2] For one recent explanation, see R. Pascoe, *The Winter Game: The Complete History of Australian Football,* Text Publishing, Melbourne, 1995, pp. 8-20.

the key participants from the 1980s and 1990s, an essentially 'slice of life'[3] approach has been adopted that periodises the progress of Australian Rules football in Sydney. No attempt has been made to write a full chronological history of the game in Sydney. Instead, a number of key periods, which have been identified from the literature, are used as signposts in explaining the evolution of Australian Rules football in Sydney, and its fluctuating fortunes.

A narrative format is used throughout the thesis, underpinned by an approach or process that is sometimes described as 'triangulation'. This process, which has been used and recommended by other football researchers, notably Robert Pascoe, involves combining and investigating a range of primary source material together, so that the criteria for triangulation is satisfied.[4] In other words, by matching the findings from selected newspaper sources, official minutes and reports, and interviews with players and officials, cross-checking of the data can occur. In most cases, this process strengthens the conclusions that are drawn from the material. This observation is especially relevant, given that a number of original sources, previously ignored by football historians, have been used in the writing of this thesis. For instance, while some researchers have drawn on the annual reports of the VFL/AFL in their analyses, no studies to date have made use

[3] The 'slice of life' approach is best seen in the Bicentennial history project of 1988. For good examples of how historical analysis can be periodised, see F. Cowley, (ed.) *A New History of Australia*, Heinemann, Melbourne, 1974, and J. Molony, *The Penguin History of Australia: The Story of 200 Years*, Penguin Books, Melbourne, 1988.

[4] Pascoe, *op. cit.*, pp. 249-250.

of the findings of an official review of the development of Australian Rules football in NSW and the Australian Capital Territory.[5] Similarly, while some investigators, particularly journalists, may have made use of interviews to profile certain individuals, few, if any, studies, have conducted their interviews within the strong historical context that this thesis provides. In terms of the interviews, a small, somewhat representative, sample was selected, consisting of a coach, an executive officer, a club captain, and several current and former players, some of whom were directly involved in the promotion of the code in New South Wales. Their consent to use material from the face-to-face interviews in this thesis was obtained, and the relevant documentation for this process appears as appendices.[6] As noted above, the intention of the interviews was to elicit opinions and information for essentially comparative or anecdotal purposes. No attempt was made to conduct any form of content analysis from the interview material. Newspaper sources, of which a dozen different titles were consulted (covering varying time frames), are discussed in more detail below.

The key periods examined are comprised as follows: The years between 1880 and 1914, which encompass the formation of the New South Wales Football Association (NSWFA), the New South Wales Football League (NSWFL), and the first promotional games by Victorian clubs; the period between 1939 and 1945, which covers the impact of war on Australian Rules

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[5] NSW/ACT Australian Football Task Force, *Taking AFL into the Next Century. A Review of Australian Football in NSW/ACT,* AFL, McMahons Point, 1998.

[6] See Appendix 7: Information to Participants, and Appendix 8: Certification by Participant.

football in Sydney; the season of 1952, which marked the National Day experiment of the Victorian Football League (VFL); and the short period between 1970 and 1975, which deals with the impact of the live telecast of the VFL match of the day into Sydney. The greatest portion of the thesis, however, examines the period from 1982 to 1999. This period covers the South Melbourne Football Club's relocation to Sydney, the successes and failures of private ownership, the provision of Australian Football League (AFL) assistance, and the continued quest to expand the code into New South Wales. Finally, the thesis moves beyond a strict chronology, with the penultimate chapter being thematic in nature, examining the many varied attempts to increase interest levels and participation rates of Australian Rules football in NSW with a particular focus on junior development.

1.2 Literature Review

The literature on the history of Australian Rules football in Sydney is both limited and uneven in quality. One of the first books to deal with the history of Australian Rules football was *Up Where, Cazaly? The Great Australian Game,* by Leonie Sandercock and Ian Turner.[7] This seminal work, which was published in 1981, delves into the social history and political economy of the Australian game. As one of the first books to analyse the history of Australian Rules football, it provides a clear and detailed description of the origins of the game, its early twentieth century maturity, its post WWII growth, and the key events that marked its development during the 1970s. It

[7] L. Sandercock and I. Turner, *Up Where, Cazaly? The Great Australian Game,* Granada, Sydney, 1981.

provides a short description of the early attempts to get the game established in Sydney in the 1880s and early 1900s. Sandercock and Turner, however, only touch upon the events that took place at the time, and provide no detailed explanation of why these early ventures into alien territory failed. Sandercock and Turner spend most of their time analysing the Victorian Football League, Australia's premier football competition for most of the twentieth century. They concentrate essentially on the Melbourne sporting landscape.

Probably the most comprehensive account of football's early development is contained in *A Game of Our Own* by Geoffrey Blainey.[8] Similarly to *Up Where, Cazaly?,* it provides an informative and detailed examination of the growth of the game from folk football on the gold fields through to the formation of the Victorian Football Association (VFA) in 1877. It contains a short description of the attempt made by the VFA to promote the game in Sydney in the 1880s. Important events in this period are highlighted and particular attention is paid to the reasons why Australian Rules football failed to secure a permanent place in New South Wales. Blainey tentatively suggests that the early barriers to the Victorian game centred on a lack of good size grounds and the growing popularity of rugby.[9] However, Blainey, like Sandercock and Turner, does not investigate the Sydney ventures in any substantial detail. In summary, while *Up Where, Cazaly?* and *A Game of*

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[8] G. Blainey, *A Game of Our Own: The Origins of Australian Football,* Information Australia, Melbourne, 1990.

[9] *Ibid.,* p. 76.

Our Own all provide a stimulating contextual study of the Australian game in Victoria, they only briefly mention the development of football in Sydney.

A similar limitation can be found in Robert Pascoe's *The Winter Game.*[10] Although Pascoe claims his book is a comprehensive review of the game at the national level, he focuses most of his attention on Victoria, Western Australia and South Australia. He does construct a model of the cultural differences between Sydney and Melbourne, which he uses to explain why Sydney did not embrace Australian Rules football. However, despite the fact that there is some discussion of just how prevalent Australian Rules football was in Sydney during the twentieth century, little of his discussion is based on primary sources.

In order to find a detailed account of football in Sydney during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, one must turn to Martin Sharp's 'Australian Football in Sydney Prior to 1914'.[11] Sharp's article was based in part on his doctoral thesis, and it describes Australian Rules football's earliest attempts to become established in Sydney.[12] Sharp gives a detailed account of crowd numbers, and the popularity of early games. He discusses the formation of the first associations and leagues in New South Wales and gives reasons as to why the initial attempts to establish and promote the

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[10] Pascoe, *op. cit.,* passim.

[11] M. Sharp, 'Australian Football in Sydney Before 1914', *Sporting Traditions,* vol. 4, no. 1, November 1987, pp. 27-45.

[12] M. Sharp, 'Sporting Spectacles: Cricket and Football in Sydney, 1890–1912', Ph.D. Thesis, Australia National University, 1986.

code in Sydney could not be sustained. Sharp provides persuasive evidence that Sydney disliked 'Victorian Rules' because it was a Melbourne invention. He also identifies chronic maladministration as an additional factor that explains the game's weak progress. His high level of scholarship makes this a valuable historical piece of writing and one that fully describes events in a limited time period.

Apart from Sharp's article, and the occasional brief accounts in various historical texts on rugby,[13] most of the scholarly research on football in late colonial Sydney is limited. However, Sharp at least identifies some of the commercial and cultural barriers, such as a lack of access to grounds, an inadequate infrastructure for junior players, and the strong predilection for the code of rugby, that effectively shut Australian Rules football out of the Sydney sports community for so long.[14]

In this thesis, newspaper reports have provided the majority of research data for analysis in the early period. Using the works of Sharp, Sandercock and Turner, and Blainey as guides, reports from the *Sydney Morning Herald,* and the *Sydney Mail* have been sourced in a chronological manner when critical events have occurred. These reports provide valuable information for this research by revealing the place of football in Sydney's sporting culture, and the extent to which rugby dominated winter sport in Sydney during this early

[13] See for example, T. Hickie, *They Ran with the Ball: How Rugby Football Developed in Australia,* Longman Cheshire, Melbourne, 1993.

[14] Sharp, 'Australian Football', *op. cit.*, pp. 41-42.

period. However, in this context it should be noted that the task of 'de-coding' newspaper accounts is often difficult for historians, as not only do many press sources of the nineteenth century fail to identify an author, but the nature of the intended readership must also be taken into account. In general, sporting themes in the print media deserve much deeper analyses than many football historians have so far been able to provide.[15]

The scholarly writing on Australian Rules football in Sydney during the post-World War I period is even less revealing than the late colonial period. Published research on Australian Rules football in Sydney for the period 1915-1979 is virtually non-existent. For example, only brief mentions of the game in Sydney are included in *100 Years of Australian Football*, edited by John Ross and published in 1996.[16] This centenary publication aimed to give a complete history of the code, but most of the text is devoted to the game in southern Australia. However, Ross does provide a tantalising glimpse into how Sydney perceived Australian Rules football when describing the development of the game in the early 1950s. For example, details of the VFL's 'national football' days, when VFL games were played in some of Australia's major cities, including Sydney, are provided in the book, but events such as these are never adequately contextualised.[17]

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[15] See R. Grow, 'Nineteenth Century Football and the Melbourne Press', *Sporting Traditions*, vol. 3, no. 1, November 1986, pp. 23-37.

[16] J. Ross (ed.), *100 Years of Australian Football*, Penguin Books, Collingwood, 1996.

[17] *Ibid.*, p. 154.

Football in Sydney from the late 1970s to the present has been covered in more detail, but, again, the literature is not extensive. The most complete account is Kevin Taylor's, *The Sydney Swans: The Complete History 1874-1986.*[18] Taylor's publication considers in detail the VFL's experimental games in Sydney in the late 1970s, the South Melbourne Football Club's move to Sydney in 1982, and the early years of the Sydney Swans. Taylor also examines the private ownership battle during 1985. Although providing an informative account of these events, *The Sydney Swans* was written for the popular market. In terms of contextual analysis, the VFL's grand vision for a national game, and the economic pressure faced by many Melbourne based clubs at this time, is ignored. On the other hand, Taylor cites a number of instances where the media, particularly television, was instrumental in generating massive exposure and publicity for the Swans during the late 1980s. A major weakness in Taylor's book is the inadequate referencing, annotation and documentation of sources for a publication of such length.

While a number of general histories of the Australian game have been published, few of these books seek to address the economic development of the code in a systematic manner. One book that attempts to do this, is Bob Stewart's *The Australian Football Business.*[19] Like *Up Where, Cazaly?*, Stewart's work provides only brief accounts of football in Sydney, specifically

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[18] K. Taylor, *The Sydney Swans: The Complete History 1874–1986,* Allen & Unwin, Sydney, 1987.

[19] R. Stewart, *The Australian Football Business,* Kangaroo Press, Kenthurst, 1983.

South Melbourne's relocation, but as with *Up Where, Cazaly?,* one of its strengths lies in the exploration of the impact of commercial and business interests on the game, specifically during the 1970s. Stewart covers such issues as the distribution of finance, player payments, and ground rationalisation. A further strength of the book, and of particular relevance to this study, is Stewart's analysis of the reasons for the VFL's desire to expand its territory.

Another publication along similar lines to the Taylor book is Jim Main's *Plugger and the Mighty Swans.*[20] Main's book gives a general account of the history of the club, from the early days of South Melbourne right up to the recent events in Sydney's history. Again, it is constrained by its narrowly popularist appeal, and its concentration on simplistic chronology and superficial personality profiles.

The Convert, by Peter Lewis, which examines how a rugby league fan adapts to supporting a new code during the 1990s, is probably the only source that focuses exclusively on Australian Rules football in Sydney.[21] *The Convert* is an entertaining read, and provides pertinent observations and descriptions of the struggle of a rugby league follower to comprehend a foreign game. Although the book is directed to the popular end of the sport market, scholarly readers will gain value from the book because Lewis

[20] J. Main, *Plugger and the Mighty Swans*, Information Australia, Melbourne, 1996.

[21] P. Lewis, *The Convert: A Fans Journey From League to AFL,* Ironbark, Sydney, 1997.

explains the impact that the rugby league crisis between 1995 and 1997 had on the success of the Sydney Swans in attracting new supporters.

Even though criticism of much of the literature discussed above can be diffused by the fact that these publications have been, by and large, directed at the popular market, it should be acknowledged that their lack of consistent referencing, annotation, and discussion of sources is problematic for academic historians. Indeed, this issue arises regularly when examining many football-related history texts, and it clearly highlights the point made by Stremski in his review of *A Game of Our Own* that: '... serious historians do not usually delve into this field, and if they do, they are only indulging themselves and writing impressionistically for the general public.'[22]

During the 1990s, the material on football in Sydney has been advanced by the release of three books, all very different in terms of style and focus. Two expansive chapters on recent developments concerning Australian Rules football in Sydney can be found in Gary Linnell's *Football LTD*, which looks at the politics and behind-the-scenes problems of the private ownership saga.[23] Part of this discussion centres on the Edelsten and Willesee 'takeovers' of the Sydney Swans, although the broader context for the

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[22] R. Stremski, 'Review of G. Blainey, *A Game of Our Own', International Journal of the History of Sport,* vol. 8, no.19, May 1991, pp. 160-161.

[23] G. Linnell, *Football LTD: The Inside Story of the AFL*, Ironbark, Sydney, 1995. Specific information on the management structure of the Sydney Football Club can be found in S. Quick, `The Virtuous Circle: Success On AND Off the Field for the Sydney Swans', in David Shilbury and Laurence Chalip (eds), *Advances in the Management of Australian and New Zealand Sport,* Lismore, 1996, pp. 79-94.

business dealings and management structure of the AFL are also dealt with at length. In *Flying North for the Winter: The Story of the Sydney Swans,* by Sally Freud and Mark Cutler, the history of the South Melbourne Football Club is traced, but the focus is essentially on the club's relocation to Sydney in 1982 and the ensuing eighteen years. This publication, although similar to the books by Taylor and Main in that it is written generally for the popular market, highlights and reflects a growing interest and demand for material on football in Sydney. Its strength is clearly its 'year in a life' documentation and eyewitness accounts, but its shortfall, for academic historians at least, is the lack of contextual analysis, referencing, and documentation.[24]

The anthology edited by Rob Hess and Bob Stewart, *More Than a Game: An Unauthorised History of Australian Rules Football*, is similar in style, content and quality to the books by Sandercock and Turner, and Pascoe.[25] It explores the game's transformation from an amateur sport to a sophisticated national enterprise. The book's balanced national view and its high level of scholarship are but two of the many attractions that make this book a valuable historical account of the Australian game. In particular, the chapters by Robin Grow and Dave Nadel focus on a number of the key episodes in the game's development in Sydney. They cover early attempts by the VFA and VFL to promote the game in Sydney in the 1880s and early

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[24] S. Freud and M. Cutler, *Flying North for the Winter: The Story of the Sydney Swans*, Random House, Milsons Point, 1999.

[25] R. Hess and B. Stewart (eds) *More Than a Game: An Unauthorised History of Australian Rules Football*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton South, 1998.

1900s, as well as more recent developments, such as the AFL assistance provided to the Sydney Swans and the deal with Stadium Australia for football to be played at this venue following the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games.[26]

In terms of other relevant material, *Sport in Australasian Society,* edited by J. A. Mangan and John Nauright, includes a succinct but well written chapter by Ian Andrews that covers the transformation of the VFL from a club to a corporate game.[27] Although not directly related to the issues of football in Sydney, Andrews' narrative, like the accounts by Sandercock and Turner, and Stewart, mentioned earlier, explores the underlying reasons why the VFL both wanted to, and needed to, expand, and why it was not content with leaving Sydney to rugby league.

The Mangan and Nauright publication is also valuable because of its analysis of other broader historical and social issues relating to sport, such as commercialisation. For instance, the chapter by Bob Stewart and Aaron Smith titled 'Australian Sport in a Postmodern Age' is particularly useful, since it identifies changing economic and cultural conditions during the 1970s and 1980s and analyses how these changes had an impact on the

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[26] R. Grow, 'The Victorian Football Association in Control, 1877-1896', D. Nadel, 'Colours Corporations and Commissioners, 1976-1985' and 'The League Goes National, 1986-1997' in R. Hess and B. Stewart (eds), *op. cit.,* pp. 45-85, 200-224 and 225-255.

[27] I. Andrews, 'From a Club to Corporate Game: The Changing Face of Australian Football, 1960-1999', in J.A. Mangan and J. Nauright (eds) *Sport in Australasian Society: Past and Present,* Frank Cass Publishing, London, 2000, pp. 225-254.

structure and practice of sport in Australia.[28] David Rowe and Geoff Lawrence's book *Sport and Leisure: Trends in Australian Popular Culture,* has much to offer for similar reasons.[29] Chapters in both these books delve into the many significant changes that have influenced sport during the last thirty years, including the impact of television, sponsorship and advertising, private ownership and increasing professionalism. These issues are all significant when studying Australian Rules football in Sydney, and they receive due consideration elsewhere in the thesis.

1.3 Conclusions

In summary, although little has been written on the place of Australian Rules football in Sydney's cultural and commercial life, a number of critical periods and incidents have been identified that may help explain football's fluctuating fortunes. For example, between 1880 and 1914 rugby dominated the winter sports landscape in Sydney despite a number of attempts by the Victorian custodians of Australian Rules football to promote the code in New South Wales. Moreover, the game appeared to make little or no headway during the 1930s and 1940s. During the 1950s, further unsuccessful attempts were made to broaden the Sydney presence of Australian Rules football, and although there were signs of increased interest, the game met strong resistance. It took another twenty-five years for the code's administrators to

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[28] B. Stewart and A. Smith, 'Australian Sport in a Postmodern Age', in J.A. Mangan and J. Nauright (eds), *op. cit.,* pp. 278-304.

[29] D. Rowe and G. Lawrence (eds), *Sport and Leisure: Trends in Australian Popular Culture*, Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Marrickville, 1990.

make another sustained effort to break into the Sydney market. As it turned out, this initiative proved to be very successful.

The interesting research question is why it took so long for Australian Rules football to gain a significant foothold in Sydney. Although the relatively brief analyses by Blainey, Pascoe and Sharp suggest that the causes of Australian Rules football's 'minor league' status in Sydney centred on a lack of development resources, and the entrenchment of rugby league and rugby union, they only attend to the late colonial and early Federation periods. On the other hand, Linnell, Quick, Taylor, and Nadel, through their contemporary, but narrowly focused reviews of football in Sydney, reveal a number of factors that may explain the game's turn-around in the 1980s and 1990s. These factors include changes in policy on national football development, a series of club financial crises in Victoria, rugby league's loss of momentum, and the national television coverage of Australian Rules football. Although all of these explanations of the game's ebb and flow in Sydney are plausible, they are sometimes founded on slim primary evidence. There is a need, therefore, for greater critical scrutiny to establish their explanatory significance. With these factors in mind, this thesis will provide an historical account of Australian Rules football in Sydney. In doing so, it will draw on a wide range of sources and emphasise a number of social, cultural and economic influences on the development of the game.

Australian Rules football is the nation's most popular spectator sport, and few other sporting activities in Australia can match the fanaticism, emotion and passion that surround it. In Victoria, South Australia, Western Australia and Tasmania, Australian Rules football stimulates the interest of millions of people, be it supporters, players or administrators. The quest for the game to spread north to New South Wales and Queensland, and to become truly national has long been the aim of the code's administrators. The dream has taken a long time to become reality. By studying the history of Australian Rules football's quest for a Sydney presence, an appreciation can be gained of the difficulties that administrators have experienced in transplanting a foreign game to an environment with different sporting traditions and cultural practices. This knowledge will not only be of assistance to the AFL in their plans for further expansion of the game, and provide useful guidelines for the national development of other sporting pastimes, but it will also assist historians as they seek to understand the complex relationship between sport and society.

Chapter 2

Australian Rules Football in Sydney:

An Historical Overview

2.1 A New South Welshman's Dream

The origins of Australian Rules football in Sydney actually stem back to the early 1870s. At this time it was unclear as to whether rugby or Australian Rules football would become established in Sydney. The latter code had become the dominant and popular winter game in Melbourne and had spread west to Adelaide and Perth. In Sydney, it was rugby union that held sway. As early as 1877, when the VFA was formed, a national game was already on the agenda. According to both Blainey and Grow, Sydney was seen as the domain that had to be captured if football was to become the popular code of the whole continent.[30]

So how did this colonial game of football begin? The view commonly held by historians regarding the invention of Australian Rules football stems from the perceived need of cricketers to remain in shape during winter without having to partake in the more physical game of rugby, which often led to injuries.[31] The antecedents of the game were first seen in Australia during the Gold Rush of the 1850s when people from all over the world came to Victoria. The games played in the goldfields were usually contested along the lines of

[30] Blainey, *op. cit.,* p. 84, Grow, 'The Victorian Football Association', *op. cit.,* pp. 63-69.

[31] Sharp, 'Australian Football', *op. cit.*, p. 27.

folk football frequently played in English villages. That is, the activity was a free-for-all game, with few, if any, formalised rules.[32]

The person credited with formalising the rules and inventing the game close to what is known today was Thomas Wentworth Wills, a New South Welshman. Wills was born in 1835, and at age fourteen was sent to the famous English public school, Rugby, where he excelled in sport. On his return to Australia, Wills represented and captained the colony of Victoria in cricket.[33] His formalisation of rules for what later become known as Australian Rules football is said to have been inspired by the Victorian cricketers' lack of success against New South Wales. The failure of the team to be competitive, Wills suggested, was due to poor stamina and lack of fitness.[34]

The game commonly regarded as the first of Australian Rules football was a forty-a-side game held over three Saturday afternoons (commencing on 7 August 1858) between Scotch College and Melbourne Grammar at Jolimont, near where the Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG) now stands.[35] The game was played with trees used as posts almost a kilometre apart, with one set on Jolimont Hill, and the other set at Punt Road, Richmond. There were no set boundaries and players moved in and around the trees and across the

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[32] Taylor, *op. cit.,* p. 7.

[33] Blainey, *op. cit.,* p. 11 and R. Brasch, *How Did Sports Begin?,* Sydney, Harper Collins Publishers, 1995, p. 154.

[34] Brasch, *op. cit.,* p. 154.

[35] Taylor, *op. cit.,* p. 7, and Blainey, *op. cit.,* p. 17.

paddocks. At the end of the third Saturday, with still no result, the game was abandoned.[36]

Despite the lack of a result, the game was not seen as a failure. Wills, who acted as umpire, was able to observe the successes and problems of the game and refine his original rules. It was not long before clubs were forming in and around Melbourne and were playing regular matches using the rules devised by Wills.[37] By May 1877, the Victorian Football Association was formed, consisting originally of five member clubs, namely Melbourne, Carlton, Hotham (North Melbourne), Albert Park and St Kilda.[38]

2.2 Barren Soil: 1877-1893

The quest to attract the Sydney public to the game also began in 1877, when a letter was sent by the secretary of the VFA to Southern Rugby Football Union (SRFU) officials proposing that an intercolonial football match, or matches, be played between the two colonies. The Association's proposal involved either playing half of one game under each colony's rules, or playing two separate games, one under rugby rules and the other under the rules of the Victorian game.[39] The VFA believed that if Sydneysiders were exposed to the Victorian game and witnessed the skills of a Victorian team it would be easy to convince them as to which code of football was

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[36] Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 7.

[37] Blainey, *op. cit.*, p. 85.

[38] The Geelong Football Club joined the competition soon after. Grow, 'The Victorian Football Association', *op. cit.*, p. 46.

[39] *Sydney Mail*, 12 May 1877.

worth playing and watching. The grand vision was cut short nearly as soon as it was devised, when on 7 May 1877, Sydney rugby officials rejected the invitation from the VFA.[40]

The reason given for the SRFU rejecting the invitation for intercolonial matches concerned the perceived difficulties that both codes would have in understanding each other's rules in such a short period of time. The chairman of the SRFU envisaged that a game combining the rules of the two codes would involve nothing but 'squabbling from beginning to end and would be no game at all.'[41] Writing in the *Sydney Mail* on 12 May 1877, football columnist 'Leatherstocking' noted the comments of another SRFU official, R. Arnold:

> He pointed out the vast difference which existed in the manner of playing the game in the two colonies, and said he was quite sure that New South Wales players, even after a season's practice, could no more accustom themselves to the Victorian rules than the players of the sister colony could drill themselves into our off and on side.[42]

Although rugby officials refused to sanction a representative intercolonial match, permission was granted for a NSW club to play a Victorian club under the proposal outlined, and in June 1877 the first reported game of Australian Rules football in Sydney occurred when the Sydney club, Waratah, played the Melbourne club, Carlton, in two matches, one each under rugby and Australian Rules. On Saturday, 23 June 1877, around 3000 spectators

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[40] Blainey, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

[41] *Sydney Mail*, 12 May 1877.

gathered at the Albert cricket ground, the largest crowd for a football match in Sydney, to see Waratah defeat Carlton two goals to nil under rugby rules. The following Monday, 25 June, the result was reversed when Carlton, playing under Australian Rules, defeated Waratah six goals to nil, this time in front of a crowd of around 1500 spectators.[43] The games aroused great interest in Sydney and were discussed for weeks afterwards. Writing on the event, *Sydney Mail* football columnist, 'Leatherstocking', noted that the 'Carltons played a splendid game and convinced the spectators that there was far greater excitement and fun, and less danger in the Victorian style of play than in the game played here.'[44] Similarly, English visitor Richard Twopeny said that he had played all three codes (Rugby, Association [soccer] and Victorian) and believed that: 'the Victorian game is by far the most scientific, the most amusing to players and onlookers and altogether the best.'[45]

The following season two more matches were played between Waratah and Carlton under similar conditions, this time in Melbourne. The games were again considered a success. The first game played under rugby union rules resulted in a draw, whereas the game played under Australian Rules saw the Carlton side successful.[46]

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[42] *Ibid.*

[43] *Sydney Mail*, 30 June 1877.

[44] *Ibid.*

[45] Cited in Sandercock and Turner, *op. cit.*, p. 44.

[46] *Ibid.*

Following the success of the Waratah/Carlton matches, the VFA again suggested to Sydney that regular intercolonial matches should be played. Again SRFU officials rejected the idea. The official reason given at the time by the SRFU for refusing the invitation for intercolonial matches again concerned difficulties both codes would have in understanding each others' rules in such a short period of time, and also the unavailability of a ground large enough to host a game under Victorian rules.[47] According to Sharp, the closeness of both games and the fact that the New South Wales Cricket Association offered the use of its ground for the matches served to debunk the SRFU reasons.[48]

According to Sharp, the reasoning behind the rugby refusal was much more complex, and was fundamentally linked to intercolonial rivalry. At the time, divisions in rugby were already appearing. Many clubs believed rugby was being ruined because of an excessive number of scrimmages and the congested nature of the game. It was the belief of many rugby officials that exposure to the Victorian game, which was considered a lot more exciting and fun with less chance of injury, which moved so much quicker and stayed so open, would only heighten these divisions.[49]

The SRFU's continued resistance to the pressures of playing intercolonial matches finally took its toll on supporters of the Victorian rules of football. In

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[47] Blainey, *op. cit.*, p. 86.

[48] Sharp, 'Australian Football', *op. cit.*, pp. 29-30.

[49] *Ibid.*, p. 30.

June 1880, a series of meetings were held to deal with the swelling discontent that had formed. The first meeting was organised by G. A. Crisp, an old Victorian player desperate to provide winter exercise for his cricket team, and was scheduled for 23 June at Strattons Hotel, Woollahra. Little could Crisp anticipate the swell of support for the game that his proposed meeting created. The attendance for the discussion was so great that the meeting had to be adjourned to a larger venue the following week.[50]

On 30 June 1880, at the adjourned meeting, more than 100 supporters of the Victorian game gathered at the Freemasons Hotel in Sydney, and involved themselves in what was a very noisy and lengthy discussion.[51] What resulted was the unanimous support for two major resolutions. The first resolution was: 'That in the opinion of this meeting a radical change in the game of football as at present played in the colony is necessary.'[52] The second resolution was: 'That the gentlemen present, or those who desire to do so, form themselves into an association to be called the New South Wales Football Association and that they adopt the Victorian Football Association rules.'[53]

The following Wednesday, the New South Wales Football Association was formed. Phillip Sheridan, one of the trustees of the Association Cricket

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[50] *Sydney Mail,* 26 June 1880.

[51] *Sydney Mail,* 3 July 1880.

[52] *Ibid.*

[53] *Ibid.*

Ground (now known as the Sydney Cricket Ground), and one of the most prominent supporters of cricket and other outdoor sports in the colony, was named president. The other office bearers included: 'vice presidents, Messrs. Henry Hook, W. Wynee, James Toohey and H. C. Rodgers; hon. secretary, Mr. C. W. Beal; hon. treasurer, Mr. W. C. Hinwood.'[54]

The first season of the NSWFA began in 1881 with only two teams, Sydney and East Sydney, but by the end of the second season, five teams, including Waratah, Petersham and Maitland, were competing in the competition. Then followed quickly the formation of West and South Sydney, City, Our Boys, Granville, Wallsend, Merewether and Hamilton. Junior clubs were also formed at the St Ignatius and St Joseph colleges.[55]

Following its formation, the New South Wales Football Association made worthwhile progress in terms of promoting the game in Sydney. Intercolonial matches were played between New South Wales and Victoria, and several Victorian clubs, including Geelong, South Melbourne, Carlton and Melbourne, regularly visited Sydney.[56] The Association, thanks mainly to the work of president Sheridan, was able to secure the use of the Association cricket ground for many of its matches and in 1889, Andy Flanagan, the then vice president of the NSWFA, donated a cup for which clubs in the senior

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[54] *Sydney Mail*, 10 July 1880.

[55] *Sydney Morning Herald,* 4 April 1903. It is worth noting that some of these clubs, such as Wallsend, Hamilton, Merewether, Waratah and Maitland, were outside the Sydney metropolitan area.

[56] Sharp, 'Australian Football', *op. cit.,* p. 31.

competition would compete.[57] The relative success of the NSWFA, however, was short lived. Sharp suggests the enthusiasm created by the introduction of the Flanagan Cup could not be developed because of a combination of poor management, bad luck, and squabbling between clubs, which all contributed to the demise of the NSWFA.[58]

By 1890, public interest in Australian Rules football in NSW was beginning to wane. Intercolonial matches were regularly being played, but a lack of quality players resulted in continued poor performances. The sight of a NSW team continually being defeated by intercolonial rivals did not help promote the game in Sydney or encourage successful players to cross over from rugby. NSW rugby teams, in comparison, were proving quite successful and players also had the opportunity to represent their colony against international touring teams.[59] When Sheridan stood down as NSWFA president in 1890, access to the Association cricket ground for NSWFA matches went with him. With no enclosed ground to play matches on, it was essentially the end for the NSWFA.[60]

Another possible contributing factor to the demise of Australian Rules football in Sydney during the 1890s could be linked to the depression that

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[57] *Ibid.*, p. 35.

[58] *Ibid.*

[59] M. Phillips, 'Football, Class and War: The Rugby Codes in New South Wales, 1907-1918', in J. Nauright and T. Chandler (eds), *Making Men: Rugby and Masculine Identity,* Frank Cass, London, 1996, p. 167.

[60] Sharp, 'Australian Football', *op. cit.,* p. 36.

swept the east coast of the country during this time. As is the case with any depression, money was scarce and unemployment was high, forcing large numbers of people to look for work outside the major capital cities. Many moved west, to try their luck on the Western Australian goldfields.[61]

During the 1890s, the discovery of gold helped to quadruple the population of Western Australia, with most of the influx coming from 'eastern staters'. In Victoria, the exodus to the west had a strong influence on Australian Rules football, with crowds dropping away and many of the clubs being hit hard by a migration of players.[62] Although there is no direct or immediate documentary evidence to suggest that the experience of clubs in Melbourne was replicated in Sydney to the same extent, it is reasonable to surmise that the onset of the depression did contribute to the demise of the NSWFA.

By 1893 there were insufficient clubs to continue the Sydney competition. The only areas in New South Wales where Australian Rules football remained prosperous were those in Albury, the Riverina and Wagga, areas that Sharp describes as 'economically and culturally bound to Melbourne rather than Sydney.'[63] The Sydney Rugby Football Union knew how to defend their game from foreign intruders and they quickly responded to any threat to their game by changing several rules that reduced the number of

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[61] D. Garden, *Victoria. A History*, Thomas Nelson, Melbourne, 1984, p. 209.

[62] For more detailed discussion of the impact of the 1890s depression on football in Victoria, see Grow, 'The Victorian Football Association', *op. cit.*, pp. 77-88.

[63] Sharp, 'Australian Football', *op. cit.*, p. 36.

scrimmages, opened up the game, improved its speed and flow and therefore its attractiveness to spectators. The SRFU also introduced rules banning any rugby players from playing in any matches under Australian Rules.[64] These factors, coupled with the poor performances by NSW teams in intercolonial matches, the loss of the Association ground, the failure to develop a junior competition and poor management, led to an erosion of interest in Australian Rules football. In comparison, the changes initiated by the SRFU proved successful, and popularity for rugby in Sydney increased markedly.

In 1895, Australian Rules football was the dominant code in Victoria, South Australia, Tasmania and Western Australia, yet rugby remained dominant in New South Wales and Queensland. According to Sandercock and Turner, Australian Rules football had:

> outstripped all other sports in the affections of four of the six Australian colonies. It was deeply entrenched in the popular culture; it drew huge crowds and revenues; it helped skilled working class players to escape from their class; it provided a few players and a lot more committeemen with a passport to prestige and power. But those devotees who sought to proselytise the heathens of New South Wales and Queensland found their message fell on arid ground.[65]

2.3 A Second Chance: 1903-1914

At the end of 1896, in the aftermath of the depression, a major bifurcation occurred within Victorian football when six of the most successful and

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[64] Blainey, *op. cit.*, p. 84.

[65] Sandercock and Turner, *op. cit.*, p. 45.

financially secure clubs of the VFA announced their intention of breaking away from the Association. At the beginning of 1897, eight former VFA clubs joined together to form the Victorian Football League. The new League quickly gained popularity from both players and spectators. It was not long before its increased professionalism and success saw it become the dominant power in Australian Rules football.[66]

As with the VFA years earlier, the administrators of the VFL again envisaged Australian Rules football being played over the entire continent. Australian Rules football was still powerful in four of the six colonies, but many administrators considered that the continued success of the game depended on it being played as the dominant code right across the country. Once more, a strategic expansion into Sydney was high on the agenda of the VFL.[67]

In 1903 the League got its chance when a sudden renewal of interest for Australian Rules football occurred in Sydney. Sharp attributes the revival of the code at the time to the work of the Young Men's Christian Association (YMCA). He suggests that members of the Association, having travelled around the country and seen Australian Rules football played in Adelaide and Melbourne, were keen to see it re-established in Sydney.[68]

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[66] *Ibid.,* p. 34. For further discussion of the split, see Grow, 'The Victorian Football Association', *op. cit.,* pp. 83-85.

[67] Sandercock and Turner, *op. cit.,* p. 68.

The increase in interest and enthusiasm for the Victorian game resulted in the formation of the New South Wales Football League. With the assistance of the YMCA, three initial clubs, Sydney, Paddington and North Shore were formed, 'constituted exactly upon the lines of the Victorian Football League.'[69] By the time the first season began in 1903, eleven teams, including, Alexandria, Ashfield, Balmain, East Sydney, Newtown, Redfern, West Sydney and YMCA had joined the competition.[70] Unlike the last unsuccessful attempt by Australian Rules football to take hold in Sydney, this campaign was not designed to challenge rugby. Commenting on the revival of football in Sydney, the football writer for the *Sydney Mail* wrote:

> The revival of the game in New South Wales need not be accepted as a challenge to Rugby. It is not so intended. There are hundreds of young men anxious to indulge in amusement in winter who do not care for Rugby. To them the Australian game will appeal. There is no reason why the two games should not continue to flourish.[71]

The VFL played a big role as football enthusiasts tried to tap into the renewed interest of the game in Sydney. In 1903, the same year that the NSWFL formed, a reported 20,000 spectators watched VFL teams Collingwood and Fitzroy play for premiership points at the Sydney Cricket Ground as part of the assistance and promotion provided by the VFL to

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[68] Sharp, 'Australian Football', *op. cit.*, p. 37.

[69] Sandercock and Turner, *op. cit.*, p. 68.

[70] Sharp, 'Australian Football', *op. cit.*, p. 39.

[71] *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 April 1903.

support football in Sydney. The VFL also poured promotion money into a NSWFL campaign to get Australian Rules football into schools.[72]

So strong was the VFL's desire to be successful in Sydney, between 1903 and 1910 they spent over ten thousand pounds promoting football in Sydney. Money was spent not only in the schools but also on sending more teams to play for premiership points in Sydney.[73] Many of the promotional games were played at no expense to the NSWFL. In most cases the VFL also agreed to forego the takings from each game so that the NSWFL could use the funds to develop Australian Rules football further.[74]

Not only did the NSWFL promote the Australian game through exhibition matches involving Victorian teams, but, recognising the difficulty converting mature footballers from rugby to Australian Rules, they also sought to promote the game of Australian Rules football in schools. According to the local press: 'It was argued that if little can be done with dry wood something can be done with green.'[75] Aided by funding provided by their Victorian counterparts, the New South Wales Football League presented schools with new footballs and also organised coaches and players to impart skills.[76]

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[72] Sharp, 'Australian Football', *op. cit.*, p. 39.

[73] *Ibid,* p. 39.

[74] *Sydney Morning Herald*, 22 May 1903.

[75] *Sydney Mail*, 11 May 1904.

[76] *Ibid.*

Reacting to another possible threat to their game, the New South Wales Rugby Union (NSWRU)[77] again took steps to make rugby more appealing and attract more players. As a counter measure to the NSWFL, the NSWRU set up their own junior development programs.[78] The press reported that:

> More free footballs were forthcoming. Enclosed grounds were placed at the disposal of the boys, the best umpires were set aside for their matches and noted ex players devoted their time to instructing the young how to punt, run, dribble and drop kick.[79]

Metropolitan teams were sent to the country to promote the game there, and financial assistance was also afforded in country areas. Further promotion of interstate and international matches between Queensland and New Zealand also occurred. The NSWRU, whether by coincidence or not, again began to show a good deal more vigour in promoting its own game.[80]

Despite the efforts of both the New South Wales and Victorian leagues, the attempt to revive football in Sydney proved unsuccessful. As early as 1905 the enthusiasm and interest began to dissipate. Three teams had already disbanded from the competition, and despite the continued promotion of games by Melbourne clubs, support for the game continued to fall away.[81] The reasons for this somewhat mysterious decline are not altogether clear,

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[77] In 1892 the Southern Rugby Football Union (SRFU) changed its name to the New South Wales Rugby Union. W. Vamplew *et al.* (eds), *The Oxford Companion to Australian Sport,* Oxford University Press, Melbourne, 1992, p. 367.

[78] *Sydney Mail*, 6 June 1904.

[79] *Ibid.*

[80] *Sydney Mail*, 22 April 1903.

[81] Sharp, 'Australian Football, *op. cit.,* p. 39.

but on 10 May 1905, the *Sydney Mail's* football columnist summed up one of the problems the League faced: 'In but one case did a full team enter the field, viz Redfern against Balmain at Alexandria Oval. The other clubs found it hard to muster men and in one case the limit was reached at 13.'[82] Even Sharp, in hindsight, admits that there are no definitive reasons for the decline of Australian Rules football in Sydney at this time, although some relevant social factors are discussed below.[83]

In 1907 a major event in the history of Australian sport changed the face of sport in Sydney. Despite the popularity of rugby union amongst spectators in the early 1900s, growing discontent was becoming evident amongst the players. The problems arose because even though rugby union was experiencing its most financially successful period, the stars of the game, those who drew the crowds and created the profits, were left out of pocket.[84] According to Chris Cunneen, 'A particular grievance was that footballers injured during the games lost working time, and consequently wages, and had to pay their own medical fees.'[85] The discontent led a group of adventurous young men to form a new professional league, a league that

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[82] *Sydney Mail*, 10 May 1905.

[83] Sharp, 'Australian Football', *op. cit.*, pp. 41-42.

[84] C. Cunneen, 'The Rugby War: The Early History of Rugby League in New South Wales, 1907–15', in R. Cashman and M. McKernan (eds), *Sport in History: The Making of Modern Sporting History,* University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, 1979, p. 295.

[85] *Ibid.* See also Phillips, *op.cit.,* pp. 158-175, for more discussion of the rugby union bifurcation and the formation of the NSWRL.

would not so much mean players would make money out of football, but one that would ensure players would not lose money by playing it.[86]

The professional rugby league quickly gained a dominant position in Sydney, with the majority of spectators and the best players quickly forming allegiances with the new league. By the end of 1910 it was clear that rugby league had become the premier code in Sydney. Regular intercolonial matches were being played between NSW and Queensland, with NSW proving successful in most instances. Spectators from Sydney 'finally had a brand of football in which their team was successful'[87], and players finally had a game that would protect and financially support them when injured or away from work. According to Sharp, 'Australian football was again left in its wake with a group of amateur enthusiasts and a small band of supporters, most of whom were expatriate Victorians.'[88]

In 1908, an Australian Rules football carnival to mark the jubilee of the code was held in Melbourne, and a NSW team joined representative teams from Victoria, South Australia, Western Australia, Tasmania, Queensland and New Zealand in the first unified representation of a football code at a national level. NSW was also represented at the national carnival in Adelaide in 1911.[89] In 1914, the NSWFL hosted the Australian Rules

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[86] *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 August 1907.

[87] Sharp, 'Australian Football', *op. cit.*, p. 41.

[88] *Ibid.* Again, also refer to Phillips, *op. cit.*, pp.158-175.

[89] R. Hess, 'The Victorian Football League Takes Over, 1897-1914', in Hess and Stewart, *op. cit.*, pp. 107-108.

football carnival on a ground in Alexandria that had been purchased in 1911 by the League to play competition matches. The carnival, however, was a financial disaster.[90] It was hosted at a time when support for the game was low, and as a result crowds were minimal. The financial losses experienced from the carnival caused the League to forfeit the Alexandria Oval. In 1916, at the height of World War I and when many young Australian men were abroad fighting in the Great War, reserve grade teams dropped out of the competition. By 1920 only five senior sides remained.[91] Once again, Australian Rules football had failed to conquer Sydney.

2.4 Football in Sydney: An Analysis of Failure

Various reasons have been put forward as to why the push of Australian Rules football into Sydney failed at these early attempts. Sydney newspapers at the time suggested the reason lay with the fact that the NSWFA failed to develop a junior competition, and its ability to have sufficient amounts of players playing the game was thus affected. The continued poor performances by NSW teams against quality opposition from Victoria compounded this problem. As Sharp explains, the lack of success by the NSW representative team meant that aspiring young footballers were more attracted to rugby than Australian Rules football.[92]

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[90] K. Piesse, *The Complete Guide to Australian Football,* Pan Macmillan, Sydney, 1993, p. 201.

[91] *Ibid.,* p. 201. For further discussion on the impact of World War I on Australian football, see D. Blair "'The Greater Game": Australian Football and the Army at Home and on the Front During World War I, *Sporting Traditions,* vol. 11, no. 2, May 1995. pp. 91-102.

[92] Sharp, 'Australian Football', *op. cit.,* p. 42.

A further problem was that Australian Rules football officials in Sydney did not promote or manage their game as well as their rugby counterparts, who in comparison were very successful in promoting and attracting players to their code by changing the rules to improve the game. Several rule changes, including the regulation of scrimmages and the opening up of the game, counteracted the strong points of Victorian football and ensured rugby's survival. The introduction by rugby officials of intercolonial and international games against opposing sides from Queensland and New Zealand also proved successful in counteracting promotion efforts made by those supporting Australian Rules football. In Sharp's view:

> When Australian football first appeared in Sydney rugby officials immediately took steps to make their game more appealing. Whenever their game was challenged rugby officials invariably took up the challenge and took the initiative away from Australian football.[93]

The geographical difference between Melbourne and Sydney is another possible reason as to why Australian Rules football failed to thrive. Australian Rules football is a game that requires a ground approximately 150 metres long. Rugby in comparison can be played on a ground not much longer than 100 metres. Sydney was an older cramped city that did not have the wide expanses of parklands to play games of Australian Rules football. Sydney is far hillier than Melbourne, which has plenty of flat ground. The flat land that was available in Sydney was too far away to be desirable at the turn of the century, when only limited forms of public transport were

[93] *Ibid.*, p. 43.

available. These conditions made it hard for Australian Rules football to find enclosed grounds to play games, particularly since cricket administrators were initially reluctant to let their ovals be used by footballers. When trustees of the Sydney/Association Cricket Ground (SCG), namely Phillip Sheridan and Sir John See, were also presidents of the NSWFA and NSWFL, access to grounds was not a problem. When these two men parted company with their respective leagues, restricted access to these grounds soon followed. With access limited to a few unenclosed grounds, revenue from matches that could be used to promote the game was minimal. Rugby, in comparison, was played on a smaller field. The likelihood of finding good enclosed grounds was therefore markedly increased. Cashman and Hickie place this issue in a broader context by suggesting that:

> Availability of, access to, and the control of land all influence the particular shape of a sport, its financial status and its support base. Sports which gain access to conveniently located and suitably developed land have much greater potential to prosper than others which either have to put up with less suitable land or have an unsatisfactory and uncertain tenure over this space.[94]

Sharp has also suggested that Melbourne and Sydney's differing culture was a main reason why Australian Rules football failed to take off in Sydney. Australian Rules football was a colonial invention, developed by the more self-sufficient Melbourne. Sydney, in comparison the oldest city in Australia, still looked largely to England during this period for its ultimate sporting

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[94] R. Cashman and T. Hickie, 'The Divergent Sporting Cultures of Sydney and Melbourne', *Sporting Traditions*, vol. 7, no. 1, November 1990, p. 44.

contests.[95] The *Sydney Mail's* football columnist, 'Wanderer', best highlights this point:

> It is only natural that for some time to come, probably years, the followers of the Australian game or of local clubs will have to play to a beggarly of empty benches, for the simple reason that comparatively speaking, the Australian game is little appreciated in this state. We are born rugbians for the most part. We have watched Rugby from our cradle, and therefore it will take probably years, perhaps the next generation, before the public will take to the southern game.[96]

A final reason why Australian Rules football failed to take off in Sydney is related to intercolonial rivalry. It has been suggested by Blainey that Sydney rejected the game simply because it was from Melbourne, or as football reporter 'Orange and Blue' put it:

> The great objection to the (Australian) rules in New South Wales was that they were styled the Victorian Rules of Football. Had they been dubbed the Scandinavian rules, well and good; but Victorian - perish the thought![97]

In this context, it is worth noting that the nomenclature for the code has changed over time. Initially the game was known as 'Victorian Rules', but in line with the national aspirations of the code, and perhaps in response to critics such as 'Orange and Blue', by the end of the nineteenth century the game was commonly referred to as 'Australian Rules'. By the middle of the twentieth century, a shortened form of the term, namely 'Aussie Rules', was also in use, but by the late 1980s and early 1990s, along with the formation

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[95] Sharp, 'Australian Football', *op. cit.*, p. 44.

[96] *Sydney Mail*, 25 May 1905.

[97] Cited in Blainey, *op. cit.*, p. 87.

of a national competition and a renewed push by administrators to appeal to a wider market (discussed in later chapters), the preferred name for the code became 'Australian Football'.

2.5 A City in Waiting: 1930-1978

Australian Rules football in Sydney had a brief revival with the advent of the Second World War. Unlike the NSWFA years earlier, the NSWFL was able to survive the tough periods following the formation and swell of support for rugby league. On the back of the enthusiasm of local amateurs, expatriate Victorians, and the Australian National Football Council (ANFC)'s yearly propaganda fund, the local competition, although weak, was able to co-exist with the strong rugby codes. [98]

The game did not exactly flourish, but there were moments when hope for the code could be afforded. For example, at the Sydney Harbour Bridge opening on 19 March 1932, there were two events staged for Australian Rules footballers, namely a goal kicking competition, and a longest kick competition. Both proved remarkably popular amongst spectators.[99] A successful Australian National Football Carnival conducted on the Sydney Cricket Ground in 1933 was also well attended and generated great interest and excitement.[100] These events aside, the Sydney competition, and

[98] For financial details of the propaganda fund refer to New South Wales Annual Reports between 1932 and 1940.

[99] 30th Annual Report of the New South Wales Football League, season 1932. This is the first report available. Previous reports do not exist in the archives of the NSWFL.

[100] 31st Annual Report of the New South Wales Football League, season 1933.

Australian Rules football in Sydney, in general, meandered along in relative obscurity for the best part of the twenties and thirties.

The outbreak of war in Europe in 1939 had both a negative and positive impact on the fortunes of Australian Rules football in Sydney. Initially the impact was negative, as clubs were severely weakened by enlistments, universal training and players working long hours in munitions works. The loss of the league headquarters, Erskinville Oval, in 1940 contributed to one of the most difficult seasons in the Sydney league's history. Compounding the problem, newspaper rationing led to meagre publicity being given to the code in the local press.[101]

When Japan entered the war in 1941, the threat of conflict on the nation's own shores proved a blessing for Australian Rules football in Sydney. With the arrival of many prominent players from southern states in various branches of the defence forces, Australian Rules football experienced a revival. The NSWFL was at its strongest during this period with large crowds attending matches.[102] During the years 1943, 1944 and 1945, the League experienced record income and returned dividends to each of the competing clubs.[103]

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[101] 38th and 39th Annual Report of the New South Wales Football League, seasons 1940 and 1941.

[102] Piesse, *op. cit.*, p. 201.

[103] 41st, 42nd and 43rd Annual Reports of the New South Wales Football League, seasons 1943–1945.

With improved quality of football being exhibited and regular increased patronage at local games during this time, the NSWFL embarked on an adventurous advertising campaign to further increase the game's popularity. Advertisements were placed in the local press and broadcast over radio. A fifteen-minute Australian Rules football program, known as the 'Aussie Rules Session', promoted the games for the weekend, and was aired each Friday evening on radio station 2KY, while last quarter descriptions of the match of the day were aired on 2SM.[104]

The promotional campaign would prove successful in attracting more players to the League, but when the war ended in 1945, many of the servicemen returned home to their families in other parts of the country. With them went not only a lot of the spectator attraction of Australian Rules football, but also the competition's improved level of skill, the key ingredient that had made the League so strong over the preceding three years.[105] Again the prospect of the code experiencing long-term prosperity was short lived.

In 1952, the VFL again showed a glimmer of interest in developing the game in Sydney by playing a series of VFL competition matches in Sydney and country NSW, including the Riverina, as part of a 'National Day' experiment.[106] The national day experiment was the first real presentation of

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[104] 41st Annual Report of the New South Wales Football League, season 1943.

[105] 44th Annual Report of the New South Wales Football League, season 1946.

[106] Ross, *op. cit.*, p. 194. For a brief account of the development of football in the Riverina region, see R. A. Gillett, 'Where the Big Men Fly: An Early History of Australian Football in the Riverina', *Sporting Traditions*, vol. 4, no. 2, May 1988, pp. 162-175. More extensive

the code on an Australian-wide front, with premiership points at stake. It seems clear that the increasing concern about the failure of the Australian game to take off in Sydney, Brisbane and Darwin was the motivation behind its initiation.[107]

On Saturday, 14 June 1952, two of Victoria's famous clubs, Collingwood and Richmond, played for premiership points on the SCG. Torrential rain leading up to the game and drizzle throughout its entirety marred the spectacle, but 24,174 spectators still braved the cold and wet to watch Collingwood defeat Richmond by 36 points.[108] While comments in the *Sunday Herald* the following day inferred that the drizzling rain and the one-sided contest had resulted in the game being a flop,[109] the VFL was emphatic that the experiment had in fact been an outstanding success. The VFL was adamant that only inclement weather had robbed the Australian National Football Council and the VFL of a 'national triumph.'[110] In 1952, the *Football Record* described, in part, some of the activities:

> In Sydney under appalling conditions a crowd of almost 25,000 watched the Collingwood–Richmond game. Right next door the main Rugby match drew fewer than 11,000. Crowd enthusiasm proves that our grand winter sport is without peer as an entertainment medium. Given a fine day there is little doubt 60,000 would have attended the SCG to

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details are contained in R. A. Gillett, 'Where the Big Men Fly: An Early History of Australian Football in the Riverina Region of New South Wales', Bachelor of Letters Thesis, History Department, University of New England, 1983.

[107] Sandercock and Turner, *op. cit.,* pp. 133-134.

[108] *Sunday Herald,* 'Sporting Section', 15 June 1952, p. 6.

[109] *Ibid.*

[110] 50th Annual Report of the New South Wales Football League, season 1952.

see the match, the fact so many stood in torrential rain is proof of this.[111]

The NSWFL, too, had reason for optimism. The Sydney public had not only attended the game in large numbers but were enthralled by the style of play exhibited in the game, and journalists commented that the crowd 'were amazed at the manner in which the players handled the ball under such atrocious conditions, and at the rapidity of the play.'[112] The early fixture between local sides Western Suburbs and Newtown also proved a success. According to NSWFL's end of season report, the local players rose to the occasion and provided a thrilling encounter, a game that the public considered was far from inferior to the main match.[113]

Further games in the national day experiment were played in Hobart, Yallourn, Brisbane, Euroa and Albury.[114] The Albury game, was a tightly fought and exciting contest, which was won by 22 points by South Melbourne over North Melbourne in front of an estimated crowd of 15,000 spectators.[115] Despite appearing to be a success, however, the 'National Day' experiment was never repeated, and the reasons for its discontinuation were never explicated by the ANFC or the VFL.

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[111] Cited in *VFL Year Book*, Progress Press, Moorabbin, 1987, p. 45.

[112] 50th Annual Report of the New South Wales Football League, season 1952, *op. cit.*

[113] *Ibid.*

[114] Ross, *op. cit.,* p. 154.

[115] *Sunday Herald,* 'Sporting Section', 15 June 1952, p. 6.

Support for Australian Rules football continued to decline throughout the fifties. The boom years during and following the Second World War were now but a distant memory. While the number of teams in the competition had increased from six to ten during the period following the war, the standard of competition had severely deteriorated and with it spectator support.[116] Once again, Australian Rules football in Sydney was floundering. The opening statements of the 59th Annual Report of the NSWFL noted that: '... without a shadow of a doubt season 1961 was the most turbulent and troublesome in the history of the league.'[117] These comments were a strong indicator of the difficult times.

Adding to the problems of the NSWFL was a reduction in the number of exhibition matches throughout Sydney involving interstate teams.[118] As was commented on by the then NSWFL secretary, J. V. Regan, in the League's 62nd Annual Report: 'The Sydney sporting public is not so much football conscious, as it is spectacle conscious and will patronise only attractions of the highest standard.'[119] This decline in exhibition matches involving talented interstate teams was proving a major contributor to the code's minor status during this period.

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[116] 58th Annual Report of the New South Wales Football League, season 1960.

[117] 59th Annual Report of the New South Wales Football League, season 1961.

[118] 62nd Annual Report of the New South Wales Football League, season 1964.

[119] *Ibid.*

It had become apparent that if Australian Rules football was to improve its image in Sydney, the NSWFL would have to attract and promote as many representative matches as possible. These games would need to display a higher standard of football than the club matches, and be played on a regular basis until such a time as the club matches were of the standard looked for by the public. Accomplishing this type of support would mean turning to their southern neighbours, the now powerful VFL, for assistance.

Fortunately for the NSWFL and for the survival of Australian Rules football in Sydney, a growing sympathy toward the code in NSW had begun to develop in Victoria. The VFL responded to the NSWFL request for assistance by not only agreeing to increase ties between the two leagues, but also, in conjunction with the NSWFL, spending significant sums of money on promoting and advertising representative matches played in Sydney.[120] Beginning in 1964 and continuing throughout the remainder of the decade, an annual 'SCG Code Promotion Game', was successful in lifting the profile of Australian Rules football. On a number of occasions, the attendance for these games outdrew rugby league's match of the day fixtures and generated great interest and exposure for the code in Sydney.[121]

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[120] *Ibid.*

[121] On 15 July 1967 the SCG code promotion game between Essendon and Geelong attracted 23,777 spectators. The NSW Rugby League's supposed match of the year played in opposition at the adjoining Sydney showgrounds attracted 23,728 spectators. In 1968 the St Kilda and Carlton promotional game on 1 June, attracted 22,472 spectators, clearly outdrawing the 14,302 attending rugby league's match of the day. On 7 June 1969, 14,610 Australian Rules supporters braved the bleak weather conditions to watch Melbourne play Collingwood. This figure compared favorably against a combined total of 7000 spectators who watched the two rugby league fixtures on the same day and the 12, 000 who attended the Rosehill races. (65th, 66th, and 67th Annual Reports of the New South Wales Football League, seasons 1967-69).

Television, which was introduced into Australia in 1956, also favourably influenced the code's Sydney development. A fillip for the game in Sydney came in 1967, with the historic agreement between the VFL and television station ABN Channel 2 to screen the Melbourne football program 'VFL Saturday Night Replay' on the following Saturday afternoon throughout Sydney.[122] This innovation created a significant amount of interest among the sporting public of Sydney, with an estimated 70,000 viewers tuning into the replays each Saturday. In the view of the NSWFL, the replays played a significant role in lifting the image of the game in the state.[123]

By 1971, increased demand for VFL telecasts led to TCN 9 screening direct live coverage of the VFL game of the round into Sydney. The TCN 9 telecast were seen each Saturday by an estimated average audience of around 100,000 viewers, and was seen as the major reason for an increase in interest and participation in Australian Rules football in schools and amongst juniors.[124]

Throughout the middle years of the seventies, the code again seemed to drift along, with, apart from continued direct VFL telecasts, little influence or involvement from Victorian administrators.[125] In 1977, the NSWFL campaigned to have a Sydney side included in the newly created National

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[122] 65th Annual Report of the New South Wales Football League, season 1967.

[123] 66th Annual Report of the New South Wales Football League, season 1968.

[124] 69th Annual Report of the New South Wales Football League, season 1971.

[125] 73rd Annual Report of the New South Wales Football League, season 1975.

Football League night competition that consisted not only of the twelve VFL teams, but also teams from the WAFL and the SANFL and teams from the other footballing states.[126] This competition was seen by the NSWFL as the perfect opportunity for not only promoting the game in Sydney but also exposing local players and spectators to an improved standard of play.

A New South Wales representative side was missing from the Australian Football Council's inaugural night series in 1978, but entry to the competition in 1979 proved to be a forerunner to the next, and most serious, attempt of Australian Rules football to conquer the Sydney market.[127]

[126] 75th Annual Report of the New South Wales Football League, season 1977.

[127] 82nd and 83rd Annual Report of the Victorian Football League, seasons 1978 and 1979.

Chapter 3

Expanding the Empire: The Sydney Solution

3.1 Bongornio's Vision

In December 1976, a leading football reporter for the Melbourne *Truth,* Jim Main, wrote an article which revealed that a group of leading businessmen backed by the VFL were canvassing the idea of launching a VFL team in Sydney. He wrote:

> Sydneysiders, after long years of a boring rugby diet, at last are getting decent serves of League football via Channel 7's direct telecasts. Victorian expatriates love the replays, and now even heathens from across the border are staying in on winter Saturday afternoons. And to help all the game's friends in Sydney I believe there are big moves afoot to get the Coathanger city into the VFL. A top Melbourne businessman, now based in Sydney, is behind the venture and has some powerful friends. He says it might take ten years to get off the ground, but he maintains there is no way known having a Sydney side in the VFL wouldn't be the greatest ever boost to the game.[128]

The businessman Main was writing about and the man who first envisaged a Sydney team in the AFL was Mannie Bongornio, a financial entrepreneur. Bongornio's vision was based on the success of the Miami Dolphins football team in the United States, a team that had been created in the National Football League (NFL) by recruiting players from other teams. Bongornio discussed the ideas with Allen Aylett, who had become the president of the VFL in 1977. Aylett suggested that the possibility of a thirteenth team in the

[128] *Truth,* 4 December 1976.

competition being accepted by other clubs was remote, but there was a strong possibility of relocating a club to Sydney.[129]

As early as 1978, Bongornio's vision became closer to reality. During that season it became evident that it would not be long before a VFL team would embark on a move to Sydney. VFL administrators looking from a distance saw the untapped Sydney market as a massive opportunity for expansion. The desire to expand the VFL into Sydney was fuelled by a number of financial problems faced by the League. It was anticipated that a VFL team playing out of the economic and business heartland of the country would have easy access to sponsors, and the players playing in the largest football competition in the country in a city of almost four million people would have a great opportunity to establish their futures. In Melbourne, 300 players from eleven teams had to compete for media attention. In Sydney, it was thought that if a club could succeed on the field, then the players would become instant superstars and sporting idols, experiencing both fame and riches.[130]

Rumours began to circulate that the Fitzroy Football Club (FFC) was keen on heading north. The FFC was $400,000 in debt and saw Sydney as its salvation. A special committee was set up by the club to review the idea of relocating to Sydney. In August 1978, Fitzroy's proposal to play its home games on the SCG on Sunday, with live telecasts into Melbourne, won the support of the VFL. However, the proposal caused such uproar amongst the

[129] Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 111.

Fitzroy members that the plan was abandoned.[131] It seemed that Bongornio's vision would not come to fruition after all.

3.2 Why Sydney?

Before further explaining the push into Sydney, it is necessary to explore the reasons why the VFL was so intent on establishing a Sydney presence. From the evidence, it is clear that the League had no intention of just leaving Sydney to rugby league.

As has been previously established, early attempts at winning over Sydney were very much motivated by a dream of the game's administrators to see Australian Rules football spread throughout the country. The push into Sydney in the late 1970s, however, was much more complex. While fully establishing Australian Rules football at a national level was still the objective, the reasons and motivations for why this needed to occur had as much to do with economics as the visionary dreams of backers of the game.

During the 1970s, football in Victoria experienced a major cultural change. In this period the game moved from being an essentially amateur pastime to a game characterised by the linked processes of commercialisation and professionalisation.[132] Australian Rules football, however, was not on its

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[130] Linnell, *op. cit.*, pp. 94–95.

[131] M. Sutherland, R. Nicholson and S. Murrihy, *The First One Hundred Seasons: Fitzroy Football Club, 1883–1983,* Melbourne, 1983, p. 156.

[132] Stewart, *op. cit.*, p. 98.

own in this regard. Sport as a whole was changing. As Bruce Wilson explains, sport was embracing the commercial world, and was becoming part of a synergetic relationship in which a high-profile game or athletic activity could be used to sell a whole range of products.[133] In particular, the introduction of colour television transmission in 1975 can be seen as a contributing factor to the general commodification of sport in Australia during this decade.

Even before colour television's introduction in Australia, demands for the rights to televise the VFL, the most watched sports competition in Australia, were great. As Andrews notes, with the advent of colour television, the attractiveness of televised sport increased markedly, and the result was an intensified bidding process to win the rights to broadcast VFL matches. In this context, the League realised that Sydney would be an important bargaining tool in their dealings with television executives. If a VFL game were regularly scheduled in Sydney and beamed back live to a receptive television audience in the southern states, one result would be more money in the form of broadcasting rights.[134]

The VFL knew that by broadening the following and raising the profile of the competition it could also increase its appeal to potential sponsors. Research in the late 1970s confirmed that VFL telecasts drew an attractive

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[133] B. Wilson, 'Pumping up the Footy' in D. Rowe and G. Lawrence (eds), *Sport and Leisure: Trends in Australian Popular Culture,* Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, Marrickville, 1990, pp. 27-39.

demographic, comprised of a high proportion of affluent men. The fact that the game appealed to this particular segment of the market made the VFL attractive to potential advertisers, and resulted in a rapid increase in corporate sponsorship.[135]

The clubs, too, saw possible benefits from a move north, especially those languishing near the bottom of the ladder, and with financial difficulties. For years, the major source of income for VFL clubs came from gate receipts and membership. By the early 1970s, however, these income sources ceased to be sufficient to fully fund the competition and its constituent clubs. Inflation in player payments of 1800 per cent, along with a 200 per cent increase in transfer fees, meant that in the space of a decade from the mid-1970s, the annual cost of fielding a team soared from $130,000 to around $3 million.[136] This rise in costs exerted great financial pressure on the struggling VFL clubs and left many in a dire situation. They needed money to buy players to become competitive and to increase the team's attractiveness to sponsors, but they could not afford to do this, given their delicate financial positions.[137] The struggling clubs knew that moving to Sydney, was essentially 'selling their soul', but they could also see the sponsorship possibilities that came with it. For many clubs Sydney was seen as a possible quick fix for their burgeoning problems.

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[134] Andrews, *op. cit.*, pp. 235-239.

[135] *Ibid.*, p. 236.

[136] *Ibid.*, p. 238.

[137] *Ibid.* See also Wilson, *op. cit.*, pp. 33-36.

Wilson probably best summed up the changes that Australian Rules football and sport in general were experiencing, highlighting the reasons why Australian Rules football was looking at expansion. He observed that:

> The clubs want money to meet a range of costs, particularly of players. The sponsors and advertisers want exposure through their association with good teams in the major competition, thus assuring themselves wide newspaper and television coverage. The media want large audiences in order to attract more advertising revenue. The reliance of one element on the other has become such that clubs and competitions have had to expand because they are dependent upon the capital from commercial interests outside the sports industry.[138]

In short, the VFL's desire to widen its territory was due to the fact that the game was experiencing a significant period of change. Corporate sponsors, advertisers and the media played a pivotal role in bringing about this change. It seemed that the VFL faced the choice of either keeping up and embracing such developments, or being left behind and losing their place as the premier spectator sport in the country.

3.3 The Sydney Experiment

Although Fitzroy's move did not eventuate, the VFL continued with its resolve to introduce Australian Rules football to Sydney by playing a series of games in the nation's largest capital city during 1979. These games became known as the 'Sydney Experiment.' On 10 June 1979, 31,395 attended the SCG to watch Hawthorn play North Melbourne. The headline

[138] Wilson, *op. cit.*, pp. 36-37.

in the *Age* the following day read 'Football Rules in Sydney.'[139] Later the same year, 17,140 fans watched Fitzroy play Richmond in Sydney.[140]

During 1980, another four games were played in Sydney, and the behind-the-scene moves to introduce a club to Sydney intensified.[141] Results of surveys that were undertaken by the VFL during the games in Sydney revealed that 60,000 Sydney people would be prepared to regularly support a Sydney team in the VFL competition, and ninety per cent of all spectators felt the game had the potential to become a major spectator sport in Sydney.[142]

In August 1980, a confidential thirty-four page report compiled by VFL corporate planner John Hennesy and titled 'The Sydney Solution: VFL at the Crossroads' was tabled.[143] The report recommended the establishment of a thirteenth team in Sydney and outlined the benefits such a team would receive and provide to the VFL. The report stated:

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[139] *Age,* 11 June 1979.

[140] *Sydney Morning Herald*, 16 July 1979.

[141] The four matches involved Footscray v. Geelong on April 27, Essendon v. Carlton on May 25, South Melbourne v. Geelong on June 15 and St Kilda v. Richmond on July 20. All games were played at the SCG and attracted crowds that were bigger than the main rugby league matches, played on the same days. (84th Annual Report of the Victorian Football League, season 1980.)

[142] Cited in Stewart, *op. cit.,* p. 112.

[143] *Age,* 12 August 1980.

> The Sydney sporting market will probably never be as ripe for an attack from Australian football as it is now. Rugby is in a state of organised chaos with a poor public image, and its participation and attendances are declining. The game (Australian Football) and its stars are now well known and it is seen as a viable alternative to the violence of rugby.[144]

The potential benefits a club playing out of Sydney could expect, according to the optimistic report, included:

> 6,000 Sydney members by the end of the first year, 8,000 by the end of year two and 10,000 by the third year. A Sydney or national sponsor worth $150,000 a year. Average crowds increasing from 17,500 the first year to 20,000, and special financial assistance, which could be looked on as a development and establishment subsidy.[145]

Even though many of these benefits could have been construed as wishful thinking, in January 1981, the VFL intensified its quest to create a Sydney affiliation. The vice president of the League, Graham Huggins, was appointed as a consultant to work on a feasibility study into the establishment of a thirteenth club in Sydney.[146] Six months later, Huggins presented his report to the VFL Board, which recommended a three year trial for a Sydney-based team that would play at the SCG on Friday nights, with return games at VFL Park. The season would be extended to twenty-six rounds with each club playing twenty-four matches and having two byes.[147] The report by Huggins highlighted that it was: 'imperative for the VFL to expand to make Australian Football a truly national sport, and the untapped

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[144] *Ibid.*

[145] *Ibid.*

[146] *Age*, 29 January 1981.

[147] *Age*, 18 June 1981.

sporting market in Sydney represented an excellent opportunity for the VFL.'[148] The 'imperative' nature of the recommendation probably owed more to the potential market opportunities than the altruistic goal of establishing a 'a truly national sport', but, at the time, such rhetoric was an essential part of 'selling' the concept of a necessary and inevitable Sydney presence to both the clubs and the football public.

3.4 The Swans: Sydney or Bust

During the period Huggins was compiling his report, the South Melbourne Football Club (SMFC) secretly began to examine the possibility of re-locating to Sydney. Taylor reveals that in 1978, following the failure to get Fitzroy to Sydney, 'a number of the South Melbourne executives breathed a sigh of relief. Privately they had harboured the notion of moving to Sydney long before Fitzroy raised the issue.'[149]

In the video recording, *Sydney Swans, 'A New Beginning'*, director Jim Cole highlighted that the SMFC, like Fitzroy, was in serious financial trouble throughout the 1970s. The old working-class followers of the club were moving out of South Melbourne, and the area was becoming populated by migrants and a young affluent middle class.[150] In 1980, the SMFC membership base had declined to just over 1500, and the club had a deficit

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[148] *Ibid.*

[149] Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 113.

[150] J. Cole, *Sydney Swans, 'A New Beginning'*, (video recording) Powerplay International Marketing Ltd, 1986. This video recording examines the SMFC move to Sydney and the changes experienced in Sydney following the sale of the Sydney Swans to Dr Geoffrey Edelsten.

of a half a million dollars.[151] Commenting on the situation, the then chairman of the SMFC, Jack Marks, remarked that: 'It didn't look to me as chairman of the club that we could get out of the problems without making some sort of move.'[152] On 15 June 1980, the SMFC played Geelong at the SCG and the first steps in the long process of moving to Sydney had begun.[153]

On 1 July 1981, after many closed-door meetings between the VFL and SMFC chairman, Jack Marks, football president, Graham John, and VFL director Craig Kimberly, the committee of the SMFC asked the VFL for permission to play half its future games in Sydney and half its games at VFL Park, in order to prevent the club from going into voluntary liquidation.[154] Permission was granted by the VFL board of directors at an extraordinary meeting of the League on 29 July 1981.[155]

The proposed move, however, was met with fierce opposition by groups of members and supporters who disagreed with the decision. An action group lead by John Keogh and called Keep South at South (KSAS) was formed to represent opinions of supporters. The first step in the KSAS committee fight was to organise an extraordinary meeting, where members could voice their opinions and argue against the proposed move.[156]

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[151] Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

[152] Cole, *op cit.*

[153] Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 89.

[154] *Ibid.*

[155] *Age*, 30 July 1981.

[156] Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

In response to the actions of the KSAS group, Mannie Bongornio and Graham Huggins set about forming their own committee, consisting of people keen on seeing the South venture into Sydney succeed. Within days, sixteen leading Sydney identities and businessmen formed the 'Committee for the Advancement of Australian Football in Sydney' (CAAFS). The aim of the CAAFS was to gather support for the move by advertising in Sydney papers, and to use this support to attract members to the SMFC. These members would then gain voting rights, which could be used to ensure the vote on a move by the SMFC to Sydney would be successful.[157]

On 22 September, the Caulfield Town Hall was filled for the extraordinary meeting of the SMFC. More than 700 members attended to hear both sides of the debate. Four speakers, two for the KSAS and two for the existing committee, presented their arguments.[158] According to Taylor:

> The scene was a mass of red and white scarves, beanies and jumpers, and the mood of the crowd was easy to judge - they wanted blood. They showed their anger at every opportunity, shouting abuse at personalities such as Graham John who they identified with the pro-Sydney move. In such a torrid atmosphere there was little opportunity for rational debate.[159]

At the conclusion of the meeting, members voted yes or no to the four resolutions put to them. The resolutions were as follows:

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[157] *Ibid.*, p. 117.

[158] *Ibid.*

[159] *Ibid.*, p. 119.

1. That this meeting has no confidence in the present board of management of the South Melbourne Club Ltd.
2. That each and every officer of South Melbourne Club Ltd. be immediately removed from office.
3. That the board of management be reduced from ten members to six members effective immediately.
4. That the following members of the South Melbourne Club Ltd. be elected to the board of management of the South Melbourne Club Ltd: John Keogh, Colin Crawford, James Harmon, John O'Hanlon, Barry Morton, Kevin Campbell.[160]

After counting of the 763 votes on the night, the KSAS group was well in front with over eighty-three per cent of members wanting South to remain at the Lakeside Oval.[161] However, with the counting of over 1300 proxy votes the following day, the vote evened up and the tally became close.[162]

At 5.20 pm on 23 September, Jack Marks delivered a handwritten statement to the press at the South Melbourne Cricket Club. It said:

> The outgoing committee has been defeated by a democratic vote of members of the South Melbourne Football Club Ltd. It was defeated because the membership did not believe that the South Melbourne football team should play its home matches in Sydney. On behalf of the outgoing committee, I extend my best wishes for great success for the club in the future.

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[160] *Age*, 23 September 1981.

[161] *Ibid.*

[162] Cole, *op. cit.* For further discussion of the events of the extraordinary meeting and the voice of the South Melbourne supporter in the Sydney relocation, refer to M. Nicholson, 'Swans Fly Bloody Coop: The Place of Spectators in South Melbourne's Relocation Saga.' Honours Thesis, University of Melbourne, 1995, pp. 19-20.

The actual final margin of the ballot remains unknown, but most reports have it as less than ten votes.[163] South, for the time being, would remain in Melbourne.

Despite winning the approval of the members, the incoming committee had to also win over both the VFL and the players before the future of the club could be determined. In July, the VFL had voted to permit South to play their home matches in Sydney. Once this motion was passed it could only be revoked, according to the VFL constitution, by a three-quarter majority of the twelve member clubs. The incoming South committee immediately applied to the VFL to reconsider this decision. Although some of the clubs who supported the original decision to send South to Sydney changed their mind, there was insufficient support to rescind the original decision.[164]

The players were also against staying in Melbourne. Commenting on the situation, then vice captain, Mark Browning, said 'we [the players] hadn't had success and we knew it wasn't going to come if we stayed in Melbourne.'[165] Many players, including Browning, captain Barry Round, Francis Jackson and Tony Morwood, went on strike.[166] It was clear that many of the players were intent on seeing South's venture to Sydney succeed.

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[163] See for example, Cole, *op. cit.*, Nicholson, *op. cit.,* p. 19, Taylor, *op. cit.,* p. 119, Main, *op. cit.,* p. 50, and the *Age,* 24 September 1981.

[164] Taylor, *op. cit.,* p. 119.

[165] *Ibid.*

[166] *Ibid.,* p. 120. See also, Nicholson, *op. cit.,* p. 21, for more details of the actions of the SMFC player group.

Over the next three months, the SMFC experienced one of the most divisive periods of its long history. Infighting resulted in the club almost folding. Waldon best summed up the circumstances as follows:

> The events from September 22 to Christmas Eve 1981 were fraught with dissension, misery, uncertainty and tension. The club with a tradition stretching back into the last century was ripped apart as a struggle for control of the club and its ultimate future was fought. Both sides in the argument – those advocating the move to Sydney and those against it – claimed to be acting in the best interest of the club, yet a rapid deterioration of the club's affairs was the result.[167]

On 23 December 1981, after months of indecision, VFL intervention and a lengthy period of confrontation, the KSAS committee finally gave in to growing pressure for a shift to Sydney.[168] Ricky Quade was appointed as coach, Barry Rogers as general manager, and VFL administration manager, Alan Schwab, was installed as the club's administration officer for three months to help stabilise the club. Graham Huggins also remained to assist in organising the Sydney matches, membership drives and sponsorship negotiations.[169]

After months of struggle and some of the fiercest internal club rows in VFL history, the SMFC was moving to Sydney.[170] According to Waldon: 'The

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[167] S. Waldon, 'Swans – Sydney or Bust!' *Australian Football Action*, no. 1, 1982, p. 6. *Australian Football Action* was a monthly football magazine, which covered the main stories of the time in the VFL, along similar lines to today's *Inside Football.*

[168] G. Growden, 'The Swans: Finally Making Ripples on Sydney's Pond', *Sport World Australia,* August 1984. *Sports World Australia* was a monthly sports magazine.

[169] Waldon, *op. cit.*, p. 8.

[170] *Ibid.*

Swans were to become the guinea pigs in the most radical football experiment since the VFL was formed for the 1897 season.'[171]

3.5 The Swans Land in Sydney

On 24 February 1982, in an event that matched for grand style any reception for a sporting team in the country, the players and officials of the club were officially introduced to the Sydney public, most of whom were cheerfully wearing 'I'm a Sydney Swan' rosettes. Mike Brady's football song, 'Up There for Sydney' was aired and the club's new name and logo were unveiled. From this point on the club would be known simply as the Swans, and their nickname would be the Sydney Swans.[172]

The lavish launch at the Sydney Opera House, in the presence of many Sydney personalities and high flyers, was very much based around style and was very typically 'Sydney', giving the Swans some important early media exposure. This coverage was exemplified by a photograph of Barry Round, the captain of the Swans, and John Roberts, the full forward of the team, holding a local female model on their shoulders, with the Harbour Bridge as a backdrop. This image adorned each of the two Sydney daily papers the following day.[173]

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[171] *Ibid.*

[172] Cole, *op. cit.*

[173] See the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Sydney Morning Herald*, 25 February 1982.

In their first game of the 1982 season, the Swans were matched against Melbourne, coached by Ron Barassi, one of the key activists behind the national expansion of the VFL. The expectations of a Swans victory in their new home city were high, as a first up win would go some way to helping the Swans make it in Sydney. Former player Dennis Carroll recalls that coach Ricky Quade, who he says was nervous at the best of times, 'was ill with anxiety as he paced the room before the match. But that was how we all felt.'[174] In front of 15,764 supporters, the Swans won by 29 points. It was a victory that was received with obvious relief from officials of both the club and the VFL.[175] Later that evening, according to Taylor, the win was celebrated with a spectacular post-match party at the home of Lady Fairfax, where the players were greeted with caviar, champagne and oysters, a far cry from the beer and pies after games in Melbourne.[176]

3.6 The Early Days: 1982–85

Throughout 1982, the progress of the Swans on the field was steady rather than spectacular. The club won twelve of their twenty-two matches, with only four losses by fewer than 6 points keeping them out of the finals. They ended up finishing seventh on the ladder. A highpoint of the season occurred in July when the Swans defeated North Melbourne to take out the Australian Football Council Escort Championship. It was the club's first premiership of any kind since 1933. Following the win, the players were

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[174] Interview with Dennis Carroll, 10 February 1998.

[175] *Age*, 31 July 1999.

invited to a civic reception at which the Sydney Lord Mayor, Doug Sutherland, hoisted the Swans' premiership flag on the mast at the Sydney Town Hall. The players also received a congratulatory telegram from the NSW Premier, Neville Wran.[177]

Off the field, there was also reason for optimism. The club secured a $1.2 million three-year agreement with Wards Express, by far the biggest sponsorship deal in the VFL. Further deals with Kentucky Fried Chicken, Just Jeans, Remington-Rand, Pam-Am and Chateau Commodore helped the club become financially secure.[178]

The first year of the Swans in Sydney, however, was not without its problems. Many Melbourne clubs viewed the prospective Sydney market as a lucrative untapped resource. They feared that South, with access to profits from poker machines (which were not yet legal in Victoria), would become so rich as to distance themselves from the rest of the competition in a very short time. The truth was, however, that apart from the occasional exception, few sporting clubs were finding poker machines overly profitable.[179] Whatever the reality was, the fears from Melbourne clubs in regard to expected profits from poker machines did lead to a clause that ensured each rival club playing in Sydney received a guaranteed $20,000 up front. The original

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[176] Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 91.

[177] 86th Annual Report, Victorian Football League, season 1982, p. 22.

[178] S. Waldon, 'How successful has been the Swans' shift to Sydney?' *Australian Football Action,* no. 5, 1982, pp. 22–25.

[179] Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

financial predictions were overly optimistic. For example, it was expected that the Swans would also make $20,000 from each match. In reality, however, they often ended up with no net income from their games in Sydney.[180] Still, as Barry Rogers acknowledged, the club was better off than at the Lakeside Oval because, in Melbourne 'we often lost quite a lot of money on a number of matches.'[181]

During the summer of 1983, many of the players moved permanently to Sydney in an attempt to make the club more identifiable with its new city. Some players, however, refused to make the move as directed. Three players, namely Silvio Foschini, Paul Morwood, and his brother Shane, went to court over the situation. They eventually won their cases, on the ruling that the VFL rules governing its clearances system were an unreasonable restraint of trade. Foschini and Paul Morwood went to St Kilda, and Shane Morwood went to Collingwood. The case proved to be a significant episode in the history of the VFL as it demonstrated that League transfer and zoning rules were open to legal challenges. This particular incident led to the transformation of the rules regarding the VFL's transfer system.[182]

The promising developments during 1982 could not be continued in 1983. Injuries to key players took a toll on the club's limited talent. They ended up finishing eleventh, the club's worst result since 1972. The poor on-field

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[180] Waldon, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

[181] Rogers cited in Waldon, *op. cit.*, p. 23.

[182] Nadel, 'Colour', *op. cit.*, pp. 216–217.

performance was compounded by new off-field dramas. As John Keogh, recalled:

> We went to Sydney with the thought that the people in Sydney and the reaction of VFL football to Sydney would be exactly the same as what it was in Victoria. Many VFL administrators were also of the misplaced belief that the game of Australian football was good enough to sell itself. Many people found out very quickly that it wasn't.[183]

In the 1983 season this reality began to hit home.

The club's lack of success was disappointing from a number of aspects. Gross attendance at SCG games dropped form 176,524 in 1982 to 132,255 in 1983, and this in turn led to decreased profits from match receipts.[184] Off the field, day-to-day costs also exceeded predictions.[185] Financial difficulties that the move to Sydney was meant to resolve were still evident. A change of thinking by the VFL in regard to the guaranteed $20,000 to visiting Melbourne clubs was unable to solve the problems.[186]

The club found itself in an unfortunate 'catch 22' situation. They needed success to breed success, to win over Sydney, to increase attendances, sponsorship and income. Winning games, however, was proving difficult because of a lack of top-line players and an inability to buy any because of a lack of funds.[187] By season's end the situation was so desperate that the

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[183] Cited on Cole, *op. cit.*

[184] Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 94.

[185] Growden, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

[186] Waldon, *op. cit.*, p. 22.

[187] Growden, *op. cit.*, p. 64.

club could not meet its debts and the directors were to be held liable.[188] In response, the other VFL clubs proposed three choices, each of which was submitted to the League. Taylor summarised the choices as follows:

> Grant the SMFC - $1 million for each of the next three years from additional television fees enjoyed by the exposure of Sydney VFL matches in Melbourne, to enable the club to be placed on a sound financial footing. The second choice was to grant the SMFC additional and immediate financial assistance. The third ultimatum stated that unless financial assistance is granted, within 21 days the SMFC directors would have no alternative but to go into voluntary liquidation.[189]

The VFL's reaction was a firm 'no' to further funding, but it made a plea for the club to resist going into voluntary liquidation. The VFL offered to take control of the club and appoint a new board to deal with running the club. The SMFC directors had no option but to agree with the VFL's offer. So on 21 May the VFL took control of the Swans, and the club's official name was changed to the Sydney Swans Limited.[190]

After the disappointment of 1983 the club entered the 1984 season knowing that they had to be successful to get Sydney supporters coming through the turnstiles.[191] The recruitment of Collingwood champion Bill Picken and North Melbourne player Craig Holden added some much needed experience to the line up, and prospects for the club looked good.

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[188] Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 129.

[189] *Ibid.*

[190] *Ibid.*

[191] *Ibid.*, p. 94.

The Swans started the season winning four of their first five matches. More importantly, it appeared the club was winning over Sydney. The animosity and 'impostor' tag that had been placed on the club was slowly beginning to fade. Players were finally settling in Sydney and beginning to find permanent jobs. According to Taylor, the Sydney public, rather than seeing Australian Rules football as 'aerial ping pong', were now accepting the game as a genuine display of skill.[192]

The optimism, however, was short lived. In what was to become a Sydney trademark, every time the club looked to be on the way up, it would somehow find a way to self-destruct. After ten games, the Swans had a six-win four-loss record. However, the turning point of the season came on 3 June, when 25,602 supporters poured into the SCG to watch the Swans play Carlton.[193] It was one of the largest crowds at a Swans' game since the club had arrived in Sydney. Carlton won by 52 points. As Taylor recalls: 'Sydney lost a lot of fans and it would take almost two years before they could win them back.'[194]

The Carlton defeat was followed by three successive losses. In response to the form slump, the selectors dropped captain Barry Round. To add to the commotion, Ricky Quade was hospitalised with a reported bleeding ulcer and was forced to resign. Following a fifth straight loss, the club played

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[192] Growden, *op. cit.*, p. 65.

[193] Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 96.

[194] *Ibid.*

Fitzroy under the guidance of Bob Hammond, a former South Australian state coach. Mark Browning took over as captain.[195] In wet and miserable conditions the Swans ended the losing streak and following another win against Footscray, a season that seemed gone was alive again. Form deteriorated again though, before the club gained some pride and respect by beating the eventual premiers Essendon in the final round of the season.[196]

Business commitments meant Bob Hammond was unable to continue as coach past the 1984 season. It was a disappointment for the club, but not the only disappointment during the off-season. David Rhys-Jones, one of the club's most promising young players, was lured to Carlton after seventy-six matches with the Swans.[197] Rhys-Jones was an example of what was an on-going problem, namely, the inability to both attract and keep quality players in Sydney.

John Northey, a Richmond premiership player, took over as coach for the 1985 season.[198] The year began on a successful note for the club with a 100 point victory over St Kilda. However, a mid-season slump occurred and the Swans won only six games and finished tenth on the ladder. Attendances began to drop. The average home game attendance had

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[195] Nadel, 'The League Goes National', *op. cit.*, p. 225.

[196] Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

[197] *Ibid.*

[198] *Ibid.*

dropped from just under 16,000 in 1982 to just over 10,000 in 1985.[199] The meagre crowd of 7,942 for the final home game was a clear example of the decline in attendances. Although the club's off-field position was neither going forward nor slipping into adversity, it was becoming increasingly obvious that the Swans had lost local support.[200] All this, however, was about to change. The Sydney Football Club was about to be turned upside down.

[199] Australian Football League/Victorian Football League, *Annual Reports, 1982-1999*. See also Appendix 1: Sydney Football Club Home Games Average Attendance: 1982-1999.

[200] *Ibid.*, p. 132.

Chapter 4

The Entrepreneurial Factor

4.1 The Day Dollars Beat Sense

In 1985, amidst the dwindling home game crowds of the Swans, came Doctor Geoffrey Edelsten, the man who was going to save the Swans. Edelsten was a high profile medical entrepreneur who owned a string of medical centres around Sydney.[201] His direct involvement with the Swans was a result of his association with Bob Pritchard, who had worked with Kerry Packer in the set up of World Series Cricket. After watching the popularity of the Swans suffer throughout the 1983 and 1984 seasons, it was Pritchard who began to formulate a plan for the future success of the club.[202]

Pritchard had spent time in the United States in 1984 and had been exposed to the system of private ownership. During his stay, he gathered information from the NFL on the buying and selling of teams.[203] On returning to Australia, he canvassed the idea of private ownership in Australian sport. The ailing Sydney Swans were an obvious target. Pritchard did not, however, have the money to buy the club himself, and he was having some difficulty in persuading a prospective owner to do the same. He had envisioned developing a partnership with Kerry Packer, but the media entrepreneur was not interested. It was then that he came in contact with

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[201] *Herald,* 9 January 1985.

[202] Taylor, *op. cit.,* p. 133.

[203] Linnell, *op. cit.,* p. 99.

Edelsten.[204] Pritchard and Edelsten had actually met years earlier when both were trying to make a career in the music industry. Their rock careers were short-lived, but this connection would reunite them years later and change the structure of Australian Rules football.[205]

The idea of private ownership of VFL teams had actually been canvassed a year or two earlier when John Elliott, the owner of Elders IXL, had preliminary discussions with the VFL about buying the Sydney Swans. The discussions never progressed to anything serious, and Elliott went on to become a powerful figure at the Carlton Football Club. However, his dream of fielding his own team in Sydney would still remain, and nearly ten years later he would again try to buy into the Sydney market.[206]

In the latter part of the 1984 season, Pritchard and Edelsten had preliminary discussions with the Sydney Swans in regard to the team's financial position and the possibility of buying out the club. Together, they produced an ownership proposal that they thought could work for the Swans.[207] On 9 January 1985, their plan was revealed to the public when the Melbourne *Herald* reported that Edelsten had offered to pay off the Sydney club's $1.4 million debt, financing the operations of the club in a deal worth $2 million.[208] By the end of January that same year, the parties interested in buying the

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[204] *Ibid.*, p. 100.

[205] *Ibid.*, p. 101.

[206] *Ibid.*, p. 97.

[207] Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 134.

[208] *Herald*, 9 January 1985.

Swans had increased to three. Proposals were submitted by Melbourne-based Richard Pratt, and a syndicate led by Sydney businessman, Basil Sellers.[209] It seemed official. The Sydney Swans were for sale.

Pratt's interest in buying the Swans soon waned and it became obvious the battle for ownership was a two-way race between Edelsten and the syndicate led by Basil Sellers. Edelsten's bid centred around buying players and turning the Swans into an overnight success, whereas Sellers' proposal was focused on long term goals being achieved through a more traditional, membership-based, football club structure.[210]

The whole saga was a long and drawn out process, full of controversy, accusations and secrecy. Throughout the whole event, Sellers would remain a private figure and would shy from all media attention. The flamboyant Edelsten, in comparison, was forever in the public eye. It was not long before he became one of the best-known individuals in Australia. He was present at all Sydney home games, and never missed the chance to appear on television or in a photograph for the press. He became the face of the Sydney Swans.[211] According to one report: 'during the 1985 season the players were taken to Edelsten's mansion and were won over by the free

[209] *Age*, 17 January 1985.

[210] *Age*, 30 May 1985.

[211] Main, *Plugger*, *op. cit.*, p. 62.

helicopter rides, the swimming pools and the new tennis racquets to play tennis on his courts. The boys loved it.'[212]

The ownership saga of the Sydney Swans and the bidding war between Edelsten and Sellers became the biggest story in Australian Rules football during the 1985 season. When one syndicate increased the dollar value of their offer, the other would respond by matching or bettering it. Amidst the bidding process, the VFL secretly came into contact with some damning information that linked Edelsten to the hiring of a hitman to kill a dissatisfied patient. Material suggesting that Edelsten was being investigated by the bureau of Criminal Intelligence in California concerning his former business operations in the United States was also uncovered by the VFL.[213] A further report in the *National Times* of 30 May suggested Edelsten, and where he got his money from, were being closely scrutinised by the Director of Public Prosecutions, the Federal Police, the Commonwealth Health Department and the Taxation Office.[214]

The information appeared damaging to the credibility of Edelsten and his proposal. It seemed likely, therefore, that the Sellers proposal would be approved.[215] The information, however, could never be substantiated. When financial and management consultants Touché Ross, who had been

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[212] *Herald Sun*, 12 June 1993.

[213] Linnell, *op. cit.*, pp. 108-109.

[214] *National Times,* 30 May 1985.

[215] *Age*, 29 May 1985.

hired by the VFL to review the financial status of both bidding parties, reported that: 'we are of the opinion that Dr. Edelsten has the capacity to fund the proposed financial commitments,'[216] Edelsten, with no hard evidence against him, was 'back in the race'.

By the time the bid had exceeded $6 million, Sellers was beginning to have second thoughts. Analysis of his figures showed that the excessive upfront costs were going to make it difficult for the venture to be economically viable. He saw no other option than to withdraw his proposal.[217] The VFL, knowing too well that Edelsten would continue to raise his price, was able to convince Sellers to keep his decision to himself. According to Linnell, 'the VFL wanted to milk Edelsten for as much as it could get.'[218]

On 31 July 1985, the VFL sold the Sydney Swans to the Geoffrey Edelsten/Bob Pritchard consortium 'Powerplay' for $6.5 million. The deal meant that the eleven other Victorian clubs would receive a windfall of $263,000, money that would relieve many of them of some of their financial concerns. On the night the decision was announced, Edelsten said 'I believe it is a great investment and history will prove me right.'[219]

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[216] *Herald,* 18 June 1985.

[217] Linnell, *op. cit.,* p. 108, see also Nadel, 'The League Goes National', *op. cit.,* p. 225.

[218] *Ibid.,* p. 108.

[219] *Age,* 1 August 1985.

According to the *Age*, the main terms of Edelsten's agreement were as follows:

> 1) Repayment of the Sydney Swans' current debt of $1.4m (owed to the other clubs)
> 2) An additional payment (Licence fee) of $1.5m (to be shared by the other 11 clubs)
> 3) A further license fee payment amounting to 5 per cent of each yearly profit.
> 4) A payment of 10 per cent of any gain in the event of the license being sold.
> 5) The granting of a license being conditional of approval by the Swans board and membership.
> 6) The licensee assumes all other liabilities of the Sydney Swans present and future.[220]

Almost as soon as the decision was announced, Edelsten began a serious recruitment campaign. Almost every footballer who had ever played was courted. According to Linnell:

> There was money to be burned. Every player agent and manager in the country was on the phone to the Swans, putting out the feelers to let them know their players were interested in moving north if the dollars were right.[221]

The recruiting drive started with the highly publicised bid to secure premiership coach, Kevin Sheedy. After much negotiation, Sheedy turned down the offer, and Tom Hafey, the former Richmond, Collingwood and Geelong coach, was signed. Joining him from Geelong were Greg Williams, Bernard Toohey, and David Bolton, along with Gerard Healy (Melbourne), Merv Neagle (Essendon), Jim Edmond (Footscray), Glen Coleman (Fitzroy), and Paul Morwood (St Kilda). The club also recruited Richmond pair

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[220] *Ibid.*

Maurice Rioli and Tim Barling, but overspending put the Swans in breach of the VFL's salary cap regulations. Barling was loaned to country team Birchip for the season, but Rioli, after much legal debate, would never play for the club. He would end up returning to Richmond.[222] Taylor estimated that the Swans spent $2.5 million on their 1986 team, at least double the agreed salary cap.[223] However, despite the salary cap breaches, the heaviest fine the Swans suffered was a paltry $20,000. In explaining why the League was so lenient on the Swans regarding these matters, Linnell suggested that the VFL considered that: 'Sydney was too important a market and too crucial in the television rights equation to drag it back to the same level on which other clubs were operating'[224].

4.2 The Powerplay Makeover

It was, however, not only on the field where major changes were taking place. The club was experiencing a much needed image makeover off the field. One of the first measures adopted by Powerplay was to identify the club as Sydney. Survey results conducted by Powerplay of 168 Sydney suburbs established a low level of female and child interest in the game.[225] The research also indicated that the Swans were not seen as a Sydney team but rather as a relocated team dumped on the city because they were no

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[221] Linnell, *op. cit.*, p. 113.

[222] Taylor, *op. cit.*, pp. 135–147.

[223] *Ibid.*, p. 101.

[224] Linnell, *op. cit.*, p. 332.

[225] Taylor *op. cit.*, p. 150.

longer wanted in Melbourne.[226] It was obvious the Swans needed to change their image.

Bob Pritchard, the Chief Executive of Powerplay during 1986, had experienced first hand the ingredients required to recreate the success of a sport or sporting team. Pritchard had been instrumental in the marketing of World Series Cricket and had also witnessed the marketing and promotion of football in the United States. His expertise in the field would prove crucial in raising the lagging profile of the Swans.[227]

Pritchard's premise was that if the Sydney Swans saturated the market, people would have to take notice. Advertising space was bought in Sydney newspapers and airtime bought from radio stations. Influential journalists were targeted, wined, dined and then given almost unlimited access to the leading players of the Swans.[228] Even the personal affairs of players were reported at length. For example, captain Dennis Carroll was a keen golfer, and it was arranged to have him profiled in a golf magazine. News of forthcoming player engagements and weddings was also sold to popular weekly magazines.[229] A visually exciting television campaign was launched that described the ruggedness of the game, but did not overlook revealing the tight-fitting shorts. All marketing and promotion campaigns centred on

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[226] Linnell, *op. cit.*, p. 115.

[227] Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 133.

[228] Linnell, *op. cit.*, p. 116.

[229] *Ibid.*

the theme of it's 'us' (Sydney) against all of Melbourne. The campaign also emphasised the slogan, 'Show 'em Sydney'.[230]

Pritchard and Powerplay spared no expense when it came to marketing the team and lifting the profile of the Swans. Ticket deals were established, and promotions and giveaways were introduced, using television, radio and newspapers. By the beginning of the 1986 season, the new look Sydney Swans had gone from virtual nobodies to one of the most identifiable sporting teams in the country.[231] General public interest in the Swans in Sydney increased from just over two per cent to twenty-seven per cent, and Sydney residents who could name two or more players increased from less than one per cent to thirty-nine per cent.[232]

4.3 Value for Money

The mass spending, however, did not stop there. Pritchard knew while getting people through the gates was important, keeping them there and ensuring they came back was also essential. To be successful at winning crowd support, the Swans, according to one press report, would have to 'give their supporters more than just a game of football they would have to give people value for money, give people fun and give them the opportunity to really enjoy themselves and go home as a family unit happy with the

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[230] Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 150.

[231] Linnell, *op. cit.*, pp. 115-117.

[232] B. Pritchard, 'Letters to the Editor', *Inside Sport,* May 1995, p. 7.

day.'[233] As a result, a Sydney match day at the SCG was transformed into a form of entertainment, a real day out for the fans, with pre-game and half-time spectaculars. Powerplay pulled out all stops to create fun and colour by combining star footballers, parachutists, fireworks, music and pretty women. They masterminded the cheerleader-type Swanettes, who danced to the words of 'Show 'em Sydney' after each goal by the Swans, and in Dennis Carroll's words 'Boy, did we score some goals and win games.'[234]

In the minor rounds of the 1986 season only one Melbourne match day crowd topped the 39,763 that attended the Hawthorn versus Sydney game at the SCG on 10 August. A crowd of 37,873 had also turned up to watch the game against Carlton and a further 33,192 to watch the Essendon game during 1986.[235] Average attendance at SCG home games of the Swans increased from 9,200 in 1985 to 27,000 in 1986.[236]

Attendances had not only increased, but the makeup of the crowds had also changed. A total of thirty-four per cent of spectators were women, compared to an average fourteen per cent for the rest of the competition.[237] According to Pritchard, 'marketing achieved a 255% increase of Sydney crowds over

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[233] Cole, *op. cit.*

[234] Interview with Dennis Carroll, *op. cit.*

[235] Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 150.

[236] Pritchard, *op. cit,* p. 7. Refer also to Appendix 1: Sydney Football Club Home Games Average Attendance: 1982–1999.

[237] Taylor, *op. cit.*, p. 150. It should be noted that Taylor offers no evidence for these figures.

the 1985 figures, with resulting satisfaction of sponsors, supporters, the media and television viewers.'[238]

Detractors of Edelsten and Pritchard have often claimed that excessive amounts of money were spent on marketing and that mass ticket giveaways contributed to the extraordinary crowds and off field success of the Swans. Commenting in *Inside Sport,* one director later observed, 'I could have filled the SCG for a tiddlywinks competition with the money spent on marketing.'[239] Pritchard in defence says the club actually spent $620,000 on marketing – a lot of money at the time, but realistic given the low supporter base. It has been debated for years as to how much was actually spent on marketing and how many tickets were actually given away. In support of Pritchard, though, it must be said that whether the excessive amounts of money spent on marketing and ticket giveaways were correct or justified, there is no denying that the profile of the Swans was certainly lifted.

Sydney ended the regular season with sixteen wins in second place, two games behind Hawthorn. Carlton, Fitzroy, and Essendon made up the final five. In the Qualifying Final, the club's first finals appearance since 1977, the Swans lost by 16 points.[240] The following week the Swans were again at the MCG and again the Swans were unsuccessful, losing to Fitzroy by 5 points. For the Swans, it was a disappointing end to a season that promised so

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[238] *Ibid.*

[239] I. Cockerill, 'Hard Sell', *Inside Sport,* March 1995, p. 96.

[240] Taylor, *op. cit.,* p. 105.

much. The club and fans were provided with some consolation when Greg Williams tied with Robert Dipierdomenico (of Hawthorn) to win the Brownlow Medal.[241]

At the beginning of the 1987 season, the change in design of the Swans guernsey from the traditional red 'V' to a design that incorporated a silhouette of the Sydney Opera house in a red yoke was further evidence of moves by the club to become more identifiable with Sydney.[242] It was the first time the jumper had been changed since 1933, the last time the Swans won a premiership.[243]

The Swans again experienced a relatively successful season, winning fifteen of the twenty-two home and away matches. The highlight of the season was a three-week period when they scored more than thirty goals in each game. They again managed to make the finals, but the finals campaign was unsuccessful as injury to key players took its toll. The Swans lost to Hawthorn in the qualifying final by 99 points and to Melbourne a week later by 76 points.[244] Once more a season that promised plenty ended in disappointment.

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[241] *Ibid.*, p. 106.

[242] *Ibid.*, p. 147.

[243] *Sunday Sun*, 4 February 1987.

[244] *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 and 14 September 1987.

During the first two years under private ownership the Swans achieved notable on-field success, which was what Edelsten had aimed for - immediate results. Little, however, was done during this period in terms of planning for the future. The Swans Under-19 team was scrapped, and during this period, young NSW players including John Longmire and Wayne Carey, who were zoned to the Swans, ended up elsewhere.[245] It seemed of little relevance at the time, but the effects of the poor local recruitment would have long-term consequences.

In the off-season, Warwick Capper transferred to Brisbane in one of the highest paid contracts in the history of Australian Rules football.[246] Powerplay was experiencing financial difficulties to such an extent that the situation had become almost untenable. Selling off some of their assets, of which Capper was one, was their only hope for survival.[247] The effects on the club of Capper's departure, though, were far reaching. According to Dennis Carroll: 'for a while in the mid 1980s Capper was Sydney ... Which is why we couldn't believe it when he left.'[248]

Not only was Capper the spearhead, the one key forward in a somewhat undermanned forward set up, he was the 'glamour boy' upon which the Swans were being marketed. Capper's white boots, tight shorts and his

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[245] *Herald Sun,* 12 June 1993.

[246] Main, *Plugger*, *op. cit.,* pp. 70-71.

[247] *Herald Sun,* 12 June 1993.

[248] *Ibid.*

exuberant personality gave the Swans a profile. Moreover, with his ability to fly over packs, grabbing the spectacular high mark, Capper became the promoters' dream. The high-leaping full forward gave Sydney folk who were looking to adopt Australian Rules football something to get excited about, and a number of authors attest to his crowd-pulling capacity.[249] His style typified the image the Swans were after, and his presence made the Swans one of the most exciting and saleable sporting products in the country.[250] With his departure went not only 100 goals per season, but also much of the glamour and marketability of the Swans.

At around the same time, the NSWRL woke from their lethargy. Stirred in part by the crowds attending the SCG to watch the Swans, and acutely aware of rugby's lacklustre image, rugby league officials developed a new marketing and promotion campaign. The campaign was based around Tina Turner and her hit singles 'What You Get is What You See' and 'Simply the Best', and aimed to present rugby league as glamorous and exciting, a game for the young. Turner's involvement and the associated promotions would prove an almost instant success. It was not long before League reclaimed its grip over Sydney as the preferred winter sport.[251]

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[249] See for example Freud and Cutler, *op. cit.,* pp. 73-76, Nadel, 'The League Goes National', *op. cit.,* p. 226 and Linnell, *op. cit.,* pp. 325-237.

[250] Linnell, *op. cit.,* pp. 114-115.

[251] D. Shilbury, S. Quick and H. Westerbeek, *Strategic Sports Marketing,* Allen & Unwin, St Leonards, 1998, p. 56.

Tom Hafey was again at the helm as the Swans began the 1988 season. Craig Davis, a former Collingwood champion, came back from a five-year retirement at age thirty-four to try and fill the spot at full forward left vacant by Warwick Capper.[252] It was further proof of not only the club's lack of vision in regard to recruiting during the past two seasons, but also of the club's growing financial concerns.

The stories of how the financial concerns of the Swans hampered their progress, both mentally and physically through the pre-season and into their 1988 campaign, have been well documented.[253] Greg Williams, in his autobiography, *Diesel: The Greg Williams Story,* writes, 'you knew things were bad when the club couldn't afford soap or toilet paper and the drink machine was repossessed.'[254] In the book by Jim Main, David Murphy recalls how he had to drive himself to his family doctor after cutting his head just above his eye in a training accident, because there was no club doctor at training.[255] Dennis Carroll remembers the club having no cups for players to drink from, and players having to buy their own strapping tape.[256] There were also stories of players waiting for overdue match payments. For example, during the pre-season of 1988, Greg Williams was owed $20,000, David Bolton was owed $15,000, Wayne Henwood had not been paid for

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[252] J. Main (ed.), *1988 Football: The Year in Review,* Century Publishing, Windsor, 1988, p. 12.

[253] See for example Main, *Plugger, op. cit.,* p. 71, and G. Williams, *Diesel: The Greg Williams Story,* Pan Macmillan, Sydney, 1995, pp.123-125.

[254] Williams, *op. cit.,* p. 123.

[255] Main, *Plugger, op. cit.,* p. 71.

three months, Bernard Toohey had not been paid for ten weeks and Merv Neagle had his car repossessed.[257] Leading into a new season, it was hardly an environment of enthusiasm and team spirit.

The early season results mirrored the off-field problems. The Swans started the season poorly with only one win in the first five games. But if any point marked the change of fortunes in the season it was a round six match against Geelong at Kardinia Park. It was the day that the VFL bought back the Swans from Powerplay. According to Main's observations, on this day it was clear that the uncertainty of the past months had been put to rest by the players, and their new-found peace of mind was reflected in a more settled performance.[258] The Swans won by 3 points. They eventually finished the season in seventh position on the ladder with twelve wins and ten losses, just missing out on the finals for a third successive year.[259]

4.4 How Edelsten Lost His Power

On 6 May 1988, after months of uncertainty, the VFL bought back the Sydney Swans from Powerplay for just ten dollars.[260] The events that led to this demise can be linked back to well before Edelsten even obtained control of the club. Even though internationally respected financial and management consultants, Touché Ross, in their independent review of the

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[256] Interview with Dennis Carroll, *op. cit.*

[257] Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 124.

[258] Main, *1988 Football, op. cit.*, p. 30.

[259] *Ibid.*, p. 96.

[260] *Age*, 7 May 1988.

financial affairs of Edelsten, provided a positive endorsement of the doctor's financial status, all was not quite what it seemed.

In 1984, before he had any connection with the Sydney Swans, and any intention of owning the club, Edelsten purchased two special memberships of the Sydney Swans valued at $5000 each. Edelsten paid for his tickets in monthly instalments of $900. This was a peculiar arrangement given that anyone who could afford to purchase such a membership could usually afford to pay for it in a lump sum.[261]

Although little was made of this at the time, it was the first indication that Edelsten did not have the wealth he was proclaiming. Then on 31 July 1985, only hours after Edelsten had won the license for the Sydney Swans, he took Bob Pritchard aside and openly admitted that the funds required were not available. Pritchard recalls: 'We're sitting there on the bed and he says "mate there's something I've really got to tell you. The only problem is I don't have a dime. I have no money whatsoever.'"[262]

The financial problems came to a head when the second instalment of $250,000 to the VFL fell due. Unable to pay the fees himself, Edelsten sought financial backing from a Perth-based investment group, Westeq. In return for their money, Westeq became shareholders in the Swans. Unbeknown to the VFL, the club effectively became jointly owned by Westeq

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[261] Linnell, *op. cit.*, p. 97.

[262] Cited in *ibid.*, p. 110.

and Powerplay.[263] It would take until January the next year before anyone at the VFL became aware that the licence of the Swans was not owned by the man who had purchased it.

On 3 February 1986, a Westeq executive, Phillip Grimaldi, announced that Westeq owned fifty per cent of the shares in Powerplay International PTY LTD, whose subsidiary, Sydney Rules PTY LTD, owned the licence to the Sydney Swans.[264] Splitting control of the club created problems that were at the time far from the public eye but would have long-term implications for the club.

So how did things go so wrong for Powerplay and what impact did it have on the Sydney Swans? The beginning of the problems can be traced back to the ease with which money was spent on new recruits, as well as the increases in pay offered to existing players. According to the *Sydney Morning Herald:* 'the players were offered double their market rate and many took it only to find that by the end of the next season no cash could be found.'[265] The example of Jamie Dursma, a then first year player only on the verge of senior selection, shows how much money was thrown around. Before the 1986 season, Dursma went to Edelsten to discuss his contact. He hoped to receive around $35,000 a year, including incentives. He was

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[263] *Ibid.,* p. 111.

[264] Taylor, *op. cit.,* p. 141.

[265] *Sydney Morning Herald*, 18 June 1988.

offered substantially more over five years, despite the fact that he had only played one year of senior football. [266]

Large amounts of money were also spent in the advertising and promotion of the club. Powerplay masterminded the Swanettes, obtained high profile players, and increased attendances at home matches. The money spent promoting the team and developing a positive image was substantial, and although this expenditure was not recouped at the gate through ticket sales, it was not the major reason why the financial affairs ended up in such a mess.[267]

The real problem and the main reason why Powerplay and the owners of the Swans went bankrupt had little to do with football and more to do with the outside interests of Powerplay. Away from the public eye, and away from the glamour that Powerplay brought to football in Sydney, things were much different. The problems started to arise when Powerplay began using profits gained from match receipts for other business investments.[268] Former player, Mark Browning, commenting on the situation said:

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[266] *Ibid.*

[267] *Sydney Morning Herald,* 12 May 1988.

[268] *Ibid.*

> I always thought the marketing arm of a football club was set up to supply funds to the club. The end result was that the opposite was actually happening and the football club was more or less supporting other parts of the company.[269]

The investments included the Steak and Kidney's America's Cup bid, and the Sydney Westars National Basketball League team. The ultimate investment debacle, though, proved to be in Sportsplay.[270]

Sportsplay was one of two sports satellite services. The other, Sky Channel, owned by Alan Bond, was the more successful of the two, mainly because it had been able to secure many top sporting events, including thoroughbred racing. Sportsplay, in comparison, had concentrated heavily on just a few events, hoping to gain exclusive rights to the televising of Australian Rules football. When this deal fell through, they were left with the less popular and marketable sports, including dog and harness racing.[271] Its ability to sell its services to pubs and hotels was therefore substantially reduced. In just six months, Sportsplay lost $7 million. In an attempt to revive their fortunes, the company embarked on a full scale marketing drive, but it too faltered. In just twenty-seven months Powerplay lost $17 million, mainly on Sportsplay, and when the stock market crashed in October 1987, Powerplay shares plummeted.[272] Eventually the business was sold to Alan Bond for just one dollar.[273] The loss sealed the fate of the owners of the Sydney Swans,

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[269] Cited in *ibid.*

[270] *Sydney Morning Herald,* 18 June 1988.

[271] Linnell, *op. cit.,* p. 333.

[272] *Ibid.,* p. 335.

[273] *Sydney Morning Herald,* 18 June 1988.

because the Swans had, as mentioned, been largely funding the activities of Sportsplay. In February 1988, Powerplay attempted to sell the Swans for approximately $8 million. They would eventually receive far less.[274]

How Edelsten so easily deceived the directors of the VFL, and why the Sellers bid was not successful (a bid which was based on building success around a structure similar to that used by Melbourne clubs where membership was important), are also questions often asked. Jack Hamilton, shortly after announcing the sale of the Swans, was quoted as saying that 'going with Edelsten was not a financial decision'. However, commenting on the whole arrangement years later, he admitted in the *Age* that, 'Edelsten offered $1 million more than Sellers. It was virtually a $1 million bonus to the clubs.'[275] With at least five clubs technically bankrupt at the time (only three clubs, Geelong $58,062, Essendon $56,142 and Carlton $9,762, were able to show a surplus without the cash from the sale of the Swans),[276] the VFL representatives were hardly in a position to reject such a lucrative offer.

4.5 A Millionaire's Plaything

When the VFL bought back the Swans from Powerplay on 7 May 1988, a sixteen-man board was installed to control the affairs of the club until a new and suitable owner could be found. League finance manager, Greg

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[274] *Age*, 7 May 1988.

[275] *Age*, 23 March 1988.

[276] *Ibid.*

Durham, was seconded to Sydney with local businessman Graham Galt as chairman.[277]

The new and suitable owner came in the form of a syndicate led by media personality, Mike Willesee. It all coalesced after months of speculation on 12 December, when the VFL reissued the Sydney license to the Willesee-led consortium in a deal worth up to $2.5 million.[278] There was no doubt that the VFL was relieved to have finally found a saviour for the Swans. According to one press report:

> The collective sigh of relief could be heard almost as far away as the Lake Oval in Melbourne. Foster parents had been found for football's problem child, rich, enthusiastic, socially accepted foster parents keen to redeem the wrongs inflicted on the young accident prone Sydney during the previous five years.[279]

The new owners, sixteen of them in total, agreed to invest a capital sum of $250,000 into the Swans, pay out existing player contracts in excess of $800,000 and inject $1 million dollars into the club for immediate funds. A license fee worth $4 million was to be paid in instalments during the five-year lease on the club. After this term, if the ownership syndicate decided not to continue, it was agreed that they would pay a termination fee of $635,000.[280]

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[277] Main, *Plugger, op. cit.*, p. 73.

[278] *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 December 1988.

[279] *Sunday Age*, 12 July 1992.

[280] *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 December 1988.

When Mike Willesee and his group of owners arrived, their idea was to restore the club's profile by pursuing the corporate dollar. This sales pitch would ultimately prove unsuccessful. The Swans were branded the 'Millionaire's club'. It became a real struggle to convince the average supporter to join a club that was perceived as being the toy of a group of millionaires. As Ian Cockerill observed, the problem was compounded by a legacy of the Edelsten years, when substantial numbers of free tickets were distributed and very few people actually paid to watch a game of football involving the Swans at the SCG.[281]

The first real football decision made by the consortium occurred almost immediately when Tom Hafey was sacked as coach. Hafey's record at Sydney had been very good, having taken the club to the finals during 1986 and 1987, and amidst the difficulties of 1988 leading the Swans to seventh on the ladder.[282] Numerous reports also mention that he was instrumental in maintaining enthusiasm and morale during the club's financial difficulties of the 1988 pre-season.[283]

However, several senior players were beginning to rebel against his tough training regime. The new owners were basically left with an ultimatum.

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[281] Cockerill, 'Hard Sell', *op. cit.*, p. 97.

[282] Hafey's record at Sydney was thirty-nine wins and thirty losses, with a winning percentage of just under fifty-seven per cent (Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 138.).

[283] See for example, David Murphy's comments in Main, *Plugger, op. cit.*, p. 73 and Greg Williams' comments in Williams, *op. cit.*, p. 123.

Sack the coach, or risk losing a number of key players.[284] Carlton reserves coach, Col Kinnear, replaced Hafey.[285]

Kinnear's appointment did little to lift the Swans up the ladder. In 1989, they again finished seventh with eleven wins and eleven losses. In 1990 the record worsened and the Swans finished in thirteenth position after recording only five wins. Adding to the on-field disappointments, the club was also beginning to struggle off the field. The regular 20,000 strong crowds during the heady days of the Edelsten era had dissipated to an average 10,000 per game, and financially the club was experiencing some significant losses.[286] In 1989, the Willesee-led consortium experienced a loss close to $1.4 million, followed by a similar loss in 1990.[287] Despite the results, though, there was little indication that the support of the owners for the cause was wavering.

Throughout the 1991 season, Sydney's form fluctuated. They ended with seven wins and a draw, finishing twelfth on the ladder. Before the final round, Kinnear quit as club coach after three relatively unsuccessful years.[288]

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[284] Main, *Plugger, op. cit.,* p. 74.

[285] *Sydney Morning Herald, 13* December 1988.

[286] Australian Football League/Victorian Football League, *Annual Reports, 1982-1999.* Refer also to Appendix 1: Sydney Football Club Home Games Average Attendance: 1982–1999.

[287] Linnell, *op. cit.,* p. 339.

[288] J. McDonald, *Football Year 91,* Pagemasters Books, Melbourne, 1991, p. 188.

Kinnear's appointment was unsuccessful in more ways than one, and his short tenure would prove critical in the problems the club would experience in years to come. Firstly, Kinnear was relatively inexperienced. For despite having been a very successful reserves coach at the Carlton Football Club, he had not played or coached at senior VFL/AFL level. Secondly, Kinnear did not make himself readily available to the Sydney media, preferring instead to devote all his energies to coaching. Such a policy could be successful in a football-mad city such as Melbourne, but it proved disastrous in Sydney. In the three years Tom Hafey was at the helm, Hafey and the marketing arm of the Swans did everything to ensure that the Swans received publicity in the Sydney press. Despite all the wrong inflicted during the Powerplay era, the publicity the club generated was one of the few positives.[289] In Nadel's summation, Kinnear's 'anti press, anti media and anti social attitude soon had the media off side, something the Swans could hardly afford in rugby dominated Sydney'.[290]

During the first three years under the control of the Willesee-led consortium, the fortunes of the club both on and off the field went backwards rather than forwards. Quality players from the Edelsten years, including Greg Williams, Barry Mitchell and Bernard Toohey, had one by one moved to different teams. In focusing on the bottom line, the owners had ignored a significant opportunity to turn the club around and win the crowds back. A team that

[289] D. Nadel, 'Hey Leanne, I bought you a Football Team!' Paper presented at Sporting Traditions X, Biennial Conference of the Australian Society for Sport History, Brisbane, July 1995, p. 6.

could win games and win them regularly was needed.[291] It became evident that the new owners of the Swans were unable to carry and cover the burden left by Powerplay. The club had trouble getting trainers, doctors and physiotherapists, and resources that a footballer playing at any other club would take for granted were non-existent at the Swans.[292] The club had little identifiable football culture and no real infrastructure. Retiring players would return to Melbourne or their place of origin, leaving no past players group. The lack of success on the field meant that interest from the Sydney public started to wane, memberships fell, and, with decreased members and attendances at home games, the ability to attract sponsors was also affected.[293]

With wins few and far between, it became increasingly difficult to sell the Swans and football to Sydney. Marketing a team that not only struggled to win games but also struggled to be competitive was a problematic exercise. However, various marketing pitches were attempted. The Swanettes were revived and a new promotional campaign based around the song 'Kick on You Sydney Swans' was released. Both campaigns ultimately proved unsuccessful in winning support. The lack of on-field success was an obvious deterrent. Cockerill summed up the situation by asking the sarcastic

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[290] *Ibid.*

[291] Cockerill, 'Hard Sell', *op cit.,* p. 97.

[292] Interview with Craig Holden, 10 February 1998.

[293] *Age,* 18 October 1992. Refer also to Appendix 1: Sydney Football Club Home Game Average Attendance: 1982-1999.

question: 'Would you pay to sit in a quarter-full stadium in mid-winter to watch your team receive a biweekly horse-whipping?'[294]

The continued success of rugby league was also working against the club. The New South Wales Rugby League was experiencing one of the most successful periods in its history. Between 1988 and1992 crowd attendances at rugby league games increased by just over sixty-five per cent, female audiences climbed by thirty-seven per cent, and television ratings rose by close to seventy per cent.[295] The Tina Turner 'Simply the Best' campaign and the astute marketing and management of the NSWRL succeeded beyond all expectations. In contrast, those supposedly in the know at AFL headquarters released a now infamous 'Australian Rules, Rules Australia' advertising campaign in Sydney which did little to influence the Sydney sports going public, who were flocking back to the rugby league competition.[296]

These were not the only problems facing the club. The lack of success had also affected the media attention the Swans were receiving. According to one press report: 'The Swans were receiving a level of media attention afforded bocce in Melbourne'.[297] The club's only regular publicity came in a weekly paid editorial in the *Sydney Telegraph,* financed by the AFL at an

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[294] *Ibid.*

[295] Shilbury *et al.*, *op. cit.,* p. 56.

[296] Cockerill, 'Hard Sell', *op. cit.,* p. 98.

[297] *Ibid.*

annual cost of $100,000.[298] The Sydney Swans, a club with no social club, no past players group, a club essentially with no soul, was in crisis again.

4.6 A Sick Patient with Few Friends

The 1992 season began with some experts suggesting that the club would struggle to win a single game.[299] Despite these forecasts, the appointment of new coach Gary Buckenara, the former Hawthorn champion, and the inclusion of a handful of new players, meant the club entered the season with an air of optimism. The optimism proved well founded. After six rounds, the Swans had won three games, including a round one victory against the West Coast Eagles, runners up in the previous season. However, things quickly turned sour, and the club experienced one of its worst losing stretches. It failed to win another game for the season, and many of the losses experienced were substantial.[300] The average crowd for a Sydney home game had slipped to around 9,000, and questions concerning the worth of keeping a team from Sydney in the competition surfaced again.[301] This time they came from not only outside the club, but also from within the club.

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[298] *Sunday Age,* 12 July 1992.

[299] See, for example, the *Age,* 10 March 1992.

[300] J. Main, 'The Saga Continues: Why the Buck had to Stop with Gary' *Inside Football,* 28 April 1993, p. 14.

[301] *Sunday Age,* 12 July 1992. Refer also to Appendix 1: Sydney Football Club Home Game Average Attendance: 1982-1999.

At the mid-way point of the 1992 season, the Sydney directors, led by Mike Willesee, released a statement to the AFL suggesting that unless the AFL was prepared to provide meaningful player assistance to the club, the directors were not willing to renew their license with the Sydney Swans.[302] The statement read:

> The Sydney Swans have subsidised the AFL's national competition for many years with little or no return. This cannot be expected to continue without assistance. The survival of the Swans and the national competition go hand in hand.
>
> Our off-field administration had developed over the years into a professional, efficient work unit. The problems unique to Sydney however continue to weaken our playing strength. We need a major infusion of strong experienced senior players for the 1993 season to be able to continue. This could be achieved principally with a significant number of pre draft selections, which could be traded. Our financial losses over the past four years have been far more than the existence of any football club warrants and financial underwriting is now also essential.
>
> The ultimate solution must recognise that eventually eleven Victorian clubs in a national competition of fifteen will not work. Apart from one state bias and imbalance, there are not enough players to go around (of required standard) and there is not enough money. We respect and understand the problems of struggling Melbourne clubs, but the bottom line is that if all eleven Melbourne clubs are to continue, there will not be a true successful national competition.
>
> The future of the Sydney Swans and the national competition is now in the AFL's hands. Strong determined and immediate action is necessary if the philosophy and ideals of the national competition are to be saved.[303]

The assistance the club was seeking included financial assistance, player concessions through the November and March drafts, special access to

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[302] *Ibid.*

players from New South Wales, and assistance in renegotiating a deal with the Sydney Cricket Ground Trust.[304]

However, support by Melbourne clubs for the Sydney cause was quickly wavering. Many clubs considered that it was no longer fair or feasible for the rest of the competition to continue to prop up the ailing harbour city club. Many of the Victorian clubs were fighting their own battles for survival, and they considered the suggestion of aid as unreasonable. The early indications were that the Victorian clubs would reject any recommendation for player or financial assistance.[305]

At the same time, the AFL Commission, sensing the strong possibility that the club could collapse, began to develop a fallback option if the owners decided to pull out.[306] The AFL needed a presence in Sydney, as a genuine national competition required at least one team in the country's largest city. The AFL also feared the effect that no presence in Sydney would have on their broadcasting arrangement with Channel Seven. In 1990, the League extended its contract with Channel Seven through to 1995 at a cost of approximately $40 million. The Sydney games were worth about a quarter of this deal. With advertisers gaining no exposure in the country's largest

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[303] The contents of the Statement were reproduced in the *Sunday Age,* 12 July 1992.

[304] *Ibid.*

[305] *Sunday Age,* 11 October 1992.

[306] The AFL (initially VFL) Commission is an independent management structure. The Commission was formed following a recommendation by the VFL Task Force Report in 1984. It was set up to independently run the game, freeing the clubs to pursue their on-field performance without the added burden of making decisions on the future of football (Nadel, 'Colour' *op. cit.,* p. 222, and Linnell, *op. cit.,* p. 83).

city, their value for money would be greatly reduced. It was feared that Channel Seven would consider reviewing its agreement, meaning less money for the clubs.[307]

Closed-door talks were initiated with North Melbourne, in order to discuss the possibility of North merging with the ailing Sydney club.[308] A separate deal that would see Carlton playing their away matches at the SCG and co-operate in a plan that would plough millions of dollars into the Sydney market was also mooted.[309] The Carlton deal involved inheriting the best three players of the Swans, and a sponsorship deal worth approximately $3.75 million over five years with Toohey's brewery.[310] It appeared the Swans had come closer then at any time in their history to folding. Not only was the support from opposing clubs wavering, but it appeared the AFL was slowly resigning itself to the possibility that the experiment in Sydney would fail.

On Wednesday, 14 October 1992, the future of the Sydney Swans was again at the top of the agenda for a meeting between the AFL Commission and directors of the fourteen clubs.[311] Despite the owners of the Sydney Swans not being willing to put up any more money, they still continued to fight for the club. Peter Weinert played a key role in convincing the directors

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[307] *Age*, 14 October 1992.

[308] *Age*, 17 October 1992.

[309] *Ibid.*

[310] *Ibid.*

[311] *Age*, 15 October 1992.

of each of the fourteen clubs that in the past Sydney had not been given a fair go and that they deserved one last attempt at becoming a viable enterprise.[312] The AFL directors, many of whom felt they had had insufficient time to consider the AFL proposals, and not being willing to make a hasty decision in regard to the prospect of Carlton playing their away matches in Sydney, voted to give the Swans a week to come up with a proposal guaranteeing their long term viability.[313]

What followed was a week of uncertainty as Peter Weinert and other Swans executives set about securing $500,000 a year over five years from the corporate sector to ensure the club's survival. Despite the relative success of the campaign, an increase in support from fans and an extension of sponsorship by QBE Insurance, the future of the Swans remained uncertain. Which way the directors of the other fourteen clubs would go was still unclear.[314] Further proposals included the suggestion of a Brisbane/Sydney merger, or the Swans moving to Canberra.[315] Peter Weinert, however, refused to give up his position. According to Main: 'He fought tooth and nail for the survival of the club, refusing to concede an inch, even in the very shadow of death'.[316] His presentation to the directors of the other clubs to save Sydney was reported to be quite convincing.[317]

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[312] Linnell, *op. cit.*, p. 342.

[313] *Age*, 15 October 1992.

[314] Main, *Plugger, op. cit.*, pp. 79–80.

[315] *Sydney Morning Herald*, 15 October 1992.

[316] J. Main, 'Thanks Peter', *Inside Football*, November 1993, p. 22.

[317] *Ibid.*

Finally, a decision was made. According to Linnell 'The prospect of Carlton triumphantly taking over Sydney and making plenty of money was enough to turn their [the other thirteen clubs] stomachs.'[318] The directors decided at a meeting on 21 October 1992, to grant Willesee and the rest of the administrators some of the concessions they desired.[319] According to the *Age*, the deal the Swans received included the following conditions:

> • The $1.985 million in license fees owed by the Swans to the AFL to be paid and then returned to the club in regular instalments over the next two years.
>
> • Sydney and Brisbane being awarded two priority draft choices each. The draft choices would be tradable and would also apply to the preseason draft in March.
>
> • The AFL will embark on a major promotional campaign in New South Wales and Queensland in the lead up to next season.
>
> • The AFL to lend administrative support to the Swans in the next few months.
>
> • A commitment by the present owners of Sydney to stay on past 1993 when their original five year deal with the league expires.[320]

By April, prior to the beginning of the 1993 AFL season, the support the Swans had experienced following their successful fight for survival just five months earlier had dissipated. The team's profile and popularity had continued to slide following several disappointing results in pre-season trial matches. According to Cockerill's hyperbole: 'the Sydney Football Club was

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[318] Linnell, *op. cit.*, p. 343.

[319] *Age*, 22 October 1992.

[320] *Ibid.*

now officially the worst sporting team in the country.'[321] In his view, the morale around the club was at an all time low. On the field the players played without spirit, while off the field, management and the marketing department were unable to lift the team's performance and profile.[322]

At the beginning of the 1993 season, with membership and interest in the Sydney Football Club at a serious low point, an offer came from the producer of the popular late night television show, *Live 'N Sweaty.* New host of the show and football diehard, Elle McFeast, had an idea which would involve six Sydney teammates producing their very own sitcom, based around their own real life experiences. The marketing arm of the Swans, unsure as to what to do next to lift the profile of the team, saw any suggestion, even one that was potentially embarrassing, as worth considering.[323]

The first episode had a theme based around a group of players arguing over who would get the unenviable job of playing on Hawthorn full forward Jason Dunstall in the opening game of the season. When the filming eventually screened to air, the show did nothing to lift the profile or image of the Swans, but rather confirmed their standing as an object of ridicule. The first episode turned out to be the last.[324]

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[321] I. Cockerill, 'The Spirit of the Swans', *Inside Sport,* vol. 64, April 1997, p. 28.

[322] *Ibid.,* p. 29.

[323] *Ibid.*, p. 28.

[324] *Ibid.,* p. 30.

An equally short lived, but not quite as bizarre, marketing strategy involved a proposal to change the club colours and nickname in an attempt to make the club more identifiable with Sydney. The aim was to eliminate any lingering perception by the public that the Swans were a relocated AFL team, a team not wanted by Melbourne. The campaign was fuelled by a Roy Masters' article in the *Sydney Morning Herald* on 5 May 1993, where he suggested that if the Swans wanted to be a Sydney side, and win the hearts of Sydney people, then they would have to bury all links with the South Melbourne days.[325]

The proposed radical changes included a colour change to the two blues of New South Wales, and a name change from the Swans to the Redbacks, Sharks, or something carrying the Olympic theme such as the Sydney Spirits. There was even a suggestion of a change to the club song.[326]

The administration, unable to lift the club profile and ultimately increase memberships sales, also turned to their small, but loyal, band of supporters. A membership recruitment scheme was established whereby existing members would receive incentives by way of club merchandise for each additional supporter, friend or family member they could sign on as a member of the Sydney Swans.[327] The campaign proved successful in the short term, with membership numbers almost doubling within the first

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[325] *Sydney Morning Herald,* 5 May 1993.

[326] Cockerill, 'Hard Sell', *op. cit.,* p. 98.

[327] Sydney Swans membership promotion, 1993.

year.[328] Even an increase to 6,000 members, however, hardly compared to the Adelaide Crows, who had a total of more than 40,000 members, and the strong Victorian clubs, who averaged close to 25,000 members.[329]

The recruiting staff also made a number of strategically weak decisions. They did not use the concessions they were provided, again opting for a quick-fix solution rather than taking a long-term perspective.[330] The club traded their draft concessions for players who they hoped would provide immediate success. The number one pick in the draft was traded to the West Coast Eagles in exchange for Scott Watters and the relatively unknown Tony Begovich.[331] The Eagles used their choice to pick young West Australian Drew Banfield. He would eventually go on to be a premiership player. Watters and Begovich did not quite come up to Banfield's standard. In terms of on-field leadership, Paul Kelly reluctantly accepted the position of club captain for the 1993 season. Kelly had been the outstanding player at the club during 1992, and, as coach Gary Buckenara indicated, he was chosen: 'because he is an example to the team on the field, off the field and at training.'[332]

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[328] AFL Annual Report 1993, p. 56. See also Appendix 2: Sydney Football Club Membership Figures: 1992–1999.

[329] *Ibid.*

[330] Main, 'The Saga Continues', *op. cit.*, p. 14.

[331] *Ibid.*

[332] *Sydney Swans Club Newsletter,* March 1993, pp. 1-2.

The season began poorly for the club, with the team losing every practice match and the first three games of the regular season by large margins, stretching the losing streak to twenty-one losses. In round four, the Swans met Essendon in front of a small crowd at the SCG and lost by 86 points.[333] The following day, the owners of the club publicly supported coach Buckenara, and denied any rumours the clubs was looking for a replacement. Two days later Gary Buckenara was sacked.[334] The Sydney Swans were deep in the middle of a crisis again.

4.7 Barassi: The Messiah

Brett Scott took over as caretaker coach and led the Swans through two more defeats, before Ron Barassi, one of football's most celebrated figures and a keen activist behind getting a team in Sydney and the success of the game nationally, offered to coach the club.[335] With Barassi, came a revamped Sydney administration and a promise from the AFL that they would finally provide some real assistance to the club.[336] As summarised in the press, the changes and assistance included:

> The dumping of private ownership in favour of a traditional membership and supporter-based system. The appointment of Alan Schwab as executive chairman for at least three months, to watch over the club's affairs. Access to three NSW players as concession before the November draft, and access to two out of contract players.[337]

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[333] Main, 'The Saga Continues', *op. cit.*, p. 14.

[334] *Ibid.*

[335] Interview with Ron Barassi, 17 November 1997.

[336] *Herald Sun,* 6 May 1993.

[337] *Ibid.*

As part of the deal, the previous owners, led by Willesee, agreed to withdraw their ownership of the club in favour of the traditional system whereby the members ultimately decide the club's fate.[338] This decision, combined with the $1.985 million license fee being redirected to the club, gave the AFL Commission complete control. Of the fifteen owners, only three would remain. Mike Willesse stayed on as club patron and board chairman, Peter Weinert continued as President and Craig Kimberly remained on the board. The other twelve ultimately became reconciled to the fact that they had lost the money they had injected into the club, believed to be around $9 million in total since 1988. Weinert, Willesee and Kimberly agreed to continue to support the club financially, but to a much lesser degree than in the past.[339]

Barassi's appointment, and the assistance package, gave football in Sydney a fresh and new impetus, but with it came the warning from chief executive of the AFL, Ross Oakley, that: 'this latest survival strategy could be the last. If the club did not soon improve significantly on and off the field, other options might need exploring.'[340] It was the club's last chance.

According to Cockerill, the name Barassi was synonymous with success in Australian Rules football, and he also noted that it was a name that was as

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[338] *Age*, 6 May 1993.

[339] *Ibid.*

[340] *Ibid.*

identifiable as any other across all football codes in the country.[341] All of a sudden, the arrival of Barassi caught the attention of the Sydney public.

[341] Cockerill, 'The Spirit', *op. cit.*, pp. 35-36.

Chapter 5

Signs of Success

5.1 Accent on Youth

At the end of 1992, Dennis Carroll, commenting on the Swans under Geoffrey Edelsten, described the club as 'like a house with a roof but without any foundations.'[342] Work on cementing these foundations finally began following the extra assistance provided to the club by the AFL and Ron Barassi's signing as coach in 1993.

At the November draft of 1993, the Sydney Football Club took the first step towards viability and solvency by putting their draft concessions to good use by acquiring some of the best young players in the country. With twelve of the thirteen draft picks used by the Swans to take young men who were eighteen years or under, and six of them still attending school, the accent on youth was clearly evident. The new administration was obviously keen on building a football team that would be successful in the long term, rather than importing experienced players who would provide only limited short-term success.[343]

In the March pre-season draft of 1994, the club took a risk in recruiting Hawthorn legend, Dermott Brereton, and disgruntled Bomber, Derek Kickett.

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[342] *Herald Sun,* 12 June 1993.

[343] *Ibid.*

Despite Brereton's injury concerns and Kickett's lack of fitness, it was felt that both could play a substantial role in helping the young players develop into good footballers.[344]

Also joining the club for the 1994 season was assistant coach, Damian Drum. Drum played sixty-five games for Geelong, retiring in 1990. Following his retirement he was assistant coach at VFA side Werribee and coach at Port Melbourne, taking both sides with a large base of young players to a Grand Final in his first season. According to the club's newsletter, Drum's appointment was based not only on his football qualities, but on his strength of character and ability to identify with, and lead, both younger and experienced players.[345]

The off-season had been the most successful for the club since the Edelsten period. Not only were some the best young players in the country now playing with Sydney, but off the field other conditions were also improving. During the off-season, a new chairman, Richard Colless, was appointed. Colless had played a major role in the establishment of the Perth-based West Coast Eagles, who soon became a power in the competition.[346] Under the influence of Barassi and Colless, the whole approach of the club to football development changed focus. Instead of focusing on the wider

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[344] *The Sydney Connection,* The Newsletter of the Sydney Football Club Limited, April 1994, p. 2.

[345] *Ibid.*

[346] See Freud and Cutler, *op. cit.,* p. 125.

Sydney audience, the attention moved inwards, to the players, the supporters, the administration staff and the sponsors. Through Barassi, Colless and their team of support staff, a transformation was made in the attitude of the players, the training staff, the administration, indeed the entire football club. A sense of pride and achievement in what they were doing was established. According to Freud and Cutler, the team started playing with passion, and the die-hard supporters, the long-term members, began to experience a degree of hope once again. In their view, passion, excitement and optimism began to flow through the whole organisation.[347]

Barassi's arrival also influenced the way the Sydney media perceived the football club. A legend of Australian Rules football had come to Sydney, to help the Sydney football club, and to help promote the team and code in New South Wales. Barassi put a positive spin on everything that happened at the Sydney Football Club and he was not afraid to share his optimism with the Sydney media, who prior to his arrival took little or no interest in the club.[348]

When the new season began on the weekend of 26/27 March 1994, the Swans were visitors in Brisbane. Despite going down by 10 points, the Swans showed enough potential to suggest that there was a future for the team.[349]

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[347] *Ibid.*, p. 126.

[348] *Ibid.*, pp. 127–128.

[349] *The Football Record,* Qualifying Final Edition, September 1994.

In round four, the club's early season optimism seemed well founded when the Swans defeated Richmond at the SCG by 14 points.[350] It was Ron Barassi's second win as coach of Sydney and a much needed confidence boost for everyone involved with the club. The following week, Derek Kickett played for the first time, as Sydney was narrowly beaten by Fitzroy. Despite a 50 point loss to Carlton the following week, the club began the season in a promising manner with one fighting victory and several narrow defeats.[351] Sydney may still have been at the bottom of the ladder, but the team had begun to win respect. They were no longer the 'easy beats' of the competition.

In round seven, Sydney was at home to St Kilda at the SCG. In a match that became known as the Mother's Day Massacre, Sydney, leading at one stage during the last quarter by 48 points were over run by St Kilda, thanks mainly to the efforts of their champion full forward, Tony Lockett. The Swans eventually lost by just one point.[352]

It was hard enough for the supporters to watch as Tony Lockett single handedly ran over the young Swans. To make matters worse, Lockett was involved in an incident in the final minutes of the first quarter, which resulted in Sydney back man, Peter Caven, being carried off on a stretcher with a

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[350] *Ibid.*

[351] *Ibid.*

[352] *The Football Record,* Semi Final Edition, September 1994.

badly broken nose.[353] The incident caused much controversy. The players and officials of the Swans were so incensed over the collision that the club captain, Paul Kelly, broke a code of silence that exists between players, declaring that: 'A bloke can't go around doing things like that. He's got to go.'[354] Lockett would eventually receive an eight-week suspension, and had little impact on the rest of the season. Officials of the Swans, however, would remember what an impact a strong and talented forward could have on the small SCG.

For the third successive year the Swans finished on the bottom of the ladder, this time with a record of four wins and eighteen losses.[355] However, there was a renewed belief that the club was slowly improving. The club had been far more competitive despite its losses, and young players brought into the team as a result of the draft had given the club far greater depth. Off the field, underlying management structures were looking much better. The new board of management, introduced with the arrival of Ron Barassi, was developing a culture of professionalism and with it a sense of optimism. The club appeared to be back on a stable footing. According to Barassi himself, one of the most important developments made by management at this time was the successful negotiation of a new deal between the club and the SCG Trust.[356]

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[353] *Age*, 31 March 1995, p. 31.

[354] *Ibid.*

[355] *Ibid.*

[356] Interview with Ron Barassi, *op. cit.*

In 1994, the SCG, the home base of the Sydney Football Club, agreed to continue the club's lease as winter tenant of the ground for a further ten years.[357] With this new deal also came the promise from the SCG Trust to spend $6 million to develop a modern, new administrative complex, change rooms, warm-up area and gymnasium, specifically for the team. The three areas which the SCG Trust promised to develop for the club were:

> A new social clubroom on the mezzanine level of the Noble Stand, a new administration complex on the northern side of the Sydney Football Stadium and a redeveloped players' facility, including warm up area, gymnasium and property areas under the Berwongle stand. The new facility will also include a coach's room, players' assembly and meeting rooms, and a medical rehabilitation centre.[358]

The development of these areas meant that players, administration staff and supporters would have some of the best facilities in the AFL.[359] The general feel, and visible image of a professional sporting team was a selling point for attracting high quality players to Sydney, for improving the on field performance and for sending a positive message back to the Sydney public.[360]

The 1994 season was, in some ways, the beginning of a new era for the Sydney Football Club. In the past two seasons the club had probably made more progress than it had in its previous twelve seasons in Sydney. As the

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[357] *The Sydney Connection,* The Newsletter of the Sydney Football Club, August 1994, pp. 1-2.

[358] *Ibid.*

[359] *Ibid.*

[360] Freud and Cutler, *op. cit.,* pp. 122-124.

club began its planning for the 1995 season, the emphasis was well and truly on ensuring that the club would continue to move forward rather than slip backwards.[361]

5.2 Re-inventing the Swans

Strengthening the player base was now a high priority for the club. In 1995, Sydney had access to seven relatively high draft selections, and instead of trading draft choices for experienced players from other clubs, the selectors again chose a group of the best young players in the country.

The major recruiting, however, took place before the draft had even been held, with the much publicised signing of full forward Tony Lockett. The campaign to secure Lockett began only days after Lockett's collision with Peter Caven, when on 11 May, members of the match committee met to discuss the following week's game.[362] The obvious point of discussion centred around the effects that the St Kilda loss, and the impact of Tony Lockett in that game, would have on the morale and confidence of the young players. Just prior to the meeting's conclusion, football manager Kevin Egan uttered a sentence that would set in motion a progression of events that would see Lockett become the highest paid player in the history of the game. Egan quipped, 'He's out of contract at the end of the year, you know.'[363]

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[361] Interview with Ron Barassi, *op. cit.*

[362] *Age*, 31 March 1995, pp. 31–32.

[363] *Ibid.*

Five months later, on 21 October 1995, after months of exhaustive work from chief executive Ron Joseph, and failed attempts by Collingwood, Brisbane and Richmond to either agree to the terms set by Lockett or organise a satisfactory deal with St Kilda, Tony Lockett signed to play for Sydney with a contract estimated to be worth $1.2 million over three years.[364]

Lockett, however, was not the only big name to join the red and whites during the off-season. Fitzroy champion and captain, Paul Roos, dismayed by the financial concerns of the Lions, was also looking for a new team.[365] His preference was to join former coach Robert Shaw in Adelaide, but when a satisfactory deal fell through, Roos was left without a club. He eventually signed with Sydney via the pre-season draft.[366]

The arrival of Lockett and Roos in Sydney created an immense impact. As media manager Stephen Brassel recalls, at the time the club was 'screaming out' for a couple of champions, not only to lift the profile of the club but also to assist in the development of the growing list of young players.[367] The new-found optimism and respectability engendered by both Colless and Barassi was a key factor in enticing quality players such as Roos and Lockett to Sydney, and their arrival only added to these positive feelings.[368]

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[364] *Ibid.*

[365] P. Roos, *Beyond 300. An Autobiography,* Random House Australia, Milsons Point, 1997, p. 184.

[366] *Ibid.*

[367] Cited in Freud and Cutler, *op. cit.,* p. 128.

[368] *Ibid.*

When the Swans played in the pre-season competition in February, the side included Tony Lockett, Paul Roos and captain Paul Kelly, arguably three of the best players in the country. In a successful campaign, Sydney reached the semi-finals of that competition, which only heightened expectations of a successful year.[369]

In 1995, amidst the divisions within rugby league caused by the Murdoch-inspired SuperLeague, the Swans began to experience success.[370] Membership increased almost threefold, attendances at home games almost doubled and, most importantly, the Swans started to win games on the field.[371] Despite a slow start to the season, the club finished off the year with eight wins including three against final eight teams, North Melbourne and Essendon, and eventual premiers Carlton.[372] New Swan Tony Lockett kicked 110 goals for his adopted club in his first season, and the young players, including Shannon Grant, Anthony Rocca and Darren Gaspar started to show more glimpses of their enormous potential.[373]

A major highlight of the season occurred in the last week in September when club captain Paul Kelly won the Brownlow Medal.[374] It was seen by a

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[369] *The Football Record*, Qualifying Finals Edition, September 1995.

[370] For a brief but informative account of the issues surrounding the Australian Rugby League (ARL) and SuperLeague division, refer to the chapter, 'Death of League', in Lewis, *op. cit.*, pp. 1-9.

[371] Freud and Cutler, *op. cit.*, pp. 133-138.

[372] Freud and Cutler, *op. cit.*, passim.

[373] *Ibid.*

[374] *The Sydneysider: News supplement for the Sydney Football Club Newsletter,* November 1995, p. 1.

number of commentators as a fitting reward for Kelly, who had played such a significant on-field role in ensuring the continued survival of the Swans.[375] Bob Skilton,[376] favourite son of the South Melbourne Football Club, perhaps best summed up Kelly's role in rebuilding the club, and paid him the ultimate compliment, by saying: 'He's played a bigger part in helping to build this club up than anyone else in its history'.[377]

At the end of 1995, Barassi stepped down from his role as coach. According to footballer writer, Clinton Walker:

> Ron Barassi won only thirteen of the fifty-nine games he coached the Swans, a worse record than he could claim with any other club, but perhaps, indeed his most courageous and, ultimately, most important effort, was establishing a platform not just for the Swans but football generally, north of the line named after him.[378]

What followed was a nation-wide search as the Swans set about finding the man with the best credentials to lead them into 1996 and beyond. The candidates were numerous, including Essendon champions Simon Madden and Tim Watson, Geelong assistant coach, Jeff Geischen, Sydney reserve coach Dennis Carroll, and North Melbourne assistant coach Rodney Eade.[379]

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[375] I. Cockerill, 'The Spirit of the Swans', *Inside Sport,* vol. 64, April 1997, pp. 32-39.

[376] Bob Skilton played 238 games for the South Melbourne Football Club. He won three Brownlow Medals and a record nine best and fairest awards (Main, *Plugger, op. cit.,* p. 284).

[377] Cockerill, *op. cit.,* p. 35.

[378] C. Walker, *A Football Life,* Pan Macmillan, Sydney, 1998, p. 413.

[379] Main, *Plugger, op. cit.,* p. 110.

After an extensive interview process, the club finally settled on former Hawthorn premiership player, Rodney Eade. Despite never coaching at senior level, Eade's credentials were nonetheless impressive. He played in four premierships with Hawthorn between 1976 and 1986. In 1991 he guided the Brisbane reserves to a premiership, and repeated this success with the North Melbourne reserves in 1995, defeating the Sydney Swans.[380]

Also joining the Swans in the off-season were Stuart Maxfield, who was enticed from Richmond, and Kevin Dyson from Melbourne.[381] Both players were taken under the concession provided to the Swans due to their lack of success over previous seasons. St Kilda goal kicker, Craig O'Brien, also found his way to Sydney. The signings were yet further testimony to the club's off field professionalism and ability to attract high quality players to Sydney.

5.3 Sydney Falls for Football

There was a real sense of expectation as the 1996 season began. It would be fair to say the supporters, players and officials, and even the football media, were expecting the Swans to experience success during 1996. For the first time in probably seven or eight years, the Swans were considered an even-money chance of making it into one of the lower positions of the final eight and contesting the finals for the first time since 1987.

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[380] *Ibid.*

The Sydney Football Club eventually ended the home and way season on top of the premiership ladder with sixteen wins, one draw and only five losses. Amongst the victories was a 51 point win over Geelong in front of 44,047 fans at the SCG (then a record for an Australian Rules football crowd at the ground). Following the success against Geelong, both of the major Sydney newspapers, the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Sydney Morning Herald,* headlined the success of the Swans on their respective front pages.[382] As Kelvin Templeton recalls, for the first time the papers were now talking about: 'Our Swans.'[383]

In the first week of the finals, the Swans met Hawthorn in a Qualifying final in what was a night of firsts for the Sydney Football Club. Not only was it the first time the Swans had competed in a final series since 1987, it was the first time an AFL final had been staged at the SCG and most importantly, when Daryn Creswell marked and goaled to put the Swans 6 points in front with fifty-three seconds to play in the final quarter, it was the first time that the Swans had been successful in a final since 1945.

The win against Hawthorn would earn the Swans not only a much-needed week's rest but also the right to a second home final at the SCG on preliminary final weekend.[384] Their opponent was Essendon, one of only two

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[381] *Ibid.,* p. 112.

[382] *Daily Telegraph, Sydney Morning Herald,* 7 July 1996.

[383] Interview with Kelvin Templeton, 10 February 1998.

[384] L. White (ed.), *The Sydney Swans Official 1996 Year Book,* Allen and Kemsley, Sydney, 1996, p. 25.

clubs (the other Fremantle) the Swans had failed to beat during the regular season. Their round six clash had ended in a draw and their round twenty-one game in a three-goal loss.[385] The expectations for another thrilling encounter were high.

The game was a tough, see-sawing affair with neither side able to establish a break. With twenty-two seconds remaining the scores were tied. Lockett then took a mark and as he moved back to take his kick the final siren sounded. Any score would put Sydney into the Centennial Grand Final. From beyond the fifty-metre line, Lockett stepped back and scored a point. Years later, Lockett himself claimed this was his most significant kick in League football.[386] The Sydney Football Club was in the Grand Final.

The leading Sydney tabloids, the *Daily Telegraph* and the *Sydney Morning Herald,* provided wide spread coverage of the preliminary final victory on the Sunday following the game. The coverage was indicative of the swell of support for the Swans over the past few months, and far removed from the days when the club, in order to obtain any publicity, was forced to buy a segment in the *Daily Telegraph* at a cost of $2,500 per week.

Media coverage intensified throughout Sydney in the week leading up to the AFL Grand Final. Club media manager Stephen Brassel received between

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[385] *Ibid.,* p. 74.

[386] T. Lockett, *My Life,* Ironbark, Sydney, 1999, p. 88.

200 and 250 phone calls per day, and on the Thursday night before the game, thousands of supporters attended the final training session of the Swans at the SCG. In fact, more supporters were present than had attended some home games at the SCG only years earlier.[387]

The result on Grand Final day would not be the one that everyone involved in the Sydney Football Club had hoped for. Their opponent was North Melbourne, who the Swans had played only once during the regular season for a decisive 79 point victory. However, the grand final was a different story. The Swans started in spectacular fashion leading by 18 points at quarter time and then 25 points in the early stages of the second quarter. However, missed opportunities in the middle stages of the second quarter let the Kangaroos back into the game. By half time North led by 2 points and by full time the margin was 43 points.

The Swans may have lost the 1996 Grand Final, but 1996 should be remembered as a watershed year for the Sydney Swans. The Sydney Football Club climbed from twelfth in 1995, to second in 1996, and in the process, they won over the sports public of Sydney. Despite the loss, the television ratings from the Grand Final provide significant evidence of the impact of the Sydney Swans on the Sydney public throughout 1996. The telecast of the AFL Grand Final attracted 1.278 million viewers in Sydney. The ARL Grand Final between Manly and St George had peaked only

[387] *Herald Sun,* 27 September 1996.

slightly higher with 1.32 million viewers.[388] More evidence was provided on the Sunday following the Grand Final, when, despite the loss, the players returned home heroes. Thousands of supporters greeted the players when they arrived at Sydney airport on the Sunday morning and later that day Randwick Racecourse was packed with fans, eager to both congratulate and thank the players for what had been a memorable season.[389] This was in stark contrast to the time when players lived in virtual anonymity, and home games struggled to attract crowds of 10,000. According to one press source, Sydney had finally 'fallen in love with football'.[390]

On-field success would not be the only highlight of season 1996. The off-field performance of the club was equally outstanding. Membership rose from 6,088 in 1995 to 9,525 in 1996.[391] Average crowd attendance at the SCG rose from 16,000 in 1995 to 25,000 in 1996.[392] Merchandising sales were up nearly one thousand per cent on 1995 figures. Sponsorship revenue was also up fifty per cent on 1995 and the total revenue also up fifty per cent from $6.2 million to $9.3 million. More importantly, the Sydney Football Club, for the first time since arriving in Sydney in 1982, ran at an operating profit of $74,000. This was in comparison to an operating loss of

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[388] Main, *Plugger, op. cit.*, p. 237.

[389] *Ibid.*

[390] *Age,* 'Saturday Extra', 24 August 1996, pp. 1-2.

[391] All figures from the *Daily Telegraph,* 17 February 1998. See also Appendix 2: Sydney Football Club Membership: 1992–1999.

[392] *Ibid.* See also Appendix 1: Sydney Football Club Average Home Games Attendance: 1982–1999.

$377,000 in 1995.[393] The 1996 season had been an outstanding year for the Sydney Football Club.

A significant contributing factor to the turnaround of the Swans in off-field fortunes could probably be traced back to the appointment of Kelvin Templeton as Chief Executive Officer at the end of 1995. Not only had Templeton won a Brownlow with Footscray in 1990, he also had an MBA in marketing and experience in a wide range of promotional campaigns, including the Medical Benefits Fund (MBF) 'Know your Heart Campaign'. Templeton's expertise and his ability to attract qualified and experienced staff to a new board gave the club a bright and fresh new look.[394]

As Templeton himself explains, on arrival at the Sydney Football Club, he raised concerns in regard to various issues such as the quality of staff and a lack of overall direction and planning. He then developed distinct operating areas and set up coherent business plans that were situated underneath an overall plan. This complete overhaul of the structure and running of the club seemed to focus everyone in a common direction for the first time.[395]

During 1995, the club commissioned sport marketing firm Emmerson and Hughes to undertake a detailed analysis of the on- and off-field operation of the organisation. Twice yearly bench mark research studies were

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[393] *Ibid*

[394] Quick, *op. cit.*, p. 82.

[395] Interview with Kelvin Templeton, *op. cit.*

undertaken, SWOT[396] analyses completed, other successful sporting clubs examined and supporters surveyed to establish demographics, attitudes and behaviours.[397] According to the *Age*, the Swans promoted the club to fit their findings:

> They promised a game where the supporters would play a big part in victories; where they would be as much a cornponent of the spectacle as the team themselves. They promised a clean game, low on thuggery, high on skill. They promised a family game, played by role models, patronised by playwrights and frequented by stars. They wanted the Swans to be the Osmonds of sport - handsome, wholesome, slick, successful and safe.[398]

A significant finding from the market research indicated that a poor level of knowledge about the game still existed in many sections of Sydney society. Improving the relationship with the Seven television network (the national network covering Australian Rules football) was therefore seen as not only essential to improving the club's ability to promote and market itself but also to raising the level of understanding of the game, especially to those less familiar with the code. To this end the club, in conjunction with Channel Seven, developed a short educational segment featuring high-profile players from the Swans explaining various aspect of the game and its rules that screened during Channel Seven's live telecast of AFL matches into NSW.[399]

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[396] SWOT - Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats.

[397] M. Dapin, 'When Feathers Fly', *Age,* 'Good Weekend', 30 August 1997, p. 31.

[398] *Ibid.*

[399] Quick, *op. cit.,* p. 83.

A further area of concern raised from the research was disquiet relating to the issue of parking at, and transport to and from, the Sydney Cricket Ground. In response to this issue, the Sydney Football Club introduced Swanslink, a joint relationship with Sydney Transport that allowed supporters to use public transport to and from the SCG for the cost of ground admission. Bus lanes were also introduced between Central Station and the SCG on game days, to reduce travel time for commuters.[400]

Further initiatives introduced included an alliance with the Sydney City Roosters Rugby League Club. This deal enabled Swans members to receive reciprocal memberships rights at the Easts Leagues Club. Additionally it allowed both clubs to conduct joint marketing and promotional activities to increase membership and support.[401]

The marketing and promotion, however, was not just confined to Sydney. A complete about face in regard to the club's Melbourne supporters was witnessed, and for the first time their role and importance was recognized. For years the club had viewed its Melbourne heritage as a major deterrent to its progress in Sydney. The perception that the Sydney public wasn't turning up to Swans games because the Swans were a relocated team not wanted by Melbourne had led to a view of Melbourne supporters as being something shameful.[402] The strategies implemented, included the establishment of a

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[400] *Ibid.*, pp. 86–87.

[401] *Ibid.*, p. 87.

[402] *Ibid.*, p. 88.

Melbourne office and the introduction of post-match functions in Melbourne, showed a realisation, according to Quick, that: 'all supporters irrespective of geographical location, enrich a club financially and spiritually.'[403] It was also a clear illustration of the Sydney Football Club's development and maturation as a professional sporting organisation keen on pursuing all possibilities to increase its supporter base, image and profile.[404]

5.4 The Final Goal

Although coach Rodney Eade played down the expectations for 1997, by initially suggesting that the goal for the season was 'a final eight finish and that sixth would be a reasonable expectation'[405], it was hard for supporters not to feel a little disappointed with the way the year finally ended for the Sydney Swans. After finishing the home and away rounds in sixth position with twelve wins and ten losses, the Swans were defeated by a faster and more determined third-placed Western Bulldogs in the qualifying final. When results went against the Swans and second-placed Geelong were beaten by seventh-placed North Melbourne in a remaining qualifying final, the year was over for the Swans.[406]

Off the field, though, things continued to look up for the Sydney Swans. Attendances for the eleven home games returned an aggregate of 393,999

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[403] *Ibid.*

[404] *Ibid.*

[405] S. Brassel (ed.), *The Official Sydney Swans 1997 Year Book,* Allen and Kemsley, Sydney, 1997, p. 8.

[406] *Ibid.*

fans, at an average of 35,818. More significantly, memberships grew by 135 per cent to 22,500.[407] While the continued on field success of the team was a significant contributor to this increase, it was far from the sole contributor.[408] The Swans during the Edelsten era, for example, made the finals for two years in a row and had a membership base of around 4,000, so such an increase could not be all related to the performance of the team.[409]

A key to the increased number of memberships was the marketing approach employed. One of the strategies implemented by the club was to get the name and address of every person attending a game by the Swans who was not a member. To achieve this, teams of volunteers circulated throughout the crowd, running competitions which required people to submit their names. The end result was a database of between 25,000 to 30,000 people who became the major target for membership drives through direct mail and through telephone sales.[410]

Sponsorship also improved markedly as the Swans became one of the most keenly sought after sporting products in New South Wales. Major sponsor, QBE, agreed to another three-year sponsorship, taking their association with the Swans to thirteen years, up until the year 2000. Rebel Sport and Sydney

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[407] *Daily Telegraph*, 17 February, 1998. See also Appendix 2: Sydney Football Club Membership: 1992–1999, and Appendix 1: Sydney Football Club Home Games Attendance: 1982–1999.

[408] Interview with Kelvin Templeton, *op. cit.*

[409] *Ibid.*

[410] *Ibid.*

Harbour Casino also stepped on board with significant contributions.[411]

The record attendance for an AFL game in Sydney was also broken during 1997 when 46,168 supporters crowded into the SCG to watch the Swans play Geelong on 30 August. Total club revenue increased a further forty-two per cent from $9.3 million to $13.2 million. These outstanding results led to the club recording an operating profit of $311,000.[412]

Planning for the future growth of Australian Rules football in Sydney also continued throughout 1997. In May, the AFL Commission announced it would provide a loan of $500,000 to Stadium Australia in each of the 1997-98 and 1998-99 financial years so that the main stadium for the Sydney Olympic Games could be redesigned to allow Australian Rules football to be played there from 2001. In November, the AFL Commission and Stadium Australia further announced that an agreement had been reached to play a minimum of six AFL matches per year for 10 years from 2001 at Homebush.[413]

Even more significantly, a task force to review Australian Rules football in NSW and the ACT was established in 1997. The continued success of the Sydney Football Club and the subsequent increase in support for the club from the media, and general public, had inspired the AFL to adopt a long

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[411] Brassel, *op. cit.*, pp. 5-7.

[412] *Ibid.*

[413] Annual Report of the Australian Football League, season 1997.

term plan for the continued growth of the game in the northern states.[414] The establishment of this task force and the deal struck with Stadium Australia was yet another reminder of the AFL's long-term commitment to the development of Australian Rules football in Sydney.

Season 1998, like 1997, would be another year of unfulfilled opportunities for the Sydney Football Club. The team eventually finished the home and away rounds in third position, but despite their solid performance and advantage of home finals, they were outclassed by eventual premiers, Adelaide, in a semi-final.

Further market research throughout 1998 revealed that the popularity of the Swans amongst Sydneysiders continued to grow. Indeed, a number of programs revealed that Sydney people saw the team as representative of the city, a perception fuelled by numerous community involvement programs instigated by the Sydney Football Club.[415] One such program, under the banner 'Team Swans,' is a community development program, with players travelling all over Greater Sydney supporting charity organizations, visiting school, supporting junior football programs and working with underprivileged children and adolescents.[416] A further initiative is the development of the Cygnature club. This club, primarily for women, has not only increased the

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[414] *Ibid.*

[415] *Ibid.*, pp. 180-182.

[416] *Swans News*, vol. 2, no. 8, June 1998.

percentage of women at home games, but has also increased the level of understanding of the game amongst the female audience.[417]

The 1999 football season was marked by the impact of Tony Lockett. The full forward had been one of the main reasons not only for the rise of the Swans up the ladder, but also for increased public awareness and popularity for the Swans and football in general in Sydney. At the start of the season, Lockett was on the threshold of achieving one of the longest standing records in Australian Rules football. His quest to reach this target, breaking Gordon Coventry's sixty-two year old record of 1299 career goals, dominated the football media. By the time the Swans were drawn to play the West Coast Eagles in the ninth round, Lockett was within six goals of Coventry's record. The media build up to the game was intense, and Lockett's record became the focus of much attention. He would, however fall three goals short.[418] Two weeks later (the week in between being set aside for State of Origin football), Lockett achieved the record against Collingwood in front of a capacity SCG crowd. The achievement created high excitement at the SCG, with large numbers of supporters charging onto the ground to share in Lockett's moment of glory.[419]

Lockett's record aside, the 1999 season was full of on-field frustration and disappointment for the Sydney Football Club. At various times during the

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[417] Freud and Cutler, *op. cit.*, p. 180.

[418] Lockett, *op. cit.*, p. 171.

[419] *Ibid.*, pp. 176-178.

season, the Swans threatened to be real premiership contenders. However, they would finish the home and away season in eighth position and lose their first and only final to top placed Essendon by 69 points.[420]

During 1999, the push for a second team out of Sydney in the national competition intensified with the Kangaroos (formerly the North Melbourne Football club) playing four home games at the SCG.[421] The season also saw the Brownlow Medal ceremony temporarily transferred to Sydney, with the AFL's best and fairest count held at Sydney's Hordern Pavilion on Monday of Grand Final week.[422]

5.5 Comparisons

Despite numerous difficulties in the years following the relocation of the South Melbourne Football Club to Sydney, it appears that Australian Rules football has finally secured a place in the city's sporting culture. By the year 2000, SCG crowds for Sydney home games regularly exceeded 25,000, but fans also experienced a total entertainment package. The perception from those in Melbourne is that the crowds at games involving the Swans are a 'chardonnay', good-time crowd.[423] This perception in part exists as a result of the Edelsten days when many of the spectators were there for the entertainment as much as for the game. However, by the end of 1999, the

[420] *Age,* 6 September 1999.

[421] *Age,* 17 April 1999, see also *Sunday Age,* 25 April 1999.

[422] *Herald Sun,* 25 September 1999.

[423] Freud and Cutler, *op. cit.,* p. 181.

crowds appear better educated in the traditions of Australian Rules football. As a small measure of this education, Richard Colless has observed that at least the crowds at the SCG now know when to boo and when to cheer.[424] The size of the crowd, and their proximity to the players also created an atmosphere during games that was the envy of many teams in the competition. For instance, it has been reported that the parochial Sydney home crowd played a large role in many of the victories by the Swans at the SCG between 1996 and 1999.[425]

But a question mark concerning supporter loyalty still hangs over the club. The Sydney Football Club experienced an impressive degree of success, especially at the SCG, between 1996 and 1999, and supporters attended games knowing that they would witness a competitive contest.[426] Whether spectator levels are maintained when the club experiences an inevitable drop in fortunes is still to be tested, at least in the long term.

The Swans did experience some degree of success between 1986 and 1988, when they regularly won games and crowds flocked through the gates to watch them play. The success, however, was short lived, and there was no real strategic planning in place to maintain the momentum. Thus, when on-field success started to desert the Swans, so too did spectator support.

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[424] *Ibid.*

[425] *Ibid.*, pp. 173-181.

[426] Interview with Kelvin Templeton, *op. cit.*

Historically, sports teams in Sydney have struggled to maintain spectator, sponsor, and media support when success has deserted them. There is probably no better example of this than the Sydney Kings basketball team. In the late 1980s and early 1990s, at the height of the basketball boom, the Sydney Kings were 'all the rage'. As Gregor Salmon and Ewen Comess, in their article 'Lost Kingdom', put it: 'they had an air of destiny about them; a title was in the pipeline, a dynasty even.'[427] Regular sell-out crowds were filling the Sydney Entertainment Centre and the organisation had more than 130 sponsors. The team was very competitive, too, making the final series in 1989, 1990 and 1992.[428]

However, the evidence suggests that those managing the Sydney Kings, and basketball in this country in general, expected the success to just automatically continue. As basketball chief executive officer, John Rymarz, recalls, there was a sense that the sport was doing very well and that the growth would go on 'forever'.[429] Markets constantly change, however, and it appears that basketball in general, and the Kings in particular, were not as quick to respond to the changes in the market as they should have been.[430] By 1995, the success of the Kings had started to wane, and with this stagnation a great deal of spectator and sponsor support began to drain away.[431] This situation occurred at the same time that the Swans began to

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[427] G. Salmon and E. Corness, 'Lost Kingdom', *Inside Sport,* October 1998, p. 99.

[428] *Ibid.,* pp. 100-101.

[429] Cited in the *Australian,* 29 June 1998.

[430] *Ibid.*

[431] *Ibid.*

experience success in the late 1990s, although there is no research that directly compares the experiences of the two clubs.

In this context, it is clear that the Sydney Football Club had no reason to be complacent at the end of the 1999 season. While some might have considered the club, in the late 1990s at least, to have been well coached, well managed and well administered, the vagaries of the Sydney sports market place and the competitive nature of the premier competition of Australian Rules football, mean that long term success is difficult to achieve and even harder to maintain. Even though this thesis does not encompass recent developments at the club, including the retirement of several veteran players and the resignation of the senior coach, it is pertinent to note that a 'crisis' mentality has not re-emerged, despite the fact that Swans have appeared in only one finals series between 2000 and 2002. In fact, the club's promising list of junior players and some encouraging on-field performances during 2002 augurs well for the future. The penultimate chapter outlines and examines how strategies to build a foundation for the long-term success of the Swans in Sydney, and the code itself, have been put in place.

Chapter 6

Building a Foundation for Australian Rules Football in Sydney

6.1 Introduction

The success of the Swans in building a fan base in Sydney is just one indicator of the capacity of Australian Rules football to expand its market. An equally important indicator is its ability to secure a foundation of participation and junior development. This chapter reviews the attempts to increase interest levels and participation rates of Australian Rules football in NSW with a particular focus on junior development. The themes discussed require some historical context and therefore there is some overlap with information already covered in previous chapters of the thesis.

In June 1997, with the establishment of the NSW/ACT Task Force to review the state of Australian Rules football in New South Wales, the AFL embarked on another ambitious expansive drive, its most serious attempt yet to win over the sports-going public of greater Sydney. The Task Force was developed to examine the current state of football within NSW, and from the findings recommendations were to be made that would ensure the long-term success of the code in these regions. The goal was: 'to make Australian Football one of the premier football codes in NSW and the ACT within the next twenty years.'[432]

[432] NSW/ACT Task Force, *op. cit.*, p. i.

By February 1998, details of the Task Force recommendations were beginning to be released. An analysis of some of the key recommendations will be provided later in the chapter, but the keystone of the document was a request for the AFL to inject up to $20 million over the next five years into increasing interest levels and participation rates of Australian Rules football in New South Wales, with junior development in Sydney the highest priority.[433]

6.2 A Measure of Success

The request to spend $20 million in New South Wales was met with expected opposition from the financially struggling Victorian clubs.[434] The Victorian public also seemed concerned that the AFL was constantly worrying about others, instead of looking after its major teams and supporters in Victoria.[435]

On face value, there would seem to be merit in such sentiments, and the need or worth of spending large sums of money on developing Australian Rules football in New South Wales could be questioned. After all, given the on-field success of the Swans at the end of the 1990s, how could the extra expenditure be justified?

Of the current playing group in the AFL, New South Wales has produced arguably three of the games most highly decorated and influential players,

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[433] *Age*, 20 March 1998, p. 1.

[434] *Age*, 'Sport', 28 May 1998, p. 1.

namely the Kangaroos captain, Wayne Carey, from Wagga Wagga, Sydney captain and 1995 Brownlow Medallist, Paul Kelly, also from Wagga Wagga, and James Hird, the Essendon captain and Brownlow Medallist in 1996, from Canberra.[436] In 1996, the Sydney Football Club won the minor Premiership and reached the AFL Grand Final. In 1997, the SFC again figured in the AFL finals series, finishing seventh. In 1998, the club again reached the finals finishing fifth, and in 1999 the Swans reached the AFL finals for a fourth successive year.[437]

In 1998 and again in 1999, the Sydney Football Club membership figures exceeded 30,000, a marked increase from 6,100 in 1995.[438] Average attendances at a home game of the Sydney Football Club also increased from almost 16,000 in 1995, to 36,000 in 1997.[439] In 1997, the Sydney Football Club, for the first time since the club arrived in Sydney in 1982, ran at an operating profit.[440] Survey results also indicate that recently retired Sydney full forward Tony Lockett was as identifiable as any other sports star in NSW.[441]

On closer examination, however, the health of football in Sydney is far from the success that the aforementioned facts depict. Patrick Smith describes

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[435] *Ibid.*

[436] *Daily Telegraph,* 28 May 1998, p. 82.

[437] Freud and Cutler, *op. cit.,* passim.

[438] *Daily Telegraph,* 17 February 1998. p. 67, see also *Swans News,* May 1999.

[439] *Daily Telegraph,* 17 February 1998, p. 67.

[440] *Ibid.*

the state of football in Sydney as: '... a head without a body. It makes a lot of noise, people gawk at it a lot, but it isn't moving anywhere.'[442] The following points tend to support the sentiments of such an observation.

There are currently only about 12,000 juniors involved in Australian Rules football in all of New South Wales, which has a total population of about eight million. Of these 12,000 participants, only 2,661, less than two per cent of the sporting market, are from Sydney.[443] In greater Sydney, an area representing approximately five million people and close to twenty-five per cent of the Australian population, there are only 3,000 juniors playing Australian Rules football. This figure compares poorly with 150,000 playing rugby union, rugby league and soccer combined.[444] In 1997, there were only 500 children involved in Auskick programs in Sydney, a figure dwarfed by the 23,662 children involved in Auskick in metropolitan Melbourne.[445] There are also only thirty-four open age clubs operating in greater Sydney. The Sydney Football League is easily the weakest of the statewide competitions, and the SCG is the only quality enclosed ground available for Australian Rules football in Sydney.[446]

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[441] NSW/ACT Task Force, *op. cit.*

[442] *Age*, 'Sport', 28 May 1998, p. 1.

[443] NSW/ACT Task Force, *op. cit.*, p. 5. Refer also to Appendix 3 for Australian football participation numbers in Sydney in 1998.

[444] NSW/ACT Task Force, *op. cit.*, pp. 6–9. Refer also to Appendix 4 for major sport participation rates in Sydney in 1997.

[445] *Ibid.*

[446] Interview with Rod Carter, 14 April 1998. The Homebush Stadium is now also used for Australian Rules football.

6.3 Lessons of History

To comprehend and appreciate how much the long term success of Australian Rules football as a supposedly national game relies on increased participation and interest levels in Sydney, it is necessary to briefly recap the history of the code in this area. There is also a need to identify the recurring themes that have contributed to the game's inability to consolidate its position in Sydney.

Australian Rules football in Sydney has a long history, as it has in other states. In the NSW capital, the code is more than 120 years old and even pre-dates its major sporting rival rugby league, by thirty years. Its history, however, is marked by many failures. The two earliest attempts to win over Sydney, by the VFA in the 1880s and the VFL in the early years of the new century, were both unsuccessful due to an inability to establish successful junior competitions. In the 1880s the SRFU had a firm grip on juniors in Sydney and established rules that ultimately banned its players from playing any matches under Australian Rules.[447] Between 1903 and 1910, the VFL spent over £10,000 promoting football in Sydney, pumping money into schools, in the form of footballs, jumpers, and coaches and players to impart skills. The (now) NSWRU again had a strong influence on juniors and, as a counter measure to the VFL, set up their own junior development programs.[448] The demise of initial attempts by the backers of Victorian football to win over Sydney was ultimately based around an inability, firstly,

[447] Sharp, *op. cit.*, pp. 30–31.

to attract junior players to play the game, and secondly, to sustain viable competitions.

Despite the failure of these initial attempts, the Australian Football Council and the VFL continued to provide money for junior development in Sydney. The 'propaganda fund', as it was known, continued for the next seventy years, but the dollar amount contributed each year indicated it was more a token gesture than a serious attempt to expand the game.[449] The transfer of the South Melbourne Football Club to Sydney in 1982 brought about an upsurge in attempts to increase junior participation.[450] Apart from the early novelty effect, there was little increase in junior numbers, due in most part to the lack of success by the Swans.

In 1986, with the arrival of Geoffrey Edelsten, football in Sydney was turned around. The Sydney Swans became an overnight success and with the assistance of increased funds in the areas of marketing and promotion, the interest in Australian Rules football increased markedly.[451] In response to increased interest levels and a desire for the club to establish a pipeline of home-based talent, the club appointed seven leading players (Dennis Carroll, Paul Hawke, Steven Wright, Darren McAsey, Brett Scott, Mark Browning and Craig Holden) as development officers.[452] The seven players

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[448] *Ibid.*, pp. 37–40.

[449] See VFL and NSWAFL Annual Reports, 1930–1978.

[450] Interview with Craig Holden, *op. cit.*

[451] Pritchard, *op. cit.*, p. 9.

[452] *Sydney Morning Herald*, 4 April 1986, p. 54.

were responsible for coordinating school and junior programs to increase the influence of the code in Sydney, and also to improve the standard of the Sydney Football League.[453]

When Edelsten's money ran out, the Swans had to cut back on all those avenues and resources used to promote football. As a result, as Craig Holden recalls: 'there was no one left in the state to promote the game. Consequently junior football fell on its backside and was in real strife.'[454] Between 1989 and 1995, Australian Rules football experienced a real slump in Sydney. The Swans experienced their most unsuccessful period, and interest in the code waned considerably. Adding to the problem was a growing lack of recognition for players associated with the code. Rod Carter recalls that Australian Rules football was not seen as a worthwhile sport:

> As a teacher I remember that my best footballers would go and play rugby union because they wouldn't get any recognition from their peers for playing Australian football. They wouldn't get any kudos. Aussie Rules wasn't seen as the game to play.[455]

In 1995, NSW became part of the Australian Football Foundation (AFF) and the NSW/ACT Development Foundation, which is now headed by Rod Carter, was put in place to look after junior football. The AFF, which is an arm of the AFL, was developed to ensure that Australian Rules football has appropriate programs to maintain growth and development. The foundation

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[453] *Ibid.*

[454] Interview with Craig Holden, *op. cit.*

[455] Interview with Rod Carter, *op. cit.*

oversees junior football, coach education, and school programs – all essential to the development of the game. It ensures there is a player pathway, so young people can go basically from Auskick all the way to the player draft. The inclusion of NSW/ACT in the foundation was an indicator of the AFL's desire for the long-term success of the code in that area, as well as being a forerunner to the establishment of a task force to review the state of Australian Rules football in NSW.[456]

6.4 A Unique and Competitive Environment

To understand the sheer size of the task facing Australian Rules football as it attempts to invade the Sydney sporting market, it is important to review the many hurdles hampering the game's development. Perhaps the greatest hurdle is the unique sporting landscape that exists not only in Sydney but also throughout the state of New South Wales. In Melbourne, Australian Rules football is clearly the dominant code almost to a level where the other codes remain non-existent. In Sydney, each code of rugby union, rugby league and soccer is strong and holds a significant place in Sydney's sporting culture. Each of the codes has significantly higher junior participation numbers and each has a solid organisational base.[457]

Rugby union, the game of the establishment, has, in the past decade, recognized the need to stay abreast of its competitors and has embarked on numerous initiatives to ensure its continued growth and popularity in the

[456] *Ibid.*

twenty-first century. The move to a professional game and other changes to cater for the sport's increasing commercialism are but two examples of these initiatives. Public support for the recently established 'Super 12' competition, involving teams from New Zealand, Australia and South Africa, continues to grow, and tickets to Bledisloe Cup matches between Australia and New Zealand are always in high demand.[458] In Australia, the game has in recent years embarked on a major junior development program. Staff allocation to the New South Wales Rugby Union (NSWRU) development arm increased from seven to fifteen in 1998.[459] The rugby community is both powerful and influential.[460] As far as football codes are concerned, it has the largest impact on the private school sporting system. Australia's success at the 1999 World Cup and the fact that the 2003 World Cup will be held in Australia, with the final in Sydney, will be further fillips for interest and participation in the game.[461]

Rugby league, despite its recent split and ongoing problems, is slowly beginning to re-establish itself. The relative success of the joint venture teams can be considered testimony to its efforts. The new, unified competition consisting of fifteen teams nationwide is now marketable again, and much money has been spent in advertising campaigns to restore faith in

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[457] NSW/ACT Task Force, *op. cit.*, p. 41.

[458] *Ibid.*, p. 35.

[459] *Ibid.*, p. 33.

[460] *Australian*, 21 October 1998, p. 8.

[461] NSW/ACT Task Force, *op. cit.*, p. 35., see also the *Australian,* 21 October 1998, p. 8.

the game amongst fans.[462] Rugby league, a sport of 'big' money and 'big' media, is still firmly entrenched in Sydney's sporting culture. It has significant support in high places, and shareholders committed to ensuring its long-term success.[463] At the grass roots level, the game has strong foundations, with 45,000 children playing the game in Sydney and a further 31,000 statewide. The Sydney Academy of Sport run a junior development program under the banner of the NRL, which employs several first-grade players who visit an average of 300 schools per year for clinics. Development officers employed by the NRL are also placed at strategic locations around the state.[464] Traditionally a game of the working class, rugby league has widespread support throughout Sydney, and remains the dominant code in terms of support and media exposure. The game is an integral part of NSW popular culture.[465]

Soccer, probably to the surprise of many, especially in the southern states, has easily the most junior participants of all the football codes in NSW, with 123,000 registered players statewide and 96,000 in Sydney alone.[466] The game's popularity seems to have emerged because of its perceived 'safeness' and non-violent nature in comparison to the contact aspects of rugby union and rugby league, especially at the junior level. Much of the sport's success can also be contributed to its junior development programs.

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[462] NSW/ACT Taskforce, *op. cit.*, p. 31.

[463] *Ibid.*

[464] *Ibid.*, p. 32.

[465] *Australian*, 21 October 1998, p. 8.

[466] NSW/ACT, *op. cit.*, p. 32.

Talent is first identified at age eleven, and worthy children are steered into one of eleven academy units throughout the state.[467] Soccer has a major program in place at the NSW Institute of Sport and of particular concern to rival codes is the development of 'schools of excellence' by powerful European clubs, where talented young players are groomed for careers outside of Australia.[468] Also adding to the game's appeal, and inspiring junior participation, is the increasing number of Australian-born players who are successful on the international stage.

Breaking into Sydney is difficult enough for Australian Rules football given the strength of its competitors, but adding to the problems facing Australian Rules football in this context is the willingness and foresight of its competitors to constantly look for means of improvement. For example, both rugby codes in recent years have introduced significant rule changes aimed at speeding up their games to make them more spectator-friendly. In both codes, rule changes have changed the focus from yardage gained through brute force and power, to gain through agility and skill. These changes, however, have not only had an impact from a spectacle viewpoint, they have also changed the size and shape of participating players. Consequently,

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[467] *Ibid.*

[468] The schools of excellence program has developed as a consequence of the improved standing of the national Socceroos team on the world stage. European clubs now see Australia as an untapped resource. West Ham was the first club to develop such a program and it enables the club to pick and nurture the best available talent. Other European clubs are following suit (NSW/ACT Task Force, *op. cit.*, p. 36).

according to the Task Force report, many elite level young players of the same body-type are now targeted by all codes.[469]

6.5 Rocky Road or Dead End Street?

Although the competitive sporting landscape is easily the biggest hurdle facing Australian Rules football as it attempts to find a niche in Sydney's sporting culture, it is far from the only hurdle. Further problems include the availability and quality of grounds, staffing issues, the standard of the SFL, and a lack of resources.

The availability and quality of grounds of sufficient size to cater for Australian Rules football is a significant problem facing the game's development in Sydney. Carter rates the situation in terms of ground quality and availability as desperate.[470] Prior to the building of a multi-purpose stadium for the Sydney Olympic Games, the Sydney Cricket Ground was the only quality enclosed ground that would even be considered for playing an AFL game. The problem, however, is not only unique to the elite level. Of far greater concern is the shortage of grounds to cater for junior club matches. The grounds that are available have to be used all weekend due to the demand. As a result the quality, as well as quantity, of grounds is a growing problem.[471]

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[469] NSW/ACT Task Force, *op. cit.*

[470] Interview with Rod Carter, *op. cit.*

[471] *Ibid.*

As was mentioned in the first chapter, Sydney is a cramped city that is geographically very hilly. Melbourne, in comparison, has an abundance of flat ground from which football grounds were developed. The lack of flat ground is compounded in Sydney because the flat ground that is available has, and is being used, by the sports that have historically been dominant in greater Sydney, namely soccer, rugby league and rugby union. To counteract these problems, the NSW/ACT foundation has had to adapt and develop a concept to suit the facilities and environment available. The answer was to establish modified nine- and twelve-a-side competitions played on the smaller soccer and rugby fields that are in abundance in schools and parks around Sydney.[472] This adaptation must, however, only be seen as a short-term solution to a long-term problem. Juniors can only play games with modified numbers on modified size grounds for so long. If Australian Rules football's infiltration into Sydney is to be successful, improving the quality and quantity of sufficiently sized grounds must become a priority.

The issue of staffing is another serious problem hindering the growth of Australian Rules football in Sydney. The explosion of interest in Australian Rules football in Sydney following the improved on-field performance of the Swans has led to an increased demand for development officers to come into schools or to assist at clinics. The issue has recently reached crisis level with the current staff over-worked and unable to cope with ever-

[472] *Ibid.*

increasing demand. To ensure a quality program continues to operate, the NSW/ACT foundation needs more staff. Presently each staff member is responsible for approximately 300 schools in and around greater Sydney.[473] Carter believes that to maintain a quality program, the ideal number of schools for each staff member to work with is around fifty, for if there is any more than this number allocated, then the quality and efficiency of the program is likely to suffer. In the same context, Carter also adds that although this is a problem, it is a problem that did not exist until recently, and for that reason the development creates a sense of excitement. The major hurdle Carter and his teams experienced a few years back was an inability to get into schools. Staff would have to put on a collar and tie and go and see a headmaster, just for the chance to teach 'Aussie Rules' in schools.[474]

The staffing problem is compounded in that in much of NSW the majority of people know very little about Australian Rules football. This lack of knowledge has two major impacts. Firstly, the strength of Auskick and junior football clubs in Victoria, and in each of the southern states, relies heavily on the involvement of parents.[475] At Auskick level, parents act as teachers and coaches, and at the junior club level, as coaches, officials and umpires. Parents are willing to become involved because they have grown up with Australian Rules football and they understand the rules and traditions of the game. The situation is substantially different in Sydney and throughout

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[473] *Ibid.*

[474] *Ibid.*

[475] *Ibid.*

NSW. Parents are hesitant in becoming involved because of their ignorance.[476] As a result, the children who are involved in programs have few trained and knowledgeable coaches to foster their development. Secondly, the problems are very similar in schools. According to the Task Force report: 'The most critical factor that determines which sports are offered in a school is the expertise and enthusiasm of the teaching staff for the sports.'[477] With few teachers throughout Sydney knowledgeable in Australian Rules football, the game is not being taught in schools, and as a result, the game is missing out on a major source of junior player recruitment.[478]

6.6 The Task Force Review

As was mentioned in the opening to this section, in 1997 the AFL Commission determined to ensure the long-term success for the code throughout Australia, and appointed the NSW/ACT Australian Football Task Force to review Australian Rules football in NSW and the ACT. In preparing the report, the Task Force conducted meetings, received submissions and obtained specific information, from wide ranging sources. Meetings were conducted with umpires, senior and junior clubs, the NSW Department of Sport and Recreation, the Sydney Academy of Sport, the Sydney Football Club and the NSW/ACT Foundation. Submissions were received from the AFL, Stadium Australia, the Sydney Football Club and Sydney Football

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[476] NSW/ACT Task Force, *op. cit.*, p. 52.

[477] *Ibid.*, p. 51.

[478] *Ibid.*, p. 56.

League Clubs. In addition, specific research was undertaken by various consulting and management companies and existing information obtained from other government and non-government sources.[479] Every possible measure was taken in preparing a document that would both review the current state of Australian Rules football in NSW/ACT and provide recommendations for the future.

The following section condenses and summarises some of the most pressing findings and recommendations from the review, with a focus on those areas concerned with junior development. To provide a definitive account of all the review's conclusions and recommendations is beyond the scope of this thesis.

Of all the Task Force's key recommendations, the review rates those concerned with junior development as the highest priority. That is, they are seen as the most urgent issues facing the game in the next five years.[480] The recommendations have been formalised from the problems facing Australian Rules football as outlined earlier in this chapter.

Knowing too well the importance of parents in a child's choice of sport, the Task Force highlights the need for the development of programs to ensure that not only children, but also parents, develop an interest in, and an

[479] *Ibid.*, pp. 1-2.

[480] *Ibid.*, p. vi.

understanding of Australian Rules football.[481] The review recommends that the Auskick program should form the cornerstone for educating children and their parents about the rules and skills of the game. The importance of the Sydney Football Club in getting people involved in the game is also highlighted, and a recommendation that the AFL Commission purchase a block of seats for each Sydney home game as a tool for attracting and educating parents about the game is also proposed.[482] Finally, as a source of incentive to attract parents to become involved in Australia Rules football in NSW/ACT, the Task Force recommends the Father/Son rule be extended to the Parent/Son rule. This rule would mean the child of any parent who enters into long-term commitments as an official of an Australian Rules football club would be able to remain and play his football in that state if he so desires.[483]

In terms of dealing with the problems associated with the lack of exposure of Australian Rules football in schools, numerous recommendations have been put forward. Again, the Swans are seen as an important tool in this regard. As suggested in relation to parents, the review recommends that seating be set-aside at Sydney home games to expose teachers to Australian Rules football. Similarly it is recommended that the senior players of the Swans should be used in schools to spark interest and impact on students.[484]

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[481] *Ibid.*, p. 51, see also the *Daily Telegraph,* 28 May 1998.

[482] *Ibid.*, p. 53.

[483] *Ibid.*

[484] *Ibid.*, p. 57.

Furthermore, it is proposed that user-friendly training manuals and videos be created, a school-based talent identification program implemented, the profile and prestige of school competitions raised and also that there be an emphasis on developing a modified game that takes into account the limitations and problems facing Australian Rules football in the Sydney market.[485] It is also suggested that greater emphasis be placed on recruiting development officers who understand not only the education system, but are also fully aware of the problems confronting Australian Rules football in Sydney and NSW.[486]

Proposed solutions to the issues relating to shortage and quality of grounds include the need for a major review of all facility requirements and availability. Permanent and quality playing and administrative headquarters for NSW football need to be established. Recognition is given that even though it is important to continue and further pursue games with modified rules and playing numbers, longer-term solutions are required. Those longer-term solutions include further investigation and understanding of government funding for facilities, investigation of possible partnerships with non-competing sports such as netball, little athletics and cricket to develop sports facilities, and also examination of the ancillary facilities within the Homebush complex as possible venues for Australian Rules football.[487] In

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[485] *Ibid.*, p. 58.

[486] *Ibid.*

[487] *Ibid.*, pp. 83-84.

addition, Wentworth Park[488] is recommended as a possible future long-term home for Australian Rules football and Drummoyne Oval, Monarch Oval, Pickin Oval and Kellyville Oval were identified as four grounds within the Sydney metropolitan area that could be developed as quality Australian Rules football facilities.[489]

To undertake the proposals highlighted is not only going to take time and energy, but also substantial funding. Preliminary estimates by the Task Force suggest that the required funding could run to $3 million to $4 million a year for the next five years. Although some of the money will come from sponsorship of various programs, broader use of the Swans as a brand, and the government, the AFL will be asked to provide the bulk of the funds.

With these financial predictions in mind, targets are recommended to ensure that the AFL's funds will have an impact. Further funding beyond the initial five years will therefore depend on the achievement of specific objectives such as an Auskick program in eighty per cent of all NSW/ACT primary schools by 2005, and an infrastructure (facilities, coaches, umpires and volunteer administrators) that can support an increase of well over four times (over 50,000) in junior participation throughout NSW/ACT, by 2010. Also expected by 2010 is a minimum of 50,000 junior players participating in

[488] Wentworth Park, located just outside the Sydney CBD, is the home of greyhound racing in Sydney and currently houses the NSWAFL and development foundation (*Ibid.*, p. 84.).

[489] NSW/ACT Task Force, *op. cit.*, p. 84. Refer also to Appendix 5, for projected participation rates for the five major sports in greater Sydney, in 2010 and 2015.

Australian football in NSW/ACT (ie., 38,000 more than current levels), and finally, there is an aim to have between twenty and twenty-five AFL draftees per year from NSW/ACT, again by the year 2010. At least half of these draftees are expected to come from greater Sydney.[490]

6.7 Dismantling the Barriers

Despite the aforementioned problems facing Australian Rules football in Sydney, there is much evidence to suggest the game is well on the way to establishing itself in NSW. The number of under-18 teams in the SFL has risen from seven teams in 1996 to twelve teams in 1998. There has been a forty per cent increase in the number of players in age group competitions throughout Sydney. In 1995 there were only ninety children involved in Auskick programs in Sydney, but by 1997 this figure had increased to 500, and in 1998 exceeded 2,000. In 1997, a twelve-a-side primary schools competition was established with thirty-two teams competing. In 1998 the number of teams competing had risen to 105.[491] Each of the above factors is evidence that the barriers are being broken down. The stigma, which for years was attached to Australian Rules football, that it was not the game to be seen playing, is slowly disappearing.

Increasing participation rates at both junior and senior levels in Sydney has long been the primary aim of administrators of Australian Rules football. The

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[490] *Ibid.*, p. 28.

[491] Interview with Rod Carter, *op. cit.* Refer also to Appendix 6, to see Sydney Football Participation Figures for Teams: 1995 & 1998.

quest for the code to become more national in outlook, and in practice, has historically centred on the game's long-term development in such areas. The recent release of the AFL Task Force summary of Australian Rules football in Sydney, however, has placed a high priority on the need for not only increased participation levels in Sydney, but also an improved output of players that will make the grade at the highest level. It is in this regard that further evidence of the development of Australian Rules in Sydney can be cited from profiles and interviews with two local Sydney players that have graduated to the senior level of the AFL.

Greg Stafford's case demonstrates potential for the growth of Australian Rules football in Sydney. His background initially revolved around rugby league. He was raised in what he describes as a strong rugby league family and notes that: 'I started out playing rugby league because my brother played it. Dad was always a keen rugby league fan, so it was a natural progression.'[492] Stafford's involvement in rugby league was, however, short-lived. A combination of a lack of interest, persuasion by a schoolmate to give a new game a go, and the transformation of a brick pit behind the Stafford house into an Australian Rules football ground, soon had him playing the Australian game.[493]

From age nine to fifteen, Stafford played in the Sydney junior competition. By 1991, at only sixteen years of age, he was playing SFL seniors for

[492] Interview with Greg Stafford, 10 February 1998.

Western Suburbs. In the same year he was also invited to play under-19s with the Swans. The following season he was back at the Swans playing half the games in the Swans reserves and the other half at Western Suburbs. At the 1992 national draft, Stafford was selected by the Swans, and played his first senior game for Sydney in 1993, aged eighteen. After spending the next three seasons in and out of the seniors he finally established himself as a regular senior player and by 1996 he had become one of the leading ruckmen in the AFL.[494]

Stefan Carey, in comparison to Stafford, played rugby union until age sixteen. Apart from a couple of school matches, Carey's first year of competitive football was at age seventeen. Despite not playing the game as a boy, Carey did have a strong AFL background since his father had played a handful of games for the Fitzroy Football Club in the 1960s. With this sort of background, Carey had always had an interest in the game and was regular attendee at Sydney home game at the SCG throughout the 1980s.[495]

In his first year of competitive football, Carey was selected to play in Sydney representative teams and represented NSW in the Teal Cup carnival in 1993. He was taken as a priority draft selection in 1993 as part of the concessions provided to the Swans. After three seasons in the reserves, he

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[493] *Ibid.*

[494] *Ibid.* Stafford transferred to the Richmond Football Club prior to the 2002 season.

[495] Interview with Stefan Carey, 10 February 1998.

finally won a regular spot in the seniors in 1997, and polled well in the AFL's Norwich Rising Star award during that season.[496]

The career paths, and eventual success stories, of players such as Stafford and Carey are evidence that local football talent does exist in New South Wales. However, such talent takes time and effort, and perhaps some good fortune, for it to be identified and nurtured.

6.8 The Future

The long-term dream of Australian Rules football becoming a national game is very much dependent on the grass roots development of the game in Sydney and throughout New South Wales. As is highlighted in the NSW/ACT Task Force report, unless the Sydney market is conquered:

> There will be no genuinely national competition and hence the AFL will never be a truly national brand. The potential for the Sydney based AFL teams will remain constrained. There will be insufficient support to sustain a second AFL team based in Sydney, if that is desired. Australian football generally will forego huge opportunities to increase revenue from TV rights, corporate support nationally, attendances, licensing and merchandising, and the opportunity will be lost to significantly boost the player pool thereby easing the strain on Victoria.[497]

But why focus too much on the negative consequences if Australian Rules football does not make it in Sydney? If the administrators of Australian Rules football can get things right, then the potential for the development of

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[496] *Ibid.*

[497] NSW/ACT Task Force, *op. cit.*, p. 10.

the game in Sydney is enormous. To suggest, however, that the popularity and interest in Australian Rules football will continue to grow to a state where it is considered equal or superior to soccer and the rugby codes as the preferred winter pastimes in New South Wales is probably unrealistic. Indeed it is perhaps, not really the underlying objective. The dream, as Craig Holden sees it, is not to convert everyone to Australian Rules football and for the game to dominate the Sydney sporting culture, but rather, the aim is to provide children with choices.[498] As he explains:

> For years kids growing up in Sydney would go to school and play cricket in summer and a rugby code in winter. The aim for Australian football is to give the kids of Sydney more options, more choices, the chance to play our national game. And we feel confident enough in our game because we think it is the best game going around that if a kid has the option of playing Aussie Rules they are going to find it very appealing and want to play it.[499]

If Holden's somewhat romantic view of the future of the game can be tempered by the realism of continued financial support at the junior level of the code, then there is every possibility that the long-term success of the Sydney Swans will be built on solid foundations, rather than just the sometimes fickle support of fans or the adrenalin created by a few isolated good seasons.

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[498] Interview with Craig Holden, *op. cit.*

[499] *Ibid.*

Chapter 7
Conclusions

The Sydney Football Club, after years of struggle, seems to have finally laid secure foundations that will ensure their long-term success and survival. With the assistance and backing of the AFL Commission through the aid of draft and financial concessions, combined with intelligent planning and marketing by the coaching and administration staff, the Sydney Football Club has developed into a professional sporting outfit both on and off the field. The club's membership figures are strong, the financial status is on par with most other clubs in the competition, and the stock of players is relatively stable, with a good balance of both younger, talented players, and more experienced personnel.

Even in these relatively positive times, there is still much to be achieved. At the moment, Sydney appears enamoured with the Swans, rather than the AFL per se. The importance of the Swans winning football games and having competitive seasons is one key factor for the success of Australian Rules football in Sydney. With this in mind the next five to ten seasons remain not only important in the history of the Sydney Football Club but also important in the history of the code. If the Swans have several particularly poor seasons on the field, and lose the support they have worked hard to gain, then the AFL could be in trouble again, with the code possibly losing its prominence as a national sport. However, the notion that on-field success alone will automatically guarantee the long-term survival of the club is a trap

that needs to be avoided. As the Task Force report emphasised, support for the grass roots of the code, building up a solid foundation of junior players, with educational institutions and family supporting them, is vitally important in entrenching the culture of the game in the Sydney sporting landscape.

The example of the Sydney Kings shows just how difficult it is for teams, with little history or culture, to maintain support when they are no longer experiencing success. The Kings were popular in Sydney during the early 1990s. They could not sustain their success, though, and the support of the Kings suffered. As a result, the national profile of basketball was somewhat diminished. Sydney is renowned for its love of winners, and for quickly jumping off the wagon of teams that are losing. Of course, this love of winners does exist everywhere, but it is a reputation that, fairly or unfairly, is regularly associated with Sydney sports fans. If this reputation is indeed fact, then it is a situation that all administrators of sport in Sydney need to take account of when planning the future of their particular sporting organisations.

The challenges facing the Sydney Football Club involve maintaining the high standards that have been set during their most recent successful period. These high standards need to be maintained in the areas of administration, planning and on-field performance. Success and continued support in the early years of the new century will mean that that the code will have countered not only the increases in participation of Olympic sports

associated with the hype surrounding the Sydney Olympic Games, but also the resurgence of rugby league given the unification in 1998.

This thesis, despite its expansive time frame, has therefore addressed a number of pertinent issues and, in part, illuminated many of the historical black holes that exist in respect to the history of Australian Rules football in New South Wales. The large gaps in contemporary literature on Australian Rules football in Sydney, especially prior to the South Melbourne Football Club's relocation, suggest that the possibilities for further research stemming from this dissertation are extensive. The unique development, role and culture of Australian Rules football in Sydney has, thus far, largely been ignored by historians, yet the topic merits a major research effort. For example, a more thorough search of press archives, particularly suburban newspapers, might uncover reports that help to explain the fluctuating fortunes of the code in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. A detailed comparative study that examines how support for Australian Rules football waxed and waned in other rugby-dominated locales, such as Queensland or New Zealand, would also be instructive. And perhaps most crucial of all, a future investigation might analyse to what extent the recommendations of the Task Force have been carried out, and whether or not their strategies to ensure the long-term success of Australian Rules football in New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory were well-founded. In all these scenarios for future research, it seems obvious that this thesis would serve as a useful starting point for such endeavours.

Ian Cockerill, writing for *Inside Sport,* once described the attempts to sell the Sydney Football Club to the Sydney sports-going public as 'a damn hard sell'. He was correct. However, given the evidence presented in this thesis, it is clear that selling the code of Australian Rules football to Sydney has always been just as hard, and, in many instances, even more difficult, than administrators of the game ever imagined.

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(* Indicates players are still playing with the Sydney Football Club. Statistics are current to the end of the 1999 AFL season.)

Barassi, Ronald, Interview: 17 November 1997.

Coach of the Sydney Football Club from 1993 to 1995. Keen activist behind the national expansion of the Victorian Football League.

Carroll, Dennis, Interview: 10 February 1998.

Played 219 games with the South Melbourne/Sydney Football Club between 1981-1993. Captained the club from 1986-1992 and has been part of coaching panel since 1994. Carroll is one of few players still involved with the club to have experienced the Sydney 'experiment' from the beginning.

Carey, Stefan, Interview: 10 February 1998.

Played fifty-two games with the Sydney Football Club from 1994-1999. Carey is an example of a Sydney 'born and bred' player who successfully made it to AFL level.

Carter, Rod, Interview: 14 April 1998.

Played 217 games for the Sydney Football Club between 1980 and 1990. Carter is currently in charge of the junior development of Australian Rules football in Sydney. The interview was primarily directed at his role in this area.

Holden, Craig, Interview: 10 February 1998.

Played 80 games with the Sydney Football club from 1988-84. Worked as a junior development officer in the mid 1980s. Holden has been a runner for the Swans and was a member of the coaching panel until 1999. He is currently the Football Development Manager for the Swans.

Stafford, Greg, Interview: 10 February 1998.

Played 108* games with the Sydney Football club since 1993. Stafford, like Carey, is another local success story. Like Carey, Stafford was interviewed primarily to establish how a young boy from Sydney got involved in Australian Rules football. Stafford has recently transferred to the Richmond Football Club.

Templeton, Kelvin, Interview: 10 February 1998.

Won a Brownlow Medal with the Footscray Football Club. Templeton is currently the Chief Executive Officer of the Sydney Football Club and has played a large role in the club's improved off-field performance and increased professionalism.

Appendices

Appendix 1: Sydney Football Club: Home Game Average Attendance: 1982–1999

Appendix 2: Sydney Football Club Membership Figures: 1992–1999

Appendix 3: Australian Football Participation: Sydney – 1998

Appendix 4: Sydney Major Sport Participation - 1997

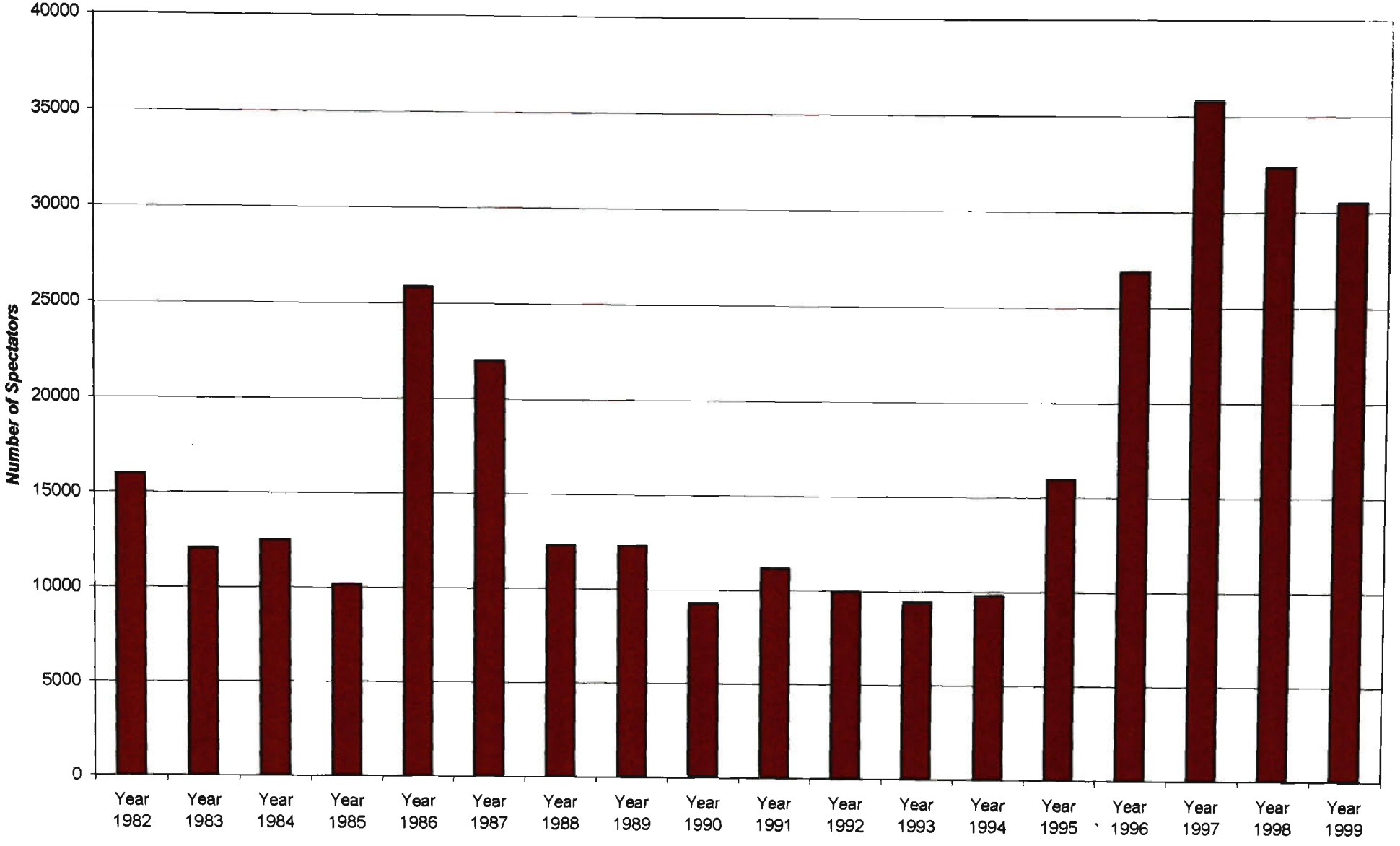
Appendix 5: Sydney Major Sport Participation: Current v Projected

Appendix 6: Sydney Participation Figures for Teams: 1995 & 1998

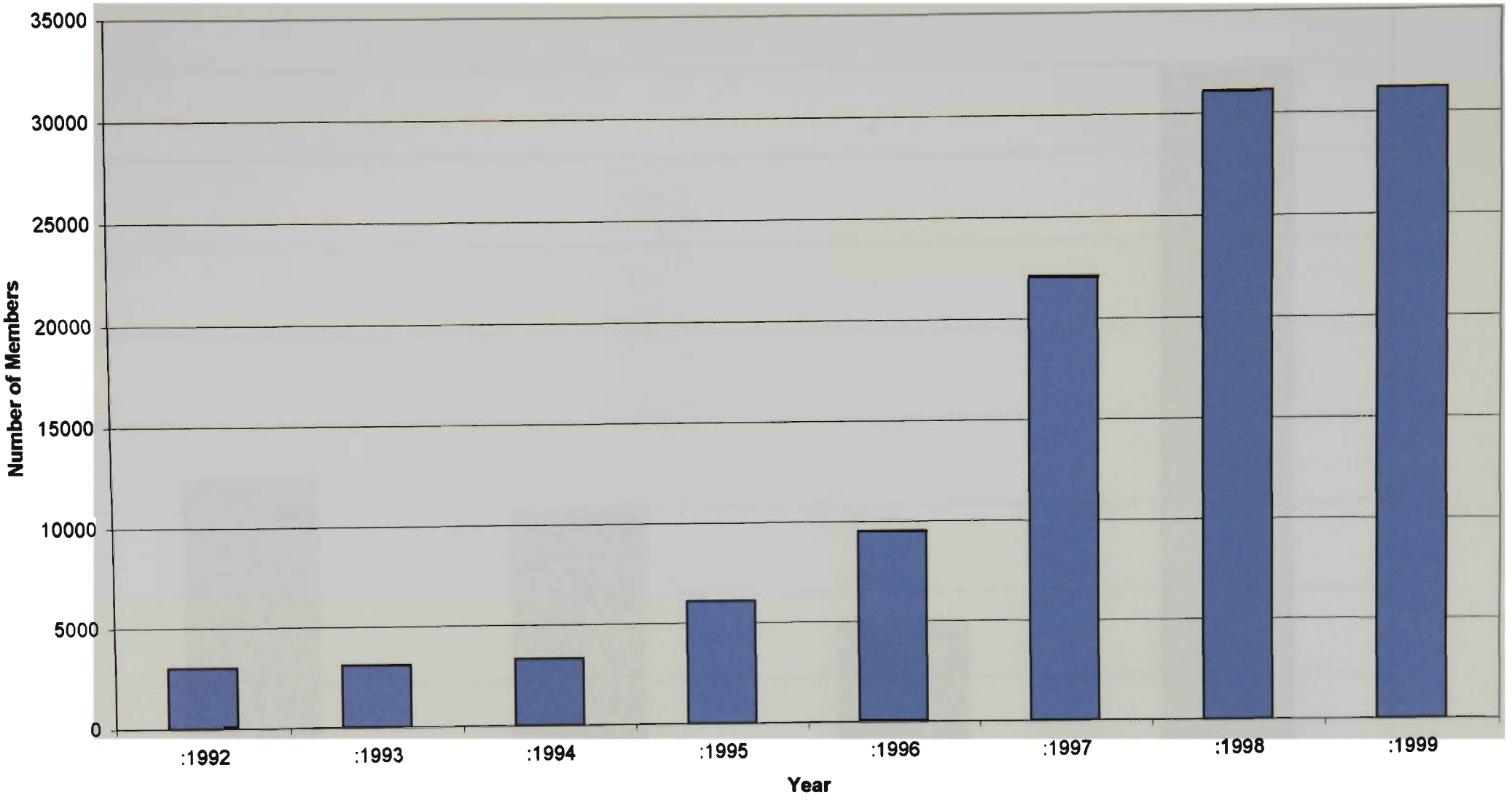
Appendix 7: Information to Participants

Appendix 8: Certification by Participant

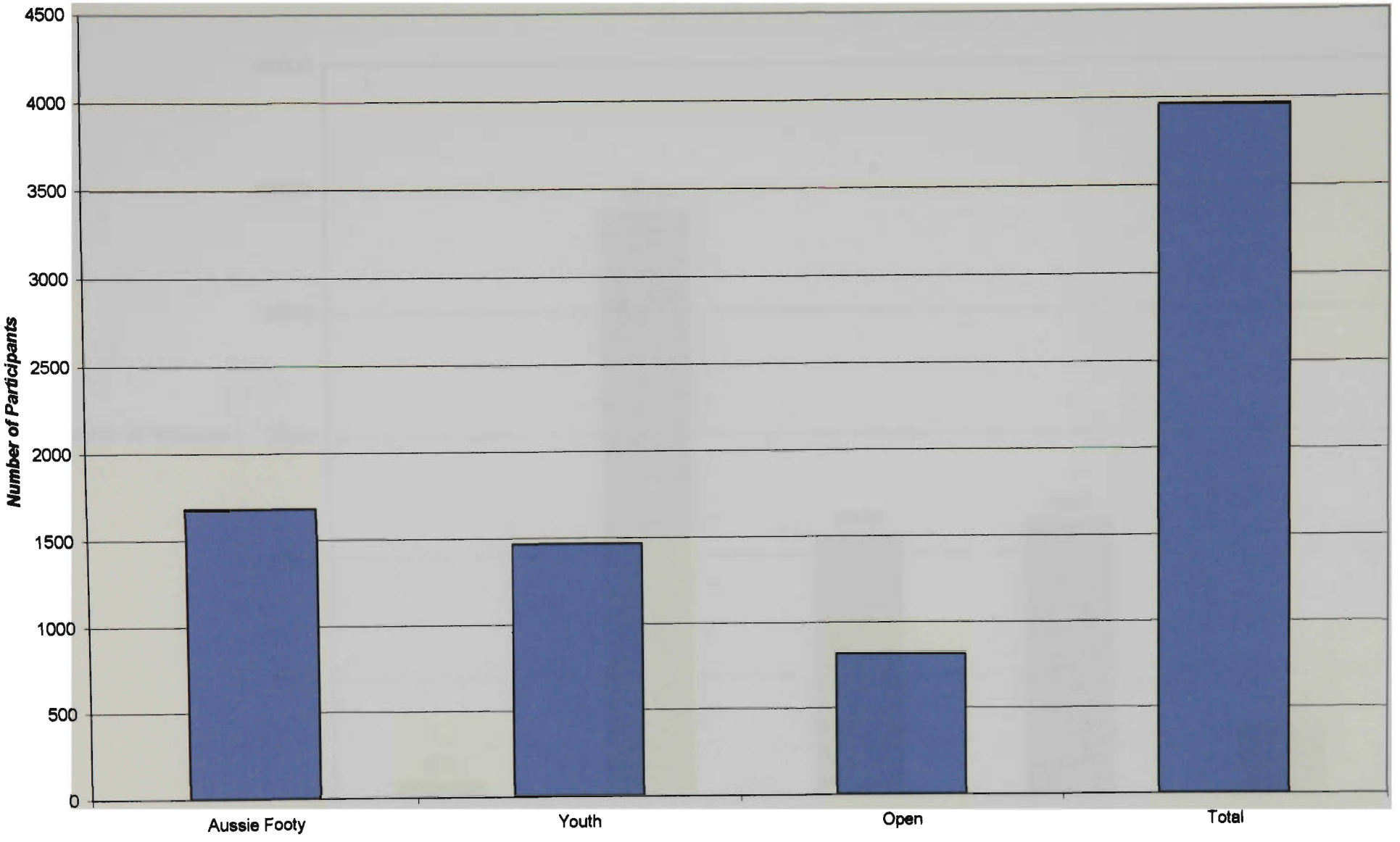
Appendix 1. Sydney Football Club: Home Game Average Attendance, 1982-1999



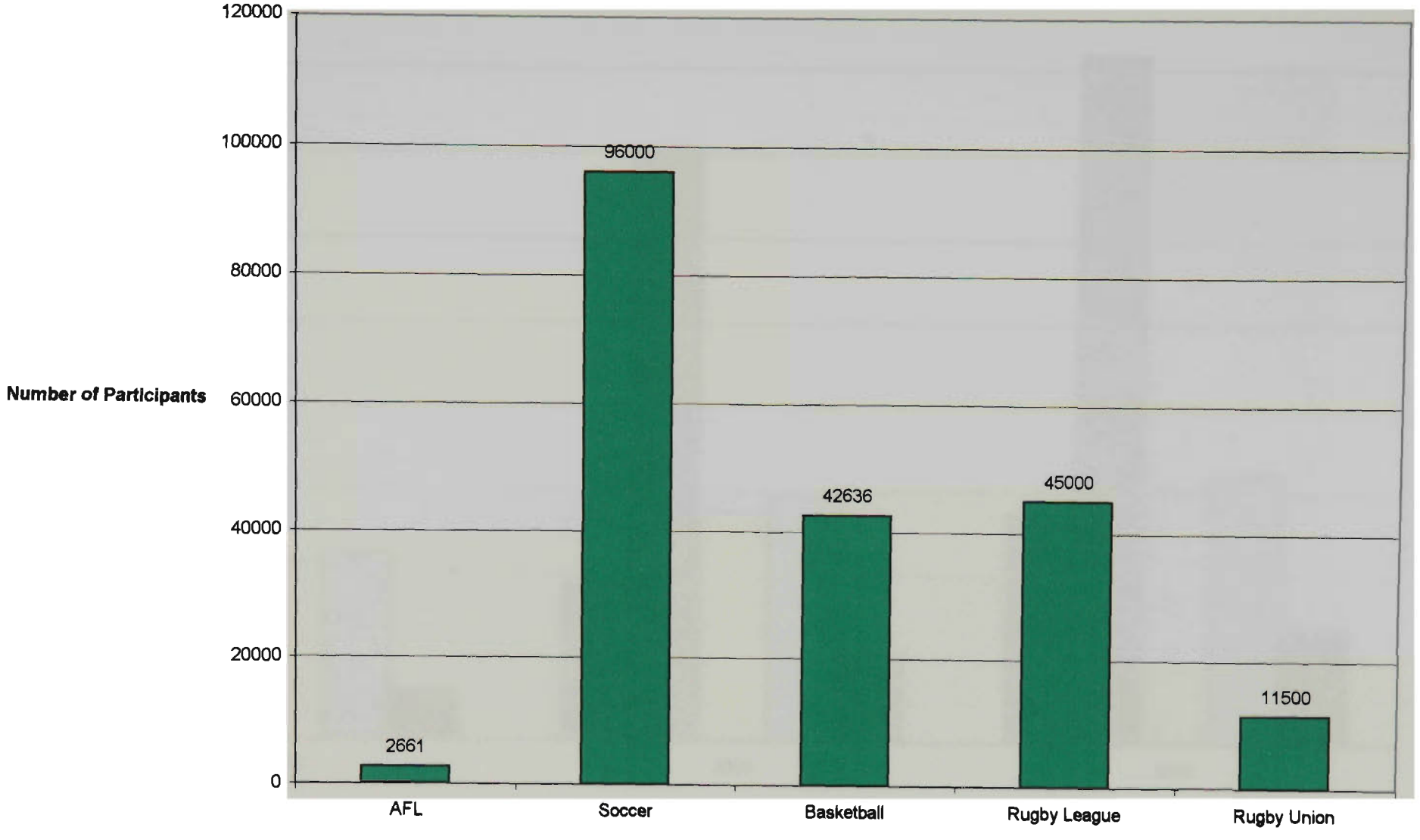
Appendix 2. Sydney Football Club Membership Figures: 1992-1999



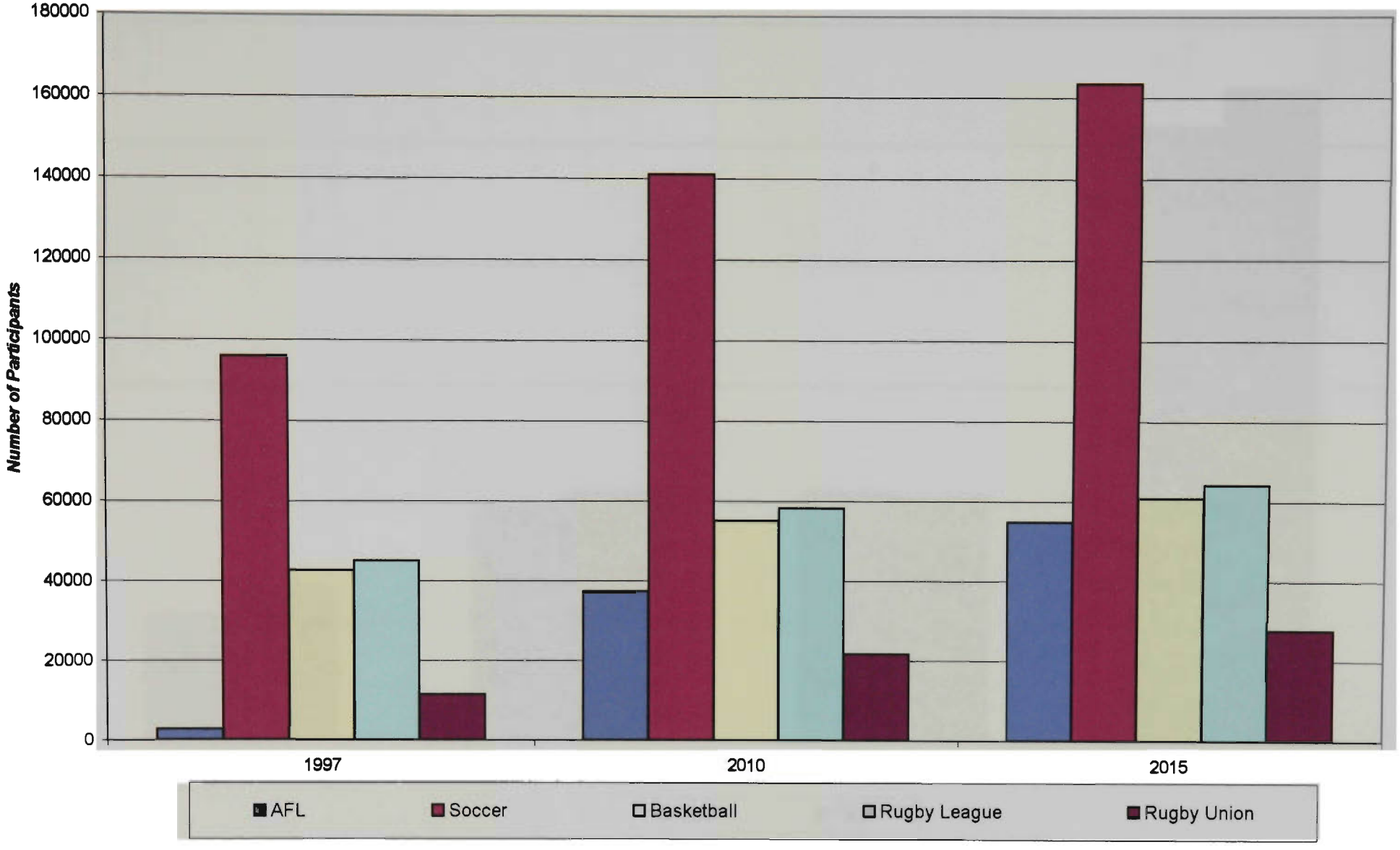
Appendix 3. Australian Football Participation: Sydney - 1998



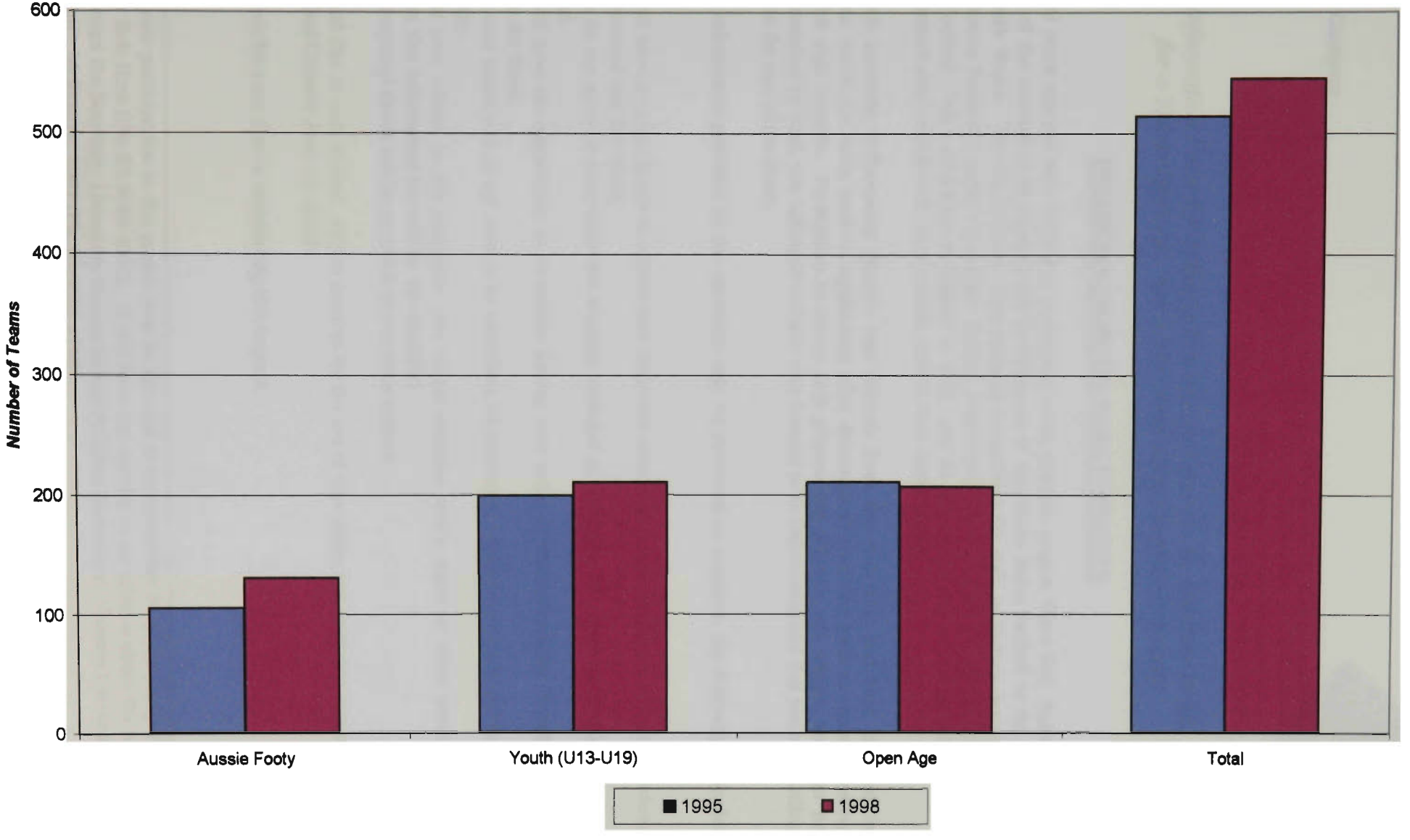
Appendix 4. Sydney Major Sport Participation - 1997



Appendix 5. Sydney Major Sport Participation: Current v Projected



Appendix 6. Sydney Participation Figures for Teams: 1995 & 1998



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VICTORIA UNIVERSITY OF TECHNOLOGY

Information Form for Subjects Involved in Research by Matthew Healy for a Thesis Entitled: 'Hard Sell: Australian Football in Sydney'

INFORMATION TO PARTICIPANTS

If you recall, several years ago you were invited to participate in the research project 'Hard Sell: Australian Football in Sydney.' The aim of the research is to examine the development of Australian Rules football in the rugby-dominated domain of New South Wales. The thesis traces early attempts to establish the code in Sydney during the 1880s right through to the Victorian Football League's so-called 'Sydney Experiment' in the 1970s. The thesis then examines the South Melbourne Football Club's relocation to Sydney in 1982, and its subsequent role in the formation of a national competition. The project also considers the future of the code in New South Wales.

Part of the research involved interviewing players and officials from the club who had been involved in these developments. Your views are being used to supplement other documentary evidence such as report in newspapers, statistics and official club records. Permission to access club players and officials was sought, and after potential participants were contacted by mail, you indicated verbally your consent to be interviewed and that you were willing to be identified by name in the text of the thesis.

Since some of the information provided in the interview may be perceived as sensitive, the following procedures are being proposed:

a) that you will have an opportunity to review your interview content and approve the use of material where it has been incorporated into the thesis;
b) that if you do not agree to have interview material included in the thesis, all interview transcripts will remain confidential;
c) that you will have the opportunity to reconsider having your name or other personally identifying information included in the thesis;
d) that in the case where you do not want to be identified, all personally identifying details will be deleted from the written thesis;
e) that in the case where, in the interview, you reveal someone else's name or other personally identifying information, this information too will be 'de-identified.'
f) That the completed thesis will be available to you upon request.

At this stage, I would like to seek formal, written consent for the use of your name and interview material for the thesis. Please see the attached Consent form for details.

I thank you very much for your time in considering this request.

Matthew Healy

Any queries about your participation in this project may be directed to the researcher Matthew Healy (Ph: 03 52784327) or to the supervisor Rob Hess (Ph: 03 9688 4062). If you have any queries or complaints about the way you have been treated, you may contact the Secretary, University Human Research Ethics Committee, Victoria University of Technology, PO Box 14428 MCMC, Melbourne, 8001 (Ph: 03-9688 4710).

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Consent Form for Subjects Involved in Research by Matthew Healy for a Thesis Entitled: 'Hard Sell: Australian Football in Sydney'

CERTIFICATION BY PARTICIPANT

I, ... of .....

certify that I am at least 18 years old, and having given verbal consent to participation and use of my interview material in the research project 'Hard Sell: Australian Football in Sydney', by Matthew Healy, Victoria University, I am now being asked to provide written consent for the use of my interview material and name in the final written form of the project. I certify that the aims of the research, along with the risks and safeguards, and how the interview material will be dealt with, have been explained to me. This includes the following:

a) that I have had an opportunity to review my interview content and approve the use of material where it has been incorporated into the thesis;
b) that if I do not agree to have interview material included in the thesis, all interview transcripts will remain confidential;
c) that I will have the opportunity to reconsider having my name or other personally identifying information included in the thesis;
d) that in the case where I do not want to be identified, all personally identifying details will be deleted from the written thesis;
e) that in the case where, in the interview, I revealed someone else's name or other personally identifying information, this information too will be 'de-identified.'
f) That the completed thesis will be available to me upon request.

I certify that I have had the opportunity to have any questions answered, and that:

1) I hereby give my consent for the use of my interview material in the thesis.
Yes / No (Please circle one)

2) I hereby give my consent for my name or other identifying details to be disclosed in the thesis.
Yes / No (Please circle one)

Signed: .....

Witness other than the researcher: .....

Date: .....

Any queries about your participation in this project may be directed to the researcher Matthew Healy (Ph: 03 52784327) or to the supervisor Rob Hess (Ph: 03 9688 4062). If you have any queries or complaints about the way you have been treated, you may contact the Secretary, University Human Research Ethics Committee, Victoria University of Technology, PO Box 14428 MCMC, Melbourne, 8001 (Ph: 03-9688 4710).