



1964

BETWEEN THE FLAGS



2021

Making sense of 57
years of heartache

IAN MUNRO

What they are saying about *Between the Flags...*

“There have been idle moments during retirement where I have flirted with the idea of writing my version of Melbourne’s history since I was a boy in the 1950s.

After reading “Between the Flags”, I’m mighty glad I refrained. Ian Munro’s work is a magnificent review of all the trials and tribulations at Melbourne in the 57 years between premierships, culminating in the 2021 flag. I loved the detailed history, the author’s passion, the colour, and, finally, the explosion of unbridled joy that came on Grand Final day in Perth.”

Mike Sheahan, journalist

About the Author

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*Dedicated to the memory of my best mate
and writing companion,
HUDSON*

And to ERIN and GEMMA, who kept the faith

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Chapter One

Dee-Luded

*Melbourne were so good people would barrack against them,
hoping they'd lose. They never did.*

Greg Hobbs, journalist

The photograph captures a scene that, to someone without the right cultural conditioning – which is to say, a keen understanding of the rites of Australian football – might seem bizarre.

A man is being carried on the shoulders of two others, who are dressed in white shorts but are otherwise obscured by a surrounding throng. Below the man's crop of tousled hair, a lop-sided grin creases his face. His bare arms extend from a sleeveless jumper. He is a big, craggy man and yet, incongruously, is holding four large balloons, like an overgrown child at a riotous birthday party.

Behind the group is an ancient grandstand, while in the left foreground a man in white shoes, white trousers and white shirt, and carrying a towel and a bottle of the sort used for liniment, beams as he runs towards the camera. Alongside the running man is a youth in a suit, his tie loosened and coat flapping, mouth agape. The photographer has caught the youth in mid-howl and mid-stride. A second youth, his arms braced as if he expects to stumble, jogs alongside the first. Nearby, a young woman seems to be falling sideways awkwardly. From out of frame someone is holding a figurine. It is out of focus, yet is unmistakably a demon with a pitchfork in its right hand and an oval football at its feet.

Together, these people present a scene of unbridled elation, something spontaneous and true, a celebration of a football triumph. No one has contrived to pose them. No one has planted sponsors' caps on the players' heads. The footballers' guernseys are unadorned with corporate logos. It is a different world, when compared to how a football triumph is experienced today.

One year later, almost to the day, another press photographer captures

a similar scene. Two of the same people are there. The same man with the same crooked grin is again held on the shoulders of others. Rather than holding balloons, this time his right hand is making the sign of 'V' for victory.

Directly in front of him is the same gaping youth, wearing the same suit, or at least a similar one, and with a similarly loosened tie. His open-mouthed cry of joy identifies him as the jubilant figure from twelve months earlier. A woman and several grinning boys beam at the camera. Some are wearing ties under sports jackets. It is September. The winter uniform of gaberdine overcoats is not to be seen.

The man with the crooked smile is Noel McMahan, dual premierships captain of the Melbourne Football Club and the veteran of 175 games between 1946 and 1956. The young fellow in the suit howling in triumph is Robert Grattidge, a menswear salesman just eighteen years old in 1956. On both Grand Final mornings he had been at work, hence his appearance at the football dressed as if for Saturday night.

These images come from my childhood. They were the result of my father's habit of buying glossy reprints of newspaper photographs to commemorate the Grand Final victories of his football club. In this way, our house became a sort of gallery of triumphant Demons. Only much later would I see how those images set me up for a fall.

Among those pictures was one of a group of Demons players celebrating on the Melbourne Cricket Ground after their miraculous 1948 victory over Essendon. Four men are laughing; one, a football jumper worn loosely around his neck but with his arms bare, is riding on the shoulders of another, whose right hand, where it grips the other's knee to steady him is missing two fingers beyond the middle knuckle. This is Jack Mueller carrying his teammate Don Cordner, the team captain, from the field of victory. Alongside them are Don's brother Denis and a trainer. In the background again is an ancient grandstand, possibly the Grey Smith Stand, which was demolished two decades later.

Mueller is a story in himself, a giant who played football with a glove before it was a fashion to do so, to protect the hand he had mutilated at work. He was appointed playing coach of the Second XVIII for 1948, effectively retiring from senior football, but his career was resurrected for the 1948 finals, in which he had one last triumphant finals campaign, kicking twenty goals in three games. Consigned again to the seconds, he played a handful of senior games in 1949, and in 1950 the club tried

to repeat the earlier miracle, recalling him for the last four games of the regular season, in which he kicked eighteen goals as Melbourne secured a finals place. But there was no second coming. Mueller's last game was a loss to Geelong in the 1950 first semi-final.

The Noel McMahan images followed the great Grand Final victories of 1955 and 1956; then there was the picture of a toothless Ron Barassi defying Bob Suter's tackle in the 1957 Grand Final; and Barassi again, airborne now and with his back arched to clinch a screamer in front of an Essendon opponent in 1957 – or was it 1959? Most awe-inspiring of all, this last image bore a message to my brothers and me: *'All the very best wishes to Graeme, Geoffrey and Ian from Ron Barassi.'* The signature was clearly authentic since it was identical to the one on my patented Ron Barassi footy boots.

There was the great Norm Smith drinking from the 1960 premiership cup, and still others. Newspaper posters bearing cartoon Demons commemorating the victories were collected from our local newsagent, opposite the gates of Kew cemetery, briefly displayed and then filed away. There was also a tabloid poster issued by *The Sporting Globe* that featured the heroes of 1957, the final of a triplet of triumphs.

For me, there was no alternative to supporting the red and blue. I learnt to read partly by recalling past glories in a history of the Melbourne Football Club that ended, frustratingly, with 1957 – the first 100 years – and so failed to record the three premierships that followed within the next seven seasons. Years later, when my father and I were passing through the MCC members' pavilion, he indicated on an ancient photograph of the stadium the approximate position he took on the fence at the 1926 Grand Final, the scene of Melbourne's surprise demolition of a dominant Collingwood team that would come to be known as 'The Machine'.

That triumph had been an extraordinary upset, yet by the time I was the age my father had been then, the Demons were synonymous with success. Supporting them was the easiest task in football: bearing witness to a sporting colossus at the peak of its achievements, which had in the previous twenty-six seasons won ten flags. This was the order of things.

Seemingly, only three clubs fought out premiership battles – Melbourne, Collingwood and Essendon – while the rest, including the once-powerful Carlton, the near-invisible South Melbourne and the count-for-nothing Hawthorn, made up the numbers. They were

the backdrop to our magnificence. In the seven seasons between 1954 and 1960, Melbourne competed in every Grand Final, secured five premierships and won 109 of the 144 games they played, with two matches drawn. Their winning percentage was more than 75 per cent.

Among my earliest memories is the dread I felt as a seven-year-old on Grand Final morning in 1960. It was bucketing down, and Melbourne was to play Collingwood. Of course ours was the better team, but wet weather was the great leveller. Somehow I knew, through osmosis probably, that the Magpies had bested Melbourne two years earlier partly because the weather had been lousy just like this.

My parents and brothers were going to the game. There was no ticket for me, the youngest, so I was put in the care of my grandmother. I remember admitting my fears to her because of the way she breezily brushed them aside, assuring me that there was nothing to worry about. She was proved right: Collingwood was goalless for the entire first half.

And in 1964, with another Grand Final victory, Melbourne became the second-most successful team in the competition. Only Collingwood was ahead, with thirteen titles to Melbourne's twelve.

There are so many ways to measure how remote that glorious time has become. Football fashion is one measure: Melbourne was powerful when there was none, when the crowd was a largely colourless sea of gaberdine overcoats and felt hats. The only concession to colour might be a hand-knitted scarf in your team colours. Club merchandise did not exist. Only children wore football jumpers to the game.

My eldest brother's jumper had number 31, of course, any junior Demon's first choice. But my parents had an unexplained rule that we kids had to choose different favourite players: no two Barassis were allowed in that tight ship. So my second brother chose Frank 'Bluey' Adams, number 6. For some reason I had number 3, which at the time was worn by Peter Marquis. I had not chosen it; I think it was the only one left in the store when my mother bought the jumper. Decked out in this way, we dragged ourselves uphill to the tram that ran alongside Kew cemetery to take us to the MCG, miniature gaberdine overcoats cloaked over our football jumpers.

Melbourne, the city, was a different place. Shops closed at midday on Saturday and remained shuttered until Monday. Sundays were torpid, with nothing but lawnmowers and the prospect of school tomorrow. Pubs closed at six pm. Licensed restaurants were few and formal and stuffy.

Today's cafe society was unimagined. The city was undistinguished except for the fact that it was one of the few not to have eliminated electric trams as public transport. Football was an emotional roller-coaster, a flicker of excitement amid hours of dullness.

Another measure of how remote is that time: the Melbourne Demons were a power when football was an amateur game, when there had long been more money to be made from coaching a country team than from playing in the city. Fred Fanning had just kicked eighteen goals in a single game and led the VFL goalkicking when, in 1947, at age twenty-five, he left to coach Hamilton for £20 a week; he was earning just £3 a week at Melbourne. Almost twenty years later, when the Coulter Law was limiting player payments to £10 a game, John Hoiles, aged just twenty-six, left the Bulldogs to coach Corowa for £4500 a year.¹

Harold 'Hassa' Mann, a three-time premiership player at Melbourne, recalls: 'When I went to the Ovens and Murray League as a seventeen-year-old, every coach was a former League player: Bob Rose (Wangaratta Rovers, ex-Collingwood), Billy Stephen (Yarrawonga, ex-Fitzroy), Des Healey (Wodonga, ex-Collingwood), Jim Deane (Myrtleford, ex-Richmond), Ray Horewood (Rutherglen, ex-Collingwood and Richmond), Jim Sandral (Corowa, ex-Melbourne).'

Country clubs went to extraordinary lengths to secure a former VFL player as coach. When Bill Serong was lured from North Melbourne to coach Echuca, the club bought a flock of sheep, shared them among farmers in the district and used the wool sale proceeds to pay Serong's £1500 salary. So audacious were the bush clubs that even the reigning premiership captain was not immune from attempted poaching. Just months after he led the Cats to the 1963 flag, the Bendigo League club Eaglehawk offered Fred Wooller a job as manager of a bowling alley as part of a deal that would have given him an annual income of more than £5000.²

The era of full-time coaches, and indeed of teams of coaches, of corporate sponsorships and logos, of sponsor names blended into playing uniforms and stamped indelibly into the ball lay far ahead. The stadium's boundary fence existed to separate players from spectators rather than as a medium for advertising. Any adornment was only to proclaim club loyalty, with banners like 'Eat 'Em Alive Tigers' or 'Melbourne – Masters of the MCG'. Now the fence proclaims the boasts of finance companies and mortgage brokers.

Just as it does today, in a city obsessed with football, choosing one's club was an act of social belonging, but then the rivals were all known, or at least knowable, suburbs. A drive to the country might carry you through enemy territory before you reached the Calder Highway, but a trip interstate to watch your team was unthinkable.

Another, more painful measure of how remote was that time: Melbourne was a power when Carlton had won only eight premierships, and Hawthorn none. Now the Blues have sixteen and the Hawks thirteen.

Success is never a reward to those who simply wait long enough, arriving as if willing it to happen is all that is needed. However, the opposite can be true: it is possible to test ever new depths of failure. This lesson was delivered to me on a bright June afternoon in 2013, during a season that was rapidly joining the ranks of the grimmest of the many grim winters in Melbourne's history. The Demons were on their way to a ninth loss in ten games. But suddenly it was worse than that. A sense of dread arrived with that strange, crystal familiarity of *deja vu*.

Alarmed, I riffled through the pages of the *Football Record*, that barely navigable collection of player numbers, trivia, pontification and, when the League administrators choose, propaganda. I was searching for confirmation of an unhappy coincidence. At that moment, midway through the second quarter, the Demons had scored a mere three points. Their opponents, Hawthorn, had notched seven goals of their own. And a further ten behinds.

It mattered also that I was sitting with a Hawthorn supporter, whose enthusiasm for his club matched my passionate embrace of Melbourne. That was part of the coincidence. I generally avoid attending games with a friend who supports the opposition. Someone always goes home unhappy. Unless, of course, they are that flippant, easygoing fan who can set aside defeat and resume their life as if all they've done is see a lousy movie. For the serious observer, sitting with a supporter of the opposition means curtailing, or at least disguising, your jubilation, lest you be seen to be gloating childishly or hiding your disappointment as your colours are lowered. Either way, politeness dictates that you must demonstrate some empathy for the enemy. It is a diminished experience whichever way it plays – like drinking room-temperature beer – so it's best avoided.

This day, though, I was sitting with John Silvester, a crime writer and a colleague who is the closest person I know to an actual celebrity. He'd been invited as the guest speaker at the Melbourne president's lunch, and

he was entitled to bring a guest. Lucky me.

So Melbourne was trailing by fifty-two points to three, and there, among the pages of the *Record*, I found what I was looking for: the head-to-head history of the two clubs. Melbourne's lowest ever score against Hawthorn was three goals and eleven behinds, a total of twenty-nine points, recorded in 1966 at the now disused Glenferrie Oval. It seemed I was about to witness a new record low. But it was worse than that: I had actually been there at Glenferrie on that dreadful day. Rather than *deja vu*, it was like salt on an old wound, newly reopened. Insult upon injury.

East Kew where we lived was Hawk territory, so there had been plenty of Hawthorn supporters about. I'd arranged to go to that game with a couple of high school friends who supported the Hawks. Nor was 1966 just any old year: it was the year that confirmed a sharp turn in the Melbourne Football Club's history, from powerhouse to struggler. It was the year in which the team's slide from superiority and arrogance to failure and embarrassment began. At the time, I hoped – expected, really – that the slip was an aberration that would soon correct itself. It was in fact the beginning of an era in which Hawthorn, once a byword for mediocrity, and Melbourne, until then a beacon of success, would exchange roles.

In 2013, then, having watched Melbourne's misery against Hawthorn nearly half a century before, it was apparently my task to bear witness to its bookend performance. The worst yet, and still worse now. Once again, the experience was compounded by the company of an opposition supporter. I should have warned the players beforehand: I had broken my own rule of not consorting with the enemy. I was a jinx.

Some people measure their lives in the triumphs they witness; it seemed mine was to be counted in records best forgotten. Forty-seven years on, was I to be the only Melbourne supporter to witness that awful record made and then remade? Silvester mostly kept quiet, perhaps conscious of how miserable the experience was for me, or bored by the utter predictability of the outcome.

By this time I had long understood what those images of triumphant teams gathered by my father really represented. He had followed the club since the 1920s: it was a thread that ran through his entire life. He had witnessed the premiership victory in 1926, then three at the beginning of World War II, another in 1948, and the club's golden era of the 1950s and early '60s. During this period, Melbourne gorged on success. As a boy,

I had experienced nothing but triumph: the Demon ascendant seemed inevitable, as fixed and dependable as the Milky Way in the night sky. By 2013 I appreciated that my father's gallery of Demons reflected the *rarity* of success.

As Melbourne's last glorious season was unfolding in 1964, I had lent a sympathetic ear to a classmate, David Fink, who was fated to be a Fitzroy supporter. The home of the Lions was one of those Victorian-era, inner-city suburbs that, like Collingwood, Carlton and Richmond, had originally housed and employed the city's industrial working class. Each of those teams had enjoyed some period of footballing success, but only Collingwood was then thriving. None, however, had experienced the misery Fitzroy was enduring: just one victory in eighteen games during the winter of 1963, and not even that in 1964. David plaintively recalled that his Lions had been finalists just a few years before.

It was true. Coached by Len Smith, brother of Melbourne's uniquely successful coach Norm, the Lions had fallen agonisingly short of a Grand Final appearance, beaten by five points in the 1960 preliminary final. Promptly they collapsed to become the competition's punching bag. It was easy to be generous to David and express wonder at this unfortunate turn of events. It was impossible to imagine it would soon be Melbourne's enduring fate.

It would have seemed equally unlikely that the game's administrators were plotting to bring about just that prospect for the Demons. Something called 'country zoning' was in the background, spoken about on radio and mentioned occasionally in the newspapers. Perhaps I was more aware of it because we had family in the country. My maternal grandfather laid claim to having played reserves games with Carlton before World War I, and was as fiercely loyal to the Blues as he was a stalwart for his local Maldon club, with which he played into middle age. Somehow I understood that country zoning meant no good for Melbourne. The plotters could not have guessed just how successful they would be, helping to pitch the club into a decades-long spiral of misery, leavened only by two brief periods of promise that remained unfulfilled.

Among the worst of the miserable seasons since were 1981, when Melbourne finished last in the competition with just one game won, and 1969, last with three games won. Conceived in optimism that this time, with a new coach and what were supposed to be new levels of professionalism in training and fitness, the 2013 season brought first

frustration and then misery. Week one: defeat to lowly Port Adelaide by seventy-nine points. Week two: defeat to Essendon by 148 points: the club's biggest ever defeat on home turf.

Friends who supported opposition teams rang me to commiserate. That is the worst of it – when you are so bad that even your rivals share some of your suffering and reach out in sympathy.

Melbourne supporters are regularly mocked for disappearing in June, once the ski season arrives. This is tripe. It is, in fact, an old joke, once clever but now endlessly recycled and laughed at because, like Pavlov's dogs, people have been conditioned to it. In truth, we are sticklers both stoic and resilient. All it takes to fire us up is a three-week winning 'streak'.

As tough as season 2013 was – the Demons lost twenty of their twenty-two games, by an average margin of more than ten goals – my worst fears that June day as I sat alongside John Silvester did not materialise. Led by the ever-courageous Nathan Jones, the embattled Demons outscored Hawthorn in the third quarter to race past that sad record from 1966. At the final siren, Melbourne had scored forty-eight points to Hawthorn's 143 points. The fact that we did not rival that lowest ever score was some compensation for a ninety-five-point whipping. It still invited questions: how had it come to this? And would it ever end?

This book is an attempt to understand what went wrong in those dark years, and why things happened that way.

Many years earlier, my father had pointed out to me the appearance of Robert Grattidge, the exuberant youth in both celebratory photographs of Noel McMahan, and related how *The Argus* newspaper had tracked him down. A follow-up story featured the pair meeting afterwards.

It was McMahan, and not anyone at the newspaper, who had recognised the same cavorting youth in each image, that report revealed. 'Flashlights popped – and there was my picture with Noel McMahan for the second year,' the kid said.³ At their meeting, McMahan even held out the offer of a training run with Melbourne for the young amateur footballer, an offer he did not take up when his boss told him he had to choose between playing football and a job.

In 2018, I telephoned Grattidge at his home in inner Melbourne. He was by then closing in on his eightieth birthday. I wanted to ask him how his passion for the club had fared in the years since – whether his loyalty had been tested, even defeated, by those decades of failure. Was he still the crazily enthusiastic supporter he appeared in those images from the

mid-1950s? Had he kept the flame burning through the lean years? What was it like to witness that long collapse?

Grattidge couldn't answer my questions. 'I did have a soft spot for Melbourne,' he told me. 'I *was* barracking for Melbourne that day, but my team is St Kilda.'

So what was he doing out there, I asked.

'In those days you could just jump the fence and you could all run on the ground. It was what you did.'

So there it was. He'd been at the celebration, but in truth he had not really been part of it. *It was what you did*. His true passion lay with the Saints. Hearing that, I understood a deeper truth: nothing in those photographs was what it seemed.

Chapter Two

Country Boys

*Melbourne's big asset was the Melbourne Cricket Ground.
It's as simple as that.*

John Lord

Melbourne had for decades been prominent in recruiting country players. It successfully used the twin lures of a job in the city and the prospect of playing at the MCG to outbid its competitors. While there was better money to be made in country football, a player first had to make his name in the city, and in today's terms Melbourne was one of the few 'destination clubs' for country players.

Recruiting was rich in secrecy and intrigue. To identify prospects, recruiters relied on tip-offs from former players and supporters in country districts, as well as on their own eye. Moreover, they had to have a willingness to cross and re-cross the state.

There was not much money involved – paying inducements was prohibited by the VFL's Coulter Law – although fifty or a hundred £1 notes spread across the kitchen table in a prospect's home increasingly became the point at which a player signed a Form Four, effectively a commitment to join a particular club.

In this fiercely contested arena, the Demons' trump cards included the fact that their home was the MCG, the finest stadium in the state even before it became the site of the 1956 Olympic Games. The club's sole employee and chief recruiter, Jim Cardwell, knew how to exploit this.

Dick Seddon, who wrecked a knee before he could play a game of senior football but who became a prominent administrator, witnessed the sales pitch directly when he and his mate Geoff Tunbridge were approached to join Melbourne in 1954.

'In his peak, Cardwell was very compelling,' Seddon recalls. 'He was a very presentable footy guy. He spoke well. He was knowledgeable, ultra-courteous, extremely well mannered. He wasn't pushy, he was

very respectful. It was quite an interesting experience just having the conversation with him.

‘He extolled the virtues of Melbourne as the premier club. He talked about its record, its culture, he spoke about the legends of the place, about Sir Albert Chadwick. He’d have stories about Bert enrolling in the armed services in the First World War, when I think he was sixteen years old; about Ivor Warne-Smith, all the legends of the place that were still there, and he spoke about the majesty of Norm Smith as a coach. That he was big on the personal development of his players, and how he wanted his charges to be fine young men. He wanted his players to be fierce, but fair. All the old clichés – they had to be gracious in defeat and humble in victory. And I reckon they were, and all those people Norm developed were fine young men.

‘There was a lot about the MCG – that’s our ground, that’s where we train, that’s where we play. No one shared it in those days; that was a very big thing. He compared some of the other grounds, like Windy Hill – you wouldn’t want to play there – or a suburban ground when there’s this cultural icon where you could play. The MCC membership was pretty important in those days ... even then there was a twenty-year waiting list ... and of course we were promised an immediate membership.’

Often enough the pitch worked. During the period from 1955 to 1964, no fewer than seven players in any of Melbourne’s six premierships had country roots, or were recruited directly from country clubs. Prominent Demons were drawn from every corner of the state.

In 1960, a majority of the premierships side that humiliated Collingwood originated from country Victoria either directly or indirectly. The team included eight players who were recruited from country clubs, and three others whose origins were in country football. The trio who had followed their fathers to play at Melbourne comprised Ron Barassi, whose father, Ron Barassi Senior, was recruited from Guildford, near Castlemaine in central Victoria; Robert ‘Big Bob’ Johnson, whose father, Robert Johnson Senior, had been recruited from Quambatook, in the state’s north; and John Lord from Echuca, who also followed his father to Melbourne.

Those recruited directly from rural clubs included Ian Ridley (Hamilton Imperials), Harold ‘Hassa’ Mann (Merbein), Geoff Tunbridge (Ballarat), Clyde Laidlaw (Portland), Len Mann (Merbein), Alan Rowarth (Birregurra), Brian Leahy (North Albury) and Trevor Johnson (Epping, which at the time was rural).

In addition to those in the 1960 team, the country recruits of the era who played in Melbourne premiership sides included Ian McLean (South Bendigo), Stuart Spencer (Portland), Keith Carroll (Romsey), Jim Sandral (Corowa), Graham Wise (Ballarat), Barrie Vagg (Shepparton), Barry Bourke (Neerim South) and John Townsend (Sale).

Cardwell was not the first to build champion teams at Melbourne by recruiting throughout country Victoria. Historian Robert Pascoe has identified country recruiting as crucial to the club's recovery after it was one of six clubs that withdrew from competition during World War I. The premiership won in 1926 followed the extension of recruiting into Ballarat, Gippsland and Bendigo. Melbourne's inducement to prospective players was the promise of a job, employment at Miller's Ropeworks in Brunswick, or at Vacuum (later Mobil) Oil, where the club chairman, Joe Blair, was general manager. 'As many as 13 of the 18 men who ran out for Melbourne in the 1926 Grand Final were employed at Vacuum,' Pascoe noted.¹

The Demons won the three premierships between 1939 and 1941, but only a handful of the thirty-one players who took the field in the Grand Final victories over Collingwood, Richmond and Essendon, respectively, came from Melbourne's traditional recruiting zone of amateur football. They included Allan La Fontaine, Alby Rodda, and Don and Ted Cordner. A clear majority of that group – seventeen players – came from Bendigo, Echuca, Hamilton, Maryborough, Dimboola, Ballarat, Guildford, Rosedale and as far as Merbein, near Mildura.

Country players had a choice about where they played. That was not so in the city, where players were tied to a club according to where they lived. Residential zoning for city recruits was introduced in 1915. The zones were recast as the city grew, and to accommodate the introduction of Footscray, Hawthorn and North Melbourne to the VFL in 1925.

Collingwood's initial 1915 zone, for example, was simply described: 'Including the whole of the municipality of the City of Collingwood, the City of Camberwell, the Town of Kew, the Shire of Heidelberg, the Shire of Eltham and the Shire of Nunawading.'

Perhaps partly because it had no suburban base, Melbourne's initial zone was more intricate:

Commencing at a point at the junction of Victoria-street and Elizabeth-street; thence easterly along Victoria-street and Victoria-parade to

Hoddle-street; thence southerly along Hoddle Street and Punt-road to the River-Yarra; thence easterly along the Yarra River to the Gardiner's Creek; thence easterly along the Gardiner's Creek to Back Creek; thence easterly along Back Creek to Glen Iris-road; thence southerly along Glen Iris-road to Ferndale Road ...

And on it went, via Summerhill Road to the Outer Circle Railway Line, before making its way west along the Caulfield Rail Line to High Street, and farther west towards St Kilda, then continuing north along St Kilda Road to the city, and returning along Elizabeth Street to its starting point.²

By the time of the 1933 rezoning, and with Hawthorn having entered the competition, Collingwood had lost its early foothold in the Eastern Suburbs and was limited to the city that shared its name. Likewise, Melbourne had four wards of the City of Melbourne and most of the City of Prahran, but no longer the convoluted zone tracing railway lines. Fitzroy, Footscray, Hawthorn, Richmond, South Melbourne and St Kilda all had their local municipalities zoned exclusively to them.³

Within Melbourne's 1939–41 group was a lightly built defender, Richie Emselle, from Collingwood's metropolitan zone. His son, Ken Emselle, a member of the 1964 premiership side, said Collingwood cleared his dad in 1936 without seeing him play. 'Collingwood were winning premierships. Dad was pretty skinny, there wasn't a lot of him. They probably took one look at him and thought, "He's not going to be much use to us."'

In the early 1950s, Melbourne's suburban zone was extraordinarily fruitful. Recruits who would be part of building the red and blue powerhouse included Don Williams (Elsternwick Amateurs), Laurie Mithen (Ormond) and Bob McKenzie (Prahran Imperials), while Brian Dixon, Geoff Case and, later, Ian Thorogood came via Melbourne High School.

But for no club was there enough talent in its city zone alone to be successful, and most actively trawled the rural leagues for players. Country football historian Paul Daffey says that in the 1950s and early 1960s, there was a simple message for young footballers looking to move to the big league: 'Collingwood, Essendon, Melbourne. Good young players were told you have to go to one of those three clubs if you want to amount to anything. They were the big clubs.'

Hassa Mann and his cousin Len were recruited from Merbein, 550 kilometres from Melbourne, in the far north-west of the state, in 1958. Geelong and Richmond also chased Hassa's signature, each offering him

a new car to sign with them, but he chose Melbourne.

‘I decided I would be better served playing with Melbourne because they were a top side,’ he recalls. ‘The Geelong offer was tempting because, as a country boy, living in Geelong would have been more comfortable than living in the big smoke. I decided no to the car.

‘Cardwell’s approach was interesting. When he was trying to sign me as a Melbourne player, his whole conversation was directed at Mum and Dad. [The message was] that if I came to Melbourne, the club would look after me the way he and Melbourne looked after country kids. It was very much about welfare. The fact of a country kid coming to the big smoke, that was a big concern for Mum and Dad.

‘One of his big selling points was the fact that if I was selected ... playing at the MCG was the big appeal, and also I could become an MCC member. MCC membership did not mean much to me, but playing at the MCG did. Melbourne had exclusive use of the MCG. Grand Finals were played and won on the MCG.

‘There is no doubt being sole occupant of the MCG was a major factor with the success of the club over that ten-year period, apart from having a group of quality players, the fact we trained and played our home games there.’

If he was not the first person to realise the uniqueness of the MCG as a recruiting device for Melbourne, Jim Cardwell knew it set Melbourne apart, and he employed that insight as none had before when recruiting country players. Prominent sports journalist Mike Sheahan later wrote that recruiting at the time was as full of intrigue as drug running. ‘Cardwell and his great opponent of the period, Collingwood’s Gordon Carlyon, had the get-up-and-go, the educated eye, the silver tongue and the little enticements necessary to win the most wanted signatures,’ wrote Sheahan. ‘Melbourne and Collingwood shared eight flags from 1953 to 1964 and contested five grand finals.’⁴

The late John Lord was signed to Melbourne after his father, who was cleared to St Kilda after twenty-four games with Melbourne in the early 1920s, asked his old mate Bert Chadwick to look out for his son. ‘My first job was with Elder Smith stock and station agents,’ Lord recalled. ‘They sent me to Melbourne for two weeks’ training. Dad contacted Bert and asked him to look out for me. Mr Chadwick not only looked after me, he signed me to the thirds. Melbourne’s big asset was the Melbourne Cricket Ground. It’s as simple as that. Players wanted to play with Melbourne,

and the only way other clubs could combat that was with money.’

It was just as well the Demons had the MCG as bait for recruits, since little else was on offer because of the values of the football club’s parent, the Melbourne Cricket Club. The MCC lauded the old-world notion of the purity of sport in a way no other VFL club did. The MCC’s values were shared by those who created the modern Olympic Games, which as late as the 1980s was struggling with the concept of professionalism.

‘Participation is more important than the prize,’ noted International Olympic Committee member Julian K. Roosevelt.

The objective of Olympic sport is to contribute to man’s perfection within an atmosphere in which he is expected to give more than he receives ... he feels sufficiently paid by the joy he experiences in taking part. He does not compete to satisfy the public and to earn money ... If the IOC accepts professionals they will have abandoned their roles as leaders in sport and as the traditional champion of the Olympics, and are merely in the entertainment business.⁵

In Victoria, however, the Melbourne Football Club had long ago lost the argument about match payments to players.

In 1911, the VFL clubs had voted overwhelmingly to allow players to be paid match payments. In keeping with its amateur ethos, Melbourne had voted against the proposition. The only other club to do so was the soon-to-be-defunct University. Now all Melbourne could hope to do was to regulate the payments players did receive. In a section of Melbourne’s centenary history that, since it had nothing about victories and premierships, had escaped my childhood reading, the author noted: ‘The MCC Committee had shown themselves utterly opposed to the payment of footballers, and on this momentous occasion they had upheld their reputation as sticklers for pure sport.’⁶

The Coulter Law – named for Melbourne’s VFL delegate, Gordon Coulter, who drafted it – was installed nineteen years later to better regulate how players were paid, and it imposed a cap of £3 per player per game. As well as regulating payments to players, the Coulter Law banned ‘the payment or offer of payment or any lump sum of money or equivalent thereto to secure or retain the services of any player’.

The law was an early attempt to devise an even competition, as the *Football Record* explained in 1966: ‘[I]f there was no such thing as a Coulter Law ... the richer clubs would grow stronger and the poorer

clubs would grow weaker ... the Law has had the desirable effect of standardising weekly payments to players'.⁷

At the same time that it was hailing the success of the Coulter Law, the VFL was pushing for a new measure which also aimed at creating a more even competition. The proposal, which was aired for years before it became a reality, was to divide country Victoria into twelve zones, with each to be assigned to one of the twelve clubs in a similar fashion to metropolitan zoning. Players within rural zones would be tied to city clubs just as tightly as those in the city had been since 1915.

*

Meanwhile, Melbourne's on-field supremacy continued. As well as the premiership photographs bought from newspaper offices, we collected – or at least my father collected – newspaper premiership posters. They are common enough now, but at the time they were a rarity. Unlike now, they were not a sales item: they were posted outside newsagencies as advertising, and were genuine collectors' items that had to be recovered once the shop was done with them. In our case, they were retrieved from the newsagent across the road from the gates of Kew Cemetery.

We lived in that part of East Kew where the streets either are named for British prime ministers—Gladstone, Asquith, Churchill, Disraeli—or have an English resonance, like Hartington, Eglinton and Childers. The houses were mostly weatherboard Edwardians, past their best days then, although before the twentieth century was out they would return to fashion. The survivors were restored, although many on large blocks, like ours, were demolished in an apartment-building boom in the late 1960s and '70s.

Running downhill from the cemetery, Hartington Street was perfect billy cart territory. Momentum built slowly at first, and then exponentially. Our cart's wheels had metal ball-bearings that built up such an increasing racket as we plummeted downwards that old ladies emerged from their houses to complain they couldn't hear themselves on the telephone. A pedestrian might have been imperilled except that the howling ball-bearings, fast-moving steel on bitumen, screamed of our approach.

A lack of brakes meant that stopping the thing demanded a sharp jerk leftwards of the steering – a rope attached at each end of the crossbar front axle – and a semi-controlled slide into the deep bluestone gutter at the end of the run. That was our cue for cackling laughter and a slow, covert

trudge back up the hill to avoid another hectoring from the telephone ladies before another run. Somehow, no teeth were lost and no bones broken.

Late on Saturday afternoons, a slow walk up that same hill was part of our post-match routine. We invariably arrived home from the game in wintry gloom that allowed maybe ten minutes of backyard kick-to-kick inspired by the events of the afternoon. We had to thread the ball past the branches of the apple and pear, apricot and pomegranate trees that populated the yard and threatened to smother any errant kicks. With the night settling around us, there was never enough time to work the game out of our system. So in the long hallway I went through the motions of air-kicking goal after goal.

Finally, Dad would send my two brothers and I up the hill to the newsagent by the cemetery to buy the *Sporting Globe*. It was a distinctive sports paper printed twice-weekly on pink newsprint. Its stock in trade were detailed, quarter-by-quarter accounts of the unfolding of play during each of the day's six games. And the race results.

An added charge from the walk up to High Street could be derived, for those who dared, from a detour along the unlit night-cart laneways that had been laid out before the suburb was sewered. That is another measure of how long ago the Melbourne Football Club was dominant: household dunnies were often outside.

Saturday night rolled into the *Pelaco Football Inquest*, a thirty-minute television post-mortem featuring seemingly ancient, retired footballers, like North Melbourne's craggy-faced defender Jack Edwards. I say seemingly ancient: Edwards was all of thirty as the decade turned. Then next week we did it all over.

It was inconceivable by my limited imagination that anyone did anything on a Saturday afternoon other than go to a game, whether that was to play North Melbourne at Arden Street – a strange ground with a dog-racing track around its perimeter and a gasometer on the outer wing – or Fitzroy at Brunswick Street, where our approach to the ground was by a timber footbridge built over a lumberyard.

Against Richmond, we were watched over by the locals stealing a view of the game from the balconies of their double-storey terrace homes along Punt Road. At Hawthorn we were squeezed into standing areas of bare concrete terracing between the outer wing and the railway line. Periodically, a red suburban train would rumble past, its passengers

peering over our heads at the play on that atrociously muddy oval.

At Geelong – a major journey of perhaps 90 minutes – we arrived early to snare a seat on the fence, having driven down in the family car, a lumbering two-tone grey Vauxhall Velox. At the best of times it was an inhospitable place, but early in 1961, before the boom started to come down on Melbourne's glory, we drove back from Geelong hushing one another quiet each time the scores were read out on the crackling car radio: Melbourne 17.18 (120) to Geelong 7.13 (55). It was a game to savour on the long ride home.

The Demons, at least while Jim Cardwell was recruiting and with the MCC's strong predilection for amateur sport, were not strong on inducements when signing players. In an administrative sense, a recruiter's first task was to persuade a prospect to sign a VFL Form Four, which was a type of preliminary registration. This bound a country or interstate player to one VFL club for up to two years, to the exclusion of the other eleven clubs. Once signed, the form had to be lodged with the VFL within seven days. It included a declaration of where the player had lived for the previous three years. Clubs were limited to registering twenty Form Fours each year. If the player did not join the club to which he was tied within two years, the form expired.⁸

So far as Melbourne was concerned, a job offer was customary, but otherwise what was on offer was the appeal of training and playing regularly on the competition's finest oval. Clyde Laidlaw, who valued his training as a dental technician, found that the jobs Cardwell had in mind were not much different to those on offer twenty years earlier. 'When I got here, the first two weeks I just walked around the town wasting time,' he recalls. 'I said, "Jim, this is no good to me. You said you'd get me a good job." So he got me a job as a builder's labourer. I left that job and Jimmy said he could get me another job, and I finished up working at the Ansell rubber company – it was a terrible job and boring – operating a guillotine and cutting up rubber. I complained about that.

'I was on his back all the time, and the next job was working at Mobiloil with [teammates] Peter Marquis, Athol Webb and [Adrian] "Spud" Dullard, "Pop" White. Ivor Warne-Smith was the boss and all I did there was rolling forty-four-gallon drums and stacking them. I wasn't enjoying work – you'd be on the assembly line at Mobiloil filling little cans of oil. I felt very let down as far as work went. I wanted to get back into my trade and into a job that had a future in it.'

So dispirited was he with the work on offer that Laidlaw moved to Warracknabeal to continue his career as a dental technician, disrupting his 1957 season. The club paid him three pence each mile to drive to Melbourne to play, but ultimately a torn thigh muscle ended his year.

Laidlaw played centre half-forward in four premierships sides – 1955, 1956, 1959 and 1960 – yet in his 124 matches he kicked just 58 goals. He was part of Norm Smith's decoy forward structure, lining up near the centre circle and under instructions to keep away from the goals. His fellow half-forwards, Hassa Mann and Geoff Tunbridge, were under similar instructions to play wide of the corridor.

'Norm was very good to me except that we had to play to this plan,' Laidlaw recalls. 'Hassa had to be right out there, and "Tunna" had to be right out there, and I had to be up on the centre line. This was to let – well, it was Noel Clark was full-forward when I started, but he didn't like playing as a decoy and went back to Tasmania, and Athol Webb came up from Tasmania and he was happy to play decoy full-forward. His job was to lead up the ground and take the full-back with him, and we were told to kick long. Bob Johnson would go into the square, and he or Barassi would mark it, and if they didn't you had Ian Ridley, Frank Adams or Stuart Spencer to take the ball off the pack.

'Ian was a brilliant forward pocket/rover. The opposition used to go headhunting Ian Ridley quite often because he was such a dangerous player. That was how we played, people could see it. It was a disciplined situation.'

Our interview done, Clyde rose from his kitchen table and led me into a room rich with memorabilia, including the treasure of Norm Smith's coaching notes, mementos of his teenage surf lifesaving days at Portland, his time in national service, a football commemorating the 1955 triumph embossed with a red demon and the players' names, an official Melbourne Football Club blazer from 1960, and his framed number 16 guernsey, worn in the 1956 Grand Final.

Another half-forward, Barrie Vagg, can also testify to the fact that, aside from a semi-skilled or unskilled job and the perks of being based at the MCG, the inducements on offer at the Demons were minimal. Vagg joined Melbourne for the 1962 season. He had previously signed a Form Four with Footscray, in 1960, and was rewarded with £50 (\$1488.46 in 2020) in what was a routine breach of the Coulter Law. 'At the time, £50 for a sixteen-year-old kid was a lot of money,' Vagg says. 'When I got it,

Dad said, “Don’t put it all in the bank at once or people might start asking questions where you got it.”

Although 182 centimetres tall, Vagg’s playing weight was just 73 kilograms. At sixteen, his home club, Shepparton, judged him too young and too light to play in the VFL, although he did play in a number of practice matches with the Bulldogs. ‘I certainly wasn’t outstanding in any practice game with Footscray,’ he says. ‘I don’t think I deserved a game at all. I wasn’t physically ready; I wasn’t mentally ready.’

Despite being named in Footscray’s seniors – he thinks because the Bulldogs wanted to tie him to them – Shepparton refused to issue the necessary permits. Instead, Vagg was persuaded to wait two years so that the Form Four expired. Other clubs came knocking.

‘I wasn’t offered anything [to join Melbourne]. I picked Melbourne mainly because of the MCG and the promise of a MCC membership, really. Hawthorn were relatively keen to sign me, and in comparing the two grounds, Glenferrie and the MCG, I thought Melbourne would be the better option.

‘A few other clubs came to me but they weren’t as persistent as Hawthorn and Melbourne, so that was my main reason for signing with Melbourne. And they were successful. The MCC membership was one thing [Jim Cardwell] put strongly, the MCG of course, also the success of the club, the strong administration, a good playing group with very positive people. His main push was the success of the club, the administrative people behind the club, the MCG and the MCC, that’s probably it, really.’

Had he joined a less successful club Vagg doubts he would have played many games at all. According to *The Encyclopedia of AFL Footballers*: ‘Vagg was not required to tear in at all costs like other Demon players and slipped into open space to make the most of his opportunities. Skilful and elusive, he was a glorious kick ... Vagg could turn sharply either way and kicked well with either foot.’ He kicked 132 goals in 115 games, retiring at the end of the 1969 season.

Cardwell was a magnificent recruiter, according to the late six-time premiership player Frank ‘Bluey’ Adams, because he was competing against others who operated with bags of cash, and Melbourne did not play the game that way.

‘If anyone wanted to get the jump on us, as they did with Dick Clay and Alan Morrow ... they just offered money,’ Adams recalled in 2018. ‘It was

not a matter of matching their amount of money or bettering the amount of money. It was the fact that we didn't pay money. If we had've been in a situation where we paid money, we would've been an even better team from the '60s onwards. We just said no, we don't do that. Then it's not like when you come to Melbourne you're on a contract of an amount of dollars. If you come to us in '64, you're going to get £15 a game [\$431.33 in 2020]. That's it.'

Adams had no choice about playing for Melbourne. He lived in Windsor, just north of Dandenong Road and 200 metres inside the club's metropolitan zone. He played for Prahran's underage sides and then tried out initially with the neighbouring St Kilda thirds, thinking it would be easier to get a game with the Saints. But Melbourne refused to clear him. The Demons knew all about the red-haired speedster and were never going to let him go.

'There's two ways of looking at it. It was a great club to come to, but maybe difficult to get a game with,' Adams said. 'One of the attractions that they did offer [was] after you play your first five years you become a member of the MCC. That probably would have been an attraction, and the MCG is your home ground so all our training was on the MCG, all our home games are on the MCG. If I was being spoken to about coming from the country to Melbourne, I would prefer to play my football at the MCG rather than the Brunswick Street Oval or Glenferrie Oval.'

Dick Seddon's friend Geoff Tunbridge was rewarded with a car from a supporter group when he travelled from Ballarat to join Melbourne, but he did not allow it to affect his amateur status. 'Tunbridge did not come down for the money,' Seddon says. '[In 1955] St Kilda left him with a cheque for £500 [\$17,590 in 2020]. He never cashed it. He put it in his scrapbook. Jim, though, was very persistent. [Geoff] decided to go to Melbourne. He played as an amateur. Even though the Coterie bought him a car, a Volkswagen so he could get to training, he paid that back.'

Ian Ridley, who played in five premierships sides, reputedly signed on for a set of false teeth. Seddon says Ridley often jokingly complained about Cardwell's promised inducement. 'That's what he reckoned he went to Melbourne for, but he never got them,' Seddon laughs, 'and when he bought them for himself he was never reimbursed.'

Hassa Mann remembers that when he signed on in 1957, his reward was a pair of boots. 'Knowing Jim Cardwell, the boots were probably someone else's. I never wore them,' he says.

Melbourne's practice of offering minimal money and few inducements meant the foundation of its success – being able to pick and choose its country recruits – was vulnerable. The advent of country zoning would weaken it further.

Chapter Three

Zoning: The Push Begins

Clubs like North ... kept going out there [into the country] and the player had already signed with Collingwood or Melbourne or the power clubs.

Ron Joseph, North Melbourne Football Club secretary

Country zoning was an attack on football's status quo, and in the late 1950s that meant Melbourne, Collingwood and Essendon. Surprisingly, when it was first suggested, in February 1957, the Dons embraced it.

At that point Essendon had won ten premiership flags, second only to Collingwood with twelve, and two ahead of Melbourne with eight. Despite the limits country zoning would impose on the Bombers' recruiting, Essendon's board supported 'dividing Victoria into 12 districts, one for each club' at the first opportunity.¹ Only much later would the Bombers understand what zoning really meant for them.

It is notable that the issue was raised within months of the former Carlton Football Club president Ken (later Sir Kenneth) Luke becoming president of the VFL. Luke, and Carlton, would press the cause for years to come. Melbourne and Collingwood, along with several others, were opposed, and since nine of the twelve VFL clubs were needed to introduce the system, they were able to block it.

If Melbourne's advantage in attracting country players was its home at the MCG and the success that had fostered in the past quarter-century, Collingwood's advantage was the fact that it was a widely popular club among country people, even those who had never been to the city, owing to its early success in the competition.

Fitzroy's recruiter, the late Keith Webb, recalled the frustration of trying to sign country players during the 1960s. 'Honestly, almost every player you went to interview in the country barracked for Collingwood,' he said. 'There were so many Collingwood supporters.'

The idea of country zoning would be tossed around for a decade. Ron Joseph, who joined North Melbourne's administration in 1965, recalls that he walked into an environment where conflict around recruiting was chronic. The strong clubs dominated any recruiting environment and could wipe the floor with most of the competition – the 'peasant clubs', as Joseph sometimes called them.

'There was always whingeing going on,' he says. 'Clubs like North, and you could put in Fitzroy in that category, and Footscray, South Melbourne, they kept going out there [into the country] and the player had already signed with Collingwood or Melbourne or the power clubs. Those known power clubs did well. Those [smaller] clubs were saying to the VFL, "You have to do something about the recruiting system." The only way you would even it up would be to institute zoning throughout Victoria.'

Among the clubs initially strongly opposed to zoning was perennial battler Hawthorn, probably because the Hawks had only just discovered country recruiting. Admitted to the VFL in 1925, it was not until the third round of 1951 that Hawthorn recorded its 100th victory. Club historian, journalist and editor Harry Gordon once noted that the Hawks had been 'a yardstick of failure', and a place where 'losing was a way of life'. As he described it, recruiting at Hawthorn had been conducted as an afterthought. Hawthorn was a club 'which had little tradition [and] a mental attitude conditioned to losing'.²

That changed following the 1950 season, in which the team failed to win even one game, and divisions over the captaincy rocked the club. Recruiting was embraced with a renewed vigour as the Hawks began scouring country football for recruits. Its efforts, like those of all clubs, were supposed to be guided by the Coulter Law ban on the payment of inducements to recruit players. However, the Coulter Law was routinely ignored. Its main effect appears to have been to add an element of intrigue to the exercise of persuading players to sign.

Hawthorn's energised recruiting had early successes in Bendigo, where in 1955 they found their first premierships captain, Graham Arthur, for a sign-on fee of £250 (\$8795 in 2020), and premierships centreman Brendan Edwards, for a relatively economical £50. Edwards committed to Hawthorn unaware that North Melbourne was prepared to offer him £200 (\$7036).³

Hawthorn's efforts were rewarded in 1956, with the second XVIII becoming the first Hawthorn side of any level to reach the finals. In 1957,

the first XVIII went further, reaching the preliminary final. Creating exclusive club zones would have confined the Hawks' recruiting efforts to one small pocket of Victoria, just as it was discovering the benefits of criss-crossing the state for players.

The Hawks pushed back against the proposal. The club's minutes noted: 'This matter, which was fully explained to the Committee by the Secretary, was rejected on the motion of Messrs Cook and Shaw.'⁴

A sense of Hawthorn's newly discovered recruiting intensity can be gleaned from the club's minutes in 1959, about the time the prospect of zoning the bush was raised a second time. In June, the Hawthorn board learned of a recruiting trip to Wangaratta, Wodonga, Drouin and Warragul. In July, the destinations were Rochester, Bendigo, Castlemaine, Maryborough and Colac. In August, they heard of trips to Maryborough and Koondrook. In September, club secretary Ron Cook told of trips to Casterton, Coleraine, Hamilton and Minyip, as well as Bendigo and Warragul. Later that month Cook returned to Bendigo, and also visited St Arnaud. In October, the targets were players with Sandhurst, Wangaratta Rovers, Cobram East, Yarrawonga and Violet Town, among others.⁵ Hawthorn later noted its committee was unanimous in opposing the zoning of country areas.

Later, Melbourne and Collingwood would unite in criticising the VFL, accusing it of promoting only information in support of zoning. Collingwood's Gordon Carlyon and Melbourne's Albert Chadwick succeeded in calling for submissions from clubs both for and *against* the idea to be aired in talks in August 1959.⁶

Journalist Greg Hobbs identifies Cardwell as Melbourne's great off-field asset, and sole reason for opposing zoning. We talked among the scrapbooks stored in his garage in suburban Melbourne. When I told him I was researching country zoning in the VFL, he remarked, helpfully, that it would be 'a bloody boring book'. His preference was for people-centred stories, like the newspaper cutting he showed me of when he escorted Ron Barassi back to his childhood roots in central Victoria. Still, he indulged me and agreed to talk.

'Collingwood and Melbourne would not have wanted country zoning because they had the two best recruiters around the bush,' Hobbs says. 'They were Jim Cardwell at Melbourne and Gordon Carlyon at Collingwood. Melbourne was dominant. They were not a Mickey Mouse club, like they became in recent years. Melbourne were so good people

would barrack against them, hoping they'd lose. They never did.'

The zoning proposal was defeated a second time in 1959, but Luke revived it in the summer of 1962–63. Perhaps he believed he needed a club to help sponsor his case, and not one that was identified with him. In this instance, Footscray joined Luke in the push for change. In January 1963, the Carlton club minutes noted that in response to the 'K G Luke proposals for transfer and control of players, Footscray Football Club were expected to bring forward proposals for a division of country areas'.⁷ St Kilda noted 'proposals made firstly by Sir Kenneth Luke, and secondly by Footscray Football Club in an endeavour to establish club recruiting areas' in country league areas.⁸ And Hawthorn noted that 'the Luke proposal and the Footscray suggested alterations' had been referred to the VFL's Permit Committee, which controlled player recruitment.⁹

Melbourne proposed its own changes to recruiting rules, its committee having decided that 'it did not support the suggestion made by either Sir Kenneth Luke or the Footscray Football Club'.¹⁰ The detail of its proposal is unknown, but in any case, in September Melbourne would vow to 'oppose the system of zoning country areas'.¹¹

Luke, a workaholic who left school at fourteen to take up an engraving apprenticeship in a silverware factory, and who graduated to run his own multimillion-dollar business, was unabashedly a Carlton man. He was president of the Blues from 1938 until 1955, and president of the VFL from 1956 to 1971, having previously been league vice president. Ultimately, Carlton would be the club most closely associated with the drive for country zoning, its delegates heading off alternative recruiting solutions and setting timetables for votes at VFL board meetings.

The decision-making body at the VFL comprised Luke, his administrative director, Eric McCutchan and twenty-four delegates, two from each of the clubs. The number of delegates was later reduced to one from each club. According to company law, the VFL delegates were obliged to set aside self-interest in reaching decisions, but that applied only in theory.

'You had to make the decision based on what was in the best interests of the company, but these guys went to the table as delegates for their club. Instead of withdrawing from discussions when they had a conflict of interest, that's when they were at their most ferocious,' recalls Dick Seddon, who later became Melbourne chief executive and an inaugural AFL commissioner.

In reality, the club-controlled VFL operated on a ‘you scratch my back, I’ll scratch yours’ system of mutual deal-making. It was common, Seddon recalls, for a delegate from one club to excuse himself from the meeting to visit the toilet, and a delegate from another club to follow soon after. On returning, they would support one another on key votes. Such ‘shit-house conferences’ were a standing joke. VFL records suggest that seven clubs opposed country zoning at the initial 1957 vote, and it would fail to sway enough delegates for years to come.

Opposition from the clubs aside, Luke faced an equally difficult obstacle in the attitude of the country leagues, which were tired of losing players to the city for no return. Contrary to the Coulter Law, country clubs were demanding, and receiving, transfer fees for players. Country officials wanted transfer payments formalised and standardised.

As early as 1937, the Ovens and Murray League, centred around Albury-Wodonga, complained that it had lost sixteen players to VFL clubs the previous year. It was a widespread concern among country leagues that players who failed to prosper in the city did not return home. As Paul Daffey has noted, ‘Many country players who tried out in the VFL fell short of the mark, but they remained in Melbourne or Geelong where they transferred to VFA or suburban clubs and were lost to country football.’¹²

Country media was a vocal supporter of the local clubs. Citing South Melbourne’s attempt to sign South Bendigo thirds’ centreman Michael Lee, the *Bendigo Advertiser* called for all country leagues to demand transfer fees before they released players to the VFL.

For many years these young players are burdens to the club and the only reward which can be hoped for is that one day the youngster will blossom out and become a senior player. Everything goes along smoothly until the young player reaches the age of about 17 and he gains his ambition of senior selection ...

He turns in a couple of best-of-field performances ... then the race is on. VFL clubs almost burn the rubber off their tyres dashing from Melbourne with a pocket full of Form Fours to wave under the youngster’s nose ... it is time to lay the cards on the table for the VFL and all country leagues, whether it be through the Victorian Country Football League or not, and demand the introduction of a transfer fee.¹³

Country leagues retaliated by refusing players permits to play in the

VFL unless fees were paid, but Eaglehawk centreman Peter Lyon simply walked out on his club to join Hawthorn. Amid claims that Eaglehawk demanded £1000 (\$29,579 in 2020) for his transfer, Lyon complained of being auctioned ‘like a prize bull’, and said he would stand out of football rather than return to the country.¹⁴ Lyon’s stand was front-page news through May and June 1963. He ultimately had his way, and joined the Hawks to be on the bench in its losing Grand Final side that year, but the controversy simply moved on: Essendon was the next accused of breaching rules governing approaches to country players.¹⁵

Intensifying country opposition to VFL raids, in October 1963 the Latrobe Valley league proposed a new rule barring clearances to the VFL until a player had been selected in thirty games for his country club. It also called for the Victorian Country Football League (VCFL) – which also had McCutchan as its secretary – to have a different secretary to the VFL.

The convention that breaches of the Coulter Law were routine but almost always ignored was broken when a Bendigo League official confirmed that clubs within the league had been receiving payments from VFL clubs to secure transfers.¹⁶ It was later claimed that around this time the Bairnsdale club received the equivalent of \$1000 to release Kevin Coverdale to Hawthorn.¹⁷

At the Victorian Football Congress in July 1963, Jim Cardwell said a formal system of transfer fee payments to country clubs would stop underhand payments. ‘My club believes in transfer fees and is against underhand methods of payment to recruits,’ said Cardwell. ‘We have never paid for a player, but we have been forced to play country practice matches, pre-season games and conduct clinics. We would rather come out in the open than use the underhand method. If League clubs had to pay for country players they would become very selective which would be of benefit to country clubs.’

Luke responded that the VFL was not ready for the introduction of transfer fees, ‘but I feel the time will come when we will make a change’. A country representative responded that ‘you all know transfer fees are paid at present’.¹⁸

Melbourne had a vested interest in formalising recruiting fees. Its amateur tradition meant it could not compete with other clubs to recruit players. The Coulter Law had adjusted payments for inflation, and by 1963 specified a limit of £10 (\$295.80 in 2020) per match, although even Melbourne argued this should be raised to £14 (\$414.11).

Cardwell described the Coulter Law as a farce. It was not policed, and clubs were making extravagant payments to recruit players. Instead, Cardwell said that match payments should rise. 'Some of these clubs paying big money to selected country recruits oppose paying more to their regular players on the grounds that they cannot afford it. It's obvious that the Coulter Law is being disregarded. It is ridiculous that a big business organisation like the League has rules that are not observed and not policed.'¹⁹

Possibly Cardwell's push for an increase in regular match payments reflected the fact that Melbourne, because of the MCC's objections to sullyng the game with professionalism, was unable to compete with the lump-sum recruiting methods of the wealthier clubs. However, the MCC would be unable to oppose higher match payments if they were agreed to by the VFL. Cardwell was hoping to keep payments to a level where Melbourne could compete for players.

Collingwood, however, went further, arguing that clubs should be able to set their own maximum payments to players. With a booming social club, the Magpies were cashed up in ways most clubs could not hope to match.

In spring 1963, the Permit Committee of the VFL outlined the country zoning proposals to regional football officials, who were not impressed. Bendigo League officials were in a fighting mood, as the *Bendigo Advertiser* showed with the headline 'The Voice of Country Football Is Being Raised'.

The 1963 season has been one where the voice of country football has become louder in protest of Victorian Football League clubs taking away star young players without some compensation to the country teams ... The VCFL is also sure to discuss today the VFL suggesting that the State of Victoria be divided into 12 zones allotting each VFL club an area for recruiting.

President of the BFL, Mr Noel Murphy said: 'Our district councillor has already been advised that the BFL is against zoning. We feel that the VFL powers are attempting to take away a country player's privilege of choosing the VFL club he would like to play with. No player should be told where he is to go and we will fully support the Latrobe Valley League's suggestion that no player obtain a clearance until he has played 30 games ... The worst feature is that the players are being enticed away before they have played senior football in the country.'²⁰

The *Swan Hill Guardian* reported that country football delegates were unanimous in opposing zoning, but it was not just the bush that opposed the idea.²¹ Country opposition was a technicality. When the VFL revisited the issue in September 1963, it still lacked the necessary support of three-quarters of its clubs.

This time, the VFL's minutes noted how the clubs voted. Only seven clubs were in favour: Carlton, Essendon, Fitzroy, Footscray, North Melbourne, South Melbourne and St Kilda. Five clubs opposed country zoning: Collingwood, Geelong, Hawthorn, Melbourne and Richmond.²²

Then a strange thing happened at Glenferrie Oval. On 10 September, the Hawks' board had reaffirmed its longstanding opposition to country zoning. Two months later, Hawthorn reversed its position. After 'discussion at length', Hawthorn's board rescinded its opposition to country zoning.²³

Meeting minutes are a bare-bones record, and no further explanation was given for Hawthorn's sudden about-face. The club's delegate, A.W. Dunning, notified the VFL's Permit Committee the next day of its new position.²⁴

Hawthorn's reversal of its initially strong opposition to country zoning is striking. Its recent history was one of energetic forays into country Victoria, and it was competing effectively for country recruits, as its snaring of Kevin Coverdale indicated. Yet just two years after its first premiership success in the competition, Hawthorn had backflipped.

Country zoning was still blocked by one-third of the competition. Collingwood had good reason to oppose it, since the Magpies were widely popular, could afford to compete to buy players and represented what would come to be called a 'destination club'. Melbourne had a history of successful country recruiting, as did Geelong, which, as something between a big country town and a small city, was naturally attractive to rural players. And Richmond had one of the rising stars of aggressive country recruiting in its ranks in Graeme Richmond.

One more of these clubs would need to abandon its opposition to enable country zones to be introduced, but Hawthorn had at least kept Luke's proposal alive. That might explain the confident predictions of both of the city's major newspapers in 1964.

Preseason training had barely begun before *The Sun* reported:

The golden era for country stars who held out their hands before signing

Form Fours is almost over. Before the 1964 season ends it seems likely VFL clubs will approve the zoning scheme, with a portion of the state allotted to the care of each League club. Some of those scouts who rushed in and 'bought' country stars this season may not have been smart. Before long those players could be signing on with VFL clubs for only the guernsey.²⁵

A few months later, *The Age* confidently reported, under the headline 'Football's New Goals', that country zoning 'has all but been accepted'.²⁶ Possibly *The Age* was misinformed by a comment from Carlton delegate and Permit Committee member Percy Bentley that nine VFL clubs were in favour of the plan.²⁷ The number of clubs supporting the change was at most eight, and that was not about to change. Just as importantly, the country leagues remained vehemently opposed to a VFL takeover of their domain.

The *Bendigo Advertiser* fumed: 'VFL's Zone Plan ... Football Dictatorship', adding, 'It is time the gauntlet was thrown down before the VFL football barons ... cut us up for distribution among VFL clubs.'²⁸

The VFL itself was mostly silent on the subject, at least publicly. Its intentions were clear but it was stalled so long as the country leagues resisted, relying on earlier assurances that zones would not be imposed on them against their will. Apart from a passing reference in Round 16's *Football Record* – 'During recent weeks there has been much talk about the zoning of Victoria' – there was no coverage in the VFL's official publication.

Instead, during 1964, the VFL embarked on a hearts and minds campaign, sending delegates to each country district to pitch the advantages of zoning. Like Mormons sent to knock their evangelical way through unwelcoming suburban streets, the VFL's missionaries went into the hinterland. And they had about as much success as the Mormons too. The bush was not buying it.

The *Ballarat Courier* had made its contempt for the VFL plain the year before, declaring the title 'VFL' to be a misnomer. 'In reality it is a metropolitan organisation – yet it dominates every facet of football in this state.'²⁹

Country football in Victoria and the Riverina region of New South Wales was organised into sixteen individual districts, each with a mix of major and minor leagues. Bendigo and the powerful Latrobe Valley League were shaping as a bulwark of resistance. Together they mounted a push for the formation of a new organisation, the Major Leagues

Association. They intended that, unlike the wider country football organisation which had McCutchan as its secretary, the MLA would be free of VFL influence.

In December 1963, Bendigo had hosted the meeting of major league clubs that created the Major Leagues Association. Among its first moves was a push to reduce the VFL representation on the country leagues body to one delegate instead of eight.

The MLA also wanted to make sure country clubs received something in return for the players they surrendered to the city. It demanded that VFL clubs give seven days' notice of their intention to interview prospective country recruits, and that country clubs be rewarded with a system of transfer fees based on how many games recruits played for their VFL clubs, rising to £500 for eighteen games. Since it looked like the VFL was going to put a price on country footballers in the future, said Bendigo's Murphy, 'major leagues should get their quote in first'.³⁰

Country zoning was not going to beat the country leagues' blockade for now, but there were other forces at work that would shape Melbourne's future – and there was one last triumph to be had.

Chapter Four

Self-Inflicted Wounds

Norm was thumping the table saying that Melbourne had to change their stance on the recruitment of players.

Hassa Mann, Melbourne captain 1965–68

Two names resonate louder than all others from the Melbourne Football Club's powerhouse era: Norm Smith and Ron Barassi. Smith was the elusive and prolific goalkicking forward, a playing member of four premierships sides and the demanding disciplinarian coach of six more. Smith held the club's goalkicking record of 546 goals, which including seven in the 1940 Grand Final. Selfless as a player, he played as a decoy forward giving to his team mates as many goals as he kicked himself. As a coach he was unmatched, taking his team from the bottom of the ladder to seven consecutive Grand Finals.

Barassi complemented Smith. No footballer's life was so deeply enmeshed in the fabric of his football club as Ronald Dale Barassi's was with the Melbourne Football Club. His father, Ronald James Barassi, was invited to join Melbourne in 1936. Ron Senior, a 173-centimetre rover and a teammate of Smith's, was a member of the Demons' 1940 premierships side about eleven weeks after he enlisted for World War II. He died of wounds at Tobruk, in North Africa, the following July. The Melbourne Football Club Coterie promised Elza, his widow, its shelter. 'We now declare ourselves the lifelong friends of yourself and your son, Ron, and we advise you that at all times we shall regard the material welfare of yourself and Ron our sacred duty,' the Coterie declared.¹

As he grew, Ron became determined to follow his father into playing for Melbourne. When Elza remarried and moved to Tasmania, Ron stayed in Melbourne, sleeping in a bungalow at the home of his father's teammate Norm Smith. The club lobbied the VFL to introduce the father-son rule to enable the boy to follow Ron Senior to the Demons, where

he would revolutionise the game, creating the on-ball role of ruck-rover.

‘I talked his mother into letting Ron come and live with us and we put up a bungalow in the back yard for him,’ Smith recalled. ‘At this early age he didn’t have exceptional ability. I’d say he had good ability. But he did have exceptional enthusiasm and a very strong desire to succeed.

‘He was tried at full forward and half forward without real success ... He was finally fitted in as a ruck-rover. He became the third leg only of a very wonderful ruck combination with Denis Cordner and Stuart Spencer.’²

Over his career, Barassi became something else: the most formidable force in the game in the most successful side of his era. He more than made up for that lack of exceptional talent with unyielding determination and inspiring leadership.

‘Ronnie loved running around,’ recalls Clyde Laidlaw. ‘But ... Ronnie was no good in a position. They tried him at centre half-forward, they tried him on a half-forward flank. They tried him at full-forward. Ronnie had no idea of marking over his head. It was only when he ruck-roved and became super-fit that he became the great player he was.’

Barassi debuted aged seventeen, in 1953. It was Smith’s second year as coach and the team won just three games. Barassi and Smith were integral to the powerhouse years that followed – the years that led to my delusions of enduring domination.

Of the six premierships of which he was part, Bluey Adams credited much of the 1959 triumph to Barassi. ‘The greatest performance was 1957,’ he observed. ‘At the end of 1956 Noel McMahan, half-back flanker retired, Geoff McGivern centre half-back [retires], Ken Melville retires, goes to the church, Stuart Spencer, best and fairest winner in double premiership years, goes to Tasmania, Denis Cordner retires, Clyde Laidlaw [at] centre half-forward has a year off. You take all those players out of 1956 and you still win the premiership in 1957 – sensational performance, that one.

‘[Then] 1959 would be ‘Barass’s’ year. ‘Barass’ kicked three goals in ten minutes just before half time. One from the boundary line with two defenders hanging on to him; one where he takes a mark splits a pack, then he does the same thing again. We should have gone in three goals down. [Instead] we go in even-stein – but if ‘Barass’ doesn’t do that, who knows what the rest of the game would’ve been?’

September 1964 closed with the familiarity of another Melbourne

premiership, but it was a deceptive triumph. Smith leapt from the coach's bench having seen his team steal the flag in the closing minutes from the old enemy. Although it was unimaginable at the time, that was the beginning of the end. Melbourne was dominant on the field, but off-field everything was about to change, and the Demons were off the pace. According to Smith, 'The club is slipping.' That was a message he said he delivered to committeeman and later president Dr Don Duffy and Cardwell as early as 1962.³ The game was about to become professional, and Melbourne was still playing an amateurs' game.

'Norm in 1964 was very much aware that the last two or three players from the 1953 recruiting group – Barassi and Dixon – were in their last years,' recalls Hassa Mann. 'Norm was very conscious of other clubs being active in interstate recruiting, and particularly in the paying of players and the inducements paid to interstate players. Norm was thumping the table saying that Melbourne had to change their stance on the recruitment of players.'

The VFL finally decided that breaches of the Coulter Law could no longer be wished away. It investigated Geelong's signing of West Australian wingman Denis Marshall. Marshall was unable to play for much of the 1964 season while the VFL examined claims that Claremont was to receive £4000 (\$118,318 in 2020) for his transfer. Geelong president Jack Jennings struck an indignant tone:

In all my years I have never heard anything so ridiculous. Claremont knows we cannot pay for Marshall, therefore it does not want to clear him. They are the seller and we are the buyer, but we don't do things that way. As long as the Coulter Law exists we will abide by it.⁴

Marshall was allowed to play after investigators found that, despite Jennings' protestations, money had indeed changed hands, but 'there was nothing to show that [payment] had been made by the Geelong Football Club or anyone acting on its behalf'.⁵ Suspicion fell on a group of enthusiastic business supporters called 'The Pivots', one of whose members had accompanied Jennings to the talks with Claremont. It seemed that Geelong had found a foolproof path around the Coulter Law.

When the controversy over Marshall's recruitment erupted, a group of four West Australian players revealed that they too had been offered cash to sign with Victorian clubs. Hoping to assist Marshall, they named Footscray, South Melbourne and North Melbourne as the clubs involved,

although the sums, between £100 and £250 (\$2958 to \$7395 in 2020), were a fraction of what was rumoured for Marshall.⁶

Recruitment remained a preoccupation for the VFL throughout 1964. Its Permit Committee was still trying to win over the bush to the matter of zoning the state even as there was a finals series to play.

Until 1933, when Melbourne's coach, Frank 'Checker' Hughes, had urged his players to 'play like demons', the team was known as 'the Fuschias'. The 1964 finals series would prove to be the club's last brilliant flowering, and it turned on a run of luck that began in Round 17 on a muddy Glenferrie Oval. The stakes were as high as they come: for the winner, a finals place; for the loser, season's end.

At the final change, Melbourne was in deep trouble. 'In a low-scoring game, at three-quarter time we were sixteen points down,' Bluey Adams recalled. 'It was probably the most physical game I ever played in my life because of what was at the end of it for Hawthorn or Melbourne.'

A freakish goal in the dying minutes from Hassa Mann got Melbourne over the line: it would be a finalist again. At school that week, another Melbourne supporter told me with authority that when he took the kick, Hassa 'couldn't see daylight between the posts'. I was not sure what that meant, or if it mattered. It was something he had gleaned from a commercial radio broadcast, a world inhabited by something called the 'Mocopan scoreboard', and almost utterly unknown to me. As almost always, I was at the game, on those terraces overlooked by passengers peering from slow-moving train carriages. But I nodded as if I knew what he was talking about.

In the real world, Melbourne's luck continued to hold, as Adams explained. 'Now, the two best sides that year were Essendon and Geelong. They meet in the first semi-final, so that got rid of Essendon,' he said. 'We demolished Collingwood in the second semi, then Collingwood play Geelong and it's wet, it's muddy, and Collingwood win. So we were lucky we didn't have to play either of them.'

'Then [in the Grand Final] we are playing a team we beat by fourteen goals two weeks ago. Having played in '58, and there was a whole heap of teammates who didn't, I spent that week trying to keep their feet on the ground. [I was telling them,] "They'll come back, they'll come back." At half time in the '64 Grand Final we're leading by two points, and I felt like saying to some of them, "Do you believe me now?"'

Melbourne's luck held all the way to the wire, snatching the lead with

just minutes to play in the final quarter. It was a famous goal from back-pocket player Neil Crompton that clinched it. Collingwood had shortly before regained the lead after Magpie Des Tuddenham passed to his lumbering ruckman, Ray Gabelich, who was in the clear, forty metres from goal. Gabelich took off, with no one between him and the goal, and with several Melbourne defenders in pursuit. With each bounce of the ball it seemed he would lose control and be run down, but to the agony and jubilation of the crowd, he goaled from point-blank range. ‘Gabbo’s Run’ would enter football folklore. Melbourne looked done.

After play resumed, Hassa Mann marked about twenty metres from goal and had a chance to repeat his heroics from Glenferrie, but his kick drifted wide. Soon after, the ball was won by Brian Dixon on the wing, where he roosted it back to centre half-forward. From a pack the ball spilled to Crompton – ‘Froggy’ to his mates. Crompton was under strict instructions never to stray forward of centre. His disobedience made him a hero to all but his coach.

‘When Gabbo kicked that goal, I can remember looking up and seeing the police coming on to the ground,’ Adams remembered. ‘I went to the Collingwood–Geelong game the previous week, and I saw the police come on to the ground like that and it seemed a minute later it was the end of the game, so when I saw the police coming out I thought, “God, a minute to go.”’

‘But Frog kicks a goal and the game just goes on and on. Smithy made a good move. He put Barry Bourke to the backline and Bourkey took a mark. While Crompton rightly gets credit for kicking a goal to win the game, Bourkey took a mark to save the game.’

‘If you grade the teams from those six premierships, 1956 is the best team and in sixth position is 1964. Maybe you have to say it was the worst team, stroke, greatest coaching effort by Norm.’

Melbourne was ecstatic. Other clubs were restless, thinking about relocations and social clubs.

In October 1964, it was revealed that Richmond had negotiated a deal with the Melbourne Cricket Club to play its home games at the MCG, while retaining Punt Road Oval a few hundred metres away in Yarra Park as its headquarters. One piece of Cardwell’s pitch to prospective recruits was instantly undermined. No longer would the Demons be the sole tenant at the game’s greatest stadium.

Worse was to come. Richmond had approached Barassi to become

their captain and coach, but withdrew from pursuing him for fear of offending the MCC and compromising their bid to play at the MCG. Instead, Carlton, impatient for success and flush with money, secured his signature after days of secret negotiation.

‘Carlton, once an enduring force in the VFL, had not won a premiership since 1947, and was in the process, under coach Ken Hands, of dropping to tenth, the lowest it had been in its once proud history,’ recorded Barassi and journalist Peter McFarlane.⁷

It had been assumed that Barassi would succeed Smith as coach. Indeed, Smith later revealed that when the approach from Carlton became known, he offered to step aside to enable Barassi to take over, with Smith remaining in some capacity such as head of the match committee, which decided selection and tactics. But Barassi had seen Smith fall out bitterly with his own mentor, Checker Hughes, over match tactics, and feared that a similar rift would be inevitable at some point in such an arrangement.

Carlton president George Harris persuaded Barassi that he would not be his ‘own man’ if he coached Melbourne with Smith looking over his shoulder. Any success he achieved would be seen as Smith’s as much as his. Barassi was convinced. ‘George was one hell of a salesman,’ he later wrote.

Then he also mentioned how I would never be recognised as a teacher of the game while Norm Smith was boss of the MCG. That was the very thought I had had the previous night. I quickly ended the conversation by saying: ‘Give me 15 minutes and I will ring back with a definite answer.’

I spoke with Nancy, my wife. She backed me as she always did. I rang George back and told him, ‘I will be in to sign straight away before anything else happens.’⁸

So, if with some trepidation, Barassi broke our hearts and was wearing the number 31 for the Navy Blues when season 1965 began.

Melbourne’s collapse was not quite immediate. After Smith had coached his side to a thirty-seven-point win over Barassi’s Blues on the first Saturday of June, the Demons were on top of the ladder, undefeated with eight wins. They had slipped to third place, with nine wins from twelve games, when the unthinkable happened and Smith – the most successful individual in the club’s history, integral to ten of its twelve premierships – was sacked as coach.

Smith was, by his own admission, a harsh critic of those around him. His ideal match committee, he once said, consisted of three people, two

of whom were away sick. He did not hide his contempt for those around the club, committee members and hangers-on alike, whom he did not respect. And with the retirement of Bert Chadwick, replaced by Don Duffy, he felt the club had lost its edge. Somehow, this most successful football identity made enemies among allies. He believed much of it was driven by jealousy. Once he had finished at Melbourne, he revealed that he had 'nothing but contempt' for the twelve-member committee. He had also made enemies when he supported Barassi in his move to Carlton, insisting that Melbourne provide him with a clearance.⁹

The background to Smith's sacking was a writ for defamation filed by an umpire, Don Blew. The shorthand version is that Smith accused Blew of being a 'cheat'. Blew was reportedly egged on by his fellow umpires to pursue the writ. Smith had made the offending comment on radio, and the Melbourne committee viewed that he alone was responsible and refused to indemnify him. His old teammate Don Cordner offered £500 from his own pocket to finance Smith's defence, but Smith refused to accept it. He believed that the club should defend him.

In truth, Smith had done little more than suggest that umpires were prone to being 'subconsciously biased towards the underdog'.¹⁰ In other words, he was suggesting umpires felt normal human sympathy for the battler. Such a case would seem defensible for any barrister with a reasonable degree of Rumpolian eloquence, but it never came to that. Blew did not pursue the case and it was allowed to lapse, but the damage was done.

Considerable ill-feeling existed between Smith and some members of the football committee. Some committeemen reckoned that Smith was too openly critical of them to the players. Smith's supporters at the club accused Brian Dixon of reporting the coach to the committee, something the champion wingman denied. Ill-feeling about what Dixon did or did not do festered so much that, two years later, when controversy broke out about whether Smith had encouraged the 31-year-old wingman to retire, the selection committee issued a statement exonerating Dixon. According to *The Age*:

Brian Dixon yesterday had his name cleared as the Melbourne player who touched off the collision between coach Norm Smith and the Melbourne Football Club committee ... a statement was issued denying that Smith had told Dixon to retire and stating categorically that Dixon was not the player who made the report to the committee which led to the sacking of Smith in 1965.¹¹

John Lord believed that a key to the wrangling being allowed to fester was the fact that Chadwick had stepped down from the presidency. 'It was the first year without Bert Chadwick at the helm,' he said. 'Smithy was a very headstrong guy, demand[ed] his way, but Chaddy was on top of all that, look at his footy and commercial history. One way, Chaddy's way, and a very fair way, hence six premierships. I would put the rent money on the Smith saga not lasting more than a day with Chaddy.'

According to one of the leading football reporters of the time, Alf Brown, this unfolded in the shadow of Smith's greatest achievement:

Smith's greatest premiership was his last mainly because he for once did not have a great side. He master-minded that win, once again against poor Collingwood. He lacked a ruckman and developed an ordinary player in Graeme Wise into a follower who could ruck unchanged all afternoon. He had ruck rovers in Barassi and Brian Kenneally cruising the packs like destroyers around a battleship.¹²

Brown could have added that Smith did so without a conventional full-forward, crafting an attack around Barry Bourke, who was all of 179 centimetres tall.

Yet within eight months of the 1964 premiership, both he and Barassi were gone.

'[The sacking] was shattering,' recalled John Lord. 'In '64 we won the premiership out of our backside. We shouldn't have won it. In '65 I thought we had a much better team. I really did think we had a better side, but we missed Barassi's leadership. I think Smithy missed Barassi's leadership. If Barassi had stayed, it would not have happened. There was division.'

The sacking occurred on the eve of Round 13, with Melbourne set to play North Melbourne the next day. Smith was reinstated the following week, and attempts were made to present a united front, with Smith and Duffy posing for press photographs shaking hands and smiling. But Hassa Mann remembers that the episode had a lasting impact which no amount of posed friendliness could mask.

'I think it had a longstanding effect on the group,' Mann says. '[Despite] the reinstatement four days later, it lingered for a long, long time. There were committeemen who did not face Norm for a long time. The actual shock of the sacking was like a death in the family. Players could feel the tension between the committee and the coach ... It was something that

should never have happened. And the way it was done, sacking a man by telegram, that was unforgivable.

I was actually talking to him on the telephone when I heard the doorbell [at Smith's end] ring with the telegram. Every Friday, Norm and I would talk on the phone discussing the tactics for the next day. Norm said, "Someone's at the door, I will see you tomorrow." Five minutes later the phone rang again. This person on the phone, I didn't recognise the voice. I thought it was a prank call. My comment was, "Get off the phone, you stupid bastard." Norm was crying, and he had to convince me it was him.

'Glenys and I drove to his home in Bell Street. We were met at the door by Norm crying, by his wife Marge crying, by his brother Len and his wife crying. So Glenys and I joined in crying. We sat there in shock. I got home at 1 a.m. the morning of the North Melbourne game.'

Frank Davis, then in his second year in senior football, took a call from Jim Cardwell. The message was shocking and simple. Smith was sacked; lie low. 'Don't talk to the press, don't talk to anybody,' he was told. 'We'll get back in touch with you.'

'A bit later on that night, Hassa rang me and said, "You've probably heard Norm's been sacked, and the players are all going to stick together" ... That's my memory of it. I was disappointed by it. I got on well with Norm I don't ever remember him blasting the crap out of me. He was good to me, always spoke to me after a game. A lot of blokes, he blasted the hell out of them, but I never had that feeling. I wouldn't say I was afraid of him, but I was in awe of him.'

Like almost everybody connected to the game, I could not make sense of the news. It was my first season of under-13s competitive football with North Kew. It was our local club, chosen by geography. Too bad about the jumper: brown with a yellow sash. And those jumpers, inherited from previous generations, had been laundered into shapelessness after many years of use.

Along with my teammates, I stood around in the car park of the Victoria Park Oval in East Kew, waiting to pile into the cars driven by indulgent fathers to our game somewhere in the south-eastern suburbs, trying to absorb what it meant that Norm Smith, that giant of the game, steward of the club I loved, was sacked.

Our football world was a small one. The committee sacked him? What's a committee? Football clubs were players and coaches and trainers, those

blokes with wet towels who doled out resin to rub into your palms to help you grip the ball, who cut up oranges for three-quarter time and plugged bleeding noses with cotton wool, and who told you that you were big enough and ugly enough to get back out there and play some more footy.

Most weeks we were driven to our away games in private cars. Certain dads, generous with their time, were also generous with their language, so with some it became a game to count the number of 'shits' and 'fuckins' our unpaid chauffeurs could fit into one conversation as we motored along Jasper Road. When we qualified for finals, someone would borrow a furniture van so the team could travel as one vulnerable mass of small humanity. Seat belts existed only on aeroplanes, not in cars – and certainly not in removal vans. There, lurching south to Murrumbena or Oakleigh, we were unrestrained cargo. No one gave a thought to what might eventuate from an accident. We were too excited, and the times too relaxed.

It was of minimal comfort that the North Kew under-13s won that day of Smith's sacking, since Melbourne did not. The Smith-less Demons succumbed to the bog of Coburg Oval and North Melbourne, going down by twenty-one points.

Barrie Vagg says that game at Coburg was the worst he ever played. Checker Hughes stepped in as coach; he was seventy-eight at the time. 'For whatever reason, we were probably all stunned to be in the position we were in,' says Vagg. 'Even after [Smith] was reinstated, it felt like the bottom had fallen out of the club. The feeling was that the meaning was not the same. There's no doubt that Barassi leaving the club was a big factor in Melbourne's downfall. He's a dynamic personality, Barassi, and I am sure everyone walked taller and played better when he was on the field. [But] the real factor in Melbourne's demise was Smith's sacking.'

Despite Smith's reinstatement the following week, Melbourne won only one more game in 1965, and missed the finals for the first time in twelve seasons. That was the beginning of the club's transformation from dominant power to a lasting and often irrelevant also-ran. For ordinary supporters, the long journey from breezy confidence to weary acceptance of entrenched mediocrity was just beginning.

Important and enduring forces were at work. Melbourne's readiness to adapt to the changes taking place was compromised by its origins within the MCC.

When I met Bluey Adams at his house in suburban Melbourne in late 2018, he was newly returned from driving his Winnebago back from the

New South Wales coast with his wife, Noelle. In his early eighties, he was fit and living well. Sadly, he was soon after diagnosed with cancer, and would die the following August. Just for a moment, as the self-described 'working-class street boy from blue-collar Windsor' recalled that period and the club's failure to maintain recruiting, he lifted his nose in the air, affected a high-tone accent more South Yarra than his boyhood Windsor, and sniffed: 'We had a very close connection with the MCC and *we don't pay for players.*'

Dropping the toff's accent, he continued: 'It's not like when you come to Melbourne you're on a contract of an amount of dollars. If you come to us in '64 you're going to get £15 a game. That's it. That cost Melbourne a lot. Stuie Spencer leaves Melbourne at twenty-five years of age, gets involved in his wife's parents' business and goes to Tasmania. Big Bob Johnson walks out of Melbourne at twenty-six to go to Perth to get big money. Donny Williams walks out of Melbourne at twenty-six years of age, and all three players regretted that. I spoke to every one of them, and they all regretted that ... They were players at the top of their game and just left Melbourne.'

Adams refused an offer from the Adelaide club Norwood of £2000 (\$64,724 in 2020) to sign with them. 'If I had done that and walked out of Melbourne in 1957, I would have regretted it. The others regretted not being a bigger part of football history than they were, and in Donny's case and Bob's case, they didn't think their financial situation improved greatly, having gone for money.

'I wasn't tempted. Only child, comfortable living at home. We had some good rewards. The bonus for winning the flag in 1955, because people chipped in money afterwards, was something like £400. It gradually went down. In 1964 the bonus was £15 for being on the list and thirty shillings a game for every game you played. In 1964 I played fourteen games, that's £21 ... £36 with the bonus, all up.

'We got bonuses for winning the flag. Four hundred pounds was the high point and less for every flag after. That's the way it worked. They got spoilt.'

Soon after that smallest bonus of all, the dynasty crumbled. Adams again: 'I think in 1965 we played St Kilda on the Queen's Birthday weekend, and we were beaten by ten goals or something like that. *That* was the end of the era. But had we not won that game against Hawthorn, the second-last home-and-away game in 1964, we'd have missed out on the finals.

That might very well have been the end of the era then.’

For me, the new reality arrived unrecognised on 14 August 1965 – Round 16 – the day defeat by Geelong meant Melbourne would miss the finals for the first time in my experience. I had separated from my parents but remained in the Grey Smith Stand, on the long rows of wooden benches. No one was sitting directly in front of me, and as Geelong scored freely and defeat became inevitable, I began to kick the seat in front in frustration at each successive goal. At last, an elderly gentleman – in the Grey Smith Stand they were all elderly gentlemen – farther along the row snarled at me to behave myself and to stop kicking the seat. I was immediately shamed by my brattishness and was too embarrassed to reply. Internally, I yelled my explanation: ‘But I’m not used to losing!’

Smith had understood the meaning of Geelong’s costly pursuit of Denis Marshall. It was a sign of the lengths to which clubs were willing to go in order to experience success. Much earlier, in the first rush of Hawthorn’s entry to serious recruiting in 1954, the Hawks had parted with £750 (\$26,792 in 2020) to secure giant forward Clayton ‘Candles’ Thompson. Thompson had not been a success, but that had not dissuaded Hawthorn. In fact, Thompson’s recruitment encouraged them, since it showed they could attract sought-after talent.¹³

Beginning his career in 1963, Ken Emselle missed the big bonuses at the start of that run. ‘I played all the games in 1964 and I don’t remember any significant bonus at the end of the season,’ he said. ‘One of the things that influenced the game was that clubs started paying players, whereas in the early days recruits came because they were offered accommodation and membership of the MCC.’

If Smith’s sacking was not the end of the club, it was a lasting wound. It was a rift. But Melbourne had not been keeping up with other clubs. As far as Smith was concerned, it had been falling away for years, blinded by its own complacency.

‘Melbourne was on the wane before the row,’ Smith said, once ill health forced him from the Melbourne coaching position after the 1967 season.

While the blow-up didn’t help matters, it didn’t make a lot of difference either.

We had cleared Barassi before the season started and you can imagine what sort of a loss that was. Also, Bluey Adams had retired and then ‘Doc’ Roet left for overseas halfway through the season.

What people overlooked was that in several of the games we won [prior to his sacking in 1965] we scraped through by a matter of points. Since then we have not done particularly well, but the row has had nothing to do with our fortunes.¹⁴

Closer to the event, he was expansive in his comments in an article written for a newspaper:

In 1953 Melbourne was not a successful side and through sheer desperation we brought in younger players. Barassi, [Don] Williams, Case and Adams were about 17 years of age and within 36 games they were tried and trusted players, good enough to take their place in the 1954 Grand Final.

The danger is that when you build up with younger players and they mature you create a standing in football. You are afraid to go back and look for more young players until you are absolutely forced to ... where we have been lax at Melbourne – and I am as much to blame as anyone else; I want to make that clear – where we've been lax is in recruiting.

Although he could see the efforts other clubs were making in recruiting, Smith defended Melbourne's approach as if making a virtue of necessity:

As a matter of principle we have refused to buy players. You see, we've had players like Barassi and Bob Johnson, who weren't bound to us but came to us – they wanted to play with us because their fathers played with us.

And we've had other players like Mithen, Adams, Dixon and Williams who've had no other choice but to play with us. Now when you get players of that calibre coming to a club you ask, apart from the rules, is it fair to them to buy players from other states?

This year we lost Barassi, Adams and Roet, and then we had injuries to Leahy, Massey, Dixon, Groom and Watson so that players of slightly lesser ability have had to carry the burden. It was obvious we were in for a tough time.¹⁵

Chapter Five

Bushwhacked

Richmond have come from last in 1960 to top in 1967 mainly by country recruiting. Only 12 of our 44 senior list players are local boys.

Graeme Richmond, Richmond Football Club powerbroker

Despite being chaperoned by one of football's most influential individuals in Sir Kenneth Luke, country zoning struggled for acceptance in the city. In the bush it was despised.

It was supposed not just to make the competition more even, but also to put a halt to the escalating costs of recruitment, as clubs increasingly outbid one another. It was also claimed that country zoning would promote and develop football in the regions, with each VFL club responsible for its defined zone – although this looks rather like a straw grasped to secure country approval.

John Rice, a *Bendigo Advertiser* reporter at the time of Peter Lyon's defiant move to Hawthorn, and who later joined the *Sporting Globe*, was prominent in opposing the VFL plan. 'I used to argue we fought the Second World War for freedom of choice, and zoning was conscription,' says Rice, whose son, Dean, later played for Carlton. 'I did not believe country footballers should be conscripted to football clubs without any choice.

'[Later,] when I got to Melbourne, I got howled down by people like Ron Barassi. Barassi rang me at the *Sporting Globe* [and] said I didn't know what I was talking about. My arguments died a natural death. I got no support in Melbourne. I still believe a player should be allowed to go where he wants to go. I don't believe in the draft, either. Young players don't get a choice where they go.'

In truth, country zoning was stalled for years, attracting insufficient support from the city clubs and determined resistance from the country leagues. Elsewhere, everything was shifting. VFL clubs were becoming professional. St Kilda abandoned its traditional home, the Junction

Oval, five kilometres south of the city, for Moorabbin, a further eleven kilometres south-east, for the 1965 season. St Kilda pointed out that its support was overwhelmingly in the south-eastern suburbs. Up to three-quarters of their supporters lived south of Elsternwick. By moving to Moorabbin, it was 'taking football to our supporters'.¹

But there was more to it. A problem for most football clubs was that the popularity of their game as a spectator sport far outweighed that of cricket, with which they shared ovals. Football generated, by far, most of the revenue for these shared facilities, but ground managers, often local councils, controlled the grounds, took the lion's share of gate receipts and limited football's access for preseason training. Footballers brought in the money for the benefit of cricketers who played to empty terraces.

St Kilda's football gate receipts in 1964 totalled £32,000, compared to the previous cricket season's gate receipts of £152. At the Junction Oval, cricket was generating less than 0.5 per cent of football receipts.² Moving to Moorabbin would free the Saints from supporting the cricket club and enable them to create a social club to support the footballers.

Other clubs were doing the same, following the example of Collingwood, which controlled its own ground and had a liquor licence for a social club that was turning over £250,000 annually (\$7.1 million in 2020). 'The Collingwood club is probably the nearest of any of our clubs to professionalism on the English scale,' said Collingwood managing secretary Gordon Carlyon.³

Geelong was also building a new social club. Footscray announced at the end of 1964 that it was leasing space from the local council for a social club at the Western Oval. Carlton was negotiating a \$100,000 loan from the Melbourne City Council towards a \$250,000 social club at Princes Park, which was planned to open before the end of the 1967 season.⁴

Hawthorn, having noted how its supporters gathered at a neighbourhood tennis club for post-match drinks, had bought a house nearby to create a social club.⁵ A supportive local council supplied car parking. It was immediately profitable.⁶ A few years later, Essendon would organise to become its own ground manager and incorporate a social club within a new \$250,000 grandstand.⁷

According to Dick Seddon, who acted as honorary solicitor for the Demons, and later became chief executive, these were some of the developments Norm Smith had in mind when he said 'the club is slipping'.

'He was crooked on the increasing commercial progress of the other

clubs,' Seddon says. 'To me, the biggest revolution that occurred that caught Melbourne unaware was the struggle for ground control. That was a fundamental change in the whole competition. In those days football subsidised cricket. The football clubs woke up after a while that they were subsidising the half-year when they didn't have the ground. They thought they should have more say in what they could do at the ground to maximise their revenue-raising activities.

'Once the football clubs gained control, that's when commercialisation started. That's when you see the proliferation of social clubs with liquor licences, perimeter fence advertising and boxes with special privileges for supporters. Smithy could see this happening, whereas Melbourne was still a sporting section of the cricket club, and because we were tenants of the MCG we were locked out of these opportunities.

'Norm had started to rail against these clubs getting an advantage over Melbourne and recruiting was part of that. Jim [Cardwell] was by then of the view if [recruits] wanted to come, they would come to Melbourne. He wouldn't have to do a lot to go and get them. All the other clubs were starting on the road to professionalism, and we were not. The other clubs became more professional and what did they use this for? To get better players.'

The final element of the fight for ground control was the creation of VFL Park at Waverley, which in Sir Kenneth Luke's vision would become the neutral venue – a home ground to no one club – for the Grand Final, and that would free football from cricket's control. Luke was frustrated in having to negotiate with the MCG Trustees over ticketing for the lucrative VFL finals.

The VFL also resented the one-third share of gate and television receipts assigned to ground managers. After Melbourne and Essendon attracted more than 86,000 spectators to the MCG during the 1962 season, the VFL pointed out that the amount received by the MCG Trustees exceeded by hundreds of pounds the money that went to each of the competing clubs.⁸

The VFL acquired land for VFL Park in 1962, buying up a swathe of market gardens. It commissioned a contemporary design and sank millions over the next decade into building what would be possibly the most unloved ground in the game's history.

Cold, wet – it was later discovered that the ground was in a 'rain belt' that received twice as much rain as much of the city – and surrounded by a vast

car park with only five entrances that made escape a post-match nightmare, there was little to love about the place. The design was wrong too. The rake of the stands was too shallow, pulling spectators away from the action – the opposite of the steeping terraces typical of new stadiums now.

Waverley was often cited as Luke's legacy. But his other campaign, country zoning, continued through 1965 and 1966 without a breakthrough. A meeting of the VCFL in September 1965 agreed to the preparation of a circular detailing the VFL's country zoning proposal. The eight-page document appeared in May 1966, complete with outlines of the leagues to be assigned to the twelve zones. A version of it was included in the *Football Record*, where it was billed as 'one of the biggest plans ever to be devised by the VFL'.

Zones would be assigned for 'a period to be determined, say five years'; VFL clubs would pay transfer fees of \$400 to country clubs for clearing players to the city; clubs would spend \$1000 a year on promoting the game in their zone; and the VFL would consult the bush on any extension of the plan beyond the initial period. The zones were not meant to be permanently assigned to any one club, as the *Football Record* explained: 'zones may be reallocated by lot for such a further period as may be agreed upon'.⁹

It was the most comprehensive picture yet developed for the concept. But it did not sway the country leagues. They turned it down in September.

Faced with this resistance despite years of lobbying, over the summer of 1966–67 Luke's assistant McCutchan travelled overseas to study how other codes handled recruiting, since even for the VFL administrators breaches of the Coulter Law were becoming difficult to ignore. Only two investigations into allegations of wrongdoing were ever launched – over the signing of Denis Marshall and, decades earlier, over the signing of Hayden Bunton Senior – yet it was harder to ignore when thousands of dollars were changing hands, such as the £4000 (\$111,243 in 2020) payment in 1965 to Tasmanian club New Norfolk for Peter Hudson.¹⁰ So competitive and expensive was the contest for country recruits that in May 1966 the St Kilda board decided it would not compete for country players. Acting on recommendations of its recruiting committee, the board agreed that 'country recruiting activities be curtailed ... due to the out of hand commitments required in regard to country recruits'.¹¹

If only the country would agree, 'zoning would overcome many of our problems', Luke lamented. He rejected calls for the Coulter Law to be

scrapped, but said that it should be reformed. ‘League footballers are not professionals,’ he said. ‘Certainly they are not lilywhites – they would not qualify for the Olympic Games – but they could not live on what they get out of football.’¹² In search of a solution, McCutchan left for the United States and the United Kingdom.

Eric McCutchan was, according to both Keith Webb and Greg Hobbs, among the straightest men in football: upright, honest, reliable and a loyal aide to Luke. Veteran football journalist Mike Sheahan said McCutchan was an authority on the league and its rules. He knew his stuff and he played by the rules, as might be expected from a pedantic, humourless bureaucrat. In government, he would be treasurer perhaps, but never leader, Sheahan said. A backroom functionary, efficient and entirely lacking in charisma.

Ron Joseph says McCutchan reminded him of a town clerk. ‘I know I was only eighteen when I went to North Melbourne, but I called him Mr McCutchan most of the time,’ he recalls. ‘That was the sort of bloke he was. He’d never say, “Call me Eric.” He liked being called Mr McCutchan. He ran a pretty tight ship and he played a very significant role in the creation of Waverley and in standing up to the Melbourne Cricket Club.’

Neither Keith Webb nor Greg Hobbs nor Mike Sheahan was able to remember McCutchan showing a leaning to any particular club. ‘He was a fine gentleman, a very conservative person,’ says Hobbs. ‘McCutchan was as straight as an arrow. Luke and McCutchan worked in tandem for years. Whatever Luke wanted, McCutchan did.’

If Luke was the main driver for country zoning as far back as 1957, McCutchan did forge his own course following his research trip. He returned to Australia in early 1967 as a convert to the National Football League’s concept of drafting. Having accepted the impossibility of persuading the intransigent country leagues to agree to zoning, McCutchan prepared a plan for how a draft would work instead.

Meanwhile, Carlton had apparently come to the same conclusion – that the country leagues would remain defiant – but had a different answer. Its VFL delegate, Graeme Emanuel, wanted the VFL to go ahead regardless of country opposition. His motion to proceed ‘without the necessity for approval thereto by the VCFL’ was referred to the Permit Committee in January 1967.¹³ Carlton’s board had decided two months earlier that too much time had been lost trying to sweet-talk the country into accepting zoning, and that it should be forced on the country leagues.¹⁴

McCutchan publicised his draft plan in March, promoting it as a solution to country football's pushback against zoning. He suggested that the VFL clubs would present lists of required players each season: an active list of up to forty players, a reserve list of up to twenty players and a district list of eight players eligible for under-19s football. Unclaimed players would go into a pool, from which they could be drafted to clubs at a selection meeting in December.

Notably, the draft would give priority to the lower-finishing clubs: selections would be made in reverse order on the ladder after that season's home-and-away matches. The side finishing last each season would have the first draft selection, and the side finishing second-last would have second selection, and so on, through to the premier club having the final pick. Country players could not be drafted until they had played one complete season with the seniors at their home club. VFL clubs would pay a \$400 transfer fee to country clubs for each player drafted.

McCutchan promised that his draft – nothing less than 'a complete reorganisation of the present system of recruiting players for League clubs' – would:

... stop players from trying to negotiate with, and bargain with two or more League clubs at the same time; create a system whereby (unlisted) players would go into a pool and other clubs would have the right to claim their services; prevent VFL clubs from signing country players who have only an outside chance of 'making the grade' and: abolish the much abused part of the Coulter Law which prevents the payment of transfer fees.¹⁵

Even the *Football Record* was on board. As Carlton was pushing for a vote to introduce zoning without country consent, the *Record* posed the question: 'Zoning or Drafting ... or Nothing at All?' It declared that football was in a chaotic situation, 'with country footballers, who are really hardly more than novices, asking fantastic sums of money to join VFL clubs'. The choices were to adopt zoning, or 'the American-styled Drafting Scheme put forward by the Administrative Director, Mr E O McCutchan, or some alternative scheme, or leave the system unchanged. The most recent vote on country zoning saw 15 of the 16 VCFL districts opposed.'

Drafting, the *Record* continued, had operated successfully for more than thirty years in American football, baseball, basketball and ice hockey. McCutchan had 'made a first hand study of it while in the United States last year.

From his lengthy discussions with top American football administrators, Mr McCutchan learned that many of the problems which existed before players were drafted were almost identical with those the VFL is confronted with today. He is convinced that drafting is the answer. The Drafting Scheme, which involves the pooling of recruits with the lower based clubs having the first choice of selection, was outlined to [VFL club] delegates on May 10.¹⁶

Something else had happened at that meeting on 10 May 1967. Carlton, determined to win the battle for zoning, headed off McCutchan's plan. After McCutchan finished speaking, the Blues' delegate, Graeme Emanuel, said Carlton had already given notice of seeking a vote on 24 May to proceed with zoning, 'without the necessity of agreement thereto by the [country leagues]'.¹⁶

In an extraordinary decision, and despite McCutchan's glowing endorsement of drafting, the delegates voted to delay considering drafting as an option for two months. VFL records state that the decision was 'having regard to the information furnished by Mr Emanuel, and the suggestion of Delegates that a select committee be appointed at a later date to examine all aspects of the problems associated with recruitment of players, it was resolved on the motion of Messrs I J Ryan (Hawthorn) and B Bourke (South Melbourne) that consideration of the proposal for introduction of a Drafting System be deferred for a period of two months'.¹⁷

If it was proposed to have a special committee examine 'all aspects of the problems associated with recruitment', why was only drafting deferred, and not zoning as well? It was a clear victory for Carlton, Luke and the clubs that had already been converted to zoning. As the *Football Record* explained, the possibility of adopting drafting would be stalled for two months. In the meantime, a decision on zoning should be made, 'one way or the other'.¹⁸

As Greg Hobbs told me: whatever Luke wanted, McCutchan delivered. This once the 'town clerk' had shown he was not beyond showing his own initiative, yet Luke had still prevailed.

The Herald was, meanwhile, reporting that 'Carlton Football Club's chances of bringing in country zoning ... could depend on a "swinging vote" from Melbourne'. Of the four clubs – Collingwood, Geelong, Melbourne and Richmond – that had opposed zoning at the previous vote, only Melbourne was showing signs of changing its mind.

‘We don’t know if Carlton want to go ahead with the zoning scheme irrespective of approval from the country,’ Jim Cardwell was saying in mid-1967. ‘If this is their proposal then my club would have to take another look at things. They could favour it, but I don’t know. It might be line ball.’¹⁹

Melbourne’s board had opposed zoning formally since March 1963, when the Bulldogs and Luke raised it. The Demons’ board had, in fact, softened its opposition and in July 1966 moved towards supporting country zoning, but only if the country leagues agreed to it.²⁰ Four months later it opposed a zoning plan put by Hawthorn.²¹ In May 1967, the board also opposed Carlton’s plan and authorised its delegate, Arthur King, to support an investigation ‘of all aspects connected with recruiting and zoning.’²²

The VFL’s subcommittee to investigate recruiting, zoning, clearances and any other related issues was headed by King, along with Graeme Huggins of St Kilda, Hawthorn’s P.J. Ryan, Collingwood’s John ‘Jiggy’ Harris and Carlton’s Percy Bentley. Their deadline was to have their recommendations to the VFL before the end of the season.

Carlton might have thought it had headed off McCutchan’s push for a draft, but the subcommittee had a surprise in store, and returned with an idea borrowed from the draft plan: priority for the lower-placed clubs. In July, the committee recommended that ‘that each of the four VFL clubs occupying the twelfth, eleventh, tenth and ninth positions on the Premiership List at the conclusion of season 1967, be permitted to make a selection – in the order as stated – of the VCFL District to be allotted to it. The allotment of the eight remaining VCFL Districts to be then determined by draw.’²³ This recommendation was included in a formal proposal for the new system on 23 August.²⁴

In other words, the stragglers that year, Footscray, Fitzroy, Hawthorn and South Melbourne, would have the pick of the choice zones. And there were no secrets about which zones were strongest. At least one recruiter, South Melbourne’s Peter Charleston, had made an extensive study of the numbers of recruits VFL clubs had drawn from each zone over the previous three years, as well as the future population of sixteen-to-twenty-year-olds for the next few years for each area. As Paul Daffey has related, the respective strengths of each region were well known. Bendigo had long been among the most powerful of country regions, as was, more recently, the Ovens and Murray League, which had the advantage of drawing on regional towns such as Albury, Wodonga, Wangaratta and Yarrawonga.²⁵

Each of the sixteen country districts had a relatively strong 'major' league, and a number of lesser or 'minor' leagues. As centres of goldmining activity when football was beginning its development, Ballarat and Bendigo had always been strong in football, although Bendigo had overtaken its neighbour after World War II.

The 1950s began a golden era for country football in Victoria, with strong, parochial supporters closely following the country championships in which the respective leagues challenged one another. It was not unusual for country town populations to be swamped by spectators arriving for a football match. Narrandera, a town of 5000 in the Riverina, drew 10,000 to a country championship match between the South West District League and the Goulburn Valley League. 'You had 8,000 people turn up to Mortlake, a town of 1200 people, to see the Ballarat League play the Hampden League in a semi final,' wrote Daffey.²⁶

The Ovens and Murray, Bendigo, Hampden and Latrobe Valley leagues were regular competitors for championship honours after 1960. The sixteen districts that comprised the Victorian Country Football League were compressed into twelve zones by the VFL's Permit Committee, to correspond to the twelve VFL clubs. While the districts were a guide to likely strong zones, with Bendigo, Ovens and Murray, Latrobe Valley and Hampden sought after, it was only after the zones were assigned to the twelve clubs that the extent of the inequalities became clear to all.

The new plan did nothing to calm the country leagues. Bendigo League president Noel Murphy's fighting mood was typical. 'We will fight this plan like hell,' he vowed. 'If the VFL think they are going to take over country football, they are greatly mistaken. We won't be pushed around. We will buck this. If the Victorian Country Football League does not take the proper protective action the Major Country Leagues will do it off their own bat.'²⁷

Goulburn Valley League councillor Bill Gibbins took up the theme, complaining that if zoning came into force, there would be no place for country football. The game would be controlled by the VFL. 'Dictatorship should not be tolerated,' he thundered.²⁸

Matching the country rebels for vehement opposition was Richmond's eponymous recruiter, Graeme Richmond. The Tigers had risen from easybeats to stand on the threshold of greatness, much of it on the back of Graeme Richmond's aggressive and expensive recruiting.

Taking up the dictatorship theme, Graeme Richmond said zoning

was an 'intolerable prospect' in a democracy:

It is bad enough that zoning be suggested, but it is unbearable that the bottom four clubs should have first choice of the zones. This scheme is designed to reduce the top clubs to the level of the struggling, of the also-rans. Any club worth its salt knows that the only way to succeed is to get out there and chase players.

Richmond have come from last in 1960 to top in 1967 mainly by country recruiting. Only 12 of our 44 senior list players are local boys.²⁹

Since the primary aim of zoning was to create a more even competition, the suggestion that the lower four clubs should have priority in choosing their zones was fitting. Besides, the zones were intended to be temporary. If the bottom four clubs had the best zones to begin with, they would be required to give them up after five years. But Carlton, having lobbied for zoning either through Luke or through its own delegates for the better part of a decade, was insistent.

The Blues, having just signed three interstate players, were also trying to muster opposition to a limit being placed on the number of recruits from outside Victoria that clubs could sign annually. In its final submission, it pleaded that 'VFL Clubs should be allowed freedom of choice in at least one area'. Joining the Blues in opposing priority for lower clubs were Richmond, Essendon and Melbourne. Carlton and Richmond were finalists. Essendon and Melbourne had finished mid-table that year, sixth and seventh respectively, with eight wins.

As the crucial swinging vote, Melbourne was potentially in a position of strength. Without the Demons' support, the zoning push would fail. There is nothing in the club's minutes that outlines the reasons behind its decision to vote one way or the other. At a meeting to discuss the zoning plan, the Melbourne board directed that its subcommittee investigate the allocation of metropolitan zones, country zoning and draft legislation, and provide 'an estimate of costs involved'. That was in April 1967.³⁰ In May, as noted earlier, it opposed Carlton's plan. By September it had resolved to oppose priority for the lower clubs but to accept zoning.³¹

Like a condemned man who obligingly slips the noose over his own head, Melbourne finally committed to one of the forces that would aid its demise. Although the club's minutes do not explain its belated support for zoning, it is easy to speculate why its stance shifted. Melbourne was still constrained by the amateur ethos of its parent, the Melbourne

Cricket Club. In the past it had not needed to buy players. It was not buying players now. It was not intending to buy players in the future. If it could not compete in the secret market of cash inducements, then at, least if one part of the state was assigned exclusively to it, Melbourne could not be outbid there. Melbourne would have seen that it would have at least one source of country recruits, regardless of how miserly – or principled – it was about paying inducements.

Keith Webb recalled that Eric McCutchan tried to bring on the zoning vote at short notice, but the delegates refused to be rushed. ‘We said no, you have to give seventy-two hours’ notice of the meeting,’ he remembered. So the issue came to be settled on Grand Final eve, Friday, 22 September 1967. The country leagues had not been won over, but the VFL’s patience was exhausted. Collingwood’s Jiggy Harris, who would ultimately be shunned by his club for being part of the committee that recommended zoning, fought his club’s fight to the last, telling the other delegates that the country leagues remained dogmatically opposed, and every effort should be made to reach an amicable arrangement.

Luke warned against more delay. ‘I fear that if you do not deal with this question tonight, you will go on and on,’ he said. ‘We are the governing body and we should make our own decision.’

Support came from Graeme Emanuel, who declared: ‘We have talked with the country for three years and got nowhere.’³²

Carlton also wanted to lock in the system by having any further change dependent on a three-fourths majority vote, but failed. In future, a simple majority vote would control the zoning system.

Collingwood, Geelong and Richmond were isolated in their opposition. Melbourne sided with the eight clubs that had already committed to country zoning, so the VFL had its three-fourths majority. Instead of the initial zones being locked in for five years, the clubs agreed to an initial three-year trial, but this would later be extended to the original five-year term.

Keith Webb, who was at the meeting, said that the delegates themselves had no part in drawing lots on which zone their club was allocated. It was a VFL official, probably McCutchan who drew the lots, he said. Contemporary newspaper accounts said that ‘the draw was made from the Premiership Cup with the names of the 12 VFL clubs being matched with the districts that were numbered’.³³ (According to the AFL, the zones were drawn from a premiership cup, and the clubs from the lid of the cup.³⁴)

Webb had been so focused on the outcome that he did not remember how the clubs and zones were paired. 'I've got an idea that it was clubs out of a hat. It was pulled out Fitzroy, Hampden League and associated minor leagues. It was all the administration that selected the whole thing.

'They decided not to zone geographically like they did the metropolitan area. They decided to do it by leagues. I picked it up quite early that they did not do their homework properly. They did it on the number of teams in each league; now, in some of the leagues the under-18s were part of the senior competition, and in others they were in another league. And they counted them as separate clubs when they were in another competition.'

The insight insiders might have had about the relative strength of the zones was made clear a few days later when journalists obtained Charleston's analysis. Recently, the most productive zones had been the Ovens and Murray, which had produced sixteen recruits in the previous three years, followed closely by the Mornington Peninsula and Latrobe Valley zones, each of which had produced fifteen recruits. The Hampden League zone had turned out thirteen, while the Wimmera and Sunraysia zones had each provided eleven players to the VFL. At the other end of the scale, the Waranga North East and Ballarat zones had each supplied just four recruits, and Western Border, which extended into South Australia, had produced only three recruits. Bendigo had generated seven recruits in that time, the Goulburn Valley six and the Riverina five.

Charleston's examination of population figures again put the Mornington Peninsula and Latrobe Valley zones at the top of the field, with estimated recruiting pools of almost 7500 individuals. As to be expected of a major regional centre, Bendigo was not far behind, with an estimated 6383 prospects.

Collingwood, zoning's perennial noisy critic, had the Western Border League, so far off to the west that some of the clubs were not even in Victoria. Club spokesman Gordon Carlyon declared the zone 'almost unworkable. Six of the clubs are in South Australia and it looks as if those players would need clearances from the [South Australian National Football League] to play with us. This is most unfair.'³⁵ To add to Collingwood's woes the zone been the least prolific of any in the previous three years, its pool of prospective recruits, while not the lowest was about half that of the most populous zones.

Richmond's zone was even more remote than Collingwood's. The 'capital' of Sunraysia, Mildura, was 550 kilometres from Punt Road Oval

along an undivided Calder Highway to the north-west, the land of gun-barrel-straight roads, red soil and wheat silos.

And Geelong, the one VFL club with a natural country constituency in the western district, was despatched to several different points of the compass entirely, receiving the Waranga North-East League, which included relatively accessible towns such as Seymour and Yea, as well as the more remote districts of Beechworth and Tallangatta, via the Ovens and King competition, while also extending its reach with the Yarra Valley League to Healesville and Marysville, and taking in a slice of New South Wales with the Murray League, linking it to clubs like Finley and Jerilderie.

Webb had not considered anything was suspect. But when I pointed out to him the way the cards had fallen, with the three clubs opposed to zoning receiving arguably the worst deals, he laughed in recognition, either at the irony or the possibility that all had not been as straight as it should have been.

More curiously still, the clubs that had played a pivotal role in securing country zoning received the most productive regions. Carlton, the prime mover, was the only top-four side in 1967 to vote in favour of the scheme, and was allocated the coveted and historically strong Bendigo area.

Footscray, which had stood alongside Sir Kenneth Luke in the summer of 1962–63, was assigned the Latrobe Valley, then the second-most prolific area for recruiting, and the most heavily populated with sixteen-to-twenty-years-olds, by Charleston's analysis. 'Most League officials think the Latrobe Valley League assigned to Footscray is the best zone,' *The Herald* reported.³⁶

And Hawthorn, which had revived the zoning campaign when it reversed its previously strong stance against it, was assigned the populous and prolific Mornington Peninsula zone, which also took in South West Gippsland. It was among the three most prolific zones, according to Charleston's analysis. And so it proved, with Keith Webb describing it as 'two zones in one'. Indeed, it had two major leagues.

To complete the allocations, the powerful Ovens and Murray League went to North Melbourne; Essendon was assigned the Wimmera League; and South Melbourne was dealt another remote but productive region, the Riverina in New South Wales.

As an Australian Rules region in a rugby-playing state, the Riverina is a sporting oddity. Its adoption of the indigenous game is apparently

a result of the fact that its nineteenth-century wool industry tied it to Melbourne rather than Sydney. ‘The Riverina was first connected to Victoria through the railways in 1876,’ writes Paul Daffey. ‘Wool-growers from Deniliquin sent their produce by train to Moama and on to Melbourne. Australian football’s foothold in the Riverina was strengthened when the South West Line was built in 1882.’ The rail line gave its name to the South West District League, which included clubs such as Ganmain and Narrandera.³⁷ Unlike Geelong’s incoherent zone, however, South Melbourne’s was at least centred in one region.

St Kilda was assigned Ballarat. Like Geelong, it was sent to a different point of the compass to its natural territory, and its president, Ian Drake, was dismayed. The Saints had already been active on the Mornington Peninsula, recruiting Garry Colling and Stuart Trott, and saw this area as a natural extension of its relocated home at Moorabbin. The view would persist that they were ‘duded’.

Melbourne lost out when it was assigned the Goulburn Valley. The region’s recent export of six VFL recruits over three years was a fraction of the production of the stronger zones, but perhaps more importantly, its population of footballing prospects was the smallest of the lot. Charleston calculated the Goulburn Valley’s pool of prospects over the next three years at 2600, barely one-third of that of the most populous zones.

In short, the clubs opposed to zoning fared poorly, while those that had played a crucial role in its introduction fared well. Since it was supposed to be about creating a more even competition, with the zones assigned randomly, it is intriguing that the most successful clubs of the preceding era – Collingwood, Essendon, Geelong and Melbourne – also fared poorly.

It is striking in another sense. To reiterate: the bottom three clubs at the time were Hawthorn, Fitzroy and Footscray, that year’s wooden spooner. Each received a highly coveted zone. It is almost too neat, too much like what the proponents of levelling the competition would have arranged if they had the power to do so. The only element that does not fit this levelling principle was the strong Carlton receiving Bendigo. Carlton, however, had been the prime driver of the system. If the lots had not been drawn in front of the VFL delegates themselves, they might have thought it was rigged.

Mike Sheahan, who began reporting on the VFL in the early 1970s, is under no illusion about how things were done. Asked if he had ever

heard of skulduggery concerning the assignment of zones, Sheahan says: 'I don't know if anyone expressed that view, but I would be amazed if it was wholly legit. I know big deals are done in politics, but wheeling and dealing was big in the VFL. Everyone in a position of authority there had a club alignment previously, and they did not leave it behind when they joined the VFL. I did hear something about a key area or areas changed hands at the death knock.'

Chapter Six

Levelled

I thought as I left, 'I will fix you, you big, fat bastard,' and proceeded to break every rule that had been brought in.

Ron Joseph, North Melbourne Football Club secretary

The day after the zoning vote, Graeme Richmond's work paid off. The Tigers claimed their first premiership in a quarter-century with a narrow win over Geelong. In the process, Richmond had turned the recruiting system upside down by challenging and beating the big clubs.

But success did not limit the Tigers' protest, the club highlighting the paucity of recruits from its new country zone in that year's annual report: 'An unproductive metropolitan district has forced us to recruit heavily from country areas, therefore, restriction to a limited zone will impair the efficiency of our fertile recruiting organisation. It is significant that of the nine country players in our premiership team, none originated from our allotted Country Zone.'¹

Meanwhile, Melbourne was confronted with replacing Norm Smith as coach. He had been hospitalised towards the end of the season, and his role filled temporarily by former captain John Beckwith. Smith formally retired from coaching Melbourne in mid-September 1967 and Beckwith was quickly confirmed as his permanent replacement.

Once the Demons' match committee reviewed Charleston's analysis, they might have been worried by their zone's low population, yet encouraged by some of the Goulburn Valley's recent exports. At the Valley's core was Shepparton, Barrie Vagg's home town. Also there was a kid from Kyabram, a promising forward called Ross Dillon, who had already kicked twenty-two goals in his nineteen games with the Demons, and who would go on to twice lead Melbourne's goalkicking in an 85-game career. Among the six recruits the zone had produced that Charleston identified was Dick Clay, who at Richmond would become, with Francis Bourke and Bill Barrot, part of arguably the finest centreline of all time.

But Melbourne would soon learn the truth of the investment adviser's warning that 'past performance is no guarantee of future performance'. The nine players recruited directly from Melbourne's zone in the first five years of country zoning would average just thirty-seven senior games for the club. Just one, Peter 'Crackers' Keenan, would play over 100 games.

The VFL devised two messages to justify zoning, one for the city and the other for the bush. VFL public relations officer Terry Young took over an entire page of a football newspaper to make the first argument: that zoning would create a more even competition. Competition for players had created a black market, he wrote, where the clubs able to offer the biggest bait secured the best players, with the result that many teams were uncompetitive.

League competition has suffered because of the gap between the top six or seven clubs who have regularly vied for positions in the Final Four, and the remainder who, after only a few rounds of matches each Season, have been in a position where they have no chance of reaching the finals.

In 1967, the top six Clubs finished the first round matches with a total of 296 premiership points as against 136 premiership points by the bottom six Clubs. This has been the pattern over a number of seasons and has caused considerable concern to football administrators. In the promotion of any competition the ultimate aim of the promoter must be to have all Clubs as evenly matched as possible so that interest will remain in the competition right throughout the Season.

In recent years the last six or eight rounds of the Season have produced only two or three matches each week sufficiently attractive to draw reasonable crowds. A number of Clubs have been unable to meet normal running expenses because of poor gate receipts, due to the staging of matches which have no bearing on the Final Four.

The League, in attempting to overcome this problem, decided on a division of the whole of the State and the Riverina into 12 sections, one of which has been allotted to each VFL Club for a period of three years.

The advent of country zoning meant that every footballer who lived or played in Victoria or the Riverina was bound to a VFL club: any player wanting to play at VFL level must play with the club to which he was bound, or else secure a clearance from that club to another.

The benefits of the scheme would not become clear until its second three-year term, Young went on, because many of the better players

from the zones may already have been signed. 'Before expiration of the present three-year term the League will decide whether the scheme should continue, and if so, what method of allocation will be used for the second term and for what period the second term should operate.' The hope was for 'a levelling effect on League competition [that] must result in increased public interest and therefore better financial status for a number of Clubs which have not been successful in recent years.'

The country district scheme differs completely from the district scheme operating in Melbourne. Country players are bound to VFL clubs because they are registered players with country clubs irrespective of where they live, whereas in the city a player is bound to a club because of his residential qualifications.²

For the bush, the message was that the era of plundering country football for no return was over. Country clubs now were guaranteed a \$500 transfer fee for each player who appeared in six games and who wanted to continue in the VFL. Moreover, VFL clubs were limited to signing no more than eight VCFL players in any year. Country players could not be recruited to play in the VFL under-19, or thirds, competition, so they would develop at home and spend more time with their origin clubs.

The advantages to country clubs, according to a document prepared by the VFL's Recruiting Committee, included an end to VFL clubs sweeping recruiting drives through the bush. Also, VFL clubs would be responsible for promoting the game within their zone, and would be required to conduct clinics and offer other support. And players could transfer from the VFL back to their country clubs with no transfer fee.³

Country football administrators remained unconvinced, though, and some leagues thought about severing ties altogether with the VFL. Ultimately, they negotiated the limit of any club taking a maximum of eight VCFL players in one season.⁴

As Ron Joseph discovered when he travelled to Albury to introduce himself to the president of the Ovens and Murray League, country hospitality was not guaranteed. Joseph was the secretary of North Melbourne and the Kangaroos' chief recruiter. He had held the job for two years, beginning when he was just eighteen years old.

'North was this stone motherless last club that had never won a premiership,' Joseph recalls. 'It had never had a Brownlow medallist. It had never had a leading goalkicker. It had played in one Grand Final,

in 1950, and it had a chance in 1958 but had not got there, and that was North's history. So after the ballot, and North has drawn the Ovens and Murray, I was going up to make myself known to Cleaver Bunton, who was president of the Ovens and Murray League and mayor of Albury. He was the brother of [triple Brownlow Medallist] Haydn Bunton.

'So anyway, he books me up to the mayor's office in Albury and I waited to meet him. He kept me waiting outside in the reception room for about two hours, and finally I was told to come in. He opened by saying things like, "We are not happy about this zoning arrangement. We are thinking with a couple of other strong leagues of challenging its legality in court. We wanted to deal with the strong, successful clubs.

'So he told me this in no uncertain terms. I sat there like a schoolboy. I was twenty in late 1967 and in due course I was dismissed. I thought as I left, "I will fix you, you big, fat bastard," and proceeded to break every rule that had been brought in.'

Among the rules Joseph determined to break was one requiring city clubs to give notice of their intention to interview potential recruits. 'We were supposed to hand in request-to-interview forms,' he notes. 'My MO, I was watching Ovens and Murray games out on my own. The people there, they wouldn't know me from a bar of soap. I made no attempts to know them. If I liked a player I would snoop around and ask people where they lived. I would usually end up at the parents' home that night; sometimes stay the night and take the family out for a meal.'

Despite the frosty introduction Joseph received, the Kangaroos had scored. In the first year of the system's operation, the Ovens and Murray won the country championships, defeating Latrobe Valley to qualify for the final, in which it overcame Wimmera. Country football was booming. A crowd of 10,000 rolled into Horsham for the occasion. That victory confirmed the Ovens and Murray's status as the strongest league in Victorian country football at the time.⁵

In Bendigo, Carlton also met early problems, the locals proving less than welcoming, according to club president George Harris. Only one club, Rochester, had made a group of six players and a committeeman welcome when they arrived in town to conduct a series of clinics. Elsewhere, dressing rooms and hot showers were unavailable, the players changing in a ticket box in one case, and local club officials had failed to attend. Harris declared the reception 'disgusting'.⁶

Over time, as locals won their way onto club lists, the resistance

ended. For the Kangaroos, country zoning was a boon. ‘Once players like [Peter] Chisnall and [Sam] Kekovich were getting games, we started to win them over,’ says Joseph. ‘There was a huge input by the country zone. It was very frosty at the start. I was a kid. [Bunton] made me feel about one foot tall. What started off as a very cold relationship became a very warm relationship.’

At St Kilda, a suspicion lingered that the allotment of zones had not been entirely by chance. Cameron Schwab, whose father, the late Alan Schwab, was an administrator at St Kilda at the time, says he understood that the Saints had voted for zoning in the belief that they would be assigned the Mornington Peninsula zone.

Zoning was introduced three years after the Saints had relocated to Moorabbin. Their secretary, Ian Drake, lived at Frankston on the Mornington Peninsula. Drake’s particular insight was that footballers grew in greater numbers in population growth areas, where young families were starting out, rather than in older, established suburbs. The region south-east of Melbourne was one such growth corridor.

‘The way [Alan Schwab] described it, St Kilda saw themselves having a significant advantage because of the peninsula and the southern corridor,’ says Cameron Schwab. ‘One of the incentives for going to Moorabbin in the first place was the access to those growth corridors. They were sort of country, but they were becoming part of the city, really.’

‘So if you lived in Frankston or Mordialloc or Chelsea, through the corridor to Berwick and into Gippsland, [St Kilda] were seen as the first-choice club. You’d have to go past St Kilda to get to Richmond or Melbourne. And St Kilda was a good club during that era, they were a successful club, so they probably saw themselves as having that advantage.’

‘St Kilda thought they were going to get the peninsula, that’s the folklore.’

Gary Colling, who was recruited from Frankston shortly before zoning was introduced, confirms that Ian Drake was ‘desperate’ to secure that zone. ‘Drake was very shrewd,’ he notes. ‘He lived in Frankston and he knew what the talent was like down there, so he was desperate to get it. He was both the recruiting manager and manager in those days. They were pretty confident they were going to get it, and they’d written submission after submission.’

Drake, who had started his career as a junior secretary at Wynyard, and continued in Hobart and Launceston, had recruited actively in

Tasmania, where he found the club's premiership captain Darrel Baldock, full-back Verdun Howell and centreman Ian Stewart.

Drake's widow, Jan Drake, relates how St Kilda lured him to Victoria a year after he was shortlisted for the secretary's job at Collingwood. The couple had married in Tasmania in 1958, and moved initially to the St Kilda area before settling in Frankston in 1962. Just as he worked over his home state of Tasmania for recruits, Drake now set his sights on Frankston and the Mornington Peninsula. At the end of one season, he gave the St Kilda players' boots to a struggling local club. He attended Frankston games each weekend and arranged football clinics.

'He was quite strongly of the belief that St Kilda would get the peninsula, that logically it would extend from Moorabbin through the southern suburbs to the peninsula,' Jan Drake recalls. 'I think it was in discussions with people [he formed that view]. It was a big shock that they got what they did.'

There was perhaps one final reason St Kilda reasoned, or assumed, or thought it had an understanding that the Mornington Peninsula zone would be theirs: South Melbourne and St Kilda were the only VFL clubs south of the Yarra River. Even Melbourne, whose metropolitan zone extended into the south-east, was perched on the northern bank in Yarra Park. Right back to the formation of the VFL in 1897, St Kilda's presence in the competition was determined by geography. Six stronger, richer clubs broke away from the Victorian Football Association to form the Victorian Football League after the 1896 season. They were Collingwood, Essendon, Fitzroy, Geelong, Melbourne and South Melbourne. Carlton and St Kilda were invited to join them, 'St Kilda because they needed a club south of the Yarra River', as Daffey puts it.⁷

Drake might have thought St Kilda had logic on their side, but the Saints were – for the first time – the reigning premiers when the vote was taken. And zoning was about levelling the competition. Instead of the Mornington Peninsula and West Gippsland, they were assigned Ballarat, which had generated only four recruits to the VFL in the previous three years, the second-worst performance of any of the zones. The Mornington Peninsula and West Gippsland zone went instead to Hawthorn.

Had Drake and his club known what the future held, they would have been thoroughly dismayed. The Ballarat zone would generate just two first XVIII players in the first five years of zoning: Stephen Theodore and Mick Malthouse, who played a combined 187 senior games for the Saints.

By contrast, in the first five years of zoning, Hawthorn introduced no fewer than eighteen players direct from the zone St Kilda had thought would be theirs.

Hawthorn's harvest included eight-time club champion Leigh Matthews and his brother Kelvin, club champions Peter Knights and Kelvin Moore, as well as multiple premierships defenders Michael Tuck and Michael Moncrieff, and premierships players Leon Rice and Alan Goad. Collectively, that first wave of eighteen Hawthorn country recruits played 2107 senior games for the Hawks, at an average of 117 per player.

Even Collingwood, with the maligned Western Border zone, did better than the Saints. In the first five years of zoning, the Magpies gave six country boys senior experience.

No club, however, had an initial haul to rival the Bulldogs, at least in terms of the sheer number of players tried. The Latrobe Valley proved as prolific as had been expected. By the end of zoning's first five-year period, Footscray had introduced twenty players from its country zone, sufficient for an entire team, to its senior ranks. They included outstanding players such as Bernie Quinlan and Barry Round, who would later tie in a Brownlow Medal count, and Ian Salmon. Overall, there may not have been the breadth of quality Hawthorn gained, but it was a substantial injection of talent.

Had Carlton not pushed so vigorously for country zoning, it might never have been introduced, considering that McCutchan had in early 1967 swung his weight behind a drafting system. But Carlton, the architect of the system, also gained significant talent despite initial resentment from the locals. Key defenders David McKay and Geoff Southby were among eleven country zone debutants in the initial five-year period who ultimately played 1013 senior games for the Blues.

Terry Young's March 1968 explanation showed that country zoning was overwhelmingly concerned with levelling the competition. And in most respects, what happened looks like the ideal outcome by those terms. Recently successful and strong clubs fared poorly, and struggling clubs received a leg-up. Had Collingwood secured one of the better zones, such as the Latrobe Valley, Bendigo or the Ovens and Murray, the VFL would likely have visited upon itself a second coming of the famed Collingwood 'Machine' of the 1920s, which played in six consecutive grand finals, winning four. Outside Victoria Park, nobody wanted that.

North Central and Sunraysia, assigned to Richmond, had produced

eleven recruits in the previous three years, but it was arguably the hardest to service, demanding at least a seven-hour drive to visit, and had half the prospective population of the most populous areas.

‘Collingwood and Richmond have every right to be filthy on it,’ says Stuart Trott, who played 200 games for St Kilda and Hawthorn, and later went into administration with the Saints. ‘It was an uneven playing field, and it was made even worse with all the travel. “Drakey” [Ian Drake] said to me once that the clubs said they had to stop St Kilda [becoming] too powerful. The other clubs worked out St Kilda’s plan of heading south and into south-west Gippsland [through] Cranbourne. The drive from Pakenham to Moorabbin is vastly different to Ballarat to Moorabbin, and no West Gate Bridge. You had to drive through Footscray. Understand, St Kilda went to Moorabbin to get the southern country.’

Geelong was not only uprooted from its natural recruiting ground, its allotment had produced just four recruits in three years. The Cats were a successful club with premierships in both the early 1950s and early 1960s, and were regular finalists. At the other end of the scale, North Melbourne, Footscray, Fitzroy and South Melbourne were the ‘peasant clubs’ that zoning was supposed to enable to challenge the big clubs.

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There is some cause to suspect the ballot was not the random event it was purported to be. Had each club’s delegate had a hand in selecting their zone – literally a hand in the cup – then the outcome would simply be an extraordinary coincidence. But because the act of assigning the zones was done by a VFL official, the opportunity existed for arranging at least some of the zones to go to particular clubs or groups of clubs.

Ian Collins was a stalwart Carlton defender at the time, his senior playing career having begun in 1961. He later became an administrator with both Carlton and the AFL, and then CEO of the Docklands stadium. He says he never heard of anything untoward about the allocation of country zones, but agreed that a rigged outcome was plausible.

‘I think you would be suspicious. I would be too,’ Collins says. ‘It would be about bringing the best back to the field ... probably both Collingwood and Melbourne. It probably was the start of Hawthorn’s rise.’

It seems intuitively wrong to argue that a professional sports administrator such as Eric McCutchan – ‘the straightest man in football’ – would tolerate a fix, but once charged with implementing the system, he would have done so as Luke’s ‘right hand’. If it seemed unfair and, for

a professional administrator like McCutchan, unprincipled to burden some clubs with difficult or unproductive zones, there was the comfort of knowing that the arrangement was to be temporary. The zones were to rotate among the clubs after the initial three years, later adjusted to a five-year period. If it was a stitch-up, then at least it was not supposed to be a permanent one.

As the notice of the zoning meeting outlined:

This regulation shall be operative for a period of 3 years commencing October 1, 1967 excepting that ... in the event of a determination by a simple majority of Delegates assembled at a meeting called for such a purpose, that the regulation shall be operative for a further period, the reassignment of VCFL districts to VFL Clubs shall be made in such a manner and for such period as the League may decide.⁸

In other words, the clubs that fared poorly in the initial round might do better when the scheme continued. In the meantime, the all-important levelling could occur. Perhaps that was consolation for the straightest man in football.

Melbourne, however, had already been levelled. When in 1965 the Demons missed the finals for the first time in my conscious life, I waved away all mockery with the prediction that we would be back in two years' time. The alternative was unthinkable – until it was inescapable. Norm Smith, unsurprisingly, had a clearer view of the immediate future, telling a trainer in 1967 that 'it will be many, many years before Melbourne will play in the finals again, let alone become a force'.⁹

Frank Davis played just six games alongside Ron Barassi, including the 1964 Grand Final, but it was the great man's move to Carlton that, he believed, was the first and primary factor in Melbourne's slide. The lack of recruiting of which Smith had complained took effect later.

'My impression of it, and I don't blame the guy, but I think Barassi leaving and going to Carlton had a big effect on that side,' Davis says, 'simply because of the fanatical way that Barassi played football, and the fanatical way he spoke to his teammates, and the things he did to spur them on. The only guy that retired from that Grand Final side was Bluey [Adams]. The rest of the side was basically the same guys that played in '64. I think the loss of Barassi was the loss of the father figure who was out on the ground with you who could make things happen.

'The sacking of Norm destabilised the club to some degree, but just

the fact Barassi was not there ... even though there were good players there, there was nobody with that great competitive spirit and booming voice that he had. And there weren't the players coming through. In '64 I think I was the only new player to make the senior list. In '65 it was Stan Alves. They had one player a year making the list, whereas when the boom started they had several players coming through.'

The slide continued under Smith's successor, John Beckwith, who saw his charges win only seventeen of his sixty-two matches as coach. Melbourne devolved into the easybeats just as The Easybeats left for London.

An episode involving Ray Biffin, who was recruited from Tasmania in 1968, is insightful. Biffin was to build a reputation as a hardman – 'Biffin by name and Biffin by nature,' as ABC commentator Doug Heywood once remarked. But according to the man himself, it was not so much that it was in his nature as in his calling.

An incident in a reserves game when an opposition player kicked one of Biffin's teammates shaped his future. 'Two things I could never accept,' Biffin says, 'anyone who spat at another player, and anyone who hoed the boot in. Well, I've run thirty yards and gone whack and just hit him. There was a bit of a blue, and from then on, it was two weeks later, Checker Hughes spoke to me at Waverley.

'Checker grabbed me and said to me, "Biff, we need someone like you playing in the seniors. We've got nobody who's prepared to use their body and look after any of the players. We need you to become that sort of player." Which is something I had never been asked to do before or had to do. I'd never had to do that sort of thing before. I just accepted the fact that if I wanted to play league footy, I needed to be a little bit stronger in some areas.'

So Biffin became the player the club needed him to be, and made himself into a cult hero before anyone had heard of the term.

For me, as the 1960s closed, there was some solace in examining the reserves ladder. That was where Melbourne was still winning. In a business studies class at Kew High School, a classmate solemnly advised me that the Demons would not be down long because the reserves were dominant. Now, like my Fitzroy-supporting classmate from years earlier, I was the one being consoled. I secretly agreed there was hope as the reserves prepared for a finals campaign, but I should instead have heeded our teacher.

Mrs Bogatin was a tiny woman, good-natured, with a comforting sense of humour and a well-worn phrase that was supposed to be encouraging when we, her students, groaned with incomprehension at some new concept she was introducing: ‘Stop complaining. It’ll get worse before it gets better.’

Mrs Bogatin was right, and not only about balance sheets and profit-and-loss statements. Before it was better for Melbourne, it grew very much worse, aided by a fruit-growing country zone that would prove mostly fruitless.

Chapter Seven

The 1970s

I have spent ten lousy years at Melbourne and the tenth has been the lousiest of them all. It's been soul destroying.

Stan Alves, club champion 1974

Everybody rebels, or at least at some point rejects something of their upbringing. For some time I tried to lose football. It was like a remnant of childhood, something that had mattered enormously but that I had come to see was ultimately futile. Arty kids sneered at it. All the would-be bohemians, adolescent filmmakers, photographers and aspiring dramatists dismissed it. There was no grey about it: sport or art, black or white, highbrow or lowbrow. Sport was uncool.

Reduced to its simplest, football is two groups of people, each dressed in identical shirts and shorts, chasing a leather ball around an open field. As Jerry Seinfeld once observed, if a player changes teams he is booed by his former fans. Why? He is wearing the wrong shirt. The punchline: we are barracking for a shirt. Decades before Seinfeld's insight, I thought that football was something you could outgrow if you wanted. Try hard enough and it would not matter anymore.

There were plenty of alternatives. The Rolling Stones were my personal soundtrack to that time. Once the Stones abandoned their experiment with psychedelia and reimmersed themselves in the American roots music that was, in fact, their roots, they embarked on their most productive period. A succession of outstanding albums followed: *Beggars Banquet*, *Let It Bleed*, *Sticky Fingers*, *Exile on Main St.*

Midway through the decade, Bob Dylan reached a new level with his timeless 'break-up album' *Blood on the Tracks*. Early Stones albums led me to Otis Redding, Dylan to Woody Guthrie and the Dustbowl Ballads, the blues masters Big Bill Broonzy, Mississippi John Hurt, Elmore James and the lodestone of them all, Robert Johnson, whose entire recorded anthology was available on two vinyl albums, *King of the Delta Blues*,

volumes one and two. There was much to explore.

Saturday afternoons could be productively filled listening to local bands at Greville Street's Station Hotel. A friend, a devoted Collingwood supporter, who like me was faking it, laughingly confided that it was just acceptable on leaving the pub to pick up a copy of *The Herald* to check the three-quarter time scores in the red ink 'Stop Press' to see how the boys were going. Then pretend to think no more about it.

With Melbourne tumbling lower into the abyss, there was still more reason to lose interest altogether – or, most desperate of all, to claim an allegiance to another team. An easy club to adopt would have been Carlton. Full of university students, hip restaurants and serious bookshops, Carlton was cool and its team was either winning premierships or contending for them. Alternatively, there was Fitzroy, not successful but with a distinctive, moody, dark blue and maroon guernsey with a cream FFC monogram, a great song sung to the tune of '*La Marseillaise*' and representing a suburb with working-class cred. As for Hawthorn – it was impossible. Increasingly successful but too comfortable, too close to its leafy Eastern Suburbs base, the colours – the awful brown and yellow I'd worn as a junior with North Kew – were hard to like. And the tune for the club song was terrible. '*Yankee Doodle Dandy*' – really?

Yet I knew that if I defected to any of them, no received glory would feel totally right. There never could be a sense of unbridled triumph, no genuine I-told-you-so retribution. Every win would be tempered by the knowledge that I had taken the soft option.

Finally, a grey Saturday afternoon in August 1977 ended my delusion that the attachments formed in childhood amid that gallery of Demons could be cast off by will. The previous season had ended with promise: Melbourne almost qualified for the finals. That fleeting hope was swiftly snuffed out as consecutive losses mounted from the start. As my father said at such times, 'The mid-season slump has come early.' Through that dismal season, Melbourne and Fitzroy shadowed one another, a rare win here followed by more misery there.

On 6 August the Demons and the Lions occupied tenth and eleventh positions on the ladder, with four wins apiece, but there was reason for optimism. In their first meeting, back in autumn, Melbourne broke the Royboys with a forty-eight-point win. I wasn't at the game but I was not alone in avoiding it – a mere 7000 people had been there. Typically, I knew when the game was over, so at five o'clock, and affecting as casual

a manner as I could muster to avoid the scrutiny of my housemates, I strolled out to my car. Alone and where no one could overhear, I tuned in to the news and the football results.

The car was parked on the street. The street was deserted. The grey gloom of a Melbourne winter evening was drawing close. Not even a dog walker was there to witness my addiction to knowing how the team had fared. I know, without specifically recalling it, that as the announcer turned to the sports results, my pulse lifted a little, in expectation and dread. It always does.

And there, sitting alone in a car, unobserved by man or beast, I flushed red. Deep, deep, flustered schoolboy red. We had lost. Not just lost: we were thrashed, a ten-goal defeat. By a team that, like us, struggled to win anything. Shame and embarrassment – for the players, for myself – rose in me like a king tide. I would soon regather myself and act as if it had not happened. I would return inside and not speak of it, and if asked about it, I would feign indifference. But I knew then that I was condemned to care, always. It was in my blood. There was no shaking off this demon.

Indeed, most weeks, a Sunday-morning phone call to discuss the game was my main link home. My father had contracted polio as a four-year-old, in 1921, which left him with compromised mobility and dependent on a walking stick and a caliper on his ruined leg. His active sport was limited to bowling slow leg spin and keeping wickets, which he did for his University High School team. He was no outdoorsman, unless it concerned a visit to the MCG or the racetrack. Outdoors activities such as picnicking he dismissed as a challenge in which you raced the flies to your lunch. Nor did he enjoy camping or fishing. So we did not bond there. Sport, especially football, was the place where we connected.

Every week in that grim time when I saw relatively few matches, I'd call him to hear his take on the game, since the newspaper coverage invariably focused on the good teams. Every year, about March, I'd ask the same question about how the Demons would go, and every year he'd say they would 'win as many as they lose'. That is to say, he was an optimist.

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The 1970s were grim for the Melbourne Football Club: seven bottom-four finishes; four coaches sacked; two wooden spoons; a winning percentage of just 33 per cent. In Ian 'Tiger' Ridley, coach from 1971 to 1973, Peter Keenan saw an old fire-and-brimstone coach, passionate but limited. 'Ridley was alright, but he had no real plan,' Keenan says. 'He was a

hot gospeller. Some of [the 1970s] was bloody terrible but 1971 was not bad.'

Indeed, 1971 was Ridley's most successful year as coach, with eleven wins and a draw, followed by ten wins in 1972. But as the wins were less frequent, the club became impatient. Ridley 'was basically fired at a best and fairest night' in 1973, says Dick Seddon. At the time, journalist Ron Carter reported that Ridley was sacked at a committee meeting hours before the best and fairest celebration. Don Duffy, who had overseen the sacking of Norm Smith eight years earlier, did the deed.

'Duffy was a decent man but he should never have been president,' Seddon recalls, 'particularly to follow in the footsteps of Bert Chadwick. Bert was a beauty. But Duffy, every now and then he thought he had to be tough, so he'd do something stupid to show he was a strong man.'

Ridley's sacking triggered a player rebellion. Many of the players loved Ridley. His overall winning percentage of 43 per cent would prove the best of any of Melbourne's coaches in the decade.

Paul Callery, a diminutive and brave rover – at 165 centimetres he'd have been considered short in the company of Welsh miners – had been Melbourne's chief goalkicker two years earlier. He was that rare beast, a player who excelled in the reserves to win the Morrish Medal, and thrived at the elite level as well. Although he'd come up through the Demons' youth ranks, he quit the club as a matter of personal loyalty to Ridley.

'Ian Ridley gave me my first chance,' Callery explains. 'I played under him in the seconds when we won two premierships. He was a fantastic coach. I remember my first game. He had this way of jutting out his chin at you, and thumping me on the chest he said to me, "They can measure your height; they can measure your weight; they can measure your speed but they can't measure what's inside there."'

'The last game he coached [at Melbourne] was my last game. I had great faith in him and [the club] was looking for a scapegoat. He was not reappointed, but in my eyes he was sacked. It was nothing against the club; I was just very loyal to Tiger. [MCC secretary] Ian Johnson took me up in the bleachers and tried to talk me out of going.' Johnson held out that old bait, membership of the MCC, but it was not enough. Callery fled to St Kilda, where he played more than 100 games.

Others who considered leaving included centreman Greg Wells, Keenan, 1964 premiership full-forward Barry Bourke, and Biffin. While Bourke retired, the others were persuaded to stay. Later, Ridley was elected to the football club committee. 'If Ridley had not been such a

decent guy, there would have been a mass exodus,' says Seddon.

Biffin, a stalwart of the club through that difficult decade, had played in the 1969 reserves premiership with Ridley as coach and admired him greatly. 'I was very happy to go because Ridley was sacked and it was claimed by the club he was leaving on medical grounds,' Biffin recalls. 'I was working with him at the time and I knew Ian was as good as gold. That upset a lot of the players because of the respect they had for him. There was no reason for him to be sacked. Things got a little bit out of control that night; the dishonesty of the club at that stage to sack him and then turn around and tell the media he had to go on medical grounds.'

Biffin refused to train with Melbourne in the pre-season. He spoke to Collingwood and North Melbourne, and had decided he would join the Magpies, even though he says now: 'I hated Collingwood. Still do.'

A three-way shuffle was arranged, with a player moving from Collingwood to St Kilda, a full-forward prospect moving from the Saints to Melbourne, and Biffin going to Collingwood. Ridley, however, persuaded Biffin to play a practice match with Melbourne to test the full-forward prospect from St Kilda who was part of the proposed deal. 'This kid was coming down to play full-forward. He hadn't been at the club. He was going to be a gun and Ridley's telling me to make certain I did a job on him.' Biffin did the job. The prospect, whose name Biffin has forgotten, 'never played with Melbourne or St Kilda. Disappeared.'

By this time, the South Melbourne champion Bob Skilton had replaced Ridley as coach. 'I remember Skilton as I walked out, has come out of the old MCG where there was the pathway to get into your car and Skilton's called out, "There's a place in my team for a fit Biffin." I just said, "It's not going to happen," and kept walking. A week later Cardwell picked me up and took me to a barbecue at Skilt's place.'

Biffin stayed. Still, internal conflict is rarely productive and the side went backwards the next year, winning just three games and finishing last. Mostly the side lost by big margins: only three defeats were by less than two goals. Club champion Stan Alves lamented the smell of defeat around the place. On winning the best and fairest, he delivered some hard truths to the club's 1974 annual meeting: 'Don't take me the wrong way but I have spent ten lousy years at Melbourne and the tenth has been the lousiest of them all. It's been soul destroying ... Don't be patronising and kind when we come in having been beaten by four points and say it's a good game. It's bloody disgusting.'¹

None of this is to say that Melbourne was utterly without hope. Quality existed in its ranks, just not enough of it. In the first half of the decade, Alves captained the club with distinction and represented Victoria several times. Greg Wells ran second in the 1972 Brownlow Medal, while key defender Gary Hardeman, who won All-Australian honours that year, was in third place. Wells also represented Victoria multiple times. Steven Smith became a fixture in the side after his debut in 1974 and went on to play more than 200 games.

But there were too few of that ilk. Keenan remembers the group as ‘an honest side, but we had too many holes’. Frank Davis, who captained the club for two seasons before retiring at the end of 1973 recalls, ‘We just didn’t have the talent. We went and got Graeme Molloy and [John] Tilbrook. They rapt up “Tilly” but in the end he was struggling to get a game. They just didn’t have any superstars coming through, or they got them one at a time. Alves, Wells, Hardeman. They let Hassa go when he was twenty-eight years of age and he finished up coaching South Fremantle to a premiership, and I think he represented WA in a state game. They just made bad decisions.’ Davis had played in a premiership in his sixth game in 1964. He never played another final.

As Davis was finishing, one of the finest, most loved players in the club’s history played the first of his fifteen seasons. Robert Flower was reason enough in his own right to follow Melbourne. In fact, some supporters were able to maintain their interest only because they could admire his uncanny ability to read the play, his poise, extraordinary balance and skills. He was lightly built and never could bulk up in the gym, despite hours of effort, yet he remained a beacon of brilliance in what, to that time, was the grimmest period of the club’s history.

Flower seemed to glide through the chaos of a game with a special sense of space and time. He was one of those players for whom time slows down, who sees things others don’t, or sees them earlier. One observer wrote that he seemed to have special control of his body:

On a couple of occasions Flower’s use of the baulk left opponents dizzy trying to keep up ... He looks so frail on the field compared to the rosy, muscly appearances of many of his opponents. If they have muscles on muscles, Flower has skin on bones ... he also has the champion’s ability to do the right thing in a crisis, to keep going when stopping is easier, often called heart.²

Flower was condemned to play through many losing seasons, partly because country zoning had dealt Melbourne a poor hand. As early as 1970, the club was complaining that country zoning had made recruiting extremely difficult. The days of having seven or eight of the best players from across the state playing for Melbourne were done. After Barassi had coached Carlton to the premiership, and with the Demons among the stragglers with six wins, the Melbourne board acknowledged that its rural zone was not up to much:

The Victorian Football League in a desire to produce a more even competition has supported this scheme and all League Clubs now find themselves operating under it.

Whilst this evening up is undoubtedly taking place it is most irksome to your officials engaged in recruiting players to be confined to those leagues that have been allocated to us, particularly when it is quite obvious that league players are not available from these leagues at the present time ... our immediate needs cannot be fulfilled from our country zone.³

In truth, the first three years of country zoning did not change football much – it was too soon for new recruits to have much impact on the clubs they were tied to – but by 1971 there were four country zone players in the victorious Hawthorn side on Grand Final day. Their opponents, St Kilda, by contrast, fielded a side devoid of recruits from their Ballarat zone.

By this time, Melbourne was hopeful that the country zoning scheme would be scrapped. Abandoning country zoning ‘can only benefit our club who ... had been, prior to zoning, one of the most successful clubs in country wide recruiting’, its 1971 annual report asserted.⁴ St Kilda’s board had also decided to support a system of drafting to replace country zones. Its records for 17 August 1972 note that St Kilda had made submissions ‘that a drafting system be introduced as an alternative to zoning’.

Later that year, *The Age* nominated Collingwood, Geelong and South Melbourne as ‘constant critics of the scheme which failed to provide them with many senior players’. However, the paper reported that the VFL subcommittee which included Melbourne’s Arthur King was believed to be unanimous in deciding to recommend that the system remain.⁵ This is extraordinary, since it puts Melbourne’s delegate at odds with the club’s stated wish to end country zoning.

In assessing metropolitan zones, the VFL devised a metric called ‘football mindedness’, which was meant to reflect a community’s

engagement with Australian Rules football. It was determined by the number of clubs and teams playing the sport, and the number of ovals assigned to it. The same commitment to equality did not apply for the bush zones. The first five years of the country system showed how wildly unequal the zones were.

At Footscray, twenty country zone players had debuted. At Hawthorn those eighteen bush debutants included four players who would be selected in the club's Team of the Century, and seven who would play more than 100 games for the club. North Melbourne drew sixteen players from its Ovens and Murray zone, four of whom would play more than 100 games for the club and one, Sam Kekovich, who would be named in the Kangaroos' Team of the Century. Carlton found eleven debutants from the Bendigo region; three would play 100 games, and two would be selected in the Blues' Team of the Century. Geelong, however, had seen only five players from its country zones play senior football in zoning's first five years, while at St Kilda just two debuted.

Melbourne had tried nine players from its country zone, but just one of them would play 100 games for the club. Peter Keenan was recruited from Assumption College, Kilmore, and was surprised to learn from North Melbourne secretary Ron Joseph that he was tied to Melbourne. 'Ron gave me a Grand Final ticket in 1967,' Keenan recalls, 'and in '68 I asked him for another one and he said, "No, we only give them to people in our zone. You're a Melbourne player."'

Keenan was only signed after he had a friend write to Cardwell suggesting he was worth a look, and after playing a practice match with Melbourne he moved away from his family's wheat and sheep farm at Tungamah, in the Goulburn Valley. His demands were 'free board, a place at uni and \$1000 above match payments'.

His father farewelled him with \$20 and best wishes. 'When I got off at Spencer Street, there was Checker Hughes and Jim Cardwell,' Keenan remembers. 'I'd been working on the header at the farm and carrying no weight, and Checker says to Jim, "He's pretty lean." Jim turned to him and said, "Yeah, but the bastard's mad."'

Melbourne would wait until 1985 for another zoned country player who would play 100 games for the club.

According to Frank Davis, the best of the Demons' first wave of country recruits was a solidly built defender, Des Campbell, from Shepparton. But Campbell hated city life and often hid from club officials

when they came looking for him. He played fifty games spread over four seasons, in 1970 and then from 1975 to 1977. ‘He played fifty games but was probably capable of playing 150 games,’ Davis says. ‘It was always “Is Des playing this week?” “Nah, we can’t find him, he’s not coming down.” If he did come down and play, as soon as the game was over, he’d be on his way back up to Shep.’

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The country zoning system, which was supposed to make for a more even competition, had proved contentious for more than a decade even before it was introduced for its initial trial period. Surprisingly, there was little reaction when it was announced in 1972 that the system would continue unchanged. *The Age* noted:

The VFL’s administrative director Mr Eric McCutchan ... said a simple majority of the VFL’s 12 member clubs had voted in favour of retaining the present system. He would not give details of voting ... It has been the subject of bitter opposition from at least four clubs, Collingwood, Essendon, Geelong and Fitzroy over the past three years. The VFL recently asked all clubs to give opinions on continuation of the system, suggest a new one, adopt the American draft style or go back to unrestricted recruiting.⁶

Oddly, given how earlier votes were detailed in the league minutes, surviving VFL records do not record how the clubs voted on whether to continue zoning. It is striking that McCutchan refused to make them public. With Collingwood, Richmond and Geelong joined by Melbourne and St Kilda in clear opposition, and with mounting criticism from Essendon, Fitzroy and South Melbourne, it must have been a line-ball decision – unless, as Mike Sheahan speculated, some delegates voted against their club’s wishes.

Despite rotation of the zones being an integral part of the design of the scheme, the existing arrangement was kept in place. The one significant change that did happen in 1972 was forced upon the system once the VFL decided to align its metropolitan boundary with that of the planning authority, the Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works. That meant the well-populated northern portion of Hawthorn’s peninsula zone was folded into the metropolitan area.

Hawthorn incorporated part of Frankston into its metropolitan zone, an extension of its hold on much of the Mornington Peninsula. But it now

had to share with St Kilda, which won a toehold in the north and east of Frankston. Also, the Demon's metropolitan zone, which had included Mordialloc and Mentone was extended towards the peninsula, adding Chelsea and Carrum to its area.⁷

Melbourne's country zone also gained the Waranga North East League – including clubs from Broadford and Seymour that had been Geelong's. This 'gain' would be compromised by the fact that the fracturing Waranga League would fold in 1977.⁸ Elsewhere, Geelong gained Werribee and Melton for its metropolitan zone, while Footscray, which lost Werribee, was assigned Berwick by way of compensation.

However, the big shift was the league's decision to strip Footscray of Moe, Morwell, Yallourn and Warragul, and assign those to Hawthorn's country area. The Hawks were already a big winner from zoning's first incarnation. As well, the minor Ellinbank League went from Footscray to Hawthorn. Hawthorn was being compensated for its losses on the Mornington Peninsula, but the Bulldogs were outraged, even as they in turn were assigned the eighteen-team Yarra Valley League.

'Boys we have been cultivating in sections of Gippsland now become tied to Hawthorn. It's unfair. We are being victimised,' declared club secretary Gordon Watt. No stranger to irony, Watt suggested the changes were because 'it seems Footscray have been winning too many premierships'.⁹

In this shuffle, Geelong lost the Yarra Valley League but gained from South Melbourne the Northern District League, which included clubs such as Cohuna, Kerang, Koondrook and Leitchville.

In simultaneous country zoning moves, Essendon lost the Ararat and Stawell clubs to Richmond, but received in their place some Mallee League clubs, while Fitzroy gained the Colac and District and Mount Noorat leagues.

Despite its misgivings, Fitzroy ultimately opted to continue to support country zoning. Its delegate Keith Webb said the club was unhappy with its Hampden League zone, in western Victoria, but there were risks in changing zones. He remembered some clubs speaking out against zoning, but said it continued 'quite smoothly'.

'You just got so used to the people you were dealing with in your zone that this is what made it easier to stay where you were,' Webb said. 'Our recruiting people – we had some who were handling the country for

us – they got to know on first-name terms all the people in the [country] clubs. It didn't turn out profitably. We really did not do as well as you would have thought.'

Underpinning Fitzroy's approach to country zoning was that as bad as the club's current deal might appear, a reshuffle of the zones might only make things worse. The Lions had no appetite for change, as their 1973 annual report made clear:

Although allocated the Hampden District which was termed a 'blue ribbon' area, results have not vindicated such a claim, as in the six years of the scheme seven players only – David Rhode, Cobden; Hugh Worall, Cobden; Alan Thompson, Warrnambool South; Ray Sault and Gerrard Noonan, Koroit; Kevin O'Keefe, Terang; and Neville Taylor, Warrnambool – have transferred to Fitzroy.

However, despite the fact that we have obtained the services of seven players only in six years as compared to other VFL Clubs which have gained as many as twenty four to twenty six players, we have no hesitation in supporting the continuation of the scheme in its present form.¹⁰

For a financially struggling club like Fitzroy, the draft was not a persuasive option. 'The draft would not appeal because too many clubs did not have enough money,' recalled Webb. 'It would mean having to go to see so many players, you would not have been able to afford the cost.'

The VFL's decision not to rotate the zones struck at the heart of the rationale for zoning. Unproductive country zone or not, Melbourne did not surrender without some resistance to its fate, although when it did resist the result was dispiriting. In 1971, long after Geelong went interstate to recruit Graham 'Polly' Farmer and Denis Marshall, Melbourne broke out the chequebook for South Australian forward John Tilbrook, who had played in a succession of premiership sides with Sturt. He was strongly built but, in the current vernacular, he was an outside player, a finisher. Ian Ridley, however, wanted him in the thick of it.

Tilbrook's clearance was not finalised until mid-season, and in his first month with Melbourne he injured his back at training, missing two more games. Late in the year he rescued the Demons from looming defeat at Arden Street against lowly North Melbourne. 'Diamond Jim', as he was known because of his hefty transfer fee, launched two booming punts to goal from the gasometer wing in the final term. Those two goals almost made up for his three misses earlier in the game and levelled the

scores, enabling the Demons to escape with a draw and leaving one class-conscious local to mutter bitterly and loudly about 'bloody college boys'.

The following preseason he was dropped from several practice games as Ridley warned his players they would no longer be selected on reputation alone. Tilbrook's best was to twice score six goals in a game, but his aggregate of fifty-nine goals from fifty-three games over four injury-interrupted seasons was a poor return for the club's investment.

'Tilbrook, that was the first time we had spent a lot of money,' Bluey Adams observed, 'but we were too far down the drain then to turn ourselves around.' Stan Alves said Tilbrook was a fine clubman, with explosive pace and a kick like a mule. His only problem was finding the ball. 'John was a finisher,' he wrote in 2002, 'and what we needed was an inspirational player hard at the ball who could bring other players into the game.'¹¹

According to Dick Seddon, the effect of Tilbrook's failure to live up to expectations blunted Melbourne's appetite for recruiting stars, which in turn had a long-term impact on the side's performance. Instead of pursuing an aggressive recruiting strategy, the club withdrew into its shell, encouraged by the 'allies of amateurism' within the MCC.

'There is no doubt there was an increased intensity by other clubs in recruiting, particularly the Carltons of this world. We were still stuck in the amateur era and wanting the players to play for Melbourne because it was Melbourne, rather than offer them any financial inducements,' says Seddon. 'When they recruited Tilbrook, it was not done as part of a policy. It was a one-off. One-off recruiting is a waste of money. One [player] is not going to make a difference to a team. Recruiting had to be done as a policy, rather than just a one-off dipping your toes in the water.'

It was not the club's way to set trends, to pursue players with hefty offers of money. 'If they wanted to go chasing players, most of it revolved around what the MCC would let them spend,' Biffin remembers. 'At that particular time we were very different to most other clubs because of the fact we were only part of the MCC. [In the MCC's eyes] we were no more important than the cricket, the tennis or the bowls section.'

'People always said we bought John Tilbrook, but he never got a lot of money in comparison to what others got. John always said he played three good games in his life, and unfortunately for Melbourne we were there watching every one of them. From a playing point of view, I don't think there were any players critical of John Tilbrook. He was just not the

player Melbourne thought he was or needed him to be.’

With country zoning reaffirmed, the club again complained that its prospects in its city and country zones were not good:

We have exhaustively surveyed the country areas zoned to us by the VFL and it does not appear to offer the quantity and the quality of players we require immediately. Undoubtedly there are a few youngsters who show promise and they will be encouraged, but the ready made players are not there. There are very few real possibilities as players for 1974 in either the Goulburn Valley League, the Kyabram District League, the Waranga North Eastern League or the Riddell League.¹²

Melbourne was missing more than players. Others had alternative revenue sources, such as social clubs.

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During the 1970s, it was possible to attend, somewhere in the bowels of that part of the Northern Stand given over to MCC members, something that approximated a social club for Melbourne supporters. It was a post-match function room where supporters drank, mingled with the players and analysed the games just played. After a win, the players – and supporters, once they knew the routine – could break into a ditty that was intended as a good natured piss-take of the coach or whoever was targeted: ‘Hooray for Ridley, hooray at last ... Hooray for Ridley, he’s a horse’s arse!’ Initially it was Ridley, then Skilton ... and so on.

My father ushered me in there several times, since some of his friends were members of a group called the Redlegs. It looked and sounded like a regular football club social club, except the room offered no view of the playing surface, it was not open to supporters to watch midweek training, and it was limited to MCC members and their guests.

The Redlegs after-match room was a compromise offered up by the MCC to the football club, except that it was only a pale replica of what was available at other social clubs, as Seddon explained. ‘I kept asking the Melbourne Cricket Club, “Can we have a social club at the ground?” but ... the answer was, “No, you can’t have a social club there.” The reason for that would be that any revenue they got from their bars they wanted for themselves. They did not want that going off to the football club.

‘The Redlegs were an exception. The Redlegs were created for young MCC members to get together after the game. They [the Melbourne Cricket Club] made a room available in the Northern Stand, but you had

to buy the beer from the cricket club. Effectively, the Redlegs was just another MCC bar for the exclusive use of the Redlegs. The only money the Redlegs raised for the football club was from raffling signed footballs.'

Seddon had become the club's honorary solicitor after Tilbrook's playing contract was bungled. Melbourne did not do contracts generally. Hassa Mann had asked for one and received his marching orders.

'As captain of Melbourne, I was paid £24 a week, £2 more than the vice-captain, who got £2 more than the other players,' Mann recalls. 'In 1968 I was approached to coach in Perth and I went to Melbourne and asked for a two-year contract. I was told, "We don't contract players," and the chairman of selectors told me he did not think I had two years left in me.'

The club's inexperience with contracts may help to explain the fact that Tilbrook's had such an imprecise 'incentive clause': for playing in a winning side, he received \$100, while if he played in a losing one, he received only \$60. But the contract did not distinguish between playing for the seniors or seconds, so he could earn more playing in a winning seconds side than he did appearing for a losing senior team.

Money was always tight. Peter Keenan was still on \$1000 above match payments six years after his debut. 'We are broke and you come in here asking for money,' he recalls the then chairman of the match committee, Noel McMahan, saying at one point, complete with a fist slammed on to a table. Grudgingly, Keenan was offered \$5000 above match payments for the 1976 season, but it was a fraction of what North Melbourne was offering.

It almost certainly did not help that in the final game of the 1975 season – a one-point loss to Collingwood at Victoria Park – Keenan and his ruck partner, Carl Ditterich, came to blows at half time. Contrary to their plan, Ditterich had rucked unchanged through the first half. 'At half time I said, "What about a change?"' Keenan recalls. 'He shoved me, and I hit him, and we were into it. Anyway, they pulled me off him. Ditterich apologised and I rucked second half.' Keenan left to become a member of the Kangaroos 1977 premiership side, under the coaching of Ron Barassi.

Melbourne was also exhibiting that classic symptom of chronic failure: rapid turnover of coaches. After Smith, there had been Beckwith, Ridley and Skilton in the space of eight seasons. There was no stomach for investing in long-term development. As soon as a coach's touch dipped, he was gone. Thus, Ridley, having started with eleven wins and a draw in 1971, dropped to seven wins in 1973 and was gone. Skilton appeared to

Right: Escorted by excited fans, Demons captain Noel McMahon is chaired from the ground in triumph after the team's twenty-eight point win over Collingwood in the 1955 Grand Final. (The Argus)



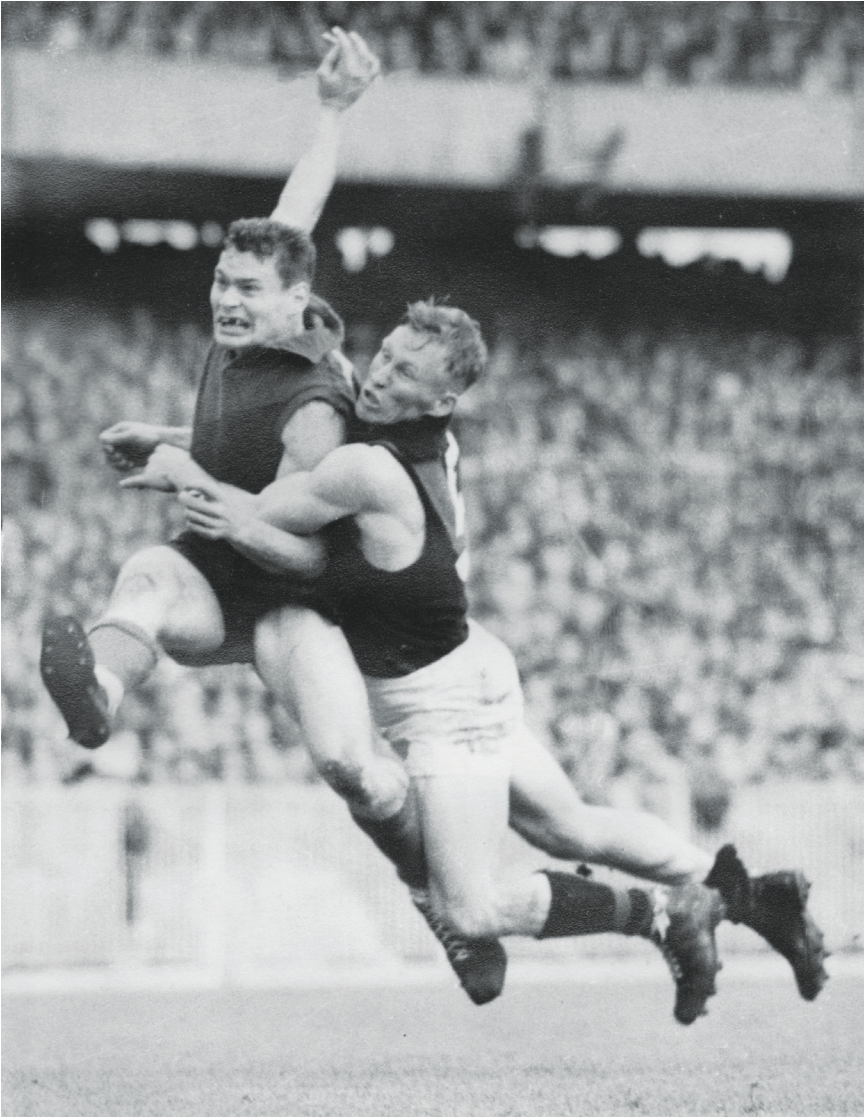
Left: Same result, same newspaper and same fan: Noel McMahon is again the centre of celebrations after the 1956 Grand Final, and also present again is Robert Grattidge, in a suit and tie and with a similar open-mouthed expression. He and McMahon will meet after the Melbourne captain recognises him in both images and The Argus newspaper appeals for him to come forward.



Above: A prized image of Barassi airborne was rendered awesome by the addition of a personal message from the great man. (*The Age*)

Below: The oldest image in the gallery of Demons that laid out delusions of invincibility was this of Jack Mueller and Denis Cordner (left) carrying skipper Don Cordner from the playing field after Melbourne's surprise win in the 1948 Grand Final replay. (*Herald and Weekly Times Ltd*)





Bob Suter played just twenty-two games for the Bombers, but his challenge to an unstoppable Barassi in the 1957 Grand Final placed him in one of football's most memorable images. (Herald and Weekly Times Ltd)

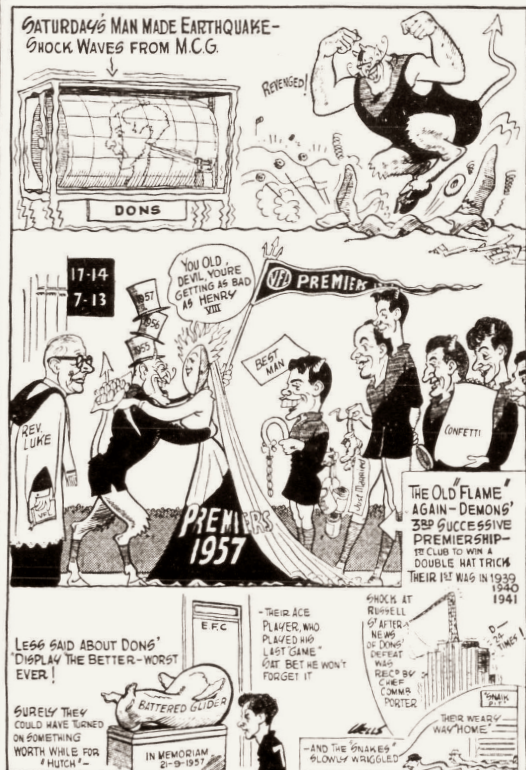


Above: John Beckwith, left, and Ron Barassi hold the inaugural premiership cup in 1959. Others are, from left, Ian Ridley, Brian Dixon, Ian Thorogood, Peter Brenchley, Geoff Case, Clyde Laidlaw, Dennis Jones and property steward Fred Fraser. (The Age)

Right: By the time Melbourne completed its second premiership hat-trick in September 1957, prompting cartoonist Sam Wells to dub them the 'Demon-opolists', moves were underway to curb the club's country recruiting. Mention of zoning rural Victoria began soon after Sir Kenneth Luke, seen here presiding over the wedding of the Demon to his happy bride, became VFL president. Wells' illustrations were renowned for their many sub-plots and this includes a reference to retiring Essendon champion Bill Hutchison, Bombers' patron and police chief commissioner Selwyn Porter, and a surprisingly toothy Ron Barassi, best on ground in the match and 'best man' at the wedding. The three players depicted directly behind Barassi are Dick Fenton-Smith, Bob Johnson and John Beckwith. (Sam Wells/The Age)

AGE, MONDAY, SEPTEMBER 23, 1957

The Demon-opolists





Above: Norm Smith celebrates the 1960 title with Beckwith, John Lord and Barassi. The impression of Melbourne's invincibility was reinforced four years later with another cup. (*The Age*)

Below: Perhaps my awareness of country zoning as an issue within the VFL stemmed from family ties to country football in the Castlemaine district. Family lore says my grandfather, Reg Baxter (fourth from left, middle row) played reserves football with Carlton before World War I. He remained a passionate Blue Bagger all his life. He is pictured, aged thirty eight, with his Maldon teammates. (*Maldon Historical Museum*)



SIGNS ALONG THE ROAD TO COUNTRY ZONING...

5. Country Areas - Zoning of Areas for Players.
 The Committee were unanimous in opposing the Zoning of Country Areas.
 The Cabaret Dance at the Delahay...

1. Newly active in country recruiting, Hawthorn asserts 'unanimous' opposition to zoning country areas on 4 August 1959.

1. V.F.L.
 Mr. Parker submitted details of proposals made firstly by Sir Kenneth Luke, and secondly by Footscray Football Club in an endeavour to establish Club recruiting areas in V.C.F.L.

2. On 19 February 1963, St Kilda's committee notes a renewed push for 'proposals made firstly by Sir Kenneth Luke, and secondly by Footscray Football Club' to establish country zoning.

3. On 27 September, 1963 the VFL minutes reported that Committee members had consulted with their respective clubs on the detailed plan to zone country areas, including introducing the payment of transfer fees when country players transferred from the VCFL to the VFL. The plan failed to win enough support. The clubs were split:

In Favour:	CARLTON	Against:	COLLINGWOOD
	ESSENDON		GEELONG
	FITZROY		HAWTHORN
	FOOTSCRAY		MELBOURNE
	NORTH MELBOURNE		RICHMOND
	SOUTH MELBOURNE		
	ST KILDA		

Zoning of Country Areas:
 The notice of motion by Messrs. Dunning and Elmer to the effect that the Committees previous decision rejecting the proposal for zoning of country areas be rescinded was discussed at length by the Committee and was subsequently carried.
 A subsequent motion by Messrs. Ryan and Ramsay that the Hawthorn Football Club support this scheme with the exception of Clause J, viz, metropolitan areas be zoned was carried.

4. Less than seven weeks after it formally opposed country zoning for a third time, on 12 November 1963 Hawthorn's committee breathes new life into the proposal by deciding to support zoning.

And Jack Dunn kicks off with AROUND THE PACKS

★ THE golden era for country stars, who held out their hands before signing form fairs, is almost over.
 Before the 1964 season ends, it seems likely VFL clubs will approve the zoning scheme, with a portion of the State allotted to the care of each League club.
 Some of those scots who rushed in and "bought" country stars this season may not have been smart.
 Before long these players could be signing on with VFL clubs for only the summer.

5. On 13 February 1964 the Sun News-Pictorial says country zoning's introduction seems likely 'before the 1964 season ends'.

Advertiser BERGEN'S IS THE BEST PLAN! It Keeps On Keeping On HUME & ISER PTY. LTD.

14 FEBRUARY 1964

V.F.L.'s ZONE PLAN... "FOOTBALL DICTATORSHIP"
 By JOHN RICE

The announcement in a Melbourne newspaper yesterday that the V.F.L. this year is likely to approve the zoning of Victoria for recruiting purposes will bring a loud cry of protest from country football leagues.

The V.F.L. scheme is far from an abandonment of the golden era of "bought" players...
 The V.F.L. is expected to announce that it will be holding off the issue until after the 1964 season ends.

Feasible Now
 Mr. Clarke suggested that the V.F.L. should not wait until after the 1964 season ends to announce its zoning plan.

No Choice
 The V.F.L. is expected to announce that it will be holding off the issue until after the 1964 season ends.

3. HOLLYMOT HCP. (2) 1.10

6. On 14 February 1964 the Bendigo Advertiser fires back.

ZONING OR DRAFTING

... OR NOTHING AT ALL?

7. The Round Six 1967 Football Record spelled out the options for the future of country recruiting: zoning as proposed by the Carlton Football Club with each club assigned an exclusive rural region; an "American-styled" drafting scheme or, as "intolerable" as this would be, to leave things as they are. Readers learned that Eric McCutchan was convinced the draft was the answer, but a majority of delegates ruled that no decision would be made on the drafting issue for months so that the question of zoning took priority.

8. On 10 August, 1967 the VFL Permit Committee borrows from McCutchan's draft plan to suggest the bottom four clubs be able to choose their country zone, and the other eight zones be decided by ballot. The Committee suggestion is "that each of the four VFL clubs occupying the twelfth, eleventh, tenth and ninth positions on the premierships list at the conclusion of season 1967, be permitted to make a selection - in the order as stated - of the VCFL District to be allotted to it. The allotment of the eight remaining VCFL Districts to be then determined by draw." This proposal was rejected.

FOOTY ZONING NEAR?

By JOHN CRAVEN

Carlton Football Cl. b's chances of bringing in country zoning for League recruits could depend on a "swinging" vote from Melbourne.

Melbourne secretary Mr Jim Cardwell said today his club had not yet reached a final decision.

The scheme must receive a 9-3 majority vote to become League policy. The last time it was raised, Collingwood, Geelong, Richmond and Melbourne voted against it.

Melbourne is the only club to support the zoning scheme.

9. During 1966, Melbourne opted to support zoning, but rejected detailed plans put up by Hawthorn and Carlton. By May 1967 Melbourne was wavering again, considering supporting zoning but only if the country leagues agreed.

ZONING'S A MESS, SAY MAGPIES

Demons, South, unhappy

By JOHN CRAVEN

Collingwood football club will protest to the Victorian Football League over the "poor deal" they received under the country zoning scheme.

Collingwood are not the only club with a problem over this country zoning plan.

Melbourne secretary Mr Jim Cardwell said today

Club general secretary Mr Gordon zone, the Western Border Zone, was

"Six of the clubs are in South Australia and it looks as though their players would need clearances from the South Australian Football League to play with us. This is most unfair.

"And because these players are interstate players, we do not know if they must fulfil a three months residential qualification," he added.

Mr Carlyon said Victorian Country Football League secretary, Mr Jack Hamilton, told him nothing could be done about the problem at present.

"Under the zoning scheme Victorian country players do not need a clearance from their home club or league. If they play six games with VFL club seniors or reserves, a \$400 transfer fee must be paid).

Mr Carlyon said: "I understand that we must wait until one of these SA players is refused a clearance before we can appeal even

South Melbourne recruiting officer Mr Peter Charleston, a former South and Hawthorn player, has compiled a list of the estimated recruiting potential for each zone.

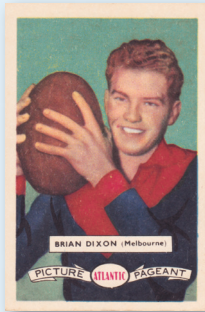
Below is Mr Charleston's list showing the number of league recruits produced by each zone in the past three years and the estimated recruiting potential for the next three years

Zone	League Club	Recruits 1964-66	Estimated Group 1967-69
Ovens and Murray	North Melb.	16	4971
Lalrohe Valley	Footscray	15	7418
Mornington Peninsula (incl. Frankston)	Hawthorn	15	3329
Hampden	Fitzroy	13	4080
Wimmera	Essendon	11	2772
North Central and Sunraysia	Richmond	11	3917
Bendigo	Carlton	7	6383
Goulburn Valley	Melbourne	6	2631
South West Riverina	South Melb.	5	5679
Ballarat	St. Kilda	4	2189
Waranga North-east	Geelong	4	2729
Western Border	Collingwood	3	4370

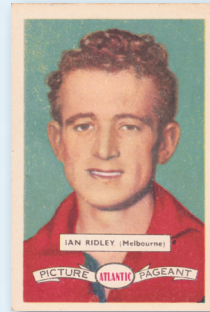
10. Just days after the key vote, on 29 September 1967 The Herald reveals South Melbourne recruiter Peter Charleston's analysis of the zones, exposing their inequality in terms of recent VFL recruits and population.



A school teacher and determinedly amateur footballer, Geoff Tunbridge insisted on repaying the MFC Coterie the cost of the car bought for him to travel to training. He was recruited from Ballarat aged twenty five and was a member of the 1957, '59 and 1960 premiership sides.



Some forty years after this cherubic image of the champion wingman was created, Brian Dixon became the public face of the anti-merger group the Demon Alternative. Until his involvement, the anti-merger faction struggled for recognition.



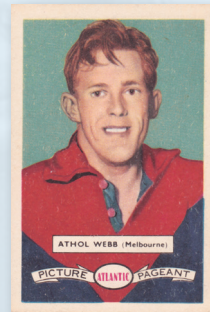
A famously courageous rover from Hamilton in the western district, Ian Ridley was another country champion at Melbourne. A member of five premiership sides, he filled almost every role at the club except boot studder before attempting to lead the merger with Hawthorn.



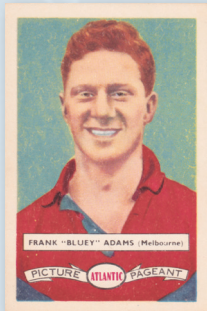
A five-time premiership player and outstanding defender, John Beckwith had the unenviable task of succeeding Norm Smith as coach. It was the beginning of the club's long winter.



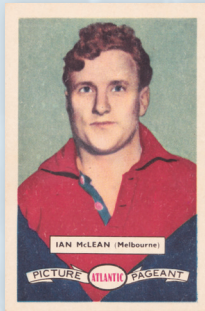
The amateur leagues, the country and Tasmania were sources of many quality players for Melbourne. Full-back Peter Marquis was one such at Melbourne, having been recruited from Devonport. He was a member of the triple premiership sides 1955-7.



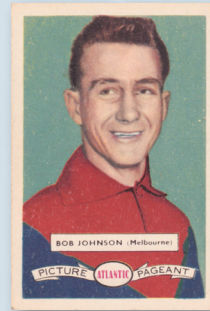
Another Tasmanian recruit, from Scottsdale, Athol Webb was the decoy full-forward whom Norm Smith crafted in his own style. Webb averaged two goals a game over his career but bettered this with five goals in the 1956 grand final.



Frank Adams was one of only two players – the other was Ron Barassi Jr – to play in all six premierships under Norm Smith. After the disappointment of the 1958 grand final, Adams was given the job of sprint coach to sharpen the entire squad during the following preseason.



Back when central Victoria was open to Melbourne for recruiting, Ian McLean was discovered at South Bendigo in 1951. Regarded as one of the finest wingmen of his time, McLean played in five grand finals for three premierships.



Bob Johnson was a towering figure and key forward for whom Athol Webb played as decoy. Big Bob snared guernsey number 16 – the same number his father wore in the 1926 grand final – when Clyde Laidlaw briefly left the club in 1957. Laidlaw adopted number 35 on his return.

be on an upward trajectory with three wins in his first season followed by nine and then eleven victories. But when 1977 produced just three wins, he too was gone.

Skilton was hampered by the fact that when he took on the role, the playing group was unhappy at Ridley's sacking. While it took him time to win over the players, he believes that once he had done so, the fact of having united an unhappy team worked in his favour. The early signs, though, were not good.

'When I got the coaching job I had a barbecue at home,' Skilton recalls. 'One of the last people to leave happened to be Carl Ditterich, and he said to me, "You know you're a bloody idiot, don't you?" I said, "Why?" and he said: "We can't play." That was not something I wanted to hear, but it could have been the best advice I could have got. You have to know what you've got in front of you.'

Recruiting remained a problem, so in 1975 the club began a 'scholarship squad' for schoolboy prospects – something other clubs had begun years earlier – which Skilton oversaw on Sunday mornings. 'All clubs were going through a learning period,' Skilton recalls. 'If you were lucky enough to have a better zone, all well and good, but you have to have a level playing field. The VFL was run by the clubs, and certain clubs had advantages, others did not. I did get sick of the fact they [Melbourne] would not do what other clubs were doing for recruiting.'

Skilton's best year coaching Melbourne was 1976, although it ended in a profoundly frustrating final round at Victoria Park as his side pressed for a place in the final five. Melbourne went into Round 22 on the back of a forty-five-point win over Geelong: the Demons had ten wins and a percentage advantage over fifth-placed Footscray, with eleven victories. Melbourne needed to overcome Collingwood at Victoria Park while Carlton finished off the Dogs at Princes Park. After a tight first half, Melbourne blew the game open with an eight-goal third quarter, and held on to win by fifteen points. Greg Wells in the centre won more of the footy than anyone. Biffin, freed from full-back, was chief goalkicker with four.

Yet this spirited victory at the home of the old enemy ended in futility. The Bulldogs had jumped Carlton early and still led by twenty-two points at the last change. Carlton finished strongly but Footscray held on for a draw, denying Melbourne an end to its finals drought. Biffin felt the excitement seep out of the group as they learned of the Blues–Bulldogs result.

'I remember the day,' he says. 'With about ten minutes to go we were leading easily and you could hear the buzz go around: Footscray and Carlton drew, and now Melbourne can't make it. You could feel it out on the ground. Everyone heard what was being said and you looked at blokes and everyone's going, 'Ah, shit,' and Collingwood kicked four goals in the space of five minutes and we looked like getting beaten. We held on and won.

'I have always felt had we made the finals that year, the club might have got on a roll and got us going, but it never happened and the success never happened either.'

Cheer squad stalwart Sue Springfield remembers that last game of 1976 as a particularly bad day. 'You would always cop flak from the Collingwood supporters,' she says. 'Victoria Park and Windy Hill were the two grounds I hated going to because of the opposition supporters. At Windy Hill they would stand behind the cheer squad and throw lighted cigarettes and beer cans at you. They'd try to set the crepe paper on the flogger alight, or they'd throw them in your hair. If you tried to walk through the crowd, they'd push and shove you. There was what they called the Grog Squad that would gather behind whoever the opposition cheer squad was so they could harass you all day.

'The best I remember is when we came from behind kicking eight goals in the last quarter to beat Essendon. We didn't walk out of there for quite a while. That was one of the best days. That day at Collingwood [in 1976] we were sure we were going to the finals, but then it sort of came apart. That was devastating to everyone there.'

Steve Smith was playing in the forward line at the time. 'Football is all about momentum, and we had momentum in the second half of the year,' he recalls. 'That was driven by some good recruiting. We had Laurie Fowler, who was fantastic, and we had Robbie Flower, Greg Wells, Gary Hardeman ... we had a lot of really good players in it. It was just a lot of good players building momentum.

'My view has always been that Melbourne had twelve or thirteen really talented players, but it was that bottom six or eight players that really made it difficult. You are only as good as the bottom five or six players, and they just weren't very good. But when you have momentum, as we did in 1976, then even those average players become really good players – as we saw with Richmond a few years ago – because they are playing with confidence. That was desperately disappointing, that last game.'

The Collingwood fans jeered in delight at Melbourne's misfortune. The Melbourne fans – well, this one anyway – took a secret pleasure in consigning the Magpies to their first ever wooden spoon.

Twelve months later, Skilton was gone. Despite the harsh closing of his coaching career, Skilton says he enjoyed his time at Melbourne. 'It was terrific to coach people like Flower and Hardeman. They were fine people and great players. It's nice to be involved with people of that ilk, both on and off the football field. I turned to Biffin for a lot of advice; you can't just walk into a club, you have to have some people you can turn to. He gave me his heart and soul.

'Steven Smith was another of my favourites; he was terrific as a player and as an official. Carl Ditterich was another terrific player for me. The best coach in the world, like Smithy – [Norm] Smith got a lot out of us [in his years at South Melbourne] – but that wears away if the talent is not there. You only have to lose a few key players, and it's amazing how people lose confidence in you very quickly if you lose a few games.'

*

As Skilton's coaching career was ending, I was taking up motorcycling. It was spring. The weather was good. There were no football finals for the Demons to distract me. Since there were no formal riding instructors, learning was by trial and error. I demonstrated as much natural aptitude for riding as the Demons had for winning games of football. The machine and I parted company many different ways: after accidentally changing into first gear on a wet road, it was thrown into a 180-degree spin that only Steve McQueen could have made work; the back wheel slid away on a wet tram track one morning in Burke Road, Camberwell, and again in the Christmas Hills late one Saturday night.

In 1978 the Victorian Education Department mercifully sent me to Mildura to teach, or at least to attempt it. From Mildura I eventually rode to Adelaide for a Bob Dylan concert, my single positive experience at Football Park. Many years later, recalling that concert was consolation for enduring a twelve-goal thrashing at the hands of Port Adelaide at the place South Australians called West Lakes.

That posting to Mildura spared me direct exposure to the one season the team was led by former player Dennis Jones, whose appointment as coach, by any account, was a surprise. However, I was not so out of touch on the north-west border that I didn't hear about the calls to 'Sack Jones!' that echoed around the terraces in the opening round, seventy-nine-point

loss to Hawthorn. It foretold another wooden spoon season, the Demons' fire extinguished by the end with just five wins from twenty-two games.

Robbie Flower recounted that Jones' appointment as coach was a shock to the players. Jones was a man out of his time. 'He tended to coach very much in the style of the Fifties and really went back to the basics,' Flower wrote. 'If there's ever been a year of easy training, then Jones provided us with it. He did not push us to anywhere near our limit.'¹³

Jones' appointment was a reflection of the club's amateurism. Steven Smith agreed with Flower's assessment. Smith has just stepped down from the presidency of the MCC when we meet in the foyer of the city building that houses his law office. 'To think they just thought someone at committee level could coach,' he marvels. 'I am not sure where the club was going on that, but it was an odd choice. Compared to Skilton or Carl Ditterich, both fantastic coaches, Dennis did not have any rapport with players. He didn't seem to have any particular strategies and it just didn't work.'

Recruited from Ormond Amateurs, Smith – like Flower, who was recruited from Murrumbeena – was tied to Melbourne through its metropolitan zone. He is one of only four players in VFL/AFL history to have played 200 games without appearing in a final. Before we part, I have to ask him: 'Why didn't you leave?'

'I was disappointed at the lack of success but just loved the club,' he answers. 'I didn't barrack for them as a kid. I was a Carlton supporter, but if you're there for eight years or nine years you develop mates there. You develop friends there through supporters. You become part of it.'

'I am glad to have done it now. People regard me as a Melbourne person. I still see the same familiar faces that have been there forever. I think sometimes people like Wellsy and Stan Alves, those who move and have success elsewhere – they are regarded as great footballers, but they finish up a bit of a nomad, neither one or the other. I am glad I stayed. It's one of those loyalty things. It's important to me. It's intangible.'

'These days players move all the time and the money is significant. The money was not that big in those days. It was not an issue. Robbie was the one I don't understand, but he felt part of the place. He just loved the place.'

Dennis Jones was appointed for two years but was out the door after one. 'You can say I have resigned and that's about all I want to say,' he offered forlornly at the end. 'I just want to fade out of football quietly.'¹⁴

Meanwhile, the backdrop to the VFL in the 1970s was the barely acknowledged truth that its player rules for recruitment and retention were legally bogus. The flood of money coming into the sport meant that commercial law and ‘restraint of trade’ applied to players. Metropolitan and country zoning was a house of cards, capable of standing only so long as nobody pushed too hard. The rules were unenforceable, and the clubs knew it as early as April 1971.

That was when VFL delegates learned of a ruling in the New South Wales Supreme Court known as the Tutty Decision.¹⁵ On hearing a complaint by Balmain’s Dennis Tutty, the court ruled that the New South Wales Rugby League’s player rules were a restraint of trade, even though the competition was not fully professional. Tutty was effectively an employee of the club, yet he was being prevented from transferring and plying his trade as he wished.¹⁶

The VFL sat tight for almost twelve months until the breach of Tutty’s rights was confirmed by the High Court of Australia.¹⁷ It then created two rules designed to enhance players’ freedoms and to strengthen its own case against a restraint of trade claim. Firstly, players with ten years’ service to a club were entitled to a transfer of their choice; and secondly, an appeals board was set up for players refused a transfer.

North Melbourne swooped so effectively to snare ten-year players that it looked like they had been tipped off, but Ron Joseph says the club’s recruiting drive was ready only because their VFL delegate saw what was coming. ‘It was just that Albert Mantello kept coming to our board meetings and saying they are going to use this rule,’ he recalls. ‘He knew they were at risk of restraint of trade. It was this half-hearted effort to stave off court action. Albert read the wind before anybody else. He could see the league had clear advice that their rules were in breach of restraint of trade.’

North already possessed one of the strongest country zones. Now a number of champions from other clubs, household names, joined the Kangaroos. Barry Davis of Essendon, Geelong full-forward Doug Wade and South Melbourne’s John Rantall donned the sky blue and white stripes for the 1973 season, helping the club to its first premiership two years’ later.

It was through the ten-year rule that Carl Ditterich, St Kilda champion

and ruckman in the Saints' only premierships, was lured to the Demons, where he would warn Bob Skilton that 'we can't play'. Ditterich had been identified as a target by North, but they baulked at his price once they had committed to the others. Melbourne intervened: the only change to the proposed contract was to cross out the word 'North' for Big Carl's destination club.¹⁸

Ditterich was sold back to St Kilda for the 1976 season, because some on the committee thought he was too expensive. Melbourne suffered only one truly narrow loss that year, by two points to Collingwood in Round 11. Ditterich could have been the difference in the Demons securing a finals spot. But success was not the club's priority. Had I known this, I might have spared myself some pain.

Dick Seddon was at that time a committeeman at Melbourne. In his 2016 memoir he painted a bleak picture of the scene from the inside: 'We did not have enough revenue, our pool of player talent was poor, our zones were not producing a good inflow of young players, we were not active in cultivating and developing our zones, our high-profile recruitment was almost non-existent and our on-field performance was poor.'¹⁹

In truth, Melbourne was not serious. As a history of the Carlton Football Club relates, the difference was money: 'The key factor that distinguished successful clubs from those which were uncompetitive was nearly always money. Once a majority of clubs chose to abandon amateurism and began to spend club funds to attract the best players there was never any dichotomy between money and football.'²⁰

The VFL's second innovation was an appeals board for players to seek a clearance from clubs unwilling to transfer them. The first case? Stan Alves versus Melbourne. Alves sought and was granted a clearance to North Melbourne and played in the Roos' 1977 premierships side, alongside Peter Keenan. Melbourne received nothing in return for the loss of its captain. This rule, like the ten-year rule, was quickly scrapped.

A few years later, Alves' successor as Melbourne captain, Greg Wells, wanted out in order to play in a premierships side. He was 'sold' to Carlton for \$35,000 and two players, and played in the Blues' 1980 premierships side.

The original agreed price for Greg Wells was \$70,000 and the Blues' rover Rod Ashman. Carlton, however, paid an initial \$35,000 and later sent Vin Catoggio and Michael Young to Melbourne, and kept Ashman.²¹ Neither Young nor Catoggio lasted beyond 1982. Young played all of

fifteen games for Melbourne, and Catoggio nine. Ashman played a further 107 games for Carlton before retiring in 1986. This is what Melbourne was reduced to in the 1970s: a feeder club, prey for the well-off.

*

There was one more attempt to reform the zoning system as it came up for renewal. In 1978, McCutchan's successor at the VFL, former Collingwood full-back Jack Hamilton, tried to revive the draft, which McCutchan had lauded in 1967. Hamilton called for a draft for rookies and also a draft for senior players over the age of twenty-two who had been with their club for three years.

'If the majority of clubs did not favour the drafting scheme I believe it is necessary for country districts to be revised and a new allocation made,' Hamilton said. 'It is not an easy task to have the scheme completely equitable and this can be offset to some degree by having the districts change every four or five years.'²²

The uneven results had continued in the second five year period. Footscray had recruited another sixteen senior players in zoning's second incarnation including Ian Dunstan and Kelvin Templeton who would both play more than 100 games for the Bulldogs. Carlton had found fifteen players, including three who would play more than 100 games in Rod Ashman, James Buckley and Ken Sheldon. Melbourne by contrast had trialled thirteen players, and they included some handy types but no lasting key position players came through and as a group they would average just twenty two games each.

Journalist Brian Hansen took up Hamilton's cause. He wrote that if the VFL clubs were too timid to replace zones with drafting, 'we'll have to wait many a year before we do get around to a balanced competition'. Greedy clubs with prime zones would continue feasting on the best football talent. 'This is the year when the clubs must vote to stay with zoning or to introduce the draft system.'²³

Hansen was bound to be disappointed. Weeks before the vote, Greg Hobbs declared the draft a lost cause, writing that 'not only will zoning stay but clubs will continue with the zones they presently occupy'.²⁴ And so it proved. Instead of rotating among the clubs, the zones and their advantages and inequities were institutionalised.

The 1970s closed with Carl Ditterich lured back to Melbourne as captain-coach. Bob Skilton recalls that he rang Big Carl, also known as 'Shadow', the moment he heard the news. 'I can remember telling him,

“You know you’re a bloody idiot,” he says.

Ditterich knew soon enough. In his seventeenth game in charge, Fitzroy destroyed Melbourne, kicking thirty-six goals to six, to notch a record victory of 190 points.

Biffin was stranded at full-forward during the thrashing. ‘To get beaten like that was extremely frustrating and embarrassing. I have always looked at it as a day when you have every one of the 20 players having the worst game of his career. I have spoken to “Wellsy” about the same thing and he doesn’t know. It was just like everyone who played the game just played the worst game of their life on the same day. Fitzroy had the best day of their lives.

‘For years after that it was an embarrassment to be reminded of that, to see photos, I remember seeing the score 36 goals to six goals. You never get over that. You get over the fact that you were beaten, that you were beaten badly, but you never get over seeing that scoreboard.’

It was grim for the cheer squad who at least had the alternative of distracting themselves from the on-field carnage. They had long learned ways to pass the time, as Sue Springfield remembered. ‘It was a struggle. There were some horrible games. It got to the stage where we all sang songs or did things just to amuse ourselves.’ Springfield’s mother, also Sue, had adopted the Demons while at primary school in 1946. She had seen the best of times. Now her daughter was to witness the worst. ‘That day at Waverley, because it was so bad you just had to do anything to make yourself feel better,’ she recalls. ‘We sang ‘Row Row Row Your Boat’ as a three part round.’

For Ray Biffin, the end came with a sympathetic gesture from the coach. ‘In the finish Ditterich brought me off,’ he recalls. ‘By that stage I was playing at full-forward, and of course I wasn’t seeing much of the ball. We only kicked six goals for the day; they kicked thirty-odd but I didn’t want to come off. I was shitty as buggery and I grabbed the phone and I said to Shadow, “What the fuck did you drag me for?” and he said, “Biff, I dragged you because I feel sorry for you,” and hung up. And that’s all he ever said to me.’

At the close of the decade, Ian Ridley identified the underlying challenge faced by the club: Melbourne had only flourished when football was an amateur game. The reasons for the slide were clear. ‘When we started to slide I remember Norm Smith saying we had to change our recruiting methods,’ he said in 1980.

The introduction of (country) zoning...and Melbourne's failure to quickly get involved in the modern era of football which embraces more money, doing more for players, and recruiting good interstate players.

While other clubs were wooing players with money and better facilities we were still working on the worn out ploy of 'play with us and every second week you will be on the MCG'. When success left us the MCG facilities were not such a big deal, and were no longer exciting. We did not have much to offer at all.²⁵

Chapter Eight

Cutting Loose

As a club within a club [Melbourne] has no rights. It cannot sign a contract with its players or write out a cheque.

David Elias, The Age, 23 February 1980

Football's most revered heroes are mostly players. Those who sacrifice their time and talents off-field are mostly forgotten once they move on. Exceptions are people like Jock McHale at Collingwood, coach for thirty-eight years; at Melbourne, Jim Cardwell is revered as the 'Prince of Secretaries' and as a vital ally to Norm Smith; Allen Aylett is honoured as both player and revolutionary president at North Melbourne; Ron Cook and Ian Dicker as visionaries at Hawthorn; Graeme Richmond and Ian Drake as effective recruiters at Punt Road and St Kilda; and, more recently, Frank Costa as club guardian at Geelong.

But few Melbourne supporters today, even those who remember Ron Barassi's return to Melbourne, would be able to tell you much about Dick Seddon, even if they did recognise his name.

The prospect of Barassi returning to the club where he'd made his name haunted Melbourne through the 1970s. Even as the Barassi-coached Carlton prepared for the 1970 finals series, there was press speculation of an approach by Melbourne to lure him 'home'.¹ In 1973, the possibility of Barassi, by then coaching North Melbourne, becoming available in twelve months' time caused Melbourne to consider appointing a stop-gap coach for the 1974 season.²

The speculation was futile: Barassi would remain at North Melbourne through the 1980 season. It was Seddon, in October 1980, along with tennis administrator turned football chief executive Wayne Reid, who made his return to Melbourne happen.

Seddon had been around the club since the early 1960s, acting as honorary solicitor while he built a legal practice in the city. In 1974 he was elected to the football club committee. He remembers being at odds

with the prevailing amateur ethos of the MCC.

‘Blokes like Bert Chadwick were appalled that we wanted to pay someone to coach the club,’ he recalls. ‘As for the players getting paid, it was totally foreign to them. I was one of those to say, “You can’t run a footy club like this these days when all the other clubs are incorporated and they’re commercialising their grounds with social clubs, with liquor licences and perimeter advertising and corporate boxes.” So they’re earning more revenue to attract players, and we are conducting ourselves as an amateur club within the cricket club.’

Under the Melbourne Cricket Club’s control, decision-making was tortuous for the football club. The football executive met every three months with the MCC, meaning the football department might wait months for approval of an initiative.

By the end of the decade, Seddon had won Chadwick over to the realisation that until the Demons adapted to the new commercial era, they would never regain their fire.

‘Bert and I were regularly sharing a scotch together in the MCC Committee Room,’ he later wrote.

Not surprisingly, given his past involvement as a former player, coach and chairman, Bert was intensely interested in the fortunes of the MFC. He did not think the club was being properly run, and he was especially critical of the lack of judgement displayed in player recruitment, and the lack of it. I told Bert the MFC must incorporate to put it on level terms with the other clubs, and Bert agreed with me and advised it was not the MCC preventing incorporation.³

Seddon prepared the legal papers to enable the club to incorporate and to reshape its relationship with the MCC, but in October 1979, when his fellow committeemen suffered cold feet at the prospect of severing ties with the cricketers, Seddon resigned. While Reid kept pressing the idea, *The Age* newspaper spelled out the problems the Demons faced.

As a club within a club it has no rights. It cannot sign a contract with its players or write out a cheque. Before it buys players in a bid to lift itself out of the footballing doldrums – Melbourne won its last premiership in 1964 – it must first ask the cricket club.

What should be a rubber stamp operation invariably turns out not to be. The cricket club committee sometimes wants to meet and review the football club decisions just to let them know who is boss. In this era, when

a squabble over player transfers can wind up before the full bench of the High Court of Australia, football clubs need to be fully incorporated.⁴

Reid finally negotiated the separation with Chadwick's successor, Sir Bernard Callinan, and in July 1980, having given up his law practice for a massive pay cut, Seddon returned as executive director and chief executive. Seddon and Reid's first priority was to recruit Barassi as coach.

In October, the pair announced Barassi's return. Barassi brought with him renowned juniors' coach Ray 'Slug' Jordon to take charge of the under-19s players, and recruited former Richmond champion Barry Richardson as chairman of selectors.

Barassi was hired on \$80,000 a year. By comparison, Ridley, in his final year of coaching, was paid \$5000.

Barassi's return to the Demons was not just the reappearance of a favourite son at the place where he'd made his name. Players had been changing clubs as long as football had been played. But when Barassi left Melbourne at the end of 1964, it was a sensation, a betrayal to some, an ending of an era for all, to which nothing else in the game's history really compares.

Barassi and Bluey Adams were the only players to play in each of Norm Smith's six premierships teams, as well as in the losing Grand Finals of 1954 and 1958. Barassi later became an identity in his own right, but back then Barassi was Melbourne and Melbourne was Barassi. He was the player to whom supporters invariably looked to save the team from looming defeat, as in the 1959 Grand Final. His return to the red and blue, to lift his flailing club from the doldrums, just seemed right.

Barassi's return generated a frenzy of excitement and expectation. Hundreds were drawn to watch the players' first training session under the great man. Membership applications were said to be 'up 1000 per cent'.⁵

With the MCC's support, bigger outlays followed. Barassi drew players he had known at North Melbourne to Melbourne, including Steven Icke, Brian Wilson, Alan Jarrott and Shane Zantuck. The more than \$300,000 outlaid on transfer fees was only partly offset by the money received from Carlton for Greg Wells' transfer. The next year, with the VFL player rules known to be legally dubious and under siege, Collingwood's Peter Moore and Footscray's Kelvin Templeton were offered as a package to several clubs. Melbourne took the bait, paying \$350,000 for the duo.

Drawing on talent from other clubs was a necessary first step, since

Melbourne's metropolitan and country zones were bereft of ready-made players. Interstate recruiting was not an immediate answer, since it was time-consuming as well as expensive. Besides, other clubs, notably Richmond, Carlton, Hawthorn and Geelong, had the jump on Melbourne in interstate scouting.

Indeed, interstate recruiting had become so competitive and expensive that in 1980 the VFL clubs agreed to an interstate draft which took place at the end of 1981. Only two of these took place but it enabled Melbourne to join the chase. The Demons chose well with Perth wingman Alan Johnson and a no-nonsense full back from Port Adelaide, Danny Hughes, joining the club. They would share three best and fairest awards before the decade was out. Otherwise the focus was on juniors.

Seddon recalls: 'We took on a policy in 1980 not to recruit from our metropolitan zone and country zone for our First XVIII. We'd recruit for the under-19s and we'd develop them in the club environment through the under-19s. It was a long-term strategy, but we thought it was a better way than taking a more mature-age player who wasn't going to improve much further.

'The idea was to use Ray Jordon to develop the players. Barassi was a great visionary at Melbourne. He sacrificed his own reputation to pursue that policy ... He knew he was staying there five years, and wasn't likely to see any benefit personally, but he embraced it, which is a measure of the guy.'

Brian Wilson, for one, was an immediate success, winning the Brownlow Medal in his first season with Melbourne. For all its premiership successes, Melbourne had until then produced only two Brownlow Medallists: Ivor Warne-Smith, who won the medal back in 1926 and 1928, and Don Cordner, in 1946. Wilson went on to play 154 games for the club. Peter Moore would also win a Brownlow – his second – in his first year with Melbourne, in 1984. Steven Icke won Melbourne's best and fairest award in 1982, and along with Wilson was an integral part of the side that eventually saw the club return to finals competition.

Injuries curtailed Kelvin Templeton's impact at Melbourne, but while he was not as prolific a goal scorer there as he had been at Footscray, he averaged almost three goals for each of his thirty-four games as a Demon. He led the team to victory with eight goals against Geelong at Kardinia Park in 1983.

In his memoir, *It's More than a Game*, Seddon attributes the MCC's

newfound generosity for player recruitment to the relationship he built with Chadwick and MCC secretary Ian Johnson, but also to vested interest: 'As stadium manager of the MCG, the MCC received a percentage of gate receipts. A successful MFC playing at the MCG would draw larger crowds, resulting in increased gate receipts and this would produce more revenue for the MCC.'⁶

There was no relenting, however, on the creation of a social club for the footballers and their supporters. The MCC would not concede. Seddon resolved to do something about that.

During 1982, the club bought two properties, Victorian terraces at 40 and 42 Jolimont Terrace, barely 100 metres from the MCC members' entrance. The following year, vacant land at 44 Jolimont Terrace was added. The idea was to create a genuine social club for Melbourne supporters on the doorstep of the ground they counted as their own.

'I wanted to put us on equal standing with the other clubs because they all had social clubs – even the weaker ones had social clubs,' Seddon recalls. 'Everyone had a social club with a liquor licence except us. Our problem was money. Every other club was commercialising the grounds on which they played. We couldn't do that. We didn't have any members, either. Why would you join the footy club if you were a Melbourne Cricket Club member? They used to go in for free anyway. We used to exist on raffles, gate receipts and whatever the VFL gave us by way of dividend.'

The Melbourne City Council's refusal to allow car parking for the social club, and, several years later, the refusal of the state government to approve poker machines for use in licensed clubs, caused the club to abandon the plan. The club was outbid on alternative buildings in Jolimont Street in December 1983, resulting in a 'need to re-think the whole exercise'.⁷

Almost forty years later Coningsby Terrace is still there, within punting distance of the MCG, privately owned and partly carved into apartments, while the vacant land alongside is occupied by an apartment building. The Melbourne Football Club still has no social club.

At training, meanwhile, Barassi was leaving nothing to chance. He had hundreds of tips for his players, down to how to tie their bootlaces. Rod Grinter, a veteran of the Ray Jordon program, recalls the time well.

'I remember sitting in a meeting with Barassi,' he says, 'and standing in front of Peter Moore, Kelvin Templeton, Gerard Healy, Peter Giles, Robbie Flower all of those legends, and [Barassi] basically demonstrating

how to mark a football. I am sitting there thinking to myself, “I think these guys would know how to mark a football.” But that’s how pedantic ‘Barass’ was. He didn’t leave any stone unturned: “This is how you mark the ball, use your thumbs as the cushion, blah blah blah.” He was a really methodical coach. He was a hard, respected person. For me, it was eyes wide open.’

Flower recalled that players were told to complete multiple skill drills – 100 left-hand handpasses, 100 right-hand handpasses, and kicking drills with both feet – before they would begin training as a group.⁸

Despite his attention to detail, Barassi’s return also failed to match expectations. His first mistake, he later owned, was to allow Carl Ditterich to retire. Big Carl’s two years as captain and coach did little to lift the team’s standing, but the players walked taller when he was on the ground. And if the eleven wins from forty-four games under Ditterich looked like a poor return, it was glory compared to Barassi’s first year: one solitary win from twenty-two games, and that by one point against an equally struggling Footscray.

Officials lamented that the players had ‘forgotten how to win’, but eight wins the next year, and nine wins in 1983, with the team briefly threatening to qualify for finals, gave the appearance of steady improvement.

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Barassi’s return had, however briefly, brought with it that rare commodity, hope, recalls journalist and third-generation Melbourne fanatic Peter Wilmoth. He was a 21-year-old newspaper cadet assigned for the 1982 season to the sports desk at *The Age*.

‘The year before we had won one game, but when it came to selecting who would cover what game, I always put my hand up for the Melbourne game, and lots of hands were down,’ Wilmoth says. ‘We were terrible but I loved every minute of it. It was the era of Crackers Keenan back in the ruck, Adrian Battiston, Robbie Flower was at his peak. Brian Wilson went on to win the Brownlow.

‘As Melbourne supporters, we had to find our enjoyment within games, so you had Robbie Flower dominate the wing, we’d watch Gerard Healy match Mark Jackson for kicking goals, there was enjoyment to be had even if we lost. I was a Melbourne fanatic, although I hope I disguised that in my reporting. The thrill when you walked into the ground and saw the colours – I didn’t care how bad they were, I just enjoyed watching

them and having the privilege of hanging out with them after the game.’

Melbourne had been slower than other clubs to introduce scholarship squads for young players in its districts, but had done so for city prospects in 1975, and extended this to its country districts in 1978. Under the Seddon/Barassi regime in 1982, these were rebranded as a junior development squad, and participants trimmed from 100 youths aged sixteen and seventeen to just forty. Another group of eighty prospects as young as thirteen was created, with the aim of them progressing to the under-19s nursery under Ray Jordon.

Special attributes, such as pace, height or ‘left-footedness’, saw boys selected for development and training to overcome their weaknesses. ‘It is not really possible to gauge the overall success of the program at the end of this, its first year,’ the club acknowledged in its 1982 annual report. ‘We must be patient and wait until the 13 year olds who entered the program in 1982 progress to the point where they are being considered suitable or otherwise as League footballers.’⁹

Melbourne had begun to see some fruit from its endeavours with the under-19s group, producing players such as Adrian Battiston, Chris Connolly, Brett Bailey and Greg Healy, while the club had identified a sixteen-year-old called Garry Lyon who looked a prospect. Lyon was the son of Peter Lyon, whose recruitment to Hawthorn had created great bitterness between the Bendigo League and the VFL in 1963. Battiston, Connolly, Grinter and Lyon all originated from the previously unhelpful Goulburn Valley zone. By 1983, sixteen years after its inception, Melbourne had changed its tune on country zoning.

Evidence of improvement within the Goulburn Valley had been building for a few years. Historically a poor performer in the country championships, the Valley defeated the Ovens and Murray team to take the title in 1978 after several strong clubs had been drafted in to improve the competition, but it still struggled to produce senior players for Melbourne, as the club noted in its 1983 annual report:

We have been particularly disadvantaged in the past by not being able to recruit ready made VFL footballers from our Country Zone, and it is only now that our Junior Development Program is beginning to produce results. The Goulburn Valley area, after years of being a barren zone, is becoming one of the best nurseries of young potential VFL talent in Victoria, not only through our own promotional and developmental

efforts but because of a growing awareness of zone football club and League officials of their obligations to youth.

Therefore we are opposed to any moves to rotate or redistribute country zones, because firstly we do not believe that it is equitable that another club should receive the benefit of our good work, especially since we have been deprived for so long, and secondly we have worked assiduously to develop and strengthen strong bonds between our club and its country zone.¹⁰

Regardless of how fruitful the Goulburn Valley might have been, Cameron Schwab believes financial issues also constrained Melbourne's harvest.

'At Melbourne there was a real restriction to how many players you could bring down each year because you had to find them board, you had to pay a transfer fee,' he notes. 'Not big fees at that point, but if you brought a player down each year, it might cost you ten or twenty grand. But to bring in a kid from Bentleigh didn't cost you anything. A wealthy club might end up bringing ten country kids down each year instead of three. So the clubs that were financially stronger were in a much better position as well. They would have more squads, more programs, more recruiters.'

Rod Grinter entered the club's country system from his home in Katandra West, a small dairy-farming town about thirty kilometres from Shepparton, in the heart of Melbourne's country zone. Although it was now almost twenty years after zoning had been introduced, Melbourne – the club and the city – had not figured in his thinking. Grinter's ambition did not extend beyond playing local senior footy.

'As a kid, Melbourne was a footy team that played in the VFL. It was a million miles away,' he recalls. 'It wasn't a matter of thinking about playing in the VFL. It was never going to happen. It was just something that I saw on TV. All I wanted to do when I was growing up was play in the firsts for Katandra. Lloyd Burgmann was a dominant figure in that he had played for Melbourne and came back and coached Katandra. I had a little bit to do with Lloyd, but so far as the MFC and a presence, I can't recall.'

'Melbourne had a thing called the Norm Smith Squad, which was based in Shepparton, and they invited young kids to come in and be part of that development program. That was one night a week. They ended up having the Norm Smith Squad play a game. From that development squad

they'd picked a team of fifteen- and sixteen-year-olds – I don't remember who it was against – at Waverley. Ray Jordon was there.

'So we had this game of footy out at Waverley, and I think the next year Ray Jordon asked me to play under-19s, and I left home at seventeen. Garry [Lyon] was another in the Norm Smith Squad, but he was a year or two years younger than me.'

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Scouring the club's country and metropolitan zones was not enough. Desperate to rebuild the playing list and unable to compete with the big-spending clubs in interstate recruiting, Melbourne pioneered an overseas talent search. It began with VFL administrator Alan Schwab suggesting to Seddon that Ireland could be a fertile field. Seddon, Richardson and Barassi set out to explore it.

Australian football's interest in Ireland went back to 1967 and a former umpire and football commentator, Harry Beitzel. Beitzel thought Aussie Rules had to internationalise its appeal or risk losing out to a growing challenge from soccer. Post-war migration had landed waves of Europeans in the capital cities, and their love for soccer was seen as a threat to the dominance of the local game.

The Irish played football with a round ball, like soccer, and there was not the robust tackling of the Australian game, but it was the code that most resembled Australian Rules. Ireland, Beitzel reckoned, was the game's best prospect for expansion. In 1967, Beitzel took a team of Australian Rules champions, including Barassi and Skilton, to Ireland to play that year's All-Ireland champions, Meath, in a hybrid game. They used composite rules and the Irish ball.

Beitzel seems to have understood the scepticism most people had towards his enterprise, which at best was seen as a novelty, at worst as a futile joke. He called his team 'the Galahs'. In the Australian vernacular of foolishness, a galah is only one step removed from a drongo.

Coincidentally, when the Galahs played a warm-up game against a civil service team, one of the Irish players was a hardman called Brian Stynes. Years later, his son Jim would prove the worth of what came to be known as 'the Irish experiment'. But initially the novelty remained just that.

It was much later that Alan Schwab ignited Seddon's interest in recruiting from Ireland by showing him footage of games played by a touring VFL-sponsored schoolboys' team in 1980 to illustrate the skills of

the Irish boys. 'Irish recruitment offered another source of players which was novel, unrestricted by VFL permit and zoning rules and relatively inexpensive, because it did not attract transfer fees. If we moved fast, we would have a monopoly,' Seddon reasoned.¹¹

An initial trip to Dublin to talk to the Gaelic Athletic Association, which oversaw Irish football, as well as to talk to schools and to facilitate travel visas, followed in late 1981, with Melbourne preparing to offer football scholarships. The following year the club staged football clinics in Ireland. Barassi and Jordon assessed the prospects, while Reid and Seddon set to developing a recruiting network.

An early target, one Seddon had billeted to him when the Irish boys came out to play a series in Australia, was Niall Quinn. Quinn was something of a sporting freak, strong in both hurling and Gaelic football and, at 193 centimetres, unusually tall. Despite the fact that Quinn had to return to Ireland to complete his secondary schooling, Seddon tried to sign him on the spot. Unfortunately, once back home, Quinn opted to try out with English soccer giant Arsenal. Seddon understood why: Gaelic football was an amateur game. And Arsenal was offering real money, whereas all Melbourne could offer was room, board and education on the other side of the world.

Later, when Seddon was in Britain at the end of another visit, Quinn contacted him. 'He came to see me in London and said it wasn't working out for him with Arsenal and could we take him,' Seddon recalls. 'I told him he'd left it too late. One reason we were recruiting there was that it was unregulated by the VFL and we didn't have to pay transfer fees. Even though he was still a young player, Arsenal would've wanted \$100,000 for him. We weren't even paying that for Form Fours at that time.'

Thus, Quinn was lost to Australian football, but he thrived closer to home, playing 474 games for Arsenal, Manchester City and Sunderland, and representing his country more than 100 times in underage and senior soccer.

The first successful signing under the Irish experiment was the athletic Sean Wight, who was in fact a Scot. He was living in Ireland because his father had found work there. He was followed by Paul Earley, who played one game but returned home. 'Earley was a pretty good player but he was homesick,' remembers Seddon. 'His mother was recently widowed and he had to go home to look after his mother.'

Two years after Wight came Jim Stynes, who had attended a two-day

clinic with Richardson and Barassi. Seddon and Richardson went to Stynes' home to talk his parents into letting their eighteen-year-old son travel to the other side of the world in the hope of playing a game they had only fleetingly seen on television.

Wight would play 150 games for Melbourne from 1985 to 1995, and later serve on the board of the club. Stynes would recover from an early disaster to win a Brownlow Medal, and would be declared four times the club's best player over 264 games. And would become club president. However, the success of the Irish experiment was far in the future.

Seddon, Reid and Barassi's five-year plan to rebuild the club stalled in 1984. The team lost its first five games, ultimately winning just nine matches and finishing two wins outside the final five. Ray Jordan's reserves side were premiers, while the under-19s were finalists. There was reason for hope, although Barassi told supporters the club had reached the end of the line so far as excuses were concerned.

My wife – also a lifelong Melbourne supporter – gave birth to our first daughter that winter. Perhaps it should be said that football allegiance was not a condition of marriage. There had been girlfriends of a non-Melbourne leaning, but also more than a couple with a red and blue allegiance. However, given Melbourne's success in my childhood, our supporters, male and female, were pretty thick on the ground, so that was not unusual. They were tolerant too. I still shudder at the memory of one date with a high-school girlfriend: a pre-season practice match in drizzling rain at the MCG against the South Australian club Norwood. The day was cold, the stadium practically deserted. Melbourne won but it was a joyless experience. What a smooth operator!

Anne's grandfather, a Scot who emigrated in the 1920s, had been taken to his first football match by a workmate, who supported some team that was opposed to Melbourne. Asked his opinion, her grandfather replied that he quite liked the game – but as for allegiance, he really liked those red socks. For that he became a Melbourne supporter. By such accidents are family traditions begun.

But in 1984, with a new human among us, I was not paying as much attention as usual as the Demons, in sixth place with eight wins when Erin was born, slid out of contention, winning only one more game from the six that remained.

Barassi thought that while there had been improvement, injuries to Flower, Gerard Healy and Steven Smith had 'put paid to whatever

chances we had of holding onto our position in the Five'. As for next year, 'explanations – whether it be lack of experience or strength or pace – just won't be tolerated'.¹²

At such a time, thoughts turn to which team the newborn will support. Will they choose for themselves a team based on club colours or nicknames, say perhaps Cats or Lions? Or will it be ordained by the fabric of the family? Truly, for our kids, it was never really debated. Melbourne it would be. If the Demons lost, the children's post-game consolation would be a warm jam donut bought from the van outside the ground as we left. If they won, two jam donuts. That's how to secure loyalty.

At some level, I'd thought bribery would not be necessary. Success would surely come. After all, Barassi had never known failure. He had delivered the Blues two premierships, and he had taken the Kangaroos to five successive grand finals. Yet Melbourne was too big a task even for him.

The month of June 1985 was Barassi's undoing. Beginning it competitive, with five wins from ten games, winter's onset delivered four consecutive defeats. They were capped with a seventy-two-point smashing by Collingwood, signalling the end. It was then that, as Mike Sheahan wrote, 'there now appears no doubt [Barassi] and Melbourne will part company after the current season, that the football marriage made in heaven has broken down irretrievably'.

Barassi had said it would take four to eight years to remake the club into a force. But for all that, the impression was that success was guaranteed. 'Maybe the man who believed for so long that winning and losing was a matter of strength of mind has conceded that some tasks require more than mental strength,' Sheahan wrote.

In fairness to Melbourne, it has been unlucky in at least one crucial area. Its country and metropolitan zones have spawned players who look as if they have been recruited from Ethiopia rather than the Goulburn Valley and this city's southern suburbs, and who lack the ability which would lift them above mediocrity.

While it's true that Barassi and reserves and under 19 coach, Jordon, can do no more than get the best out of the available talent, some of us would say that they have persisted far too long with players equipped for roles no more productive than that of spare parts players at senior level.¹³

If it looked like failure, not everyone agreed. Cameron Schwab said that, under Seddon, the club had finally started to become serious, and whatever else the Moore/Templeton deal delivered, it made the club relevant again. 'You've ended up with Ron Barassi as coach and Ray Jordon coaching the under-19s. That's like an A-list,' he says. 'Whether it was past their time is a different debate. Melbourne during that time has become a serious footy club, but it's still got all the fundamental underlying weaknesses it always had.'

From the inside, Robert Flower understood the impact Barassi had, even if the results did not show it. 'Barassi was fantastic for the football club because he turned our football club around from being an amateur organisation under the auspices of the Melbourne Cricket Club ... In the package of life and football he was fantastic for me and I appreciate it,' he told Mike Sheahan years later.¹⁴

The season was still weeks from ending when Barassi conceded that his five year plan had failed. His final words on the project echoed those earlier complaints that the players had 'forgotten how to win'. Now he spoke of a 'losing syndrome'.

'It's very sad. It's my original club and my father played there and they've been in the doldrums for so long,' he said in 1985.

I'd gone there to try to change that but it hasn't worked and I think it's time someone else had a go. There aren't too many coaches in modern football who have been let be with a club that's just average for five years. They usually get the sack before then. Melbourne has trusted me for so long.

I hate excuses. Let's just say that a coach's job is to get the best out of his players. That's where I think I failed. I might have been a bit heavy with the players. I miscalculated the losing syndrome at Melbourne. I didn't know the losing syndrome was so entrenched. I've never encountered it before. Realistically at Melbourne we haven't had the material to be a really top side or when we've looked like it we've been cut about by Lady Luck.¹⁵

By the time the Irish boys were making their way in senior football, Seddon had departed to become one of the four inaugural AFL commissioners. Then Barassi and Jordon were gone. Their influence remained, however, and the revolution that they began would still bring results.

Chapter Nine

Zoning and the Making and Unmaking of Dynasties

*Since the introduction of country zoning in 1968
only five Clubs have won the premiership ...*

Alan Schwab, VFL administrator, 1985

The VFL's assistant general manager, Alan Schwab, in April 1985 passed a damning judgement on country zoning. With the benefit of hindsight, he used the drafting of new player rules to point out how comprehensively country zoning failed to live up to its supposed objectives. There had been none of the 'levelling effect on League competition' Terry Young had forecast on behalf of the VFL. Indeed, the reverse was true. Fewer teams than before could realistically aspire to appear in a Grand Final, let alone win the premiership.

The major aim of country zoning, Schwab recalled, 'was to restrict the richer and stronger Clubs and to give the weaker ones a fairer share of the "player market" ... [but] since the introduction of country zoning in 1968 only five Clubs have won the premiership.

They are Carlton (five times); Richmond (four); Hawthorn (four); North Melbourne (twice) and Essendon (once).

As Essendon only joined this elite group last year, it means that four Clubs had shared the flag in the previous 15 seasons. Between 1947 and 1967 – in pre-country zoning days – nine clubs won the premiership. And if we go back to 1944 (through to 1967) we have each of the 12 clubs participating in a Grand Final with ten of them being premiers.

Since 1968, seven Clubs have contested a Grand Final and one of them – St Kilda – played off for the 1971 flag with a team brought together prior to country zoning: since then they have finished last five times.¹

The rest of the decade only underlined Schwab's point. From 1985 until 1989, the title was shared among three of those same five clubs: Essendon, Carlton and Hawthorn. Instead of creating a more competitive environment, country zoning had achieved the opposite. More than a failure, it was counter-productive. There had been ten premier clubs from 1944 to 1967, compared to just five in the period 1968 to 1989.

If the richer and stronger clubs during the period before country zoning was imposed on the country leagues were Collingwood, Essendon, Geelong and Melbourne, then they were certainly 'restricted'. Of the four, only Essendon, and then after seventeen years of country zoning, won a premiership under that system. Only two clubs from the bottom half of the ladder when the vote was taken – Hawthorn and North Melbourne – had won a premiership during the country zoning era.

Hawthorn was the prime beneficiary: country zoning was midwife to its golden era. While astute coaching and stable administration were central to ensuring the club did not squander its good fortune, the country zoning system was transformative for the Hawks, delivering a wealth of quality footballers and shaping its teams over a quarter of a century.

The Hawk's eighteen debutants of zoning's first five years were followed by a further twenty new country zone players between 1973 and 1982. This second wave included club favourites such as Gary Ayres, Chris Mew and Peter Russo. And there was Dermott Brereton, a 'legacy country zone recruit', who was taken from Frankston after it was trimmed from Hawthorn's rural region and added to the metropolitan zone. Five years after country zoning was abandoned and the national draft was introduced, the Hawks 1991 premiership team still included six players recruited from its old country zone.

Of those country zone players, fifteen played 100 or more games for the club. When Hawthorn selected its Team of the Century, no fewer than seven players – one-third of the group – were from the club's country zone. At no other club was there a harvest like this one.

Considering the wealth of talent that flowed into Hawthorn, it seems unlikely that its golden era would have been as extensive without the bounty of country zoning. Indeed, it may not have existed at all. If Ian Drake had had his way, it might have been St Kilda's.

In the three seasons before country zoning was introduced, the Hawks had finished bottom four, winning just fourteen of fifty-four games. Four years later Hawthorn was premier, with its bush leagues

contributing Leigh Matthews, Kelvin Moore, Les Hawken and Leon Rice to the Grand Final side. When next they won the title, in 1976, half the side was comprised of talent reserved exclusively to the Hawks by virtue of its country zone, with Peter Knights, Barry Rowlings, Michael Tuck, Michael Moncrieff, Geoff Ablett, Kelvin Matthews and Alan Goad joining Leigh Matthews, Moore and Rice.

This group is also striking for its longevity. Tuck for many years held the record for senior games played, with 426. Leigh Matthews and Moore each played more than 300 games. Geoff Ablett, Moncrieff and Knights each played more than 200 senior games, and Goad turned out more than 100 times for Hawthorn's senior side. The country zone offered up a group that was the backbone of the club for a generation.

Carlton, with a longer history of success, did not have the same reliance on its country zoned players when it named its Team of the Century, but four Bendigo region players were included, a higher number of country zone players than any club but Hawthorn. One of these, Greg Williams, was initially rejected by the Blues but later recruited from the Sydney Swans. The Blues also gained ten 100-game players from their zone, including Williams.

Country zoning was not a significant contributor to Carlton's premierships in 1968 and 1970, but in 1972 the Bendigo zone contributed four players to the premier team, including Geoff Southby, David McKay, Trevor Keogh and Paul Hurst.

In 1979, country zoning was a major source of playing talent for the Carlton premiership side: joining Southby, McKay and Keogh were Peter McConville, Ken Sheldon, Jimmy Buckley, Peter Francis and Peter Brown. Des English and Rod Ashman, both from Eaglehawk, joined four other country graduates for the 1981 premiership, and in 1982 five of the Bendigo boys shared in Carlton's glory.

Over time, the Bendigo region was more fruitful than Carlton's metropolitan zone. Eight players in the Blues' 1979 premiership side were recruited from the country compared to six players from the city. In 1981, six of the Blues' Grand Final team came from the bush, and five from its northern suburbs metropolitan zone. In 1982, the country and metropolitan zones contributed five players each.

As with Hawthorn, many of Carlton's country recruits enjoyed long careers: Southby played fourteen seasons and 268 games; McKay endured for thirteen seasons and 263 games; Ashman, regarded as one

of the club's greatest ever rovers, played fourteen seasons and 236 games, while Jim Buckley played fifteen seasons and 164 games.

Essendon's experience seems to show that without a productive country zone, success was unachievable. Two years before the system was introduced, the Bombers were premiers, and they were losing grand finalists in 1968, yet for much of the 1970s the club fell out of finals contention.

After the system had operated for three years, Essendon was lamenting its plight. In 1970, chairman Alan Hird complained:

The creation of recruiting zones throughout Victoria severely restricts the recruiting activities of Victorian League clubs. Successful recruiting within Victoria is no longer the prerogative of well administered clubs ... in past years the club secured a number of champions whose services under the present zoning scheme would not have been available to us.²

Such players included John Coleman, Reg Burgess, John Gill, John Birt, Ian Shelton, John Somerville, Charles and Ian Payne, Alan Noonan, David Shaw, John Williams and Don Gross.

Embittered supporters might have suggested that the Essendon board should have considered that before voting for country zoning.

Yet after Essendon's rural zone, the Wimmera, began producing a generation of exceptional talent in the second half of the 1970s, the club began to recover its former status. Merv Neagle, Shane Heard, Glenn Hawker, Tim Watson, Roger Merrett and Max Crow arrived in quick succession. With the emergence of this platoon from the wheat belt, and with the appointment of Kevin Sheedy as coach, Essendon recovered. Neagle, Heard, Hawker, Merrett and Watson all enjoyed premiership success in 1984 and 1985. Essendon gained eight 100-game players from its country zone, and one member of its Team of the Century in Tim Watson.

Of the remaining two premier clubs during that time, Richmond had the least assistance. Its two premierships in 1973 and 1974 came with a core of players recruited before the system was introduced, including Kevin Bartlett, Barry Richardson, Rex Hunt, Kevin Sheedy, Francis Bourke, Dick Clay and Michael Green. They were bolstered by interstate recruits Neil Balme, Craig McKellar, Brian Roberts and Cameron Clayton. The Tigers had also been busy pulling players from other VFL clubs, including Paul Sproule (ex-Essendon), Gareth Andrews (ex-

Geelong), and David Thorpe and Robert McGhie from Footscray.

The Tigers' Sunraysia country zone players in those titles were Merv Keane in 1973, and, in 1974, Keane and Daryl Cumming. On the eve of those premierships, the Tigers noted that 'the recruiting measures introduced in recent years have not taken their full effect yet. But in time, a strong club of today could be reduced to mediocrity tomorrow through no fault of their own.'³

When they won the premiership in 1980, the Tigers' side included four Sunraysia zone players: Keane, Mark Lee, Dale Weightman and Terry Smith. And they were significant contributors to the success, with Lee and Weightman among the Tigers' best players in the Grand Final romp over Collingwood. Keane and Weightman would be included in the club's Team of the Century. Even so, compared to Carlton and Hawthorn, Richmond succeeded with a relatively small number of recruits from its country zone: only five recruits played 100 games or more.

Country players from outside the Sunraysia zone who helped Richmond to the 1980 title were Mick Malthouse and Jim Jess, cleared by St Kilda, and Geoff Raines, who was released by Footscray for a small fee.

North Melbourne was the other club Alan Schwab cited when recounting the shrinking number of successful clubs in the competition. Country football historian Paul Daffey believes the Kangaroos could have done better out of the Ovens and Murray zone, which was, in the early 1970s, the pre-eminent country region. 'They would not have been much stronger than Bendigo,' he says '[but] in the twenty years from when the country championships started in 1954, they were the only team consistently making the semi-finals.'

Unlike the other success stories of the country zoning era, North Melbourne was not seeking to reach a summit it had climbed before. Their history was bereft of premierships and it was this lack that drove their transformation. The Kangaroos' ambitious president Allen Aylett had played 220 games for the club, but only eighty-nine of them were victories. As president, however, he oversaw a single-minded pursuit of success. North's clinical approach consisted of making a study of other VFL clubs that had risen recently from mediocrity to success. Carlton, Richmond and Hawthorn were their role models.

In contrast to Hawthorn and Carlton, which had one-third to a half of their premiership teams recruited through their country zones, only eight country zone players turned out for the Roos in their two premierships of

that era: Ross Henshaw, Peter Chisnell, Sam Kekovich, Mick Nolan and Gary Cowton in 1975, and Xavier Tanner, Phil Baker and John Byrne, who joined Henshaw and Cowton for the 1977 title.

Five consecutive Grand Finals and two premierships for a club that had barely played finals previously was still a strong return. Its premiership success turned on its rapid response to the ten-year rule, and aggressive recruiting interstate that resulted in Malcolm Blight and Barry Cable moving east. Equally important, however, was the recruitment of Barassi as coach. Yet with fully a quarter of each premiership side from its country zone, the Ovens and Murray had clearly been a significant element in the club's success. In all, North Melbourne drew forty-two players directly out of its country zone, and found eight 100-game players among them.

Collingwood, one of the original targets of country zoning to be brought back to the field, trialled thirty-one senior players from its Western Border zone, fewer than any other club. Five zone recruits played 100 or more games for the club, and Bill Picken was the sole country zone member of Collingwood's Team of the Century. The relatively poor harvest cost the Magpies a premiership, maybe two, according to historian Michael Roberts.

Collingwood had been making an art form of narrow Grand Final losses before country zoning was introduced. As country zoning's impact bit, however, Collingwood did not succumb, perhaps because its metropolitan zone was among the strongest in the competition, according to Greg Miller, who served as a recruiter to both South Melbourne/Sydney and the Kangaroos. That wooden spoon year of 1976 was bracketed by finals campaigns through most of the decade. But their regular Grand Final failures reduced them to a standing joke for many.

There was a tied Grand Final in 1977, followed by defeat in the replay; a five-point loss in 1979, a twenty-point loss in 1981, in addition to the thrashing of 1980, and a top-of-the-table finish in 1973 which ended in a preliminary final defeat.

'One really good player does make a difference to those games,' Roberts says. 'It's not like country zoning gutted the club and sent us tumbling to the bottom of the ladder for twenty years. We were strong enough, and our other recruiting was strong enough, to stay thereabouts. We were nearly there in '73, we drew in '77, then the five point loss in '79 and twenty points up late in the third quarter of '81. There were four premierships absolutely there for the taking, and just one more bit of

quality could have made the difference.’

To which country zoning advocates might respond: mission accomplished.

If Collingwood defied the fate its threadbare country zone implied, so at first glance did Footscray. The Bulldogs were viewed as one of the big winners of the project when they were assigned the powerful Latrobe Valley region, yet still premiership success eluded them. Indeed, the Bulldogs were not even regular finalists, despite an extraordinary run of talent from the region.

Footscray introduced more players directly from its country zone than any other club: fifty-five. Of these, fifteen played 100 or more games for the club – the same number as at Hawthorn – yet only two were selected in the Bulldogs’ Team of the Century.

However, Footscray did benefit. In the three completed seasons before country zoning was introduced, the Bulldogs ended each year among the bottom three clubs, and they remained among the last three in 1968 as well, winning only seventeen of seventy-four matches between 1965 and 1968. But within three years Footscray was a finals contender. From an average of four wins a year, the Bulldogs recovered to win eleven games in each of 1971, ’72 and ’73, and competed in their first finals series in more than a decade in 1974.

Among the first wave of Latrobe Valley exports were outstanding players including Bernie Quinlan, Barry Round and Ian Salmon. Only Salmon, however, remained at the Western Oval for his entire career. While both Quinlan and Round played more than 100 games at Footscray, both had longer careers elsewhere. Quinlan arguably played his best football with Fitzroy, and Round with South Melbourne/Sydney.

Footscray’s region remained prolific. In country zoning’s second wave – the period after the secret vote to extend it without rotating the regions as planned – the Latrobe Valley produced a further sixteen senior players for the Bulldogs despite the loss of several regional centres in West Gippsland. In this second period, the Footscray greats included the prolific goalkicker and Team of the Century selection, Kelvin Templeton, along with 100-plus gamers Ian Dunstan, Geoff Jennings, Terry Wheeler and Jim Edmond. Many more followed later, with Brian and Neil Cordy, Rick Kennedy, Brian ‘Choco’ Royal and Greg Eppelstun taking the path to the Western Suburbs before the system was scrapped.

The examples of Carlton, Hawthorn and Footscray seem to confirm

that a prolific country zone was essential for success, but insufficient in itself. Carlton and Hawthorn had at least one thing the Bulldogs did not: money. And once the Bulldogs created a social club to try to generate more income, the venture proved disastrous as the football club fell out with the administration of the social club.⁴

Where Footscray had turmoil, Hawthorn had unity. The Hawks had just three coaches during the country zoning era: John Kennedy, David Parkin and Allan Jeans. Each is revered for his contribution to the club and the game. In the same period, Footscray took the field under eight different coaches. All are respected for their football acumen, yet not one of Charlie Sutton, Ted Whitten, Bob Rose, Billy Goggin, Don McKenzie, Royce Hart, Ian Hampshire and Mick Malthouse delivered the success the club craved.

What part did country zoning have in Melbourne's transformation from powerhouse to poorhouse? On almost any statistical measure, Melbourne fared badly. If an above-average country zone was no guarantee of success for the Bulldogs, how much did it matter that Melbourne had the relatively poorly performing Goulburn Valley? Melbourne's zone generated just three 100-game players for the club over twenty years, the least of any in the VFL.

Another measure is club champions. At Hawthorn, no fewer than twelve club championships went to country zone players: Leigh Matthews (eight times), Peter Knights (twice, including a tie with Matthews), Kelvin Moore, Chris Mew and Gary Ayres. Also, the Hawks' zone supplied the second-place getter to the club champion on twelve occasions – Michael Tuck was runner-up seven times. In the premiership years of 1976 and 1978, Matthews, Knights and Tuck filled all three positions.

At Footscray, the country zone produced the club champion six times, with the winners including Ian Dunstan, who won it three times, Kelvin Templeton and the Bulldogs' second country zone Team of the Century selection Brian Royal. At Geelong, Garry Hocking won the best and fairest award four times in the 1990s. At Carlton and Essendon the club champion award went to zoned players six times - Tim Watson won four times at Essendon; Southby and Keogh each won twice at Carlton - while at Richmond five best player awards went to country zone players. But at most clubs the country zones delivered fewer club champions. At Collingwood, the Copeland Trophy went to Billy Picken twice and to Phil Carmen. South Melbourne's country region produced one

club champion, Ricky Quade, in 1976, and there was just one at North Melbourne, where Sam Kekovich won in 1969. Fitzroy waited until 1984, when Ross Thornton claimed the award, to see it go to a country zoned player.

Melbourne waited longer still, until Garry Lyon won the Bluey Truscott Memorial Trophy in 1990. He won a second time in 1994. No other player from Melbourne's country zone won the award. Lyon was also the Goulburn Valley's sole inclusion in the club's Team of the Century.

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When Greg Miller and I meet at an Elwood cafe to discuss country zoning, Greg opens by warning me not to overplay its significance. Having considered Footscray's failure to make more of the Latrobe Valley, and Collingwood's relative success in reaching Grand Finals despite its lousy hand, I reply that I understand there are limits to its relevance.

'A lot has to do with culture and leadership,' Miller says. 'Zoning alone does not equate to success at all. There are a whole lot of factors that equate to success, and the most important one is the impregnability of the top people at a footy club. Those people set the tone and the culture. The president, the coach, the football manager and chief executive. Development through good culture is more important than recruiting, and I have been a recruiter all my life.'

'You have to have an impregnable force at the top, even more so now because the media will try to break you up. It's the chairman, it's the coach, it's the chief executive and it's the football manager. None can have an ego and none can let the others down. People, the media, look at recruiting because it's measurable. You can't measure leadership.'

As the architect of one of the greatest steals in recruiting history, Miller must be taken seriously. He began recruiting with South Melbourne, which meant he spent his time north of the Murray River, in the Riverina, where he first came across a couple of kids called John Longmire and Wayne Carey. Miller says that in 1979, '80 and '81 he was spending fifteen weeks in the region each year. Miller first saw the pair in an under-12 interstate carnival in Darwin. They were each in the Swans zone, around Wagga Wagga.

It was unusual for a recruiter to be watching under-12 competition, but New South Wales was a special case because the entire state was effectively a development zone. 'It was not good enough in New South

Wales just to sit back and see what the locals could do,' Miller says. 'You had to be involved and add your expertise to a smaller pool of expertise in that area. I was involved in all sorts of New South Wales squads down to a very young age.'

A key element of his recruiting method was the rule that once a player was zoned to a club, he remained tied to that club for three years, even if he moved into another club's zone. This was to stop players shopping around the clubs.

'What I did regularly, I found guys who shifted zones,' Miller says. 'They were on the cusp [of the three-year rule]. Because the three-year [deadline] was coming clubs did deals, so Dennis Carroll, for example, moved to Albury from Tumberumba and became a North Melbourne zoned player, I quickly had to move and sign him [for South Melbourne/Sydney] and give him a little bit extra and convince him to come before he became a North Melbourne player.'

'John Longmire [was] vice versa to Dennis Carroll. He was a Swans player [who] moved into North Melbourne's zone, because he went from Corowa-Rutherglen in the Coreen League to Corowa-Rutherglen in the Ovens and Murray. In that town, they had teams in both leagues, the underage and the senior league, and he moved into the senior league. I knew that I would lose him to South if I waited. Because he moved to North Melbourne's zone, I had leverage over the Swans: "He's in my zone; if you don't clear him, if I wait one more year he'll be my player for free."

'I used that a lot. I shifted players everywhere. I shifted Mark Bayes from his mother's place to his dad's place in my zone. I didn't tell Footscray for twelve months, then I rang Footscray and said, "Will you clear him? I'll give you \$20,000." They were desperate. I didn't have twenty grand, but I got it and they did the deal.'

An example of the three-year rule working as intended was Collingwood's recruitment of Rick Barham from South Warrnambool, which was in Fitzroy's zone. Barham played underage football for St Andrews and Branxholme, both of which were in the Magpies' zone, and he played senior football as a sixteen-year-old with Hamilton before his one season with South Warrnambool. A Fitzroy recruiter urged him to stay on at South Warrnambool to become more mature: had he stayed for two more years, he would have been tied to the Lions. Barham, however, took the opportunity to train with Collingwood, and within months was a senior player in the VFL. He made his debut in May 1977,

six months after his eighteenth birthday, and went on to play 151 games for Collingwood.

Clubs also contrived ways to hold players tied to them as juniors. John Law played junior football in his home town of Strathbogie, which was in North Melbourne's zone. He attended school and played cricket in Euroa, however, which was zoned to Melbourne. When he wanted to play football in Euroa because it was a higher standard, North Melbourne arranged for him to do so only on match permits, which were a means of allowing a player to play for a limited period without a full transfer. Had he been given a full clearance, he would have been in Melbourne's zone. The Kangaroos moved quickly after that.

Key to the Longmire/Carey recruitment was the fact that Miller moved from recruiting for the Swans to recruiting for North Melbourne, joining the Roos in 1985. It was a great steal; the pair shared in five best and fairest awards at North Melbourne. As Wayne Carey recalled in his book, Miller made the move to North Melbourne equipped with some 'intellectual property', and set about, firstly, signing Longmire to his new club.⁵

But Miller had forgotten about the other kid from Wagga Wagga who had caught his eye years earlier. At fourteen, Carey was now living in South Australia and playing underage football for North Adelaide. Miller was in town to look at a promising junior when a chance remark from a hostile South Australian junior football official – 'you won't be getting Carey' – reminded him of the kid's talent and alerted him to Carey's whereabouts.

Miller arranged housing for Carey in Melbourne. He paid the Swans \$60,000 for Longmire's clearance to North Melbourne, while Sydney, unaware of what they were letting go, released Carey to the Kangaroos for a further \$10,000. With it, Miller completed one of the great recruiting masterstrokes in the game's history.

By the time Miller was a recruiter, clubs were required to maintain a list of fifty junior players from their zones on whom they laid claim. In theory, this meant that the fifty kids most likely to make it in senior football were locked to their zoned club, while juniors not included in the list were fair game for other clubs. For Miller, this created opportunities.

Miller's singular initiative to bypass country zones was to stage his own junior football competition at Waverley the day after the VFL Grand Final. From 1979 to 1984 at South Melbourne/Sydney, and later at North

Melbourne, he invited the best prospects from his club's country and metropolitan zones to play at Waverley. Also invited were prospects from the country zones of the other eleven clubs who had not been included on their club's list of fifty juniors and so could be signed by any club. Those who made the trip were billeted out and given a standing room ticket to the Grand Final as their 'reward'.

'You had to know who the top fifty were on your list, and then if a kid was coming up to that age [of fifteen and a half], you had to have him on your list,' Miller recalls. 'I had 100 kids coming from across the country and metropolitan zones, and the ones that were not on other clubs' country lists.'

His method delivered to North Melbourne players such as Wayne Schwass (from South Warrnambool, in Fitzroy's zone), and Alastair Clarkson and Craig Sholl, from Essendon's zone.

'It seemed to me that, for Essendon and Fitzroy, we were parasites in their zone,' Miller says. 'We had success in those two areas. Craig Sholl was playing for Horsham reserves. I reckon he won the reserve grade B&F, and Essendon did not have him on their list. He played in that game at Waverley and you saw how well he moved. Again, no other club was doing those sort of things, so I had this comparative measuring opportunity and I was able to get to know them as well. I was able to see who got pissed on a Saturday night after the Grand Final and who was fair dinkum. That actually was singly one of the best things I ever did, because I built South Melbourne and North Melbourne on that premise of working harder, examining other clubs' zones, getting them into your environment and comparing them with each other.'

So the country zoning system was not watertight. Deals could be done and rules bent. Kevin Sheehan, from Sandhurst, in Carlton's zone, was swapped for a player from Werribee, then in Geelong's metropolitan zone. Sheehan played 102 games for the Cats as a result. Brett Lovett, from Inverloch, was unable to break into Hawthorn's senior side but became a valued player at Melbourne over 235 games, and represented Victoria six times.

Other players were overlooked. Carlton rejected Greg Williams, despite Ian Collins' recommendation. 'Greg was in our zone and we knocked him back three times,' he recalls. 'I think he came down and played a practice match, played a few games in the reserves, but the match committee just thought too small, too slow.' After thirty-four games and

a best and fairest award with Geelong, and 107 games and a Brownlow Medal with Sydney, 'we got him back. But he cost us a lot more to get back than when he was in our zone.'

Williams bore the Blues no ill will. 'Carlton had their "mosquito fleet" in those days and played in premierships. They really weren't looking for a small slug,' he told Mike Sheahan years later. He had initiated his career at Geelong by writing to coach Tom Hafey, who invited him to Kardinia Park.⁶

Collins had better luck with Tom Alvin, who was zoned to Footscray. That club's members had been told of Alvin's ability in the 1983 annual report, where he was nominated alongside Brian Royal and Graeme Cordy as evidence of the Dogs' strong country zone.⁷ However, Collins had only recently been installed as the executive director at Carlton when recruiter Shane O'Sullivan shifted from the Blues to Footscray as general manager. Soon after, two football department officials followed O'Sullivan to Footscray.

'I said, "There's only one way to stop this, [and that] was to go and take the best player out of their zone,' Collins recalls. 'I knew Tom's cousin, who was from Maffra. Tom was the star up there. He was tied to the Bulldogs, but Tom was a Carlton supporter and I knew it. I recruited him with a lot of bluff and bravado and playing hardball. He came down, we funded some money and a transfer. I said [to Footscray], "If you keep taking my staff, I'll keep taking your players."' "

Paul Couch tried out with Fitzroy but ultimately played 259 games for Geelong from 1985 to 1997, and won the 1989 Brownlow Medal. A former recruiter for the Lions, Ian Crawford, said the match committee felt the left-footed Couch was too 'one-sided'. Michael Turner was also of interest to the Lions but played all his 245 games with Geelong, following his father, Leo, to the Cats.

The Lions also missed Adrian Gleeson. Fitzroy dropped Gleeson off their junior list when he told the club he wanted to remain at home in Koroit to complete his Year 12 schooling. That left him open to offers from other clubs. 'I was oblivious to being on a list,' Gleeson says. 'I only knew I was off when I was contacted by Geelong and Melbourne.' Ultimately, Carlton coach Robert Walls and Ian Collins persuaded him to go to Princes Park. 'I had friends at Fitzroy. In the end, it was between Fitzroy and Carlton. Fitzroy had a good team in 1985–86, [but] the bigger club was probably a bit more appealing.' Or, as Crawford puts it, 'Carlton

was very powerful, we were very vulnerable.’ Gleeson went on to play 176 games for Carlton from 1986 to 1996.

Fitzroy’s early country harvest had not been a great one. In the first ten years of the system, eighteen players from the Royboys’ country zone were tried out, for a total of 713 games, or thirty-nine on average. Only Alan Thompson played 100 games. Yet like Essendon, when Fitzroy recovered its competitiveness, it was with a significant injection from the bush. Leon Harris, Tim Pekin and Ross Thornton, each playing more than 100 games in the maroon and blue, were part of the side that lost the 1986 preliminary final to Hawthorn. Other country recruits present that day were Bernie Harris and Mark Dwyer.

Crawford said Fitzroy considered taking legal action over Wayne Schwass’s recruitment by North Melbourne after the Kangaroos moved him to Melbourne, but the club was discouraged by Alan Schwab and Jack Hamilton from challenging the player rules.

‘That was very devious, what North Melbourne did,’ Crawford says. ‘That was when zones were about to finish. They moved him up to Melbourne to live with Wayne Schimmelbusch. He lived with Schimmelbusch for three months but they said he’d been there three years. We knew where he’d been going to school.

‘It might have been different if it was a strong club but [Schwab and Hamilton] were worried it would have escalated. It was just before the national competition came in. In their words, it was “be quiet and let it lie”’. As compensation, North Melbourne released a 188-centimetre utility player, Brendan Ryan, to Fitzroy. Ryan played one senior game for the Lions.

Overall, Fitzroy had four country zone recruits play 100 games or more, but their missed opportunities – like Couch – were big ones. Still later, as the Lions’ future became precarious, their coach David Parkin had trouble persuading zoned players to try out with the club. Ken Hinkley, from Camperdown, ‘flatly refused’ to join until Parkin threatened that he would not be cleared in any case. ‘So he reluctantly came and played some games, and he didn’t try in any of those to make sure we wouldn’t hold him. Unfortunately for me, I got the sack at the end of the year and he got his clearance [to Geelong],’ Parkin says.

So the system was on occasion sidestepped, but if country zoning really had minimal impact, it would have been implemented as intended, with the zones reassigned for the five-year period after 1972,

and reassigned again in 1977. After its first five-year ‘levelling’ of the competition, it would have been true to the stated aims of the project to redraw the zones. Instead, once country zoning started to deliver talent in its first incarnation, there was no moving the zones as the fortunate clubs jealously guarded their patch. Only in a system where the clubs controlled decisions and were able to shape deals and make mutually beneficial compromises could such a system survive.

‘There was a big weakness in what they set out to do because, basically, it was only enforced in the first phase of it,’ Ian Collins observes. ‘You were to have your zone for a period of time and then they were to reallocate the zones. But once it got in, and some clubs were very happy with their zone, they sort of caucused and said they were not going to change their zone ... like Hawthorn’s zone was fantastic.’

Another difference contributing to the unevenness of the zones was the attitude of the local leagues, says Miller. ‘Bendigo was harder for Carlton to operate out of because of their militant league attitude. They never embraced or wanted to embrace their role as a launching pad into VFL footy, and they fought against you in a way,’ he recalls. ‘In the Riverina you had [the challenge of] distance, but you also had support.’

Indeed, despite the challenge of distance, South Melbourne/Sydney did gain much talent from the northern border region. Among those who managed 100 games or more for the Swans were 1976 club champion and later coach Ricky Quade, David McLeish, Reg Gleeson, Steve Hoffman, Colin Hounsell, Dennis Carroll, Anthony Daniher and David Murphy.

But in addition to the mistake of releasing the Longmire/Carey duo, the Swans also erred in trading Terry Daniher and, sight unseen, his brother Neale to Essendon. Terry went on to play 294 games for the Bombers, while Neale’s brilliant, blossoming career was cut short by injury.

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Tracking all the shifts in zones is a fraught exercise. Under the pressure of changes in population and economics, entire competitions changed shape. For example, the St Kilda-aligned Bacchus Marsh and Ballarat District leagues combined in 1973, and five years later merged with the Clunes Football League – from which Carlton had recruited David McKay in zoning’s first period – to form the Central Highlands competition. The Waranga League was at different times aligned with both Geelong and Melbourne; the Ovens and King League shifted between Geelong and North Melbourne.

Country clubs sometimes changed leagues: Echuca was competing in the Bendigo League in zoning's first incarnation, but in 1974 it joined the Goulburn Valley League. Likewise Euroa, first tied to Geelong through the Waranga competition, joined the Goulburn Valley League in 1974.

As well as the recasting that took place in 1973, forced by the metropolitan restructure, in 1978 South Melbourne was assigned ten clubs from the Mornington and Nepean competitions as compensation for the remoteness of its Riverina base – and gained Ian Roberts as a result – while the outer-metropolitan Riddell League, assigned originally to Melbourne, was carved up among four clubs.⁸ Essendon also was handed a section of the Mornington Peninsula in 1982,⁹ possibly as compensation for the remoteness of its Wimmera base. But with the exception of Footscray's loss of four significant Gippsland towns to Hawthorn, the adjustments that were made were marginal, involving individual clubs or leagues. Overwhelmingly, the regions the clubs received in 1967 remained their base throughout.

Country zoning had a further, compounding effect, since success breeds success and money. The success clubs experienced during the early years of country zoning helped them to become prolific in interstate recruiting. Carlton topped up their list with aggressive interstate recruiting, and by luring players from other VFL clubs, such as Val Perovic (St Kilda), Mario Bortolotto (Geelong) and Greg Wells (Melbourne). From South Australia came Robbert Klomp, Phil Maylin, Craig Bradley and Stephen Kernahan. From Western Australia came Mike Fitzpatrick, Ken Hunter, Jon Dorotich and Richard Dennis and Peter Bosustow, who signed with the Blues because he wanted to play alongside Alex Jesaulenko.¹⁰

'We also signed up players on agreements outside the rules saying they can only come to us,' says Ian Collins. 'They'd sign a restrictive covenant which said if they were coming to play in the VFL or AFL competition, they could only play at Carlton.' The going rate? 'It varied. I'd think Bradley and [Peter] Motley are the two that stand out, but "Sticks" [Kernahan] was committed to us early days. His biggest problem was that he didn't want to play in Victoria until he'd played in a premiership with Glenelg, which he finally did, and then he came over. Everyone was having a sniff at Sticks, but also Bradley and Motley. They wanted to come together because they were such good mates. We were able to facilitate that.'

Equally, Hawthorn snatched Rodney Eade, Jon Platten and Gary Buckenara, while North Melbourne launched their premiership tilt with

Barry Cable, Malcolm Blight, Ross Glendinning, and Jimmy and Phil Krakouer.

How would Melbourne have fared if it had been assigned a stronger zone – or, better still, if the system had worked as intended and the zones been rotated? Success is never guaranteed. Had the zones rotated as intended, or had Melbourne received one of the prime zones, its team would have been more competitive, but the hangover of amateurism likely means it would have struggled to retain those elite players.

Zoning undoubtedly made Melbourne's task harder, just as it did for St Kilda. Writing in his club's 1986 annual report, St Kilda president Ian Drake welcomed the end of country zoning with the comment that drafting 'will restore initiative in recruitment'. Like Melbourne, the Saints had to wait a long while for champions to emerge from Ballarat; in St Kilda's case, Tony Lockett and Danny Frawley debuted more than fifteen years after the system's introduction.

Dick Seddon said he saw country zoning as a significant, but not the main issue for Melbourne's long winters of the late 1960s and 1970s. The bigger issue was the football club's relationship with the MCC, and the cricket club's reluctance to spend on recruits, particularly after the disappointment of the Tilbrook experiment. Invited to apportion responsibility for the club's bleak years, Seddon attributes 30 per cent of the responsibility to country zoning, with the club's amateurism and complacency following its golden era the greater cause.

As for complacency, it was pointed out more than once during the 1970s that the club's rise was preceded by a last placing in 1951 and a second-last in 1953, as if a recovery were simply a matter of waiting long enough. Successful clubs of that early country zoning era can be readily associated with their driven leaders: George Harris at Carlton, Ron Cook at Hawthorn, Ian Drake at St Kilda, Graeme Richmond at Tigerland and Alan Aylett at North Melbourne. All were matched by equally determined colleagues. Melbourne no longer had that sort of hunger. As Bluey Adams observed, the players' bonuses diminished with each successive premierships: £400 was the high point in 1955, and through that extraordinary decade there was less for every following flag as 'they got spoilt'.

Unlike Collingwood, Melbourne cannot claim that any premierships were lost on account of the system, but much pride was. Unless the MCC was prepared to open its wallet earlier, then if Melbourne had a

more productive zone it most likely would have met a fate similar to Footscray's.

The Bulldogs had little money and much internal wrangling, that feud with their social club, and they sold some of their better players. For example, the Bulldogs were plunged into crisis in 1978 when their coach quit at the season's start, saying too many players had been sold to pay the bills. 'Footscray has to keep selling players to keep buoyant which they should not be doing if they are to be a top club,' Billy Goggin declared. He said he'd decided to quit as coach when the Bulldogs opted to sell Dennis Collins to Carlton.

According to Goggin, only the inevitable outcry that would result from selling Bernie Quinlan had stopped the club taking that step, but he forecast that the full-forward too would soon be gone. 'The only reason why Bernie Quinlan hasn't been sold is because I felt that it would be the worst thing that could happen. I'm sure he will be cleared now,' he said.¹¹ Indeed, with Goggin gone, Quinlan was sold the following month for \$70,000 to Fitzroy, where he flourished as the champion known to all as 'Superboot'.

Melbourne's fall from grace was a function of its amateur origins within the MCC, compounded by the shutting-down of its traditional recruiting zones and the loss of its unique appeal as the sole tenant of the MCG. It is some sort of badge of honour to have been so strong that the rules of recruiting were remade to bring you undone.

The Bulldogs' zone enabled them to make two fleeting appearances in the finals but no great impression. Had Melbourne had a zone so prolific, the 1970s would have been much less miserable. But it was only with the coming of the national competition and the scrapping of country zoning altogether that Melbourne would return to finals action.

(see Appendix page 323)

Chapter Ten

A Red Hot Go

We were just a group of guys who were coached by a hard, hungry coach who wanted to get the best out of his teams, and he had a group of players who would scratch and fight to win as well.

Todd Viney, on the John Northey era

Garry Lyon's leg snapped with a sound as sharp and clear as a rifle shot. I was about seventy metres away, standing in the outer section of the Western Oval, when he went down. It was cruel for both player and team.

In just his second season, he was already an integral part of the side. In his first season he played twenty of a possible twenty-two matches and was the team's second-most prolific goal scorer. The final round of the 1987 season was his thirty-eighth appearance in senior company and he had not long before kicked the fifty-fourth goal of his career. It would prove to be his sole disposal that day.

I, and those around me, heard what Lyon did not. Lyon's only sense right then was searing pain in his left leg:

I didn't hear the break but I remember screaming like a wild banshee ... I remember thinking that I had to get up. I lifted myself off the ground but my leg basically stayed on the ground. Both bones in my lower left leg were snapped and it was just dangling there. Flopping. I saw that and started panicking.¹

Losing him was as bad a portent as could be imagined. Whichever side won, 29 August 1987 was going to be a momentous day.

Both Melbourne and Footscray were in the running to play finals, but both were also relying on Hawthorn, in second spot with sixteen wins, to defeat Geelong. The Dogs and the Cats were each on eleven wins and a draw, against Melbourne's eleven wins but superior percentage. Only once before in the twenty-three years since Barassi hoisted the 1964 Premiership Cup had Melbourne been this close to a finals appearance.

That was in 1976, when the Bulldogs foiled the Demons' charge with a drawn game against Carlton.

Supporters' patience was running out. At the end of the 1986 season, the club had appealed for contributions to a fund to buy players: 'Give Robbie Flower One Last Chance to Play a Final'. I tipped in \$50 and received, for my trouble, a disappointingly bland certificate of acknowledgement now long since lost.

Yet we were rewarded with this, as fraught and thrilling a day as any that Melbourne supporters had experienced for a decade. More than 31,000 turned up for the Round 22 fixture, compared to 11,000 who attended the equivalent match a year earlier. It was more than double the average attendance of the previous five Dogs–Demons clashes at Footscray.

Normally, I would have ridden my motorbike to the game so I could park near the ground, but it had been stolen from the front of our house in Northcote. Leaving aside the mystery of who would load a nine-year-old, 400cc Suzuki onto the back of a truck in the dead of night, the result was that I had to park streets away, and found myself sharing the final walk to the ground with Stuart Spencer, Melbourne's chairman and veteran of two 1950s premierships. He was pale. He was harried. He strode with intent. 'I'm more nervous than I ever was when I was playing,' he confided when I asked how he was feeling. So it wasn't just me.

Midway through the third quarter, nervousness shifted to dread as the Bulldogs opened up a twenty-four-point lead. Melbourne had been one player short since Lyon was stretchered from the ground. But the third term was the low point. From there, Melbourne rebounded as Flower glided across the front of a pack to mark and goal, one of his two for the quarter.

By the last change, the margin was six points. A four-goals-to-one final term saw Melbourne surging towards the finals – except that down at Geelong, the Cats were defying the form line to lead Hawthorn by two goals into time-on.

Flower revealed later that the Demons' football manager had lied to the players at the three-quarter time huddle, telling them that Hawthorn was thrashing Geelong, when in fact the Cats were on top. Flower was puzzled just after time-on as he followed a ball over the boundary line and a great roar went up. The crowd, half-watching the Demons and Dogs and half-listening to broadcasts from Kardinia Park, cheered the

Hawks' late charge, which saw them take the lead for the first time.

Among the cheering throng was a teenage kid called David Schwarz. A keen Hawthorn supporter but not of driving age, he had been unable to make the trip to Geelong to see his team. While Melbourne supporters backslapped and hugged around him, he revelled in the result for Hawthorn.²

It had taken twenty-three years, but with Melbourne victorious by fifteen points and Hawthorn finishing ahead by just three points, Robbie Flower's finals campaign became a reality.

It is not possible to judge just when Melbourne's resurgence began to become real. It might have been its winning of the preseason competition, a four-point victory over Essendon. It was the first anything the Melbourne senior team had won in almost a quarter of a century. It mattered at the time, but it is not genuine silverware and no one was really convinced. It is tempting to think the real resurgence began in Round 7, a day that showcased Robbie Flower's resilience.

Returning after missing four matches with a broken hand, it took Flower the first quarter to find his way into the game as Melbourne, with Steven O'Dwyer dominating the ruck, and rovers Adrian Battiston and Greg Healy busy in the middle, took an early lead. Flower, playing deeper than his customary wing, did not produce one of his classic wingman's games, yet his poise and skill added polish to an often wayward attack. He finished with six goals from just fourteen possessions, the goals coming from a mix of contested and uncontested marks and opportunistic ground balls, and kicking on both sides of his body. By the last change Melbourne led comfortably, by fifty-nine points.

There was also a notable contribution from Melbourne's country zone, with Garry Lyon beginning to make his way alongside Tatura exports Battiston and Paul Payne, and Grinter from Katandra. Melbourne won easing up, by forty-six points, although it was not until the last five rounds that the team generated enough momentum to carry them into the finals.

The week after the euphoria at the Western Oval, Melbourne's opponent for its first final in twenty-three seasons was North Melbourne. The Kangaroos were finals regulars and seriously strong favourites to put the Demons to the sword. While Melbourne was making a late charge into September, the Kangaroos had been safely ensconced in the upper echelon of the ladder. So grim were our prospects that once Todd Viney steamed out of the centre with ball in hand and fired through the first

goal of the game, I took refuge in the thought that, at least for a minute or two, Melbourne was ahead.

But it continued. A four-point margin at quarter time blew out to thirty-seven points by the half. I still was not convinced, still feared a late fade-out. Yet Melbourne dominated the second half, gaining confidence as the demolition continued. The Roos scored just one second-half goal while the Demons rampaged, freed from fear of failure, kicking another thirteen goals to win by 118 points. Some North Melbourne official was quoted later calling it the most embarrassing day of his life. Icing on the cake, that was.

The following week, more of the same. South Melbourne had relocated to Sydney in 1981. The Sydney Swans were at the vanguard of Australian football's push to convert the rugby states to the game. It was about bigger television revenue, higher ratings, more corporate dollars. The VFL had a keen interest in Sydney succeeding. The Swans were the VFL's love child. We were not supposed to win.

Included in the Swans' line-up was Gerard Healy, an outstanding footballer and veteran of 130 games with Melbourne. He had defected to Sydney after the 1985 season, just as Barassi's time came to an end. From the outside, his move looked much like those of Stan Alves and Greg Wells – an escape to a team that was playing finals and contending for a flag. In Healy's first year with Sydney, they finished second on the ladder but crashed out, losing both finals matches.

Now it was richly ironic that Melbourne torpedoed Healy's second finals campaign with Sydney. Thumped by Hawthorn by ninety-nine points in the first week of the finals, the Swans suffered a second belting from Melbourne the next, by seventy-eight points. Irony extended to the fact that Melbourne's coach, John 'Swooper' Northey, had been judged insufficiently charismatic to be a pioneer coach in rugby territory and was sacked by the Swans as Healy was making his move north.

At some point in the rout, as Healy lined up for a shot at goal, I had called out, as a kind of prayer, 'Miss this and we'll let you come back!' Someone nearby snarled that he was not wanted back, but I'd have had him in a heartbeat. Healy won the Brownlow Medal the next year. Had he continued his career with Melbourne, that elusive premiership might have been won sometime that decade. He could only have enhanced our chances.

Melbourne's charge through the 1987 finals won the admiration of most neutral observers. It was a footballing fairytale. A twenty-three-

year finals drought rolled into three wild weeks of relief, heightened expectations – and, finally, despair at Waverley.

Favoured by the wind for the first three quarters of the preliminary final against Hawthorn, the Demons entered the final term twenty-two points ahead, but went goalless in the last thirty minutes, adding only six behinds.

Melbourne had several chances to seal it. Tony Campbell ran towards goal, directly in front, and missed from forty metres. Graeme Yeats also missed. Still, with the crowd alternately howling and holding its breath, the Demons clung to their diminishing lead. Another chance to save the game came when Simon Eishold marked in the goal square. But he was placed on an extremely tight angle, and screwed the ball behind the goal post. Any one of them could have won it.

Hawthorn took the lead, and a place in the 1987 Grand Final, only after the final siren had sounded. With the ball kicked into Hawthorn's forward half, with Grinter and Hawk wingman Gary Buckenara jostling for position, Grinter conceded a free kick fifty metres from goal. The siren sounded but the umpire did not hear it above the roar of the frenzied crowd. As Buckenara prepared to take his kick, the inexperienced Irish ruckman, Jim Stynes, triggered a fifteen-metre penalty by crossing the mark as he tried to reach an unmarked opponent. Buckenara's job was made much easier as the umpire shifted him closer to goal. His kick won it.

For the crowd, the next half-hour was a confused spectacle of despair and elation, but little dignified celebration. Hawthorn supporters taunted devastated Melbourne fans. My father and I drifted back to our car, me barely comprehending what had just happened. It was the biggest day of my adult football-watching life, and it was shattering.

Sometime later, a Carlton fan told me that while she had loved Melbourne's mad, seemingly unstoppable charge through the finals, casting aside assorted wildlife – the Kangaroos and the Swans – some part of her was glad when Hawthorn won that final. 'I didn't want it to be us that stopped the fairytale,' she said.

It was Flower's last game. He did not blame Stynes for his lapse:

Jimmy was the unfortunate end result of a day that probably looked as if we could have won it at any time. And the first quarter I took a mark 15 metres out, if that, on a slight angle, had a shot for goal and hit the guy on the mark, so it goes through for a point. Put that back on the score line and where do you sit? So you never look at isolated moments within a game.³

At the Kangaroos' Grand Final Breakfast, broadcast on television a week later, it was striking how the crowd seemed shocked when Eishold's mark was replayed. The angle he'd been placed on seemed far too extreme for where he had first grasped the ball inside the goal square. That was salt into weeping wounds.

Melbourne supporters like to believe that, had they met Carlton in the Grand Final, sheer momentum would have seen the premierships drought ended. I doubt it. Carlton made a meal of Hawthorn, and Melbourne would have faced the Blues without both Flower and Brian Wilson, each having suffered a broken collarbone against the Hawks.

That was the first of five successive finals campaigns under coach John Northey, the man who restored the club's self-respect. Northey maybe was the fortunate recipient of the foundations laid by the Barassi/Jordon/Seddon revolution. But his was also a period of astute interstate recruiting, with the addition of Warren Dean and Earl Spalding from Western Australia to join the forward line, and winger Steven Stretch and on-baller Todd Viney from South Australia.

Through the national draft in 1986 Melbourne added Steven and Matthew Febey who would play a combined 401 games for the club, and Andy "Chopper" Lovell whose career at Melbourne would feature 121 games and 146 goals. In the second national draft Andrew Obst, from South Australia, and Steven Tingay, from Shepparton in Melbourne's former country zone joined them.

The introduction of both the draft and the salary cap prompted complaints of "football socialism", particularly from the presidents of clubs that had enjoyed success over the previous decades. This was a reflection of their short sightedness. Such critics ignored, or perhaps were ignorant of the fact that their own clubs' success had been facilitated by the distortions of country zoning, which, if it was not socialism, was some kind of fix.

Meanwhile, Northey kept the team in finals and premierships contention until his resignation in 1992. His first season yielded an unremarkable seven wins and several massive defeats, but his message, encapsulated in the catchphrase he demanded of his players, that they have 'a red hot go', finally paid dividends. His teams were tough, gritty and committed to the contest. Over time, I was left with the impression that Northey's sides suffocated their opposition with pressure, often grinding out wins rather than overwhelming their opponents.

‘Effort without class, a hallmark of the Northey era,’ was how David Schwarz, who began his career under Swooper, described it. And that comment does capture the commitment Northey’s teams had for contested play. But to go back and examine the winning margins of his teams is to be struck by how few were actually close finishes. Of Melbourne’s ninety victories on Northey’s watch, only sixteen were by less than two goals. The average winning margin overall was more than five goals, and in 1987 and 1991 the average win was by seven goals or more. There was more than effort there. There was a team playing like demons, driven to succeed.

‘John Northey was never a great tactical coach, but he was brilliant when it came to motivation. His key messages were to believe in yourself, to back yourself, put the team before the individual and have a go,’ Schwarz added.⁴

Todd Viney arrived at Melbourne for the 1987 season, having avoided the uncertainties of the national draft by signing a Form Four on the washing machine at Stuart Spencer’s flat in Toorak, under the watchful eye of Cameron Schwab.

‘John Northey had a huge impact on me,’ Viney says. ‘He really looked after his players and created a great team spirit. He insisted on hard work and discipline. If you ran over the top of a cone rather than running around it in preseason, he’d stop the whole group and you’d go do a 400 or an 800 as a penalty – the whole group. If we played poorly, you knew next week was hard one-on-one training. Often if we played poorly we’d have to turn up at the Lakeside Oval and do two laps of the lake as punishment. He was a hard disciplinarian, but he got the best out of his teams.

‘His game plan was pretty simple, but it was very much around the contest, taking the game on and moving the ball quickly. But it was certainly around the contest, tackling and a physical game style. Overall the coach, the group – you use the word “gritty”, we were a very competitive group. There were a lot of highly competitive players. It was just in their DNA: Brett Lovett, he was a star, Graeme Yeats was a super competitor, Danny Hughes at full-back, Greg Healy, Garry Lyon, there were a lot of guys there who were super competitors – Jimmy Stynes, obviously.

‘We were just a group of guys who were coached by a hard, hungry coach who wanted to get the best out of his teams, and he had a group of

players who would scratch and fight to win as well.’

In Northey’s third season at the helm, his charges carried on from where they left off, winning seven of their first eight games. After sixteen rounds they were in second spot with twelve wins, but then lost five consecutive games, slipping almost out of contention. They scraped in to the finals with an unexpected last-round win over Carlton.

Northey’s motivational tricks were on full display for the Demons’ elimination final against West Coast. The Eagles’ coach, John Todd, had made disparaging remarks about Melbourne, which had featured in the press. Copies of his description of Melbourne as an ordinary side were prominent in the change rooms when the players assembled.

But then, as Viney recalled, there was always something on the walls when Northey was coaching. He fostered an ‘us and them’ culture. It might seem a transparent tactic that would soon grow old, yet apparently not. When I suggest this to Rod Grinter, he says simply: ‘It pressed my buttons.’

In my imagination, finals matches are played under blue skies in bright sunshine at the MCG. That was not how the 1988 elimination final unfolded. It was at Waverley, again, and the day was typically miserable and wet.

With unusual foresight, only weeks earlier I had bought myself my first hat, a genuine Akubra, one of those models crafted from a dozen or so rabbit pelts. That hat paid for itself through the torrents of rain that marred the game’s first half. It was the Eagles’ second season in the VFL, and this was their first final. It was grim in the stands and it was grim on the field. Against expectations, the Eagles handled the wet better than Melbourne. Two goals to one in the first quarter and three goals to one in the second saw the Eagles up by twenty-two points at half time.

The Akubra was the only bright light for me, sitting in the exposed outer terraces. Its brim was turned upwards at the back so that if it rained – if! – water would not run down my back. The brim was tilted down at the front to shade my eyes from the sun, and to allow run-off. This was how I spent the first half of the elimination final against the Eagles, dipping my head forward and releasing a stream of rainwater between my feet.

Near the end of that second term, the rain stopped, and in the third quarter Melbourne reorganised. Northey sent Sean Wight – he of the Irish experiment – to full-forward. It was a matter of showing faith in the

players, Northey recalled. Wight ignited the Demons' attack, hauling in marks almost at will.

'I always thought Sean Wight was always a little bit wasted in the back pocket,' Northey recalls. 'He was always a great defender. I thought he had more strings to his bow than just saving goals and doing those sort of things. When you're getting a bit desperate, you've got to try things, and some of those moves we tried worked out very well.'

Wight transformed the game, kicking two of Melbourne's six goals for the quarter. It is his marking, and the last seconds of the game, that linger in my memory. With just over a minute left, Melbourne trailed by four points. Wight marked near the centre and found Earl Spalding, whose kick veered off-line for a minor score. West Coast led by three. A long kick bombed forward in blind hope by the Eagles was marked by Alan Johnson, who kicked to full-forward, where a handpass found Garry Lyon, who goaled with a kick across his body. There were perhaps forty seconds left to play and Melbourne led by three points.

Eagles midfielder Murray Wrensted had known sporting success. Three years' earlier, he had won the highest individual award in West Australian football, the Sandover Medal, and he was a member of East Fremantle's premiership side that same year. Recruited to the Eagles when they were created in 1987, he now found himself on the end of the Eagles' final desperate thrust to save the game. He marked about fifty metres from goal and played on, probably conscious that only seconds remained and he would likely be unable to roost the sodden football from a deliberate shot at that distance. We held our breath.

Running over the heavy turf, Wrensted was forced to kick over the head of an approaching defender. The ball slewed from his boot, not for a moment threatening a goal. We breathed again. The siren sounded before the game could restart. Then we laughed. 'Good on ya, Murray!' Wrensted did not play another game for the Eagles, but for me his name always brings back a fond memory.

We were soon on a roll again, with wins over Collingwood in a semi-final and another win over Carlton in the preliminary final, in which a dynamic blond rover by the name of Ricky Jackson snared five goals, and Lyon booted three.

Melbourne had at last qualified for the Grand Final, but the road they had travelled was a punishing one. The final five system then in operation offered a major advantage to the top side. Hawthorn had a week's rest,

while four clubs – Carlton, Collingwood, West Coast and Melbourne – met. West Coast was eliminated. Once Hawthorn saw off Carlton a week later, and Melbourne beat Collingwood, the Hawks went straight through to the Grand Final, with another week's rest, while Melbourne and Carlton played the preliminary final.

Melbourne's win over Carlton pitted them against their nemesis from 1987, but after three sudden-death finals the Demons faced a side that had played one match in three weeks. Yet the Demons went into the game with genuine belief, Viney recalls. They were one of only three teams to have beaten Hawthorn that year, and had won two of their previous three games against the Hawks, the previous year's white-knuckle preliminary final being the only loss.

But the Demons' prospects were set back too when the AFL Tribunal suspended ruckman Steve O'Dwyer for the Grand Final. It was a fact I recalled bitterly years later when the tribunal found a way to clear Sydney's frequent tribunal visitor, Barry Hall, for a Grand Final appearance.

In fact, Melbourne was never in the contest. They were outscored by four goals to one in the first term, and were eight goals adrift by half time. In a telling passage of pressure football, the Hawks were able to force the ball forward fifty metres through the centre of the ground without one clear possession. Melbourne resisted, but was overwhelmed by a champion team at the peak of its powers.

I was once again numb as we drifted out of the MCG after the game. If anything, it was worse to understand that the devastation of losing the previous year's preliminary final was a mere dress rehearsal for this hollowing-out of hope and expectation. The margin was nine goals at the last change, but it blew out to a record ninety-six points as all hope was lost.

Todd Viney, then in his second season, rejects my suggestion that the hard road into the Grand Final brought the Demons undone. He believes the young group simply did not handle the intense build-up to the game.

'In reality, we overplayed the build-up to it all,' he says. 'We were an inexperienced group dealing with the parade. I think we built ourselves up to it too much, and we came down the other side of the performance curve in a big way. We were jumped at the start. We built the Grand Final up. We got to the top and we were mentally overprepared, overcooked.'

It has to be remembered, though, that Hawthorn, with nineteen home-and-away wins, was the outstanding team of the year. Melbourne's

record going into the finals was thirteen wins. It is testament to the club's resilience, and to Northey's ability to unite the playing group, that they played finals again the next year. That ninety-six-point margin stood as a Grand Final record until 2007, when Port Adelaide was crushed by Geelong by 119 points. Port floundered the next year, as if the crushing defeat had broken the club, and would not play finals again until 2012. Northey simply demanded more red hot goes.

'[John] relied on the emotion of the occasion or moment and coached from the heart,' Garry Lyon remembered.

He had a great ability to get the boys up and playing for one another. He stressed spirit and camaraderie. He had a group of blokes sharing age, experience and mateship, and he managed to seamlessly pull us together ...

Northey was so positive. He always motivated us with the 'us against the world' approach. If the media were into us, he'd use them. If the umpires had been giving us a sting he'd use them.

He was always into conspiracy theories. To this day I am not sure he believed half of the things he went on about, but there were times when we went out to play believing that we were the only ones on our side. He concocted theories about the league which planned to undermine the club, the umpires who thought we were too fierce, the tribunal who were eager to rub us out. Northey had the whole world turning in on us. For a group of young blokes playing at a club that hadn't tasted much success and lacked superstars, Northey's way worked.⁵

Northey himself puts more emphasis on team fitness than on motivation. He had been surprised, when he arrived at Melbourne, how as a forty-something-year-old coach he was able to keep up with and even outpace some of his players on their training runs at Mount Buninyong, near Ballarat.

'I always started last so they couldn't say he had a start on us, and I remember passing players and I'd turn around and say, "Now how are you boys travelling?" and then they'd pass me but only for a short period,' Northey says. 'Those sort of things to me were a good lesson for the players. On all the training camps I did all the work they did just to show them where I was at and [that I was] prepared to do what they were going to do, which was hurting to get that fitness that was required.

'It's not only "us against them". It's how you train, how you prepare

yourself, how you play ... One of the things I've always wanted was to have the players in peak condition to be able to see the games out.

'When you've been down, every side perhaps underestimated, probably not the ability we had, but that we were able to sustain the enormous pressure right to the end of the game. I remember talking to Graeme Richmond after we'd beaten the Tigers, and he said, "I left at the twenty-minute mark. We had the game sewn up, and by the time I'd got home you'd won. I couldn't work out how." To come from a great man like that, that was pleasing.

'So yes, they were able to sustain the pressure on the opposition. It was all the pressure and the ability to finish the game off.'

The cruellest year of Northey's era was 1990. Melbourne won sixteen of its twenty-two games, including a last-round twelve-point win over Hawthorn, then the reigning dual premierships holder. Northey remembered that all the talk was that he had shown his hand and the Demons would not repeat the dose the following week, when they had to confront Hawthorn again. Yet Melbourne triumphed once more, this time by nine points, and suddenly the dominant team of the era was out of the way. Melbourne, however, having opened a path in a generally even season, blew its chance with a five-goal loss to the Eagles at Waverley.

West Coast comprised a virtual West Australian state side due to concessions at the club's creation in 1987. And they were a hurdle the Demons could not overcome.

'I know a couple of messages I gave to players prior to the game, they didn't work out, and [the Eagles] were able to score a couple of quick ones and we were never able to quite recover from that,' Northey remembers. 'That, I felt, was the one that got away. Collingwood won that year and I thought we were as good as any of them.'

The following year, another finals campaign saw another semi-final loss to the Eagles at Waverley.

For the rusted-on supporter, these were still heady times. The club was no longer an object of mockery. No one offered their sympathy. There was no talk of long winters or thought of organising a holiday in September. Yet none of it rated as revenge for past humiliations, because there was no final triumph. Eliminating Hawthorn from the finals when they were poised for a third successive premierships would count for something if we had something to show for it, but that final prize eluded us.

Northey was judged harshly when the team struggled to stay in finals

contention in 1992. It was appalling to hear him abused by MCC members as he moved from the coaches' box in the old Members' Pavilion to address the side in the latter part of the season. Seriously, what did they want? Six coaches had come and gone without a finals appearance. Only twice in twenty-three barren years had we gone into an end-of-season game that was not a dead rubber. Northey had taken his sides to five finals series in seven seasons.

Yet Melbourne hesitated to extend his contract. According to Northey, Ian Ridley told him that he 'should be alright' but still there was no decision. Events moved on, and Northey resigned and returned to his first club, Richmond. 'Out of the blue, Cameron Schwab came and said, "Come and coach Richmond. Alan [Jeans] is not well." I spoke to him and later that afternoon I accepted the job because Melbourne was so slow in coming to any decision,' he recalls.

Viney had no hint of Northey's imminent departure. 'We all loved Swoop,' he reflects. 'We played for him. I had no sense that was unfolding. He always had something on the wall. He used motivational tapes, highlight tapes of us playing well together. There wasn't the technology then to prepare them, so they must have taken enormous time. Then he would come across different stuff where he could use a story, which is very much part of today's coaching.'

'He had a huge impact on all those guys who played footy for the first time. We had been relatively successful without winning the premiership. We were respected by the competition. Every team we came up against knew that they were in for a fight.'

Chapter Eleven

Broken Promise

Schwarz has an unmistakable air of the superstar about him.

Trevor Grant, journalist

For the briefest time, one shining summer amid the wilderness years, it did seem that there could be genuine expectation of triumph. Not mere hope, but real belief that redemption was at hand; that finally, after the thwarted promise under John Northey, the Demons had assembled a team capable of creating a new history worth recalling. Melbourne had lived off the memories of its gilded era long enough. Something better was coming.

The archangel of this promise was a youth imbued with rare gifts of athleticism. He did not jump at the ball so much as launch. Having launched, he hung airborne as if levitating. And his hands, his hands were a vice. When he rose to catch the ball it stayed caught. And he could run, and when he fell he bounced back up and ran some more, with a flowing blind turn thrown in for good measure to leave his opponents flatfooted, foolish and stranded.

David Schwarz was a product of Melbourne's metropolitan zone. Country zones had been abolished in 1986, but the Victorian metropolitan zones persisted until 1992. Melbourne's zone was a series of islands: Murrumbeena in the south-eastern suburbs gifted the extraordinary Robert Flower; some piece of the beachfront around Edithvale-Aspendale delivered David Neitz; and Sunbury, in the far north, offered up Schwarz, a kid with an extraordinary history.

His father was shot dead in a motel room when the boy was present. He escaped, bolting through the meal delivery chute. He would later reveal that for years he shuttered that memory while he grew into a young footballer of almost unmatched promise. He had survived something no child should witness and seemed set to thrive in the game. For us, too, he brought hope of something better than mere survival.

For me, the day of promise came at the end of July 1994. The AFL had by this time adopted a final eight finals system, and the Demons were in ninth place, one game behind Essendon, the reigning premier, in sixth position. What promised to be a close contest was a romp: Melbourne stormed home by seventy-seven points. The reigning premiers were humiliated and dropped out of the top eight.

Skipper Garry Lyon kicked eight goals, but it was the aerial dominance of Schwarz and Jim Stynes that foretold of looming greatness. Schwarz was unstoppable, taking fourteen marks and kicking five goals.

As 1994 approached its close, I was offered the role of news editor at *The Sunday Age*. It was a promotion in the sense that it offered a significant pay rise, but it was a job that few at the paper coveted. *The Sunday Age* was then a feisty, lively newspaper that took seriously its duty of holding governments to account while simultaneously entertaining its readers. It was serious without being dull or self-important. It was entertaining without being trivial.

The editor, Bruce Guthrie, was a rare combination of keen political observer and sports enthusiast, someone who like few others understood Melbourne culture. Melbourne the city, that is, not the team. His team is Essendon, and there is no not knowing that. In the hours after the 'Baby Bombers' took the 1993 premiership, he strode through the office declaring, 'It's not a premiership, it's a dynasty.' Guthrie said I should take the job he was offering because I would be learning from some of the best, a category in which he included himself.

He was highly effective in the role, instinctively driven to question those in power. At the time, Liberal premier Jeff Kennett was riding high in his first few years in office. His grip on power was unchallenged. Voters might have given Kennett a thumping parliamentary majority, but Guthrie made it his business to ensure the premier and his ministers were not allowed any slack. It made for an exciting, expectant newsroom: every week an adventure.

Ideas for the Sunday edition were tossed around at an all-in news conference on Tuesday mornings, the staff gathered in a semi-circle around the editor's desk. Guthrie was famous for his hectoring style. If the ideas did not flow, he'd tell the room, 'I've never seen so many dead people sitting up.'

I was reluctant to take the job, partly because I'd seen what the role had done to others. Working at *The Sunday Age* with Guthrie and his

successor, Jill Baker, was the most fun I had in thirty years of journalism, but this job I was being offered did not look like fun. It seemed anyone who took the job could not get out of it quickly enough. Maybe it was the sixteen-hour double shifts on Saturdays that curdled their enthusiasm.

Rather than balk at the challenge, and the pay rise, I accepted it, with one condition: if Melbourne made the Grand Final, I wanted the day off. Guthrie agreed. He did not even laugh. In that early summer of 1994, the idea of Melbourne playing in a Grand Final was not the fanciful prospect it usually seemed. The seed that David Schwarz had sowed that day in July against Guthrie's mob at the MCG had already shown signs of germinating.

In the final round match of 1994, at the Sydney Cricket Ground, Schwarz kicked nine goals without a miss as the Demons overran the Swans by forty-six points. The highly gifted Indigenous forward Sean Charles kicked five goals of his own.

Those Demons were a scoring machine. Lyon, Schwarz and Charles aside, the main forward target for the previous few seasons was the mercurial Allen Jakovich, who routinely scored multiple goals quickly and from seemingly impossible angles. That Jakovich was missing due to a back injury seemed not to matter. The 1994 season had opened with Melbourne roosting a mammoth 174 points against Geelong, and would close with a return to finals football.

The two standout teams were West Coast and Carlton. Melbourne finished seventh, so when the Demons eclipsed the Blues in a qualifying final, kicking nine goals to five after half time, it seemed to open up new possibilities for the finals campaign. Charles was Melbourne's leading goal scorer with five, while Schwarz and another promising youngster, Martin Pike, each kicked four.

Journalist Stephen Reilly described the boilover victory as all the more surprising because the first term had begun with 'the air ... thick with Carlton authority'. Then, in an instant, the extraordinary happened:

Zap. Four Melbourne goals in the last five minutes of the term. Zap. The psychological grip on the contest was Melbourne's ...

It was a spree ignited by Sean Charles who finished the match with his second bag of five goals in as many weeks. Electrifyingly quick, nimble and accurate, Charles needs few touches to cut any side deeply and is the perfect ground-level foil to the aerialists – Garry Lyon, David Schwarz and Martin Pike – around him.

Charles' burst of brilliance seemed an inspiration: 'Schwarz immediately pulled in one of [his] customary soaring marks, and passed to Lyon on the lead, who goaled.'¹

Others prominent in the win were Andrew Obst in defence and Steven Febey and Andy Lovell, midfielders who repeatedly gave the Demons momentum. Schwarz, however, was special.

'Schwarz has an unmistakable air of the superstar about him,' wrote veteran sports journalist Trevor Grant after that game.

The definition of superstar-to-be is often loose and ill-fitting but when you see a young, blond centre half forward who can launch himself like a jump jet at the ball, produce a new party trick, such as the blind turn past a rover and running goal against Carlton in the qualifying final last week, it's hard to be circumspect.²

From 1986 to 1992, John Northey's sides played with some flair, but it was their determination and pressure that often overcame their opposition. Northey's teams honoured his demand to have a 'red hot go'. They were honest and tough and relentless rather than spectacular.

The team coached by Northey's successor, Neil Balme, in 1994 was different for its ability to blow their opposition away by means of multiple scoring options. The team was still inconsistent but topped 100 points in twelve of its twenty-five games. Schwarz's emergence as a young key forward – he turned twenty-two several days before his July demolition of Essendon – to play alongside Lyon seemed to promise a special future.

Indeed, Lyon himself later lauded his young teammate's phenomenal ability:

He was doing stuff in AFL games, in finals, particularly against Carlton that made a mockery of the way the rest of us were playing. He'd grab the ball from a throw-in, have a few bounces and kick a goal. I remember seeing him do that against the Blues in the finals series of '94.

He was playing on Peter Dean. As 'Schwarta' ran around slapping high fives I looked over to his opponent and said 'Shit, Deany. What are you going to do about that? He's making you look bloody stupid.' I'm not sure Dean had any ideas. He, like me, was simply stunned by some of the things Schwarz could do when he was on song.³

The following week it was Lyon's turn to put on an exhibition, against Footscray in a semi-final. The Dogs had finished the regular season in

fifth position but narrowly lost their first final to Geelong. Melbourne dominated from the outset with former Eagle Dean Irving and Stynes sharing the ruck duties, and a winning midfield of Viney, Tingay, Glenn Lovett and Lovell. Neitz and the underrated and unlucky Paul Prymke, supported by Sean Wight, held the Bulldogs forwards in check.

Lyon found space, and his teammates found Lyon, with the regularity of a metronome. Three goals in the first quarter, three more in the second, and four in the third; most were kicked from the vicinity of the fifty-metre arc after leaving his opponents in his wake.

The Bulldogs were still in touch early in the third quarter after scoring the first goal after half time. From there, though, Melbourne scored twelve goals to three, with Brett Lovett, Kevin Dyson and Lovell sharing multiple goals. Schwarz finished with just two goals, but he still had presence with a display of strong marking, sometimes flying through a pack, sometimes holding his ground in wrestling matches with his opponents and trapping the ball first with one hand, and snaring it as he dropped to the ground. His ground play, including more tackle-defying blind turns and goal assists from ruck throw-ins, only confirmed his multi-faceted abilities.

Len Johnson captured the sense of the game in his match report for *The Age*:

Most of the game's defining moments were positive for Melbourne, negative for an under-manned Footscray: Neitz hard and decisive at the ball; Lyon dashing clear for a lead, mark and his 10th goal in the third quarter as Danny Southern, Brad Nicholson and Mark Hunter debated which of them was supposed to be minding him; and Schwarz, having won a duel with Southern, taking the ball from the air at a boundary throw-in and hand-passing to Brett Lovett for a goal.⁴

Lyon ended that game with eleven marks and ten goals, and Schwarz with fifteen marks and twenty-six disposals. Although the gap between the teams was just two goals early in the third term, the final margin was seventy-nine points.

With powerful key position players at both ends, this looked like a team for which anything was possible. The fact that Footscray had beaten Melbourne twice in the home and away rounds only to be overwhelmed in the final hinted that the team had grown in confidence and poise over the course of the year.

Their luck ran out after that. Melbourne became the first Victorian side to be sent to Perth for a preliminary final, and was thrashed by the Eagles by sixty-five points. It was a pitiable end, but the Eagles went on to whip Geelong by eighty points in the Grand Final. That result made the preliminary final outcome seem almost respectable.

In any case, the Demons were back and threatening, and if they made the big one then I was going to be there. That, at least, was the plan when I accepted Guthrie's offer.

*

Schwarz ended 1994 by finishing third in the club best and fairest, behind Lyon and Tingay. In his end-of-year report to members, Melbourne president Ian Ridley confirmed what everyone knew:

This year the club was approached by Fitzroy to look at the possibility of merging. The policy of the club in this regard is 'to never seek a merger but to listen to the proposition if an approach is made'.

The Board is of the opinion that it would be irresponsible and neglectful to duty to adopt an alternative policy. The emotion amongst supporters certainly ran high, but such an important change would always remain the decision of the members.⁵

He wrote that while 1994 was an exciting year, it had not been a great one, since a great year was one that produced a premiership. 'Let's hope that '95 is a great year,' he concluded.

Such optimism would not survive the summer. The first blow came when Jakovich retired. Melbourne has never been a club that relied on one key forward. No Melbourne player has ever kicked 100 goals in a season. Fred Fanning was closest, with ninety-seven in 1947. The club's most prolific goalkicker to that point, Norm Smith, had played as a decoy forward, creating as many opportunities for his teammates as for himself, and that was also how his teams operated.

But in forty-seven games for Melbourne, Jakovich kicked an extraordinary 201 goals, including seventy-one in just fourteen games in his first season, 1991. Had his body enabled him to play a full season, he would almost certainly have racked up the ton, but a full season was beyond him. And then he was gone.

Martin Pike departed also, due to off-field misbehaviour. He went to Fitzroy, where he also fell out of favour due to off-field indiscretions, but eventually played in premierships with North Melbourne and Brisbane.⁶

Yet worse was to come. During a practice game in February 1995 near Melbourne's then training base – St Kilda's old Junction Oval – David Schwarz injured his left knee, and over the coming days word seeped out that he needed a full knee reconstruction. There was a rumour that the injury was caused by a recessed water sprinkler, but it was the effect rather than the cause that mattered. It was a huge setback for Schwarz personally. For the club it is impossible to understate its significance.

With each departure, Melbourne's astonishing capacity to outscore its opponents was diminished, but the loss of Schwarz, an emerging champion capable of dominating entire games while playing the most difficult position on the ground, centre half-forward, was an unparalleled blow.

The competition then had one outstanding centre half-forward, North Melbourne's Wayne Carey, who by any account is one of the all-time greats of the game. Carey was twelve months older than Schwarz and had debuted in 1989, so he was more advanced in his development as a player, but Schwarz in 1994 had given every sign of becoming his equal.

Carey dominated games, imposing himself on them and changing their course, but the Demons in the mid-1990s had the closest thing to Carey's kryptonite: a young defender called David Neitz. This second David shared more than a given name and a Germanic family name with Schwarz: he had a leap which he used to hurl himself into marking contests, he had glorious hands for marking and he was an accurate kick. By the end of his career, Neitz would kick more goals than any other Melbourne player in history, but not before he had won All-Australian honours while playing as a centre half-back in 1995.

The Kangaroos would become one of the dominant clubs of the era, but for that brief time until Schwarz wrecked his knee, Melbourne was ideally placed to challenge them: Neitz could blunt the great man's influence, while Schwarz wreaked Carey-like havoc of his own at the other end.

But that prospect would never be fulfilled. Instead, Melbourne had to wait while Schwarz began his rehabilitation from his knee reconstruction to see how he might remake his career. He returned to the game in record time to kick a goal with his 'comeback kick', and a total of three goals in his first game back, against Collingwood in Round 9 of 1995. It was seemingly a great day: Melbourne won with a four-goals-to-nil final term and Schwarz was back, if not yet taking to the skies.

The following week, his game ended before quarter time. Pulling away from a ground-level contest on the MCG members' wing, Schwarz collapsed, his troublesome limb folding underneath him like the leg of a card table. The crowd, numbering more than 26,000, fell silent, and remained that way pretty much for the rest of the day. An air of gloom settled over the stadium. The Demons took the lead early and were ahead at every change, but it was a joyless victory. Schwarz was lost to us again.

The side that had promised so much was disappearing before our eyes. There was still a solid core of Stynes, Lyon, Viney, the Febey twins, Neitz, Obst and Lovell, as well as Stephen Tingay, who would play most of the season. But much was lost as well. Along with Schwarz's serious injury, Pike and Jakovich had left the club. Sean Charles suffered a broken scaphoid bone, and this wrist injury would plague the rest of his time at Melbourne. At the other end of the ground, Paul Prymke, third in the 1995 best and fairest count, would be forced out of the game with a rare back problem. He would play only a handful of games in 1996 before retiring.

There have been worse times for the club, but nine wins from twenty-two matches, and ninth place, was a long way short of what the previous year had promised. In the aftermath, there was much speculation that Schwarz had rushed his return. He would be more cautious next time.

Grand Final day 1995 came and went, with me anchored to the news editor's desk. Yet the biggest blow came in February 1996. The Demons were up at Lavington, on the Victoria–New South Wales border, for a preseason practice match. Schwarz was easing into another comeback. It was a Saturday. I was at work scrolling through news wires for breaking stories that might warrant inclusion in Sunday's edition, one of the more tedious tasks of the role.

The picture editor, Leigh Henningham, came over to where I was hunched at a computer. Henningham is a lifelong St Kilda supporter, so he knows about misery. He had some news that was not yet on the wires – it came from one of his photographers on the scene.

'I'm sorry, Munnors,' Leigh began. 'Schwarz has done his knee.'

The next day's paper showed a disconsolate Schwarz, his left knee bandaged, sitting alongside club president Ian Ridley. He told Ridley: 'This is it.' Years later, Schwarz recalled the incident for Mike Sheahan: 'I was playing in the reserves. I went to take off from the goal square, I remember it vividly, and my leg just blew out. I didn't even get a chance

to turn. It just popped. I broke my leg in two places My [anterior cruciate ligament] was torn, my [posterior cruciate ligament] was torn. It was just like a car wreck, my knee. At that point I thought my career was done.⁷

Comparisons were drawn to other champions cut down in their prime. The surgeon who had twice operated on Schwarz was recommending he give the game away. The club doctor, Andrew Gaff, was quoted as saying: 'We are dealing with the concept that Schwarz is playing a high risk game with a biological disadvantage.' Club football manager Richard Griffiths said: 'He's got to weigh up whether he wants to go through another reconstruction-rehabilitation process and I suppose the club has to weigh up whether we should expect the kid to go through it all again. When does it stop?'⁸

The archangel had lost his wings. He never would fly again. But he would play. Urged on by his mother, who pointed to the fact he had a contract with years to run, Schwarz did it all again after his knee was rebuilt by another surgeon. After an arthroscope revealed irregularities in the structure of his knee, his ligaments were reconfigured with material from his hamstring.⁹

His final comeback was in mid-season 1997. Maybe it was just me, but at the time it seemed that through those three seasons, 1995, '96 and '97, the club was in a holding pattern, utterly distracted by the uncertainty surrounding this extraordinary talent. He had promised so much and, fleetingly, so had the team. Hope was snatched away, but the possibility that surgery might restore his promise was tantalising. Meanwhile, North Melbourne, the team led by Wayne Carey, he whom Schwarz had seemed ready to emulate, won the title in 1996 and finished in the top four in 1995 and 1997.

I thought the club was holding its collective breath waiting for Schwarz' return, but from within it was worse. One thing Melbourne had right in the second half of the decade was hunting for bargain recruits. Andrew Leoncelli had tried out at Carlton, but was delisted after one year when the club lists were trimmed from fifty-two players to forty-two. He had been straight out of school, was too light and not especially quick, and so was deemed surplus to requirements at the Blues. He had a year away from football, then returned to the game with the amateur club Old Xaverians. From there he was a cheap pickup for Melbourne at the urging of Barry Richardson, despite coach Neil Balme's misgivings: if he was any good, how come he was not in the system?

Preseason training for 1996 was at Elsternwick, since the Junction Oval was off limits for cricket. It was not, however, at the well regarded oval that is the home of amateur football, but in the surrounding parkland. This was far from a professional training environment. Leoncelli was trying to display elite football skills in unprotected parkland subject to swirling, unpredictable winds for a sceptical Neil Balme, yet that was not even the worst of it.

‘My impression of Melbourne when I went to the club was that they’d enjoyed some finals experience, but they weren’t sure where they were headed at that point,’ Leoncelli remembers. ‘David Schwarz had just been injured. They had played finals earlier in the ’90s and there certainly were some very good footballers at the club.

‘I just don’t think that the attitude and the standards at the club when I turned up were especially high. Certain individuals had high standards but as a collective, as a group, I didn’t think that the standards at training and the commitment to training and the commitment to being professional was amazing.

‘I had been at Carlton, and that was a fearsome environment, totally predicated on success. When I say fearsome, it wasn’t a nurturing environment. They expected you to sink or swim, to perform, and if not they wouldn’t talk to you.

‘It was a very different feeling being at Melbourne compared to being at Carlton. Melbourne was relaxed, and I think Neil’s attitude was more relaxed than the Carlton hierarchy. Some training sessions we’d have ten players on the track. There were so many injured players [that] sometimes there weren’t enough players to do kick-to-kick, because someone had a cold ... there were five different-coloured jumpers for people who were severely injured, people who were sort of injured, people who were mildly injured.

‘Any excuse to get out of training was accepted, [this one] can do contact, [this one] can’t do contact, then you kick the ball in lane kicking, and by the time you get to the end you’re already back on again. There was no waiting. It was shambolic at times.’

Perhaps standards had fallen due to the growing number of injured senior players who could not train, but there were more surprises to come. Leoncelli was drafted after kicking two goals in the Lavington game when Schwarz went down. He played several matches in the reserves before breaking into the seniors for a string of games late in the year.

‘So the four or five reserves games that I played in, we’d congregate at someone’s house later or we’d go to a pub, and everyone’s smoking marijuana. Everyone! I am like, “What is going on here?” I mean, I am not anti it, but not when you’re playing football. They were all nice fellas, but they all wanted to cut corners. They were all having a good time finishing last.’

The promise of 1994 was long forgotten by the time Leocelli arrived. It is tempting to ask what that emerging team might have achieved if David Schwarz had not been saddled with his dodgy knees, his ‘biological disadvantage’. But it is equally tempting to wonder whether, if that team of which Schwarz was part had continued on its glittering path, club president Ian Ridley would have pitched Melbourne into an existential crisis by attempting to merge with Hawthorn.

Chapter Twelve

The Demon Alternative

For every fan, the colours of his/her club's guernsey and all it represents are etched in the soul. That deep love needs to be treated with respect. It wasn't.

Letter to the editor, The Age, 21 September 1996

Ninety-five years after her father played his final game for Melbourne, Jan Dimmick became the unlikely personification of football loyalists defying the establishment's bid to merge the Demons with Hawthorn.

Thousands stood and chanted alongside her at a frenzied, chaotic meeting to vote on the merger. They included a former state government minister and premiership player, and a mining magnate of apparently limitless wealth. Headlines like 'Demon Fans Pillory Ridley' and 'Supporters Give Their Board Hell' fairly captured the indignation and contempt shown to those proposing the merger.

But it was Jan Dimmick, sixty-something years old and with carefully coiffed hair, who *The Age* put on its front page the next morning. Others equally outraged were behind her in that photograph, men and women, young and middle-aged, captured with their faces frozen midway through the chant of 'No merger!'. But it was Jan Dimmick who was its real subject.

For the media, she was both the archetypal Melbourne supporter – older, reserved, comfortably middle-class – and the antithesis of a rebel. Yet there she was, amid the chaos and determinedly part of it. As she later told the paper: 'I must say, I have never been to anything like that in my life ... The board didn't count on the passion, and there was a lot of anger. Football is grassroots. It's for the people.'¹

Even the AFL, which lauds the passion of football supporters, was unprepared for what unfolded. Waves of jeering and abuse lashed the club's directors who were urging a merger with Hawthorn. Revelations that one director had handed out sixty Demon memberships to his

employees so that they could lodge proxy votes in favour of the merger, without regard for whether they actually supported the team, intensified the fury.

Despite appearances, Dimmick was right where she belonged. Her football roots run deep. Dimmick's father, Graham Colclough, was a seventeen-year-old Scotch College schoolboy when he debuted for Melbourne in Round 2 of 1901. He balanced his time with Melbourne with school football for Scotch, and missed at least one Melbourne game to prepare for his exams.

He had a quick impact, kicking three of the team's seven goals in its Round 6 win over Carlton, and he scored a crucial goal in the brutal Round 11 contest against Collingwood. 'It was an unsatisfactory game all through and there was far too much roughness and bullocking,' reported *The Argus's* correspondent, Old Boy.

It is only fair to say, however, that Collingwood were the chief delinquents ... the final quarter was remarkable for, after Collingwood had kicked a behind, Colclough, after a fine run in which he was well shepherded got a goal for Melbourne, and Langley following suit, Melbourne were a point ahead ... when Langley added another goal it looked safe for Melbourne.²

Both Old Boy and his colleague The Follower, who reported football for *The Age*, were generous by modern standards in naming the better players, often crediting half the side. Yet it is notable that Colclough received honourable mentions in most games he played. He was among the few who 'shone' in the Round 5 loss to Essendon, and he 'had a run in the ruck and did well' in the final game of the regular season, a narrow win over Fitzroy.³ Then he was gone, his promising VFL career ended.

His family, woolgrowers who ran merino sheep, had assigned him to work on a property at Steiglitz, more than ninety kilometres west of Melbourne. Since it was too far to travel to play with the Redlegs in Melbourne, he transferred to the Ballarat Football Club, where he played from 1902 to 1907 and in 1912, scoring forty-three goals in sixty games. He also studied overseas.

Since he was in their territory, Geelong invited him to continue his VFL career with the Cats. Jan Dimmick recalls: 'I can tell you this, when he was [at Steiglitz] Geelong wanted him and he said to them, "I like Geelong, but I couldn't play for you, because I couldn't play against

Melbourne.” Geelong he could have got to easily, but because he couldn’t get to Melbourne he wouldn’t play for anyone else [in the VFL]. That’s the loyalty he had and I am the same.’

Graham Colclough’s first wife, and the infant she was bearing, both died during childbirth. Colclough enlisted, aged thirty-two, in World War I, listing his marital status as widower. He married Jan’s mother after he returned from the Western Front. He had left Australia as a private and returned as a lieutenant, having been awarded the Distinguished Conduct Medal and the Belgian Croix de Guerre for bravery. He was recognised for ‘conspicuous gallantry and devotion to duty’ at the battle of Polygon Wood. His citation read:

He constructed a Lewis gun position with great skill under heavy shell fire. When the enemy attacked he handled his men with great coolness, and, though wounded, remained at his post preparing against a flank attack when the enemy had gained a footing in the trenches on his right. He set a magnificent example of courage and determination.⁴

Colclough had been gassed several times during the war, and Jan remembers that he was not always well, but his love of sport was undiminished and he passed it to his daughter. The Demons were part of their shared affection and identity. Jan’s earliest memories are of sitting between her father and mother, distracted with a colouring book, in the Grey Smith Stand watching the team in red and blue.

The football-as-business types who drove the push for club mergers lost sight of, or perhaps never understood, the fact that it is from such histories as this that the game derives its power to engage supporters. None could have guessed that the path to Jan Dimmick appearing as the symbol of football rebellion began ninety-five years earlier with a callow youth playing a game he loved.

Football officials had been working towards something like the Melbourne–Hawthorn merger at least since 1983, when a management consultant’s report commissioned by the VFL suggested that only seven or eight of the twelve VFL clubs would survive to compete in a national competition. The game’s future demanded expansion into the non-traditional football states. South Melbourne had by then relocated to Sydney. The Victorian clubs viewed as most endangered were Fitzroy, Footscray, North Melbourne and St Kilda.⁵

It was a rotten time for supporters. Their clubs were under siege.

Periodically half the competition was said to be financially insolvent. Even if it struggled on the field, Melbourne's best hope of survival was its name: what would a national competition be without a club representing the city where the game had been invented?

That was partly why the Demons were regularly linked to talk of mergers. It was Melbourne policy that the club would not seek a merger, but would consider any approaches from others. A mooted merger with Fitzroy failed in 1984, when the Lions' president, Leon Wiegard, withdrew from talks. Five years later, Footscray fended off a forced merger with Fitzroy. Melbourne was also linked to mergers with North Melbourne and Richmond. In 1986, one football journalist suggested that the best hope for struggling Collingwood was to merge with Fitzroy.⁶ In 1995, there were eleven merger discussions, six of them 'serious', according to AFL chief executive officer Ross Oakley.⁷

During 1996, North Melbourne tried to engineer a merger with Fitzroy, but was rebuffed by the AFL Commission, which decided instead to shoehorn Fitzroy into a union with the Brisbane Bears. The Bears, an 'expansion club' created to convert rugby-league-loving Queenslanders to the Australian game, became the Brisbane Lions. The AFL contributed \$6 million to assist the merger.

Meanwhile, at Melbourne the optimism generated in 1994 had long faded. The nucleus of a good side remained for the 1996 season: the durable ruckman Jim Stynes, brilliant midfielders like Steven Tingay, gritty defenders like Brett Lovett and Anthony Ingerson, David Neitz and the emerging small forward Jeff Farmer.

But some of Melbourne's best players were injured or in rehabilitation. Garry Lyon was restricted to a handful of games by a chronic back injury. Sean Charles played even fewer games due to his recurring wrist injury. Experienced midfielder Todd Viney, a handy tennis player as a junior, had quit football to coach the Australian tennis prodigy Mark Philippoussis. David Schwarz was pursuing his third rehabilitation from reconstructive knee surgery. Luckily for the Demons, Viney returned after tensions with Philippoussis' father made his task impossible.

'I remember thinking that the club needed me to come back,' Viney says. 'There was some argy bargy going on that was part of the decision, but when "Schwarter" happened that was part of my consideration for sure. My sense was that from an administration point of view we were not solid. That whole period we were financially stuck. There was a lot going

on above the players' heads, so that you always felt there were insecurities around how we were being run: "Are we going to survive?"

In late July, with Melbourne in fourteenth place with five wins, and three weeks after the Fitzroy–Brisbane deal was sealed, news broke that Melbourne and Hawthorn were set to 'investigate' the possibility of merging. Instead of Fitzroy's demise lessening the threat to Melbourne, there was renewed momentum for another merging of traditional clubs, again with a \$6 million assistance fund from the AFL.

In truth, and in secret, the boards of Melbourne and Hawthorn had already mapped out a timetable for the union. Their plan was to call a press conference in the MCC's Long Room, at which the clubs would announce that they had agreed to 'talk'. Two weeks after that, they would announce that they had agreed to merge. Three weeks after that, the respective club members would vote to complete the process.⁸ This pantomime was to be completed within five weeks. However, the clubs lost control of the timetable when the *Herald Sun* broke the story on 25 July.

The newspaper reported that investigations showed both clubs would struggle to survive long-term. While publicly Melbourne president Ian Ridley stressed that no deal had been done, it was clear that plenty of groundwork had occurred, down to the design of a new jumper: Melbourne's traditional strip with a yellow hawk inserted into the red yoke.

An accompanying comment by Gerard Healy endorsed the move after what he called a decade of covert dealings that had linked Melbourne with several clubs. The failure to create a social club at the MCG Hotel, the failure to professionalise the club when it was successful, and the 'turbulent relationship' with the MCC were among what Healy saw as Melbourne's insurmountable problems.⁹

As if to underline Melbourne's plight, the team was thrashed the next day by a rampant North Melbourne, on their way to winning the club's third premiership. Wayne Carey dominated, kicking eleven goals.

Ross Oakley, as head of the AFL Commission, had borne the brunt of Footscray fans' anger when the Bulldogs' resisted merging with Fitzroy in 1989. He had yet to heed that lesson, promptly offering the view that the proposed Melbourne–Hawthorn merger would be consistent with the AFL Commission's goal of having just eight Melbourne-based clubs, and breezily forecasting 'another merger at some stage in the near future'.¹⁰

The immediate origins of the merger push lay in a weekend retreat

that Melbourne staged in May to plan its future. Club chief executive Hassa Mann said he initiated it because he wanted to prepare for the inflated player payments and increased player movement between clubs that was likely to result from the advent of player managers. Although the club was profitable, its concentration on maintaining its financial health had compromised recruiting.

‘We needed a review,’ Mann recalls. ‘I felt we were not in tune with what was going to happen. I could not see us being competitive in the medium term. A merger was not talked about before that weekend. My whole idea was Melbourne, the club, had to come up with a five-year plan on where we saw our future heading.’

The retreat was at Hepburn Springs from 11 to 13 May. Mann recalled a bleak exercise. The only strength was the club’s financial position. Otherwise, the club had ageing and injured players, it was denied its training ground by the cricketers until a few weeks before the start of each season, and there was no social club. ‘We had nothing,’ says Mann. ‘Nothing.’

In his memoir, Ridley said all the working groups at the retreat decided a merger with Hawthorn was the best option,¹¹ although Mann says Ridley was slow to accept this advice. ‘Ian was the last person to be convinced,’ he recalls. ‘But once he accepted that was the route we had to take, he was driving it.’

Just five years earlier, Hawthorn had been enjoying a golden era. If it seemed extraordinary that it wanted to merge, the reason was soon clear. The Hawks were broke and in debt. Hawthorn president Brian Coleman said the club needed \$1.2 million to remain independent.

Melbourne, on the other hand, was debt-free. What it stood to gain from the merger was a stronger playing list – in the short term, at least – and key features it had long lacked, including a summer training base and a social club at the Hawks’ Glenferrie headquarters.

The backlash was immediate. Hawthorn’s legendary former captain Don Scott vowed to raise the money to keep his club independent. His status as a former champion instantly generated interest, and he became a focal point for opposition at Glenferrie.

Melbourne’s anti-merger faction was less glamorous. It began with cheer squad members being recruited pre-match to distribute a flyer – ‘Save Our Demons’ – inviting opponents of the merger to meet at the office of a company called Corporate Business Systems, in South

Melbourne. That was my introduction to what would become known as the Demon Alternative.

At first sight, the meeting was not encouraging. Maybe two dozen people were in attendance, and the group was preoccupied with an advertising strategy. It was difficult to imagine this motley group of small-business people and enthusiasts mounting anything capable of challenging the resources of the AFL.

CBS was the creation of brothers Mark and Anthony Jenkins. It engaged in supplying computer services to the corporate sector, and tilting at windmills. 'We were not large in numbers, but we were comfortable that we had a lot of support outside that particular meeting,' Jenkins recalls. 'A lot of people sent faxes in and we had that core group turn up.'

While the group discussed raising money to produce press advertisements, my contribution to the meeting was to point out that the stronger option was 'free media', by which I meant newspaper column inches and radio and television airtime. The problem was that we lacked credibility. There was no Don Scott among us, and Ridley had already persuaded a number of former players to his way of thinking.

In the meantime, the current Demons players refused to cooperate with the merger push. Pitted against the reigning premiers, Carlton, Melbourne defied the prophets of doom in a memorable contest. With regular defender Anthony Ingerson partnering David Neitz in attack, the injury-racked Demons shocked the Blues with an eight-goal second quarter to lead by thirty-eight points at half time.

Yet everyone knew it was the third quarter that counted. Ever since Carlton had begun to run down a forty-four-point half-time lead in the 1970 Grand Final with a devastating third term, it was talked of as 'the premiership quarter'. Carlton had finally overcome a tiring Collingwood to take the title that year by ten points. It was among their fondest memories.

But now Carlton was closing in on a top-four finish; Melbourne was in an existential crisis. So if there was concern in the Carlton rooms at trailing the Demons, there was only anticipation among their supporters. Yet the Demons refused to yield. Denied several of its stars, Melbourne's 'injection of youth made the slow old Blues look like rest-home material', as Neil Roberts wrote in the *Sunday Herald Sun*. 'Players such as Andrew

Leoncelli, Darren O'Brien, Jeff Farmer and Adem Yze took risks running to and through packs. They set up forward play so often that the Dees could have led by five goals more at three quarter time.¹²

That lead was still a healthy forty-nine points at the last change. I was seated at ground level in the northern stand, towards the city end, with my father, neither of us making a racket. He never did. His barracking was mute. It consisted of riding the bumps and elbowing his neighbours. But I could be verbally provocative sometimes, particularly if aggrieved at some error of adjudication.

On this occasion, I simply called out, 'Great quarter, Demons!' at the three-quarter-time siren. Nobody responded. It was an unarguable statement of fact. Its rejoinder would come later.

The final quarter started agreeably. Melbourne pushed forward but added only one behind. In front by fifty points, we appeared impregnable. Then the Carlton skipper, Kernahan, goaled not once but twice. Then he combined with another South Australian, Craig Bradley, to lift the Blues.

One goal followed another in rapid succession. Bradley's midfield dominance was aided by his teammate Brett Ratten. Carlton rose to their dynamic best. Eight goals in a quarter of an hour saw Melbourne's unbeatable lead destroyed. Carlton supporters, arrogant and expectant after years of success, rediscovered their voice. They were hankering now for a brutal, morale-destroying kill. As they closed the gap to a solitary point, it occurred to me that, should somehow Melbourne lose this game, I would vomit out my heart and leave it lying there, steaming, on the cold, concrete concourse.

The tide turned when a little-known forward wearing number 38 ran onto a loose ball forward of centre for Melbourne. Darren O'Brien had made his AFL debut earlier that year at age twenty-six. He was an unlikely hero, but running directly towards the Punt Road end, he had the presence of mind to steady himself before he kicked. We had a perfect view of the ball's trajectory. It never wavered. A goal. Melbourne by seven points. We breathed again.

Soon after, Ingerson scored his third goal, and Neitz kicked his eighth. Melbourne closed out the game by nineteen points. The threat of heaving out my heart passed. There was little time to savour the win before an affluent-looking bloke dressed in an expensive, navy blue overcoat, accompanied by two suspiciously blonde women of similar late middle age and also dressed in Carlton blue – real born-to-rule types – stood to leave. He turned

to me and sneered, 'Carn the Melbourne Hawks.'

So much for supporter solidarity in the face of unwanted change.

Melbourne won eight of their next ten games against Carlton. The memory of that taunt over our plight made every one of those victories that much sweeter. And the win suggested there was more life in the club than its win/loss ratio implied. Melbourne had outplayed the reigning premier.

Before anyone could dwell on that, Ridley and his board played their trump card. The president emerged from a meeting at the Jolimont Terrace headquarters with a press release featuring the names of club greats who supported the merger. Names familiar to supporters as far back as the 1940s, like Donald Cordner and Noel McMahan, and from the 1950s and '60s, including Geoff Case, John Beckwith and John Lord, and even more recent stars, such as Peter Keenan and Steven Smith, were backing the merger. So too was the great Jim Cardwell – and, most revered of all, Ron Barassi himself.

Melbourne seemingly had edged a step closer to merging. The backing of the former players, wrote *The Age*, 'is a huge win for the Melbourne board which has had virtually no organised opposition to the merger ... in stark contrast to Hawthorn where the anti-merger mood is being whipped up by prominent identities such as Don Scott'.¹³ As if to empower the pro-merger forces further, a theme song for the merged Melbourne Hawks was released. The public relations push was gathering speed.

In the days following Ridley's announcement, I rang Ray Biffin at his work. Biffin was among the former well-regarded players who had put their name to Ridley's press release, despite having earlier indicated that he opposed the merger. I told him that I found it difficult to believe that people like him had loaned their reputations to the merger. Biffin replied that Ridley had persuaded the group that the merger was really a takeover. Melbourne was giving up a nickname but gaining much more.

The fact that so many greats of the club had backed Ridley was testimony to his standing, but there were two notable holdouts: Brian Dixon, a veteran of five premierships, and Robbie Flower, holder of the club record for games played.

Mark Jenkins recalls that a member of what became the Demon Alternative approached Flower on the group's behalf. Flower refused to buy in, telling the emissary that while he supported the group's aims, he would not publicly criticise or oppose Ridley. In the *Herald Sun*, Flower

stated his belief that the decision was rushed: a merger should only ever be a last resort.

‘If it’s right now, it’ll still be right in 12 months time ... Is it haste created by the thought of \$5–6 million? I see a merged club as a new club: no history involved,’ Flower said. He added that any decision based purely on business principles ignored history and the emotional attachment of thousands of supporters.¹⁴

But his refusal to join the Demon Alternative was a blow. Flower’s response was ‘gut-wrenching’, Jenkins says. And while Jenkins was interviewed several times for news bulletins, there was still confusion about what the group actually stood for.

One morning Jenkins was invited on to the ABC Radio breakfast program hosted by Peter Couchman. ‘It turned out they were hoping they’d get an anti-merger Hawthorn person and a pro-merger Melbourne person,’ Jenkins recalls. Only when they were live on air did Couchman realise his two guests were actually aligned in their views.

Melbourne lost two more players after its victory over Carlton. Both Todd Viney and speedster Paul Hopgood were reported for striking. Each was suspended for one match after claiming in their defences that the pressure of the merger talk had contributed to their offending. ‘With merger discussions going on we decided to fight for our lives, or basically give up,’ Viney said.¹⁵

That left the club with only twenty-three fit players. That fact alone should have made Melbourne’s win over Fremantle in the next round all the more meritorious. The Demons led throughout to win by twenty-one points. Instead, the media decided that the game had not been a sufficiently engaging spectacle. It was, according to the *Herald Sun*, ‘a scrappy contest’. Melbourne fans would have been ‘relieved rather than inspired’.

Still, there was a flicker of good news in the way the win was diminished. Scott Gullan wrote that Melbourne’s anti-merger faction ‘put more effort into its protest than the Demons did in one of the worst games of the season’.¹⁶

We had at least been noticed.

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Few among the 23,000 at the MCG that night knew what it had taken to be noticed. Mark Jenkins and his brother Tony had dipped again into their business reserves to take out newspaper advertisements calling on

members opposed to the merger to a rally at the Fremantle game.

Save Our Demons had by then evolved into The Demon Alternative, the name coined by George Zagon, who led one of the key supporter groups. Like Mark Jenkins, Zagon had some success with radio. Equipped with two pages of talking points that he and I had honed together, he appeared for an interview with Neil Mitchell on his high-rating morning talk show.

But in reality, to this point the group was a media curiosity, no more than a nuisance for the club. The two dozen originals had grown to about fifty in number. For the Fremantle game, the group prepared a running sheet, beginning with the volunteers assembling at Light Tower 1 at 4.30 p.m., three hours before the bounce. From there they moved to their assigned gates at 4.45 p.m. to distribute flyers calling on supporters to join the cause.

During the game, their instructions were to 'remain polite whatever the provocation' and 'try not to interfere with people's view of the game'. They were to regather at quarter time and three-quarter time to adapt tactics on the run, and then would congregate in the football members' area for the last half of the final term to wave 'No Merger' placards, to sing the club song, for Zagon to exhort members to defy their board, and for journalists to notice.

Distributing hundreds of 'No Merger' signs through the crowd involved an intrigue all its own. Cheer squad member Sophie Galer said the squad was told to keep out of the debate, despite its members being almost universally opposed to merging. 'A couple of people said "Maybe this is the only way we can stay afloat" whereas I, and the majority of them, said, "We're not going to follow some bastardised team." We had a club liaison person pushing the club message to us, saying "You're not there to voice your own opinions, so there will be no comments on merging, particularly on banners."'

Defiantly, a banner was prepared for the Fremantle game that read: 'We were threatened; We were told: No merger with the Brown and Gold', which the cheer squad was prevented from using as the players' run-through. Instead, it was carried into one of the grandstands and displayed there. It served its purpose.

'We always had ways of getting things into the ground,' Galer recalls. 'The banner is twenty feet wide but it folds up into a package the size of a couch cushion. You can whack a lot of stuff in there. We rocked up with

the “No Merger” signs in the banner. Then we coordinated with other groups to pick them up from us and hand them out.’

Raising their profile gained media attention, but there were other obstacles. The biggest was access to the membership register. Barrister Tony Rodbard-Bean, acting for Jenkins’ group, formally asked for a digital copy of the register in a letter to the club the day of the Fremantle game. Rodbard-Bean cited the club’s articles of association and company law: ‘The information obtained will only be used for a mail-out to members of the Melbourne Football Club in respect of the current debate concerning the merger.’

Another barrister, Michael Pearce, despatched a letter to the club by facsimile the same day, also citing corporate law as the basis for release of the membership list, and the opposition’s right to submit their case to members within the AFL-financed mail-out the club was preparing.¹⁷

Yet the board resisted releasing the members’ list for almost a fortnight, citing privacy concerns. Jenkins’ involvement had begun with the printing of 5000 flyers, which were handed out at the Carlton game. It continued with press advertisements promoting the anti-merger activities a week later. To argue the case for access to the full list of members, he began Supreme Court action. Only then did the board agree.

‘They capitulated just before the Supreme Court case and gave us access to a paper copy of the members’ database,’ Jenkins says. ‘We would have preferred an electronic version. They were maintaining we should only have access to it on the premises ... so we pushed further for it to be given to us, but it was done in paper form, just a nice spiteful thing.’

The club’s pro-merger campaign unfolded in a series of letters to members. Beginning on 30 July, five days after the *Herald Sun* published images of the Melbourne Hawks guernsey, the club wrote that a subcommittee would ‘investigate the merger option’.

On 22 August, Ridley messaged members again, outlining the club’s recent soul searching into how it would be competitive in the era of a national competition. ‘People must understand that the old VFL is dead and buried and the national competition is here to stay,’ he wrote. Clubs like Adelaide and West Coast had entire cities in which to flourish, while Melbourne had to compete with nine other local teams.

‘Currently the club’s turnover is approximately \$7.6 million. Some Victorian and interstate clubs are already operating on a budget in excess of \$12 million,’ he wrote. A merger with Hawthorn would unite the club’s

administrative and playing sections in a way not currently possible. To do so elsewhere – at, say, Elsternwick Park or the Prahran Football Ground – would cost more than \$1 million; linking to Hawthorn would deliver a year-round training venue, newly renovated offices, player facilities, a social club and gaming venue at no cost.

A background paper accompanying the letter lamented that it was:

hard to see how, over the next three years, the Melbourne Football Club with the current AFL Rules in places (eg concessions etc) the National Draft, Port Adelaide entering the competition in 1997, and the doubts over injured and ageing players, can put a seriously competitive team on the field if it remains an independent club.¹⁸

Yet the club had a credibility problem. Three weeks earlier, members had been told a merger was merely being ‘investigated’ by a subcommittee. Since then, they had learned the AFL was financing both clubs’ merger campaigns with a \$200,000 publicity budget.

Jenkins had a win when Brian Dixon agreed to aggressively oppose the merger. ‘Because Ian [Ridley] had done a lot of work in the background to essentially sign up a lot of ex-players to commit to the merger beforehand, we didn’t have a lot to work with,’ Jenkins says. ‘But when Brian was very vocally against it, someone in our group reached out to him and we met him down at South Melbourne at the office and went through where we were at that time. The problem that we had was that there was no one person who could command the attention of the media. That’s why we gravitated towards Brian when he came out passionately against the merger.’

Dixon was a former state government Minister for Youth Sport and Recreation. He was energetic and driven, but in the context of the Melbourne Football Club he was a complex, even divisive figure – but none of us knew that then.

The turning point in the campaign came around the time Ridley’s 22 August letter was landing in members’ letterboxes. Dixon was late to the meeting at CBS but made a dramatic entrance by interrupting what was going on with a declaration: ‘It’s going to be okay. I’ve found the money.’ He would not reveal how much or where it was from, but within days the merger landscape was transformed.

Dixon had asked an old friend, Izzy Herzog, to tap into his network of moneyed Melbourne supporters to see if he could find any who

were willing to back the club. Herzog arranged a meeting with mining magnate Joseph Gutnick. As Dixon related it to Jenkins, Gutnick opened the meeting by telling Herzog: 'Before you say anything about what you've come to talk about, what's happening with our football club and what can I do to help?'

Herzog relayed Gutnick's determination to help to Dixon. 'Brian later went to meet Joe and gave him an overview of The Demon Alternative,' Jenkins recalls. 'Joe requested a second meeting to get to know who else was involved. We were called to his office, I think on a Sunday afternoon. We tried to show diversity. There was myself, George Zagon, Toni Stanaway, who is a passionate fan. We went through an introduction of what we had done to that date. He said, "I am behind you," and we walked out with a cheque for \$250,000.'

On 26 August, three weeks before the vote, Gutnick was revealed as the mystery source of the millions that could save the club. The Melbourne Cricket Club gave The Demon Alternative a break when it allowed the group to stage its press conference announcing Gutnick's involvement in the football team's change rooms.

Gutnick was a mystery to most outside the mining industry and the Jewish community. An Orthodox Jew whose religion precluded him attending games on Saturday, and an ordained rabbi with a record of locating gold and diamond deposits, in 1996 he was worth \$439 million.¹⁹

'Diamond Joe's' alliance with the supporter group changed everything. Writing a week after the merger push became public, Mike Sheahan had observed that 'it seems that most Melbourne and Hawthorn supporters have been conditioned to accept the inevitability of mergers, [and] that a fight now would achieve little more than delaying the end for a year or two'.²⁰ Neil Roberts told his readers that resistance 'was only stalling the inevitable'.²¹

Even Rohan Connolly, as defiant a traditionalist as existed in the media, was pessimistic. Under the headline 'Merger Resistance an Exercise in Futility', he wrote:

As a professional observer, I sigh and concede its inevitability. As a football supporter I shudder, try to comprehend what Melbourne and Hawthorn fans must be going through and, like any fan who doesn't barrack for the Demons, Hawks or Fitzroy, think 'there but for the grace of Ross (Oakley) go I'.²²

Yet by the end of August, with the emergence of a possible financial backer for Hawthorn – the International Management Group – and with Gutnick promising \$3 million in support for Melbourne, the merger was no longer inevitable. In fact, in some quarters its collapse was considered likely.

The board attacked Gutnick's credentials by asking where he had been all this time. But he was clearly a threat to be taken seriously. The board agreed to meet Gutnick, Dixon and Jenkins for what were promoted as 'peace talks' the following Thursday, 29 August. The meeting revisited the arguments of the letter to members, and canvassed allegations of blocks of proxy votes being compiled for the merger.

The following day Ridley issued a statement criticising Dixon as the figurehead of the anti-merger forces:

What a player Brian was! But we have always called a spade a spade at Melbourne, and I don't believe Brian's track record is up to speed given the on and off the field demands of today's football club. A vote against a merger is a vote for Brian Dixon to run the MFC with volunteers in the office, volunteers coaching and volunteers everywhere else. Is this for real?²³

Dixon later confided to Jenkins that ill-feeling existed between himself and some of his former teammates over his refusal to support Norm Smith when he was sacked in 1965. Evidently, suspicions about Dixon's role in Smith's sacking, refuted by the club back in 1967, still festered.

Melbourne's playing season ended two days later, in the 'merger game' against Hawthorn. That the merger partners were set against each other in the last match of the season was an extraordinary coincidence.

The conventional football wisdom held that Hawthorn would triumph, and comfortably. The Hawks needed victory to secure a place in the finals. Melbourne may well have been playing for posterity. Against expectations, the result was in doubt until the last.

It proved a classic contest befitting two clubs playing possibly their final games, a match of intense emotion and exhilarating goal surges first one way, then the other. It crammed the unexpected changes of fortune and momentum shifts of an enthralling five-day Test match into two and a half frantic hours. The seeds of a possible Melbourne resurgence were clear, should the club survive the next month. David Neitz, a key defender in 1995, was imperious at full-forward; Jeff Farmer shone brilliantly; Adem Yze deployed his laser-precise kicking to advantage.

At the first bounce, Stynes and Hopgood were felled by Paul Salmon

and John Platten respectively. The Hawks meant business, but Neitz, marking strongly and with four goals to quarter time, saw Melbourne lead. In the second term it was Hawthorn surging with six unanswered goals as their skipper, Jason Dunstall, closed on his 100th goal of the season. However, the busy rover Alastair Clarkson, a former Kangaroo, goaled just on half time to keep Melbourne in touch, setting up a third-term recovery in which Farmer tormented his opponent, kicking three goals in quick succession.

Ultimately, Dunstall kicked ten goals for Hawthorn, giving him 101 goals for the home-and-away season. For Melbourne, Neitz kicked six goals and Farmer four. Only two points separated the teams at three-quarter time, and the final siren sounded with Melbourne trailing 101 to 102. Like the Carlton game, this was an exhibition that confounded the gloomy assessments of the playing group which the board had adopted in its campaign.

‘If Melbourne does merge its fans can take solace in the fact that their club, unlike Fitzroy, went out with a bang,’ *The Age* remarked. ‘While the hapless Lions received a belting on the other side of the country, the Demons gave Hawthorn an awful fright at the home of Australian football in front of 63,196 vocal spectators.’²⁴

A one-sided, low-standard game might have persuaded some wavering Melbourne members of the need for the union with Hawthorn. Instead, they had been treated to one of the best games of the season, tough, tight and skilful. As well as coincidence, the ‘merger game’ suggested that the Melbourne list so derided by its own committee might just have a future after all.

For Andrew Leoncelli, in his first season with the club, and having played his seventh match in the ‘merger game’, it was an ominous time. ‘I thought, I have finally got my chance and now my dream will be over,’ he says. ‘I didn’t see myself in the best forty players of a merged team.’

‘The merger game was an amazing experience, very emotional. I told all my friends they had to come because it could be my last game. Everyone [on the list] was really nervous. We had lots of team meetings and briefings. “Tiger” Ridley, all those people were pitching to us that “we have to do this to survive”, but it was going to be the end of the club.’

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The final fortnight before the vote was a flurry of activity. The clubs despatched the AFL-financed brochure with its images of new uniforms.

The Demon Alternative countered with a letter promising it would soon set out its case in full; the group objected that the board was breaching its fiduciary duties by only issuing propaganda in support of its own case, and issued a warning against using the proxy form included in the board's material.

As the football world turned its attention to the finals series, the CBS office ran as a dual operation, both computing business and anti-merger headquarters. Up to fifteen volunteers answered calls with 'CBS-Demon Alternative', to the annoyance of business clients. They sought pledges from supporters to buy a membership in future, and until 1 September had urged people to buy one in order to have the right to vote. They sought donations and recruits to deliver proxies and leaflets to supporters.

Gutnick's cheque had enabled printing of the group's big hit, a four-page glossy pamphlet that opened with a front-page reproduction of the Melbourne jumper with the *Penguin English Dictionary's* definition of the word 'merge', which included 'become completely absorbed (into); lose identity; absorb; swallow up ...' Inside, it included a telling observation from senior sports reporter Patrick Smith about Gutnick's pledge: 'It buys time. Lots of it. No need to merge this month, next year or even five down the track. The Melbourne Football Club has been handed a peace plan but is too pig-headed and proud to see it.'²⁵ The leaflet was clearly a success, since it triggered a direct response from the board seeking to counter its main points.

In addition, The Demon Alternative engaged a telemarketing firm to contact members and compiled a list of so-called skulduggery, or misinformation and confusion about voting procedures. Complaints included conflicting explanations of how members could vote against the merger by proxy. Among them was a woman who reported being told by a director simply to send in the blue form issued by the club – but in fact this would have awarded her proxy to the pro-merger group.²⁶

On 6 September, Ridley wrote to clarify how to complete the proxy form, and on 10 September the board issued its point-by-point rebuttal of The Demon Alternative's case. 'Projections indicate that the Melbourne Hawks will have net assets of approx \$8.5-9 million on commencement, a maintainable profit each year of around \$3 million and the ability to battle it out with the juggernauts from interstate when they come with their open cheque books chasing Neitz, Farmer and Co,' it concluded.

Ridley was not turning back. As player and coach, he was a hero to

those who now opposed him. He was almost certainly unprepared for the venom coming his way. That stemmed partly from the secretive approach that shrouded the club's methods. Supporters were being asked to believe that nothing had been decided until recently, yet there were those jumper designs and that crummy new song. It was an approach that fostered suspicion.

Years later, that suspicion was justified when Ridley's memoir revealed the secret timetable of announcements, agreements to talk, the vote settled and the merger completed within five weeks. Ridley sought to make a virtue of the fact that members were being granted a vote on the future of the club when it was not a legal requirement,²⁷ all the while rushing to a preordained conclusion. Ridley later conceded that he should have been less secretive, and that he ought to have held an open members' forum on the merger.

To give Ridley his due, he had a clear grasp of the challenges facing Melbourne. He was the first person I remember publicly identifying the club's amateur background as a disabling feature. He'd been talking about that for twenty years.

'Melbourne was a great amateur club. Without a doubt the greatest amateur club in the history of the game,' he had said in 1980. But the revolution of clubs becoming financially self-reliant and bidding for players exploded. And Melbourne, with its reliance on the MCC, had not adapted to the change. Intermittent successful seasons were not enough for it to capitalise in terms of membership and revenue.

In his memoir published in 2002, he wrote:

As we gradually climbed out of the debt abyss during my early years as president, we began to realise that we needed to consolidate our position for the future ... The successful teams were those that had what we didn't: money, players, large memberships, their own ground to train on, top facilities. As each year passed, Melbourne's golden era slipped into a distant age that seemed more illusory and unrepeatable.²⁸

Meanwhile, Ridley noted, further mergers seemed inevitable: the AFL was determined to make it so. Merging with Hawthorn offered Melbourne the administrative and training base, along with a flourishing social club that it lacked. And this when Melbourne was in a position of strength. Ridley had seen the club become financially sound while Hawthorn was mired in debt and vulnerable. Better to be negotiating from a position of

strength than bargain from a one of weakness, he concluded.

Publicly, Ridley disputed that the merger was a takeover, but conceded Melbourne was the merger's 'senior partner'. He tried to minimise what the merger meant. A recurring theme in his addresses was that the club had once been the 'Invincible Whites', later 'the Fuschias' and finally 'the Demons'. He made it seem simply evolutionary that the club would become 'the Hawks'.

Finally, he said that the initial approach had come from Hawthorn, in keeping with Melbourne policy, over the summer of 1995–96. 'When looked at objectively Hawthorn had much in common with us. They struggled with a similarly sized membership, they had a very similar culture, and their supporter base traditionally encompassed the same socio-economic groups and regions as Melbourne's.'²⁹

Asked what Norm Smith would have made of the situation, Ridley harked back to the role of the MCC and its refusal to spend money on recruiting. Melbourne could have recruited the great West Australian ruckman Graham 'Polly' Farmer for £1000, but the cricket club would not become involved. Instead, Farmer became a Geelong hero.

Norm made a lot of noise on this issue openly stating to people close to the club that if the direction was not changed, Melbourne would fall further and further behind in their attempts to succeed in the future. I think Norm would say to me, 'Tiddles, I told you this would happen back in '65.'³⁰

Viewed in this light, the attempted merger was the end point of a process that began more than forty years earlier, of the club losing its monopoly of the MCG, failing to keep pace with the game's growing professionalism and being unable to match the facilities and resources of its competitors. Nor had country zoning aided its cause. Ridley was trying to make the best of a bad situation, to preserve and strengthen his club at minimal cost, to help it make a quantum leap into the present. But it would only come with a loss of identity.

The battle against the merger was a kind of guerrilla war. It was an unequal contest pitting the passion and commitment of ordinary supporters against the authority of the clubs and the resources of the AFL. It was fought with phones and letters and the law. Several barristers, working for free and supported by Gutnick's lawyers, sought an injunction to stop the club publicising its merger case to members on the grounds that Ridley and the directors were failing to provide balanced

information about the proposal.

Justice Barry Beach ultimately ruled against them, finding that the club need not present its opposition's case, but the exercise still put the club on the back foot. Rodbard-Bean recalls: 'It showed the average member that there was someone fighting on their behalf, and it showed that The Demon Alternative was a force to be reckoned with.'

Meanwhile, The Demon Alternative's newspaper advertisements had boasted growing numbers of former players opposed to the merger, including 1948 premiership hero Alby Rodda, Keith Carroll, a premiership defender from the 1950s, and more recent stars including Alan Johnson, Greg Wells and Steven Stretch.

'I think that was a reflection of the legitimacy that The Demon Alternative had gained with the passage of time,' says Jenkins. 'At first there was no alternative to what the club and the AFL were saying. Over a period of time, and it did take a lot of cost, we built that legitimacy in the eyes of Melbourne supporters, so those players had the opportunity to stand up and oppose the merger.'

As voting day approached, I made my own preparations. No longer news editor, I was back on the road and I knew I could not count on attending the meeting. Floods, tragedies, bushfires – anything could happen that would see me out of the city while the club's future was decided, so I lodged a proxy vote with the club. I also ventured to the club's office in Jolimont Terrace to buy several mementos: coffee mugs and beer glasses in Demon livery. I feared they might be the last of their kind, to become treasured artefacts of a vanished culture.

It was impossible to know what the future held. The Demon Alternative, fuelled by Gutnick's and the Jenkins brothers' money, and aided by the call centre and volunteers, felt they had made real progress. The mood at a rally on the Thursday before the vote, held in the team's change rooms, was buoyant. Gutnick was swamped by autograph hunters.

The telemarketing exercise offered more grounds for optimism for The Demon Alternative. Consistently half those contacted declared themselves opposed to the merger. Of the rest, up to one-third were undecided. Those in favour of the merger never numbered more than 24 per cent of those contacted. By the eve of the vote, the group had spoken to 4262 members, of whom 2108, or 49.4 per cent, were opposed. Those supporting the merger numbered 1004 (23.5 per cent), with 1005 undecided. They represented one-third of the club's 12,964 members in

1996, and almost half the previous years' 9544 members, the numbers having been inflated by the factions' membership drives.

Throughout the exercise, there was also a record kept of a small number who objected, sometimes aggressively, to being contacted at home. These 'hostiles' numbered 145. If the undecided members were assigned in equal numbers to pro-merger and anti-merger camps, and all the 'hostiles' were considered merger supporters, there was still more than a 61 per cent majority of members contacted opposing the merger.³¹

On the eve of the vote, Rohan Connolly apologised for having earlier presumed that the merger was inevitable. 'Whatever happens resistance to this aggressively marketed union has been anything but futile,' he wrote in *The Sunday Age*. 'For some of us, it has restored a lot of faith in what the game is all about. I shouldn't have doubted it.' Connolly did not pretend to know how the vote was to play out, but noted ominously: 'Who knows how many mysteriously conjured proxy votes might make the Melbourne Hawks a reality despite the hordes of members passionately opposed who will no doubt fill the halls?'³²

The next morning's newspapers carried confirmation that one of the directors – furniture retailer Bill Guest – had bought memberships for sixty of his staff to lodge proxies on the merger. An employee at another major Melbourne sponsor related a similar episode. The unnamed employee said that up to thirty staff at his company had been asked to sign proxies supporting the merger. Staff who were not Melbourne supporters had signed and returned the pro-merger proxy. 'The thing just turned up on my desk,' he said. 'It was a membership card with a proxy attached. I was asked if I would sign it. I decided not to.'³³

Ridley said Guest had done nothing illegal. Anyone could buy a membership and give their proxy to either side. Much later, he admitted that Guest's actions were an embarrassment. 'Although Bill's signing of his staff certainly did not constitute a block, it was still morally ambiguous,' he wrote in his memoir. 'I was partly to blame for this. Earlier in the process I had certainly not discouraged merger supporters from recruiting members to the MFC.'³⁴

At the time, Ridley countered that The Demon Alternative had equally encouraged supporters to buy memberships in order to vote, and that Gutnick and his wife had bought membership tickets just before the qualifying date.

There was a difference, however, between the board's and The

Demon Alternative's actions. The Demon Alternative was appealing to Melbourne supporters to buy memberships and to cast their vote; the actions of some merger supporters put the future of the club in the hands of people with no ties to it. A list of corporate sponsors later obtained by Jenkins revealed that there were at least 468 memberships tied to this segment of the club, all potentially marshalled in the 'proxy war'. Merger opponents at Melbourne and Hawthorn unsuccessfully called for proxies to be ruled ineligible.

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As it happened, I was unhindered by sudden assignments to rural Victoria or anywhere else, and I arrived early at Dallas Brooks Hall for Melbourne's merger meeting, taking a seat near centre stage but several rows back. I intended to be unobtrusive. I didn't want to be that guy captured by a news photographer hurling spittle-flecked invective at the stage, so, like an obsessed stalker, I settled on a subtle strategy of staring down board members to convey my profound objection to the merger.

I recalled Tom Wolfe's account of African American and other minorities harassing social welfare bureaucrats in 1960s San Francisco. In a technique Wolfe described as 'mau-mauing', and that drew on memories of Kenya's bloody Mau Mau rebellion, groups from the city's ghettos used chants, shouting, stare-downs and implied threats of violence to intimidate public servants who were the front line in dealing with the poor. As Wolfe described, there was rarely physical danger in the performance: 'it was a tactic, a procedure, a game'.³⁵

I reckoned on mau-mauing Bill Guest, he of the sixty memberships doled out to non-supporters. But what works in a small office in a meeting with maybe a dozen people is not suited to an auditorium of several thousand. There was so much noise, so much hatred, so many cries of 'traitor', so many outbursts of 'no merger' chants and choruses of 'It's a Grand Old Flag', that anything I was going to add to the racket or the moment was superfluous. At no time could I hold the gaze of anyone on that stage. I let the mob rant for me. There was mau-mauing enough in that.

Outside, lengthy queues formed. Rodbard-Bean recalls that the queue outside the meeting ran from the entrance of Dallas Brooks Hall, along Victoria Parade to Lansdowne Street and then towards the Fitzroy Gardens. Up to 2000 people appeared to be stranded once the building reached capacity. 'I was taking how-to-vote cards to the back of the

line,' Rodbard-Bean remembers. 'It was a ten-minute walk to the end of the queue as the meeting was supposed to be getting underway.' In his memoir, Ridley said that a basement room was opened to accommodate the overflow, but it is impossible to know how many members left thinking they had no prospect of admission.

If Ridley ever faced a more hostile crowd, it could only have been at Victoria Park playing against the Old Enemy, the Magpies. His cause had already lost some ground hours earlier, when Barassi withdrew his support for the merger. Ridley was shocked at what confronted him. Good, decent people acted like animals, he said. When he asked a board member to formally propose the merger, 'the crowd howled'. When he called for a seconder, he was 'anticipating a fair dinkum riot'.

He couldn't hear himself speak. People were on their feet, howling. Sometimes a chorus of chanting drowned him out; sometimes uncoordinated abuse did the job.

As he finished speaking, he called on his fellow directors seated on stage to stand with him: 'All you board members that had the bloody courage to recommend this, get on your feet! Get on your feet,' he snarled twice more, turning to face the directors, 'and get out here!' It was a plea for the display of a united front, with Ridley the fire-and-brimstone coach. It might have worked once, but right then it just looked desperate. Later, as he was sitting on the stage exhausted, many of the merger's opponents apologised to him for what he had been forced to experience.³⁶

Harry Laumets, a former cheer squad member and club member of long standing, has no such regret. 'I had no remorse for the booing and the words that came out of my mouth,' he recalls. 'Some pro-merger people who were there said they were disgusted at the behaviour of the anti-merger people. They didn't understand. They expected people to sit there and to listen politely. Unfortunately they were booed. Melbourne supporters are supposed to be conservative and quiet. I think that was quite an eye-opener for the club.' It was not just the loss of the Demon that counted: 'The jumper was going to be touched. People didn't want that.'

Jenkins made a conscious effort to keep control. 'I was fighting to stop it from overwhelming me,' he says. 'The rage in the room was clear, but I never felt there was a danger of violence. It was like a crowd expending its energy against a bad decision. I never had the feeling it would erupt into violence, but the tension was over the top, at times from both sides.'

The count that night showed the merger proposal carried 4679 to 4229,

by 450 votes. That was less than the 468 potential corporate proxies made up of Guest's employees and others. The proxy count ran strongly the board's way, with 4182 in favour and 2774 against. Supporters voting on the night were strongly against the merger, with 1455 opposed compared to 497 in favour.

In other words, 60 per cent of proxies were in favour of merging, while 75 per cent of those who voted in person were opposed. With a greater number of proxies lodged, the proposal was passed with 52.5 per cent of votes cast. 'The record will say Melbourne voted for the merger,' says Laumets. 'But was it really above board?'

Sophie Galer was unprepared for the outcome. At the final game, it had seemed everyone brandished a 'No Merger' sign. 'The overwhelming majority of people I spoke to were fiercely against it,' she says. 'To hear it got through, that's never sat right with me. Everyone you spoke to at the games was against it. It was a pretty awful time.'

The fury inside Dallas Brooks Hall was matched at the Camberwell Civic Centre, where Hawthorn members gathered. Even Don Scott, who led the merger resistance, seemed shocked. 'The feeling in that room was ... seeing so-called educated, intellectual men lose it and become animals,' he said later. 'People in respected positions, MPs, people who held positions in our society, that just went out the door. It was scary.'³⁷

Hawthorn members voted down the merger, so in practical terms nothing changed, except a stain was left on Melbourne's reputation – it was the club that wanted to lie down. However, that interpretation does not withstand scrutiny. Unknown numbers who wanted to vote at Dallas Brooks Hall had turned away, believing they could not gain admission to the meeting, which Ridley acknowledged.³⁸ Also, the shenanigans with proxy votes cast a pall over the entire process.

In any case, the distinction that Hawthorn opposed the merger and Melbourne supported it is not the entire story. If, instead of the Melbourne Hawks, the merged entity was to have been the Hawthorn Demons, the voting likely would have been different.

In fact, days before the vote and with the resistance gaining momentum, the Hawthorn board had tried to shore up support by changing the proposed name to 'the Melbourne-Hawthorn Hawks'. Mike Sheahan reported that:

growing uncertainty at board level on the outcome of the merger issue prompted [Hawthorn] to seek the change from the agreed 'Melbourne

Hawks' to a name more palatable to its swinging voters. It was an unofficial admission that a significant section of the Hawthorn membership views the merger more as a takeover than a joint venture ... Melbourne refused point blank to concede further ground on the name. The Demons are having sufficient trouble with their members without asking them to further dilute their name.

The name is the fundamental issue. While a majority of Melbourne members may find Melbourne Hawks acceptable, a growing number of Hawthorn members have grown increasingly agitated about the absence of their club's name in the new entity's title.³⁹

Ridley told Sheahan changing the name was impossible. Later, Ridley admitted that the club could not afford to give ground. 'We refused outright,' he wrote in his memoir. 'As it was the name was split evenly. We had "Melbourne", and they had "Hawks". I knew it was a difficult point for Hawthorn to sell to its members, but changing it at that late stage would have been disastrous for our own vote.'⁴⁰

My last memory of the night is seeing Rodbard-Bean, Gutnick and Mark Jenkins huddled in the emptying auditorium, planning their challenge to the meeting's legitimacy in the Supreme Court.

Rodbard-Bean, who scrutinised the votes, says large numbers of proxies in favour of merging were clearly filled out by the same person: 'When I was going through them, when you got to particular sections of votes you had clumps of them in the same handwriting, the same pen, and the same signature – Bill Blogs, Sam Blogs, Anthea Blogs or whoever – but obviously not filled in by the member who was supposed to be exercising a proxy.'

Ultimately, the Supreme Court challenge to the vote did not proceed once, the next morning, Robert Flower demanded the warring cease. At a meeting between Ridley, Gutnick, Flower and Garry Lyon, Flower complained that the club was being torn apart, and warned that he would walk away unless the factions put a stop to the conflict. As a result, Jenkins says, the legal challenge was abandoned, so the conduct of the meeting, the handling of proxies, the members who were denied entry and all else was allowed to rest.

Afterwards, there was much head shaking and criticism over how legendary figures at both Melbourne and Hawthorn were abused at the meetings, but those rebellious Melbourne and Hawthorn supporters did

the general football community a great favour. The AFL vowed to never again seek to facilitate a merger, and the \$6 million bait was withdrawn. For a decade, the AFL had been in the business of putting Victorian clubs out of business. Things were done that never would have been done if the AFL had not been trying to expand the game into the rugby states and add non-Victorian clubs to the competition while limiting the total number. Only the phenomenal gains in broadcasting fees that came later with pay television would enable the AFL to love all its clubs again.

A letter to *The Age* captured the betrayal felt by supporters:

Football in Melbourne is more than a sport. It satisfies the crucial human need of belonging, a sense of family, of tribe. It represents heritage, and for every fan, the colours of his/her club's guernsey and all it represents are etched in the soul. That deep love needs to be treated with respect. It wasn't.

The writer, Jill Toulantsas, was among those who had complained about unclear instructions for voting by proxy.⁴¹

During the campaign, a number of Demon Alternative supporters donated to the cause. Years later, the Jenkins brothers calculated they contributed \$55,000 to the 'No' campaign. It was several years before their business recovered; and several years more after that before Mark Jenkins admitted the sum to his wife. 'The money we put in wasn't a strategic contribution,' he recalls. 'It was a matter of, "We need to take out this ad", "We need a brochure", to do this, to do that. It wasn't until the tale of the tape that we realised the extent of it.'

His reward was to be recruited to the board, along with Gutnick and other Demon Alternative representatives including Rodbard-Bean. Brian Dixon, however, was specifically excluded by Ridley.

Asked if he is still sure that opposing the merger was the right thing to do, Jenkins says: 'We endured those very bleak years and horrible losses and I did question myself about what I had done and contributed to. Then ... I was at a game and I looked down in the stands with all those young kids, growing into teenagers and early twenties all decked out in red and blue. At that moment I knew we did the right thing. We gave these guys the opportunity to enjoy something we had enjoyed ourselves that would otherwise not have been there. It was quite an emotional time for me. That was what struck home and I knew we did the right thing. So that's a long-winded yes.'

On the morning of Tuesday, 17 September 1996, Jan Dimmick's

husband, Frank, who was in the habit of reading the papers in their bedroom as he dressed for work, called out to her, 'You better have a look at this.' On the front page of *The Age* was, for her, a lesson about the power of the telephoto lens.

'That night I was there early,' she recalls. 'I was near the front. I didn't know they were taking that awful photo. They took it from a long way. Wasn't it terrible? The next day they came and took a much nicer photo.'

The next day's photo was of Jan sitting in an armchair, smiling with her head thrown back. Her club had survived – although, a quarter of a century later, the matter of the vote still grates.

'I was dead against the merger, and I believe we would have won the vote if people had not been locked out,' she says. 'All those people would have put us over the line. People still come up to me remembering. I had a man at the football the other day and he said, "You were the no-merger lady."

'My dad loved Melbourne. I never wanted to change and I never would want to change. People come at you, they say poor old Melbourne, things like that, but I just let them go on. Melbourne is my team and I don't want any other.'

Chapter Thirteen

Football 101

All of a sudden it seemed we had something to believe in, something to think about and concentrate on and not get lost in the financial woes, the presidents and the CEOs that would come and go. We had Neale Daniher giving us a true north.

Russell Robertson

Once Neale Daniher saw that his whiteboard scribbblings had caught my attention, he moved quickly and turned his writing to the wall. I had read only so far as ‘Who do you play for; your parents; your mates; your club; yourself?’ The rest was to remain secret.

We were meeting in a classroom during February 1998, Daniher’s first preseason guiding the Demons. Melbourne was still deep in its nomadic period; this time the club’s preseason was at Caulfield Grammar – which made sense, since the novice coach was presenting what he called ‘Football 101’.

Years earlier, before the merger attempt, Ian Ridley had been pleading with MCC members to support the club financially. The Demons’ membership was around 13,000, but tens of thousands more Demon-supporting MCC members would not buy a football membership. I wrote to Ridley suggesting he offer MCC members something more than a warm inner glow for buying a football membership. Maybe a voucher for their kids to attend a footy clinic, the option of a post-game meeting with the players, or free access to a quality, glossy club magazine. Collingwood and Essendon already had such magazines, which I cited as an example. I also volunteered to write for the club newspaper.

Nothing happened to my suggestions until after the failed merger, when Ridley stepped down, Gutnick became president, there was more money around. The magazine at least became reality. And I was assigned the job of interviewing the new coach.

He was already into a program of morning lectures followed by

afternoon drills putting theory into practice. Daniher was businesslike, cordial enough but clinical too. I was just something he had to deal with as part of being coach of an AFL club. He was not unfriendly, but from the moment he turned the whiteboard out of sight I knew I wasn't trusted. We weren't going to be mates, and he had better things to do than deal with me.

He had declared that he would pursue a Victorian brand of football, 'an attacking style of good, honest football'.¹ My first question, which was about his game plan, he brushed aside:

It's not a matter of tinkering with one area and everything will be bright and breezy; when you are bottom of the ladder with four wins there's a lot of things you have to get right. There's a lot more things we have to change through the whole culture and feel of the club.²

It seemed he was alluding to the loss of direction that derailed the club after the promise of 1994 foundered. Daniher's predecessor, Neil Balme, had seen his coaching career sink amid the club's injury woes.

A slow start to 1997 had put Balme under enormous pressure, which intensified during a pivotal Round 6 clash between St Kilda and Melbourne. The Saints and Demons filled fifteenth and sixteenth places on the ladder, with just one win each. The loser would be in outright last place. These were perfect circumstances for a death watch on the coaching career of either Balme or his St Kilda counterpart, Stan Alves. Melbourne had been adrift for the better part of two and a half seasons, and were tormenting supporters with an indirect, short game that left frustrated supporters screaming, 'Kick the bloody thing!'

Melbourne's crisis deepened in the first half, which saw them score just two goals and trail by forty-three points when the newly minted president, Joe Gutnick took to the airwaves. Opening with, 'This has been going on for far too many years and we'll have to make some radical changes in the very near future,' Gutnick left no room for doubt that heads would roll. Accounts of the half-time radio interview swept through the crowd, who witnessed more of the same in the second half, the Saints romping home by eighty-six points. Schwarz and Lyon were already missing with injury, and the following week Neitz followed with a double break to the jaw. It was that sort of time.

The week after Gutnick's comments, Hassa Mann departed as chief executive, but Balme was not far behind, sacked after Round 9 and eight

successive losses. Melbourne finished 1997 with four wins. St Kilda recovered to top the ladder and play in the Grand Final.

Balme was a deep thinker about the game, recalls Todd Viney, and very supportive, able to persuade his players that there was no way they could lose. 'My memory of Balme is that he did not get the opportunity because we had so many key injuries to players,' he says. 'We hardly had our best players available – "Schwarter", Tingay, Glenn Lovett.' All were injured.

Symptomatic of the club's plight, according to Leoncelli, was that he finished third in the best and fairest award in 1997 having played just twelve games that year, and nineteen games overall. 'I was over the moon [to be on an AFL list], but I was also acutely aware that '96 and '97 were two very difficult seasons for the Melbourne Football Club,' he says, 'and I guess everything that we did – the team ethos, the people at the club, how we trained, the commitment to training – culminated in the results that we delivered. So they moved [Balme] on.'

'Everyone was devastated because Neil was a gentleman, ahead of his time and just a great footy person. Today, he'd be a great coach because he is the one who builds confidence and reassures you and makes you feel like he is listening and keeps up on the detail. [Today] he would have under him a team of assistants who were doing all the training and a team of fitness people, and in the mid to late '90s they just weren't there.'

Enter Neale Daniher, after a coaching apprenticeship as an assistant at Essendon and Fremantle and an exhaustive recruitment exercise devised by Hassa Mann's replacement, Cameron Schwab, and new football manager Danny Corcoran.

Jenkins remembered the powerful impression Daniher made when he presented to the club's board. 'I was struck by how positive he was,' he says. 'He was very strong, articulate and positive about what would happen under his reign. We had suffered a couple of 100-point thrashings and he talked about the evenness of the competition, and [said that] while a man like him was in the role, that would not happen again.'

Leoncelli says it was clear that Daniher, Corcoran, the novice assistant coach Chris Fagan, from Tasmania, and recruiting boss Craig Cameron worked in close tandem. 'There was good chemistry in that group. You could see that group was committed to the cause.'

Daniher's first decision was to order the players to get rid of their racing bikes. Cycling had become a fitness alternative for players who, because of injury or rehabilitation, could not run. 'Bike riding had become

this massive thing, cross training and bike riding. The first thing Neale Daniher said was, “All those fuckin’ bikes, they’re going out. Get rid of them – can’t play football riding a fuckin’ bike,” Leoncelli remembers.

Football 101 was a back-to-basics course, as the name implies. Trainer Sam Allica, who had been at the club with Norm Smith, said that first preseason had seen a marked lift in intensity and a return to fundamentals, such as players being taught to protect the ball carrier. ‘When you see them do it you think, it’s a long time since they did that,’ Allica told me in early 1998.³

Football 101 was about how to set up at stoppages, how to set up in attack, how they were going to move the ball from defence, where to create space. It was about crowding the opposition, corralling them rather than moving in too quickly to attempt a tackle, when to control the ball, when to kick backwards – and also what not to do, such as not kicking short to a contest and not kicking inboard to a contest because if it spills there your team will be exposed, out of position, so go down the line, work the boundary, then look to go to the middle. After the lectures came the revision – and after the revision, the exam.

‘Actually it was a refresher for everybody,’ Leoncelli says. ‘Some of the guys, a lot more experienced than me, would have been thinking, “I know all this,” but it was a healthy refresher for everybody on common-sense football. You know: panic time, red time, we’re up by a few points and what do you do? We keep possession, we hang on to the footy, we kick the ball backwards. Scramble back off the mark, don’t take three minutes, turn your head and move quickly and look inside, the whole field’s open. There’s usually an opportunity that’s on if you go quickly. If you take three minutes to move back, of course everyone’s picked up. Just basic stuff like that, which some guys still don’t get.

‘He was into strength and a simple, effective, attacking game plan. Run and carry. Share, look to the corridor. He was an attacking coach, which was good, but we had the tools up forward, David Schwarz, David Neitz, Jeff Farmer’s at their feet.

‘He was into building culture among the group, into bringing good people into the club, all across the club. He was an includer. The club staff loved him, the supporters loved him. He brought an air of professionalism that had been sadly lacking.’

David Schwarz recalled Football 101 as the most innovative part of Daniher’s first season:

In the mornings we would attend lectures on game style and tactics, then in the afternoon we would put the theory into practice on the school's playing fields. During the lectures he would say 'Right, the backs do this, the forwards do this, the mids do this and the rucks do this'. We had game plan A, plan B, plan C, plan D. We were even tested on this stuff.⁴

Russell Robertson didn't break into the senior side until after Balme's dismissal and Greg Hutchison had taken over as caretaker coach. Even from the little he saw of Balme, he said Daniher could not have been more different: a self-proclaimed control freak.

'The first pre-season we did with Neale Daniher was a university style set-up,' Robertson says. 'That, coupled with feverishly hard work, murderous runs, a fitness staff that was worded up to flog the crap out of us until we couldn't walk any more, in preparation for the footy season. I think that he was trying to give us a sense of purpose, a reason to train hard. He knew where the club was at. Coming from Essendon to Melbourne, he must have just gone, "Holy guacamole, what have I got here?"'

Daniher's first job was to recast the playing group. St Kilda full-back Jamie Shanahan, and Fremantle's 1994 number one draft pick Jeff White, lured back to Victoria, were the headline recruits, while the first draft pick of 1997 brought the sublimely skilled Travis Johnstone to the club. In the spirit of adding mature-bodied players who had been unable to break into AFL football elsewhere, Melbourne invited Guy Rigoni to try out.

Rigoni had previously been unable to break in at Hawthorn, just as Leoncelli had been unable to progress at Carlton. Rigoni's trial was under duress: unwanted by the Hawks, he had returned to country football. At the time he was invited to a run with Melbourne reserves in the final round of 1997 he had been celebrating the end of the season with his Myrtleford teammates for several days. His best-on-ground performance in the shadow of his brewery-fuelled training convinced the club he was a bargain. He was selected at pick 77 in the 1997 draft, just behind another hard-at-it defender who would instantly impress on debut, one Nathan Brown.

There was another promising kid new to the list, James McDonald, described by Corcoran as 'an impact player'. Then known as 'Junior Burger' – since his older brother Anthony was already on the list – James

McDonald had played four games late in 1997. He would become a stalwart.

With Garry Lyon having recovered from back surgery, and Stephen Tingay fit to play alongside the experienced Stynes, the Febey twins Matthew and Steven, and the emerging small forward Jeff Farmer, the list was instantly in better shape, although the course of the year was unexpected. ‘Melbourne supporters have been patient long enough,’ Daniher declared, ‘but they need to understand rebuilding. We are sixteenth, and going back into the eight and then to the top of the ladder is not going to happen in one year.’²⁵

Also among the immediate changes was a change of captaincy. Garry Lyon had played just eleven of a possible forty-four games during the 1996 and 1997 seasons. Todd Viney replaced him as captain.

‘Garry got to the point he could not get out on the park,’ Viney recalls. ‘Neale, I think, felt he needed the captain to be playing. I know Garry was struggling so there was probably uncertainty around. He was a great philosopher, Neale. The stuff that we see in his battles with motor neurone disease, he was just a very wise man that could put everything into perspective. He was very strict, very straight and honest. Everyone knew where he stood, and sometimes he could be even harsh, but in my experience players always prefer harsh over not knowing where they stand.’

‘Neale, for the first time, I felt, coached in a modern sense in terms of the game plan and strategy. I only had two years with Neale, and it might be more to do with my maturity and my age, but I felt I learnt more in two years with Neale than I did in the previous eleven around tactics and the game style.’

‘He showed how to drill the team in accordance with the game plan. Everything was related to the game plan at training. There was no generic training. It was all for a purpose. Neale was very much the attacking coach, moving the ball through the corridor, he was about moving the ball quickly, being brave. It was very positive, taking the game on and backing yourself. As skipper ... I was just his voice among the playing group when he was not around.’

During that preseason interview I conducted with him, Daniher called for patience:

Supporters won’t see it immediately. But we hope to see that we are a bit quicker, more skilful, playing more directly into our forward line where

we hope to have players like Schwarz, Neitz, White and [Shaun] Smith who can mark, to enable us to go long and direct.

We want to get the ball carried out of the back half quicker than it has been in order to give our forwards time and space. That means we don't want to be held up through the midfield. We don't want to be going as wide as much.⁶

After an opening-round loss to Fremantle in the West Australian heat, the Demons strung together a series of wins that included a twenty-five-point defeat of the previous year's preliminary finalist North Melbourne, and a tense two-point escape over Carlton at Princes Park. The Carlton win featured several notable performances, including a dominant midfield of Rigoni, Tingay and Viney. James McDonald confirmed his impact status with the last two goals of the game: one from instinctive ground play, the other from a spectacular pack mark.

For all the emphasis on structures, Daniher's was a skilled team – as Robertson attests, having played forward of such fine users of the ball as Adem Yze and Travis Johnstone. 'Adem Yze would put it so hard onto your sternum you could feel it all the way through to your spine,' Robertson says. 'Whereas "Ooze" could smack the ball into you, and the defender would be no chance to get there with those amazing left-foot passes, and you just knew it was coming, Travis, you'd look at him and you would lead, and look at him and think, "What are you doing?" He'd stop and prop, and again you'd think, "What are you doing?", and he would put the ball somewhere the defender wasn't and you'd just go, "Oh, thank you."

'I didn't have to lead. I would move to show I was there and he'd just put the ball somewhere beautifully for me to run on to it. Wow! And that's where he got the Rolls-Royce nickname. For me as a forward, knowing space, knowing limited space, knowing starvation corner the half-forward flank, Travis Johnstone was gold.'

For supporters, the best of seasons make for an epic journey into the unknown. The adventure is measured in equal parts hope and fear, expectation and dread. Success beckons and is swept away. Doom approaches and another year of disappointment seems imminent, but then a reversal of form and fortune brings new light. Daniher's first season was like that.

Five consecutive victories took the team to third place on the ladder. No sooner did expectation build than defeat came from Richmond

in the seventh round followed, by a squeaking three-point win over Collingwood and losses to Essendon and Adelaide. A big victory over Hawthorn was followed by massive defeats to Geelong and St Kilda by a combined 180 points. Dare to dream, and the season slams the door on that ambition. The Saints' Round 13 triumph evicted the Demons from the eight.

Yet we clung to hope. A surprise win over the Eagles in Perth – the Demons' first since 1990 – with Robertson contributing four goals and James McDonald three, and the season lived again. It was a turning point for the team and for Robertson, one of those glorious days when a young player learned he belonged at the highest level.

'We went over there as a depleted team,' Robertson remembers. 'West Coast Eagles were raging. They had a fantastic side. They were at full strength. Stephen Tingay was one of the older blokes, he was sent down back to play on [Peter] Matera. Todd Viney played, Garry Lyon ... but that's about it for senior players. We had guys you wouldn't have heard of or wouldn't know now. And we won. I kicked four or five and got the Rising Star nomination, and I was marking everything and running around, and I realised if I keep this attitude of effervescence, go for everything, then who knows what I can do?'

Robertson's opponent was Glenn Jakovich, younger brother of Allen. He was a formidable opponent, which only confirmed Robertson's sense that he belonged at the level, yet the next week brought another loss, to the Bulldogs. Only following a big defeat at the hands of North Melbourne did the team find a vein of consistent form.

In the five consecutive victories that ended the home-and-away season, Melbourne's multiple scoring options were highlighted, with Farmer, Lyon and Neitz contributing thirteen goals against Brisbane and nine against Sydney, and Schwarz, Lyon and Farmer scoring fourteen of the team's sixteen goals against Carlton. White and Viney were dominant in the midfield, and well supported by Rigoni, Leoncelli and Tingay, while in defence Shanahan, ex-Fitzroy defender Marcus Seecamp and Anthony Ingerson shone. Melbourne looked to be the complete team. Only history gave reason for caution.

Melbourne's first final since 1994 could scarcely have been more challenging: the opponent was Adelaide, the reigning premier – and the Demons' victory could scarcely have been more comprehensive. The Demons led from the opening minute from a Jeff Farmer goal, with the

final margin forty-eight points. Farmer and Neitz each kicked six goals in a tally of 17.13 (115) to Adelaide's 9.13 (67). White dominated and Ingerson starred in defence.

Melbourne fans leaving the ground were treated to the sight, and sound, of unfiltered Adelaide supporter bitterness from a middle-aged woman in the Crows' red, blue and yellow. As I passed by in her general vicinity of Yarra Park she was snarling at any passer-by, me included, 'Youse'll be back on the bottom next year.' Not for her the old rule of 'humble in victory, gracious in defeat'. Sadly, though, she would be proved right.

However, for now the roller-coaster was rushing on. The following week that mid-season thumping from St Kilda was avenged, with Daniher's team romping home by fifty-one points. Rigoni, Steven Febey and Farmer, with four goals, were Melbourne's best. Just as anything seemed possible, Melbourne dominated the first quarter of the preliminary final against a rested North Melbourne, but kicked three goals from nine scoring opportunities and trailed by a point at the first change. The Kangaroos asserted their authority in the second half and ran out thirty-point winners.

'We played our hearts out against the Kangaroos but Wayne Carey and his team held their nerve,' David Schwarz reflected. 'If not for some poor kicking for goal early on we might have beaten them.'⁷

The roller-coaster had slammed to a stop, yet the season felt like a rebirth. Until the next season's reality check.

While the team was competitive in the early rounds of 1999, it failed to generate any momentum. Midway through the season, six wins from thirteen contests was unimpressive, but had the team outside the top eight only on percentage. Nine consecutive losses and the forced retirements of Lyon and Tingay returned the club, if not quite to the bottom, as the Crow crone had forecast, then to just a couple of rungs above.

It was not only retirements and loss of experience that undermined the 1999 campaign – Stynes also had finished at the end of 1998 – but injuries and disruption through the season. In 1998, the Demons' game style was fresh and the players were settled: fifteen appeared in twenty or more senior games. But in 1999 only six players achieved that mark.

Also, a cloud had hung over the club after it was revealed before Round 1 that Melbourne had broken the salary cap rules from 1994 to 1998. An alternate set of books outlined payments to players that had not

been declared to the AFL. For the club, it raised the spectre of fines and exclusion from the national draft.

It was particularly embarrassing for Dick Seddon, the former Melbourne chief executive and inaugural AFL commissioner, who had overseen the introduction of the system. Seddon said the most important of the AFL Commission's initiatives was the introduction of franchises, which tied the clubs to the AFL effectively as licensees: clubs could be controlled, punished, even have their licences cancelled. But to the football public, the most obvious changes were the national draft – which led to the elimination of country and metropolitan zoning and chequebook interstate recruiting – and the salary cap.

'The clubs were haemorrhaging financially through making excessive player payments to poach each other's best players. An urgent mechanism was required to halt the slide into insolvency,' Seddon recalled.⁸

However, the AFL itself was complicit in the system breaking down. Expansion clubs preyed on established stars, offering better financial deals than they could achieve at their existing clubs. Melbourne's resurgence into the finals, coinciding with Fremantle joining the competition as senior players came out of contract, left the club exposed. Fremantle, which entered the competition in 1995, targeted Stephen Tingay, reportedly delivering a surfboard to his home to give him a glimpse of the idyllic life that awaited him on the west coast should he quit the Demons for the Dockers.

According to Greg Miller, the AFL shared the responsibility for salary cap breaches. 'I can tell you one thing for sure, the AFL was a very political animal the whole time,' he recalls. 'They were, in the early days of the salary cap, as much to blame for breaching it as anyone else. The things they did for fledgling clubs like the Swans, and that was turning a blind eye. They would certainly play the games for the competition to be even, to grow. They were deeply in, I wouldn't say corruption, but politics, manipulation, to achieve the end game.'

Melbourne's salary cap problem emerged at a board meeting at which Gutnick revealed he was preparing to attack Essendon for its breaches of the salary cap. Schwab warned that Melbourne had skeletons in its own closet.

Gutnick insisted the club report itself to the AFL. The fledgling president took the high moral ground, and the club hoped for a discount on whatever penalty followed. Melbourne lost its first-round pick in the

national draft of 1999, its first three selections in the 2000 draft and was fined \$600,000. Of the fine, \$250,000 was suspended, as was loss of the 2000 first-round pick, to be imposed if a further breach occurred. It was a significant blow for a rebuilding club.

Fortunately, the club made the most of what 1999 draft picks it did have. Selections 19 and 20 resulted in Brad Green and Paul Wheatley joining the club. They were followed by Matthew Whelan with pick 50 and Cameron Bruce at pick 64. All became stalwarts of the club, and Green a captain. As well, a better-than-handly midfielder in Stephen Powell joined from the Bulldogs in exchange for pick 35.

The fallout included Cameron Schwab losing his position as chief executive, although he had inherited the problem. A sporting romantic, he understood football culture and he knew Melbourne. He understood what made the club different. 'Every football club is the same in the sense they all grew out of a suburb, except Melbourne. Melbourne grew out of a ground,' he used to say. Referring to the introduction of country zoning and the lost monopoly of the MCG, he told me, 'Melbourne went from the most advantaged club in the VFL to the most disadvantaged in the space of ten years.' I could only quibble that I didn't think it took that long.

Schwab's departure ushered in an era of off-field instability. His successor, John Anderson, was the third chief executive in three years. Disenchanted with Schwab's treatment, Craig Cameron considered quitting and Lyon had a public falling-out with Gutnick. Gutnick suggested there was more to Schwab's departure than the salary cap debacle.⁹ Lyon made peace, pledging to agree to disagree.

Possibly this turmoil affected the season's results, but Leoncelli said that the 1999 campaign was derailed by personnel changes – the departures of Stynes at the end of 1998, then Tingay, Viney and the former skipper Lyon, whose final act on the MCG was a lap of honour to the sound of Green Day's hit song '*Good Riddance (The Time of Your Life)*'. 'It was definitely personnel, then there's some injuries, then it's confidence, and before you know you're behind the eight ball,' Leoncelli says.

Daniher hinted that the players had assumed that the good form of 1998 would continue automatically. The 'fantastic work rate' of the previous year had slipped, and injuries had brought pressure onto younger players who were not ready for it:

When I arrived in 1997 an era was coming to a close. It had one last yelp that was quite exciting and we were hoping it had a little more energy. Halfway through 1999 we realised Garry wasn't going to play another 21 fantastic games and Toddy wasn't going to win another best and fairest.

This year was a bit of an awakening for our younger players to realise it's up to them now. When we finished the [1998] season I don't think we handled success as well as we would have liked. We got a bit self-satisfied.

In two or three years, Daniher said, the young core of the club would be ready to 'start playing strong finals, and eventually Premiership footy'.¹⁰

The lack of a leadership group was another problem. 'It was a great effort by all of them to get to a preliminary final from last, but after '98 she was all over and we knew it,' Daniher said two years later.

Lyon, Stynes, Viney, Tingay and Shanahan were on their last legs and we had to build a new leadership group. Behind that was the salary cap situation and Cameron Schwab getting sacked.

We always had a real plan of building that leadership group, the new ones whose time had come – Shane Woewodin, Jeff White, Alistair Nicholson – and they had to say that to themselves when the crunch time came: This is our time, this is our style, the others have gone and we're not going to stuff it up.¹¹

For all the emphasis on structures, Daniher was willing to trust in players' natural brilliance. He would tell Robertson, 'You're a good mark. Go for it. If it's not working within the team I'll let you know, but until then I don't need to talk to you.'

Much of what happens in a game of football is chaotic. The very shape of the ball invites random events. So to see Robertson signalling to a player who is running along the northern wing of the MCG seventy metres away to kick high into the air, and to see that running player – whoever it was, one of the Febeys, or Rigoni, or Powell, or Yze – disregard the short leads from other forwards and send the ball on a long and steeping arc towards goal, and to see a pack of players gather, fighting for position before several of them leap for the ball, only to see a sole figure rise higher still, above and behind that contorted tangle of arms and bodies, and catch the ball before crashing harmlessly to earth was to marvel at the odd predictability of what you had just seen. Since it did

happen more than once. Each time Robertson completed the feat was a kind of miracle, a set piece that relied on countless other random pieces working together.

Robertson had honed his craft from childhood. He had leapt and caught a ball in an under-10s game and the spectators had cheered. That was odd, he thought. Normally no one cheered at mini-league. So he persisted, jumping into his mates and launching off them until he ran out of human launching pads. His father encouraged him by stuffing a football into the foot of one of his mother's stockings, attaching the stocking to a bicycle tyre inner tube which in turn was attached to a piece of four by two. The whole contraption hung off the garage of the family home.

'Dad said, "I want you to run and jump and grab the footy and then let it go, and it will always be there, you can run past and practice your marking in the air," Robertson recalls. 'I had hours of fun with that thing. Dad bought a ruck bag as time went on. He'd kick the ball, I'd bounce off the trampoline and catch it and land on the ground. I just became so good at falling that it wasn't anything to me, so being in the air was just second nature.'

Jeff Farmer was another of astonishing brilliance, a small player blindingly quick on the ground but also able to soar above a pack to mark. Melbourne's 2000 season was teetering with six wins from thirteen games, and the team was fresh from a ninety-eight-point hiding from Carlton, when Farmer took flight at the MCG in the Round 14 game against Collingwood. Dragged before half time, having barely recorded a possession, Farmer languished on the bench as his replacement, Ben Beams, immediately threw himself into the play.

Beams shone. He instantly seemed capable of amassing possessions at will, and early in the third term goaled from an interception, giving Melbourne a ten-point lead. Soon after, Beams broke his wrist and left the field cradling his arm and in obvious pain. It was Farmer's second chance. He did not squander it. By the last change he had three goals, one from an intercept mark, one when he roved to Schwarz, who was rucking in the forward pocket, and another by putting himself at the end of an Yze pass.

In the opening minutes of the final term, he read the flight of the ball better than any of those around him: another mark, another goal, and he continued marking and kicking goals for the rest of the game. For

his most audacious mark, he chose a high kick into full-forward, where Robertson was set to soar in his practised manner. Robertson leapt into his opponent and launched himself skyward, and all the random elements were coming together once more – the high ball inbound, the handily placed opponent's back – until Farmer intervened, riding that same hapless Magpie to take front position and snatch the mark from his teammate's hands. All three sprawled on the turf, Farmer clinging to the ball, Robertson muttering something to himself.

By the final siren, the Wizard had nine goals and Melbourne was victorious by sixty-five points. It was the launching pad for the rest of the season. Eight wins from the final nine contests – and that sole loss by one point to North Melbourne – meant the Demons were red hot. Farmer followed his nine goals against Collingwood with seven against Hawthorn and eight against Fremantle in Round 20. The final game before the finals was a seventy-point demolition of the Eagles at Subiaco.

Melbourne was young and exciting, with players like Shane Woewodin and Daniel Ward making an impression. Crucially, the Demons upended the finals series in the first week against Carlton.

Carlton had every right to be confident. They ended the season in second place with sixteen wins, two ahead of Melbourne in third place. And their last encounter had been a romp for the Blues. It was the sort of contest long-suffering supporters approached with minimalist expectations. A young, mostly untried team facing a team of proven champions, albeit one missing their injured champion Anthony Koutoufides. Hope that at least the underdog can make a game of it.

And that was how it began. Melbourne came hard and fast trying to generate their quick, attacking game with dash from Johnstone, Rigoni, Ward, Yze, Peter Walsh and Anthony McDonald. Matthew Collins seemed up to the tough task of minding the dangerous Carlton forward Aaron Hamill. They were third- and fourth-year players, supported by novices like Green and Junior Mac. Melbourne's intent was clear but they could not score heavily and Carlton eased ahead, and by half time led by sixteen points.

Maybe it was tighter than Carlton anticipated, but they always seemed to have an edge. With the first two goals of the second half, the Blues' lead ran out to thirty-one points. Our hope was diminishing by the minute, but Schwarz, Farmer and Anthony McDonald combined for a goal to stop the Blues' run. Into extra time, Schwarz linked with Green for another

goal. Missed opportunities in front of goal resulted in Carlton adding two goals and six behinds for the quarter, to Melbourne's two goals one. Melbourne trailed by twenty-one points at the last change.

Green marked strongly in the opening minute for the Demons to edge closer, and he found space soon after to mark and narrow the margin to nine points. The game was alive.

Sitting in the Northern Stand a couple of rows ahead and to my left was a pair of serious young blokes, in their mid-twenties, Carlton supporters. They were not the foaming mouth variety supporter. They became my barometer for how the opposition saw the game unfolding and, judging by the head shaking and the whispers, they were increasingly unhappy. It was gratifying that whatever happened from here, the Blues were feeling the heat.

Then Bruce snapped truly and the game hung in the balance as Melbourne attacked relentlessly.

The game teetered on turning into a comfortable win when Schwarz, no longer the athletic high flyer but instead the strongly built forward Garry Lyon had christened 'the Ox', thumped the ball from a ruck contest thirty metres towards goal, where Yze soccered the ball through. Less than a minute later, Green kicked his fourth from a pack after Ox made a crucial smother and Melbourne was up by nine. It was a delirious moment.

Green missed a chance to put the result beyond doubt, and in the end Melbourne had to win it twice after Carlton rebounded with two quick goals to snatch the lead deep into time on. Melbourne snatched back the lead immediately after the restart, and a second goal made the game safe, catapulting the Demons into a preliminary final two weeks later against North Melbourne.

'That Carlton game was the most amazing, and one of the most emotional I played in,' Leocelli remembers. 'Because they had cut me it was special. I scored the goal that put us back in front and Cam Bruce sealed it. The whole training and playing group sang the song together. Grown men had tears in their eyes.'

That 2000 preliminary final against North was a different experience entirely to its predecessor. Melbourne dominated the Roos after half time, and by the last change football members took the fifty-eight-point lead as a cue to abandon their seats and line up outside the stadium to claim their right to a grand final ticket while the teams went through the

motions of completing the game. Even the temptation of the Jeff Farmer show – he finished with eight goals – could not keep some in their seats.

Much has to go right for a club to win a premiership. Premierships demand luck. There used to be a belief that a team needed to lose a grand final before they could win one, but Adelaide had disproved that by winning the title in 1997 at their first attempt. But they'd had an element of luck Melbourne was denied in 2000.

In 1997, when the Crows won their way into the Grand Final, St Kilda awaited. The Saints were a strong side and stayed in contention for years afterward, but the finals campaign of 1997 was St Kilda's first finals appearance for five years. As for the special pressures of a grand final, they were novel to both teams.

On the other hand, Essendon, when Melbourne confronted them in 2000, were on a mission to make amends for a lost preliminary final the year before. They were seasoned campaigners, of whom seven had been part of their 1993 flag, whereas key players in Melbourne's winning path to the Grand Final were kids just making their way in the game.

Essendon had played the near perfect season, winning twenty-one of twenty-two regular-season games. Their only loss was a narrow one, when the Bulldogs introduced a radical flood of their own backline in Round 21. Daniher considered emulating that tactic in the grand final but decided against it. He backed his players to play their natural game, fearing that doing anything less would dent their confidence.¹²

Afterwards, David Neitz wondered whether, if he had kicked the two goals he missed in the first quarter, the young Demons would have settled better into the contest. Instead, Essendon took an early lead. Melbourne was beaten in more than one sense of the word. Green, so decisive in the elimination final, was hospitalised from a blow to the throat after he had scored a first-quarter goal. Rookie ruckman Troy Simmonds was knocked unconscious and stretchered off when he was shirt-fronted with his head over the ball.

Michael Long was suspended for four matches over the Simmonds knockout, and Dean Wallis was suspended for three matches for the strike on Green, but the premiership was won by the time the penalties were applied. The Bombers were not threatened after leading by forty-one points at half time, and went on to win by sixty. Yet Melbourne was not disgraced. They lost to one of the greatest sides the game has seen. No other team had looked like getting close to Essendon in the finals. North

Melbourne fell short of the Bombers in the first final by 125 points, and Carlton in the preliminary final by forty-five.

That Essendon side, Todd Viney says, was a super team that should have won more than that one flag. Robertson recalls: 'It wasn't a matter of what our team lacked, it was a matter of what we ran into.'

I broke my rule of always staying to the final siren. I had stayed to the bitter end when Hawthorn trounced Melbourne by ninety-six points in the 1988 grand final, but this time I left early to avoid the opposition's song. Essendon's key forward Matthew Lloyd was lining up for goal as I reached the gate, so my leaving was to a chant of 'Lloydeee, Lloydeee'. Almost as bad as the song.

The achievements of Neale Daniher and his team are greater for the context of the third-rate conditions in which the team was housed at the Junction Oval. Their base was, in one player's words, 'a shanty shed underneath a derelict grandstand'. The toilets stank, the showers were grimy, the meeting rooms were cramped. Recruiter Craig Cameron was consigned to an upstairs office, which in Danny Corcoran's opinion was unfit for pets. Corcoran said his first task most days was to clear his desk of possum faeces.

Possoms lived, fought and died in the ceilings. In one instance, a writhing ball of maggots fell from the ceiling on to the desk of assistant coach Stephen Newport. I have a finer memory of Newport. A decade earlier, his two goals from about fifty metres out kicking to the Punt Road end of the MCG ensured Melbourne's victory over Collingwood in the 1988 semi-final. He nailed them both in time-on of the final quarter: Melbourne won by thirteen points. I blithely rode the train home to Northcote, the only passenger sporting red and blue in a full carriage of solemn Magpie supporters. Newport's poor reward was to be traded to St Kilda and, later, when coaching called, to be deposited in the Demons' ratty training base.

Frank Davis, who returned to the club from Hawthorn as a recruiter, said he found the players 'in the worst possible amenities you've ever seen for any football club ... There was only three or four offices, there was a players' room and that was joined on to the change room, which you couldn't swing a cat in, and then they had a gymnasium at the end with not a lot of weights and bikes, and they had possums in the roof. Once again the atmosphere in the place was not conducive to producing good football. You'd go there and train, but you'd get out as soon as you could.'

Corcoran, who had been lured to Melbourne by Cameron Schwab, was instrumental in Daniher's appointment, telling Gutnick that Daniher was the best candidate 'by a country mile'. Within a year, both he and Daniher would realise that the club was, in Daniher's word, 'dysfunctional' at several levels, but for now the conditions alone offered a hint. It was the cost of being dislodged from its historic home the MCG.

'Coming into Melbourne Football Club from Essendon, which basically was trying to win the flag every year, we came into this club that had no facilities, had no training ground and was put down at the Junction Oval, which was gridlocked by cricket every summer,' Corcoran remembers. 'We had nowhere to train. We had access to another oval across the road which we were granted to use, [but] the pitch was roped off and the players used to carry these PVC pipes that were to be erected as goal posts for something to kick at. Neale was continually moving the rope that roped off the major square, dragging the rope in smaller and smaller and smaller, which he continually did. I said, "Mate, you'll get us kicked off here,' and then the curator would storm over. Neale'd bolt and then the curator would come over to me and I'd say, We're just doing it for this one drill." So, welcome to Melbourne.

'Then we had to go and do weights in a gym that would have been substandard in Congupna. There were machines twenty or thirty years old. We had no computers and Cameron couldn't give us any money, so as general manager of football I had to lease some weights equipment to get us underway at preseason. The condition of the players was appalling. There was just a bad conditioning and development program, out of date and out of touch. We could only attract x amount of staff because we didn't have any money.

'Money was perennially the issue at this small club that had this wonderful tradition that they all lived off from the halcyon days, and had never moved into the real world of the AFL.'

The gymnasium eventually had sufficient gear that a player could 'build a body', as Leoncelli says, but it was a problem having team meetings over two or three hours in rooms where players could not move about. 'A more professional approach to everything drags you up. It inspires you. It gets you to spend more time at the club. You like being there, you do the extra rehab, you're not desperate to get out of there because the thing's derelict,' he says. 'We didn't have professional facilities, but the approach to everything had changed.'

While Corcoran views the 1998 team as a good one, he says it was a time bomb of wounded and ageing players nearing the end of their careers. ‘The problem with the culture when we arrived, the way it came through [was] the Robert Flower issue in that Melbourne supporters fell in love with their players, because they couldn’t fall in love with their team because it was so bad,’ he says. ‘The players had a false sense of what it took to win premierships because it became all about the individual. It wasn’t a team-first culture because they hadn’t grown up in an environment where it was all about team and winning premierships. This wasn’t totally the players’ fault as they had seen merger talks and an inability of the club to keep pace with the AFL arms race.

‘We’re all here for one thing – to win games. To Neale’s credit, he was brave enough to change that,’ says Corcoran. ‘The supporters love their players, which is a good thing, but you’ve got to love success more, and the players have to fit in to that culture, otherwise you have to change it.’

Melbourne had the option of moving into comprehensive new facilities at Olympic Park around the turn of the century. Schwab was keen but the rent, at about \$500,000 a year, was considered prohibitive. Instead, Collingwood seized the opportunity at Olympic Park.

Melbourne remained headquartered at the Junction Oval, but one improvement was that Corcoran approached the Sandringham VFA club and secured its oval as a summer training venue. That move facilitated the Sandringham Zebras serving as Melbourne’s reserves side for several years. The bonus, Corcoran said, was access to the beach for recovery sessions, and to the Zebras’ social club for player meetings.

Some things did not change. Salary cap breaches or not, the lack of money made retaining players difficult. Fremantle was rumoured to be pursuing Jeff Farmer in 1999, while Melbourne was insisting he would be held to his contract, which had two years to run.

‘For me it was a very small club and it didn’t have the financial wherewithal to compete in the arms race that AFL football had become,’ Corcoran says. ‘There was not much help from the MCC, except in words. We couldn’t keep Jeff Farmer because Fremantle offered him a fortune. The new clubs that came in, Fremantle in particular, there was always this battle to keep your players.’

Melbourne’s attempt to replicate its strong performance of 2000 unfolded against a backdrop of internal dissension and rumours of a challenge to Joseph Gutnick as president. Gutnick did not understand

the game or its culture, which offended some long-term supporters and directors. To such people, he was a fraud as president.

I experienced Gutnick's unfamiliarity with the game directly, since it became my role to ghost-write the president's column for him in the club magazine. We would meet in his office and discuss the club for a while, after which I would attempt to craft a message to readers in the language of a football club that more or less reflected what Joseph had to want to convey. Often he simply wanted to implore people to buy memberships, which was hardly necessary, since the magazine was for those who were already members.

It seemed to me that although he did not know the second thing about the game, like most people in this city Gutnick had adopted a team as his own. His attachment to the club was genuine, and when its existence was threatened he had come to its rescue. For this, most supporters remained grateful. Yet it was possible to appreciate what Gutnick had given the club – breathing space and a chance to rebuild – and at the same time understand that he was ill-suited to be president.

Several times Gutnick was allowed to sit in the coaches' box to observe the game, but like all guests in such cases, he was supposed to keep quiet. He might learn something. One of these occasions featured a tight finish and a crucial player error. With Melbourne ahead by two points, Marcus Seecamp attempted to centre the ball to a teammate in a gesture of controlled, tempo football, but instead lobbed the ball behind his target, creating a turnover. Daniher exploded: '[Expletive] "Seekers", you [string of expletives], you've cost us the [expletive] game.'

Daniher might have been known as 'the Reverend' outside the box, Corcoran observes, but he was no Reverend inside it. Gutnick turned to Corcoran, his escort for the day, and demanded the coach be rebuked for his unacceptable language. Conscious of his own place, Corcoran said he would do so 'later', yet Gutnick tried to insist the coach be taken aside mid-game and rebuked for his profanities. Simply, he did not know his place. Perhaps in another life, a more humble Joseph Gutnick might have been appropriate for the role of president, but he was too little grounded in the game in this one.

This meant that Daniher battled not only the competition's poorest facilities, but also a divided club. The salary cap fiasco that saw Schwab outed was merely the opening act. On arrival, Daniher had reckoned his greatest challenge would be lifting a team that was rooted at the bottom

of the ladder, but the ‘most enduring obstacle was that Melbourne was a somewhat dysfunctional club’, he later observed.¹³

After Hawthorn members vetoed the 1996 merger, the Hawks’ board quit, whereas at Melbourne, having nominally won the vote, the pro-merger board stayed put, making room only for Gutnick, who replaced Ridley as president, and two of Gutnick’s allies, including Mark Jenkins. As Daniher noted, the board was split into pro-merger and anti-merger factions. It was an uneasy truce.

Among Gutnick’s reforms was the introduction of a woman onto the board. Because of the manner of her recruitment, journalist Bev O’Connor was seen as a Gutnick ally, although she insisted on her neutrality. ‘I had existing relationships with several Melbourne people like Hassa, Ian Ridley and Billy [Guest],’ O’Connor says. ‘I did not want to be in that fight. I did not go in as an ally of Joseph. It was important for me to be neutral.’

Neither Mark Jenkins, who left the board in 2000, nor O’Connor, who joined in 1999 and remained until 2008, saw any overt opposition to Gutnick from prominent figures like Bill Guest or Ian Johnson. However, Alan Stockdale, the former Victorian treasurer, did not hide his objection to Gutnick.

Gutnick was accustomed to having his own way in business, and as Melbourne president he continued in an autocratic style. Publicly, opposition to his leadership manifested in leaks to the media, but O’Connor recalls that both the pro- and anti-Gutnick factions played that game. ‘There were a lot of very big egos in that room,’ she says. ‘It was like having ten Eddie McGuires around the board table. You always had this feeling of a power play going on.’

In April 2001, with the team trying to bounce back from its Grand Final drubbing six months earlier, the club imploded. Rumours surfaced that establishment figure Ron Walker, a former lord mayor of Melbourne, treasurer of the federal Liberal Party, property developer and part creator of Crown Casino, had been approached to challenge Gutnick for the club presidency.

If anything, Gutnick inflamed the crisis, urging his ‘enemies’ on the board to quit or face a bloodletting at season’s end. He abandoned the president’s box to appear among the regular club members during the Round 4 match against Sydney, and declared: ‘I think I’ve got the support of the members, but I don’t know if I’ve got the support of the upper end

of Collins Street.¹⁴

It was the act of a rebel insurgent rather than an incumbent president. Although he had much support from the members, his actions threatened to prolong the divisions of the failed merger. In May, Gutnick demanded an immediate spill of all board positions. His targets were Guest, Stockdale and Johnson. Guest and Johnson, who were dual vice presidents, had been barred from speaking for the club while Gutnick was briefly overseas.

Gutnick ultimately resigned and was replaced by a reluctant Gabriel Szondy as chairman, with O'Connor as vice president. Szondy, a chartered accountant and tax specialist with a prominent city firm, had been elected as part of Gutnick's team in 1999. He said Gutnick would still have been president if he had abandoned his insistence on a midyear election.

The team had started the season well enough, winning four of the first six rounds, but foundered with three consecutive losses to Round 9. That was when Daniher spoke out. Until then, the football department had asserted the fiction that the row was not affecting the players. 'It is a distraction,' Daniher conceded. 'We don't really need an election mid-year. That's obvious ... We're staying out of this argument altogether but we really want our members and supporters to really get behind us.'¹⁵

The sense of a soap opera unfolding in real time deepened in early June, when Stockdale quit the board to better oppose Gutnick's re-election. He accused Gutnick of inflaming internal club divisions and inventing the story that 'the top end of town' wanted to oust him. The dispute was deeply personal. Stockdale, who had separated from his wife and re-partnered, said he was outraged that 'Joseph has apparently told journalists that my relationship with my partner Dominique is on show at the football and that he has moral objections to my relationship with her'.¹⁶

Gutnick constructed an alternative board of his supporters, but his ticket was ultimately outvoted two to one. Crucial was Flower's decision to side with the alternative group calling itself 'Team Vision'. Gutnick won more than 3000 votes, but I suspect many were like me: grateful for his intervention and financial support, but convinced by his imperious midseason conduct that he misunderstood the role.

At this point, he had lost the support of O'Connor, who remained vice president as part of Team Vision. 'Creating that division and distraction mid-season made it clear he didn't have the club's best interests at heart,' O'Connor says. 'No one who understood footy would ever call for an

extraordinary general meeting in the middle of the year. [And it was] the year after we had been in a grand final.’

Team Vision, which included advertising executive Paul Gardner, who would later succeed Szondy as president, won all ten seats on the board. The problem for Gutnick, Gardner remembers, was that there was ‘a sense that Joseph had saved the club, but he also thought he had purchased it’.

Amid the feuding, the team slumped to five wins after fourteen rounds. A belated end-of-season recovery – with victories over looming finalist Sydney, then Fremantle and the Bulldogs – saw Melbourne finish with ten wins and in eleventh place. And Jeff Farmer was lost to Fremantle.

Daniher and the team rebounded in 2002 and returned to the finals with a win over the Kangaroos before a loss to Adelaide in a semi-final. At year’s end, the club’s Brownlow Medal hero from 2000, Shane Woewodin, was traded to Collingwood. His post-Brownlow form had failed to match his post-Brownlow price tag, but for many supporters his move was a new source of unhappiness. Then 2003 was another disastrous year, the team slumping to just five wins, ending the season with eight consecutive defeats.

Corcoran points to the recurring instability off the field as a cause of the alternating success and failure during that period. ‘In my journey of six years I saw three presidents and five, it might have been six, CEOs,’ he says. ‘The club was unstable. It just didn’t give anyone a sense of stability. We were lucky to be isolated down at the Junction Oval, so we weren’t involved all the time in the hurly-burly of the politics, and [could] focus on footy, which Neale had this great capacity to do.’

It was this instability that led to Daniher becoming the face of the club, because there was no one else with the standing to do so. As much as possible, the players were shielded from the off-field changes, but the problem is that instability offers an excuse. Daniher was troubled by the unending change, recalling that ‘by 2004 the constant turnover of chairman and CEOs had really started to concern me. Were we ever going to develop a vision for the club that took us beyond survival?’¹⁷

Corcoran says: ‘It’s not one thing in isolation. Instability was always a factor. Instability, whether you like it or not, filters through the club and gives everyone an excuse. You don’t need much in AFL footy for everything to go wrong but the instability was the biggest factor. The second part was the good players that had been there a number of years, [the issue] was probably their poor physical conditioning led to injury

crises. Then there's the luck factor – players get hurt, like Rigoni does his back. So it's not one thing; it's always a combination of factors that all of a sudden you can't control.'

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There's an attitude, a way of thinking among Melbourne supporters, that probably originates from this era. It is characterised by chronic pessimism, a sense of impending doom even as success seems to beckon. Sufferers are always braced for the setback, the cruel twist that, like David Schwarz's fragile knees, will snatch away hope and optimism, leaving in their place disappointment and despair. No lead is ever big enough, no game is ever safe, no finals position is ever secure.

And no season did more to foster this bleak outlook than 2004. It was another 'recovery year', like 1998, 2000 and 2002, except that it promised for a long time to be better than all those. It began with thumping, confidence-building victories when the Demons, truly worthy of the name, despatched Richmond by fifty-nine points in Round 2, Port Adelaide by fifty-three points in Round 4 and Carlton by 105 points in Round 6. There were wins on the road, in Perth and Sydney, and four consecutive victories by an average of almost fifty points that put Melbourne on top of the ladder with fourteen wins after Round 18. Nor were those all easybeat wins: St Kilda was top of the ladder when Melbourne shook it up by fifty-seven points in Round 15 at the MCG.

Again, the team boasted multiple goalkicking options: Neitz, Cameron Bruce, Robertson, Green and Indigenous livewire Aaron Davey each averaged better than a goal a game to register almost 200 goals collectively. Neitz led the pack with sixty-nine goals. A solid defence led by Alistair Nicholson, Matthew Whelan and Paul Wheatley was cohesive, the players understanding one another's games.

Davey was a revelation. When he'd been overlooked in the 2003 national draft, Craig Cameron put him on Melbourne's rookie list. Davey's blistering speed proved a weapon both offensively and defensively, as he surprised opposition defenders with his run-down tackles to lock the ball in Melbourne's forward zone.

Playing for the Kangaroos' affiliate Port Melbourne, Davey had seen Daniel Wells run down opponents from behind and it left an impression. 'Before I played at Melbourne I hated tackling, but it's amazing when you try to nail a spot on an AFL list,' he says, 'and I had pretty much one crack at it as a rookie, that was something I could base my game around and

inspire my teammates, but more importantly I got to love doing it. It was a challenge every weekend to get a couple.'

Daniher did not ask a lot of Davey. As with Robertson, he let the youngster rely on his natural flair and intuition. 'My role was to go out there and try to inspire my teammates and do as many run-down tackles and kick freaky goals as much as I can,' Davey recalls. 'The thing about "Danners", he knew we all brought different attributes to the team. Mine was speed and kicking goals. Neale always told us if you think you are in range and you can kick the goal, go for it. For me [the best feeling] was always the tackling. I embraced it and it got to the stage that I'd set myself challenges.'

Apart from the qualifying final against Carlton in 2000, the team's finals matches were always knockout games with no safety margin. That had been true for John Northey's teams as well. Surging to first place on the ladder with four rounds of 2004 remaining finally offered a tight Melbourne unit the chance to launch a serious assault on the title.

At some point later that season, it occurred to me that the Demons should change their nickname. They'd have been better defined by the name of Tom Petty's backing band, the *Heartbreakers*. From the heady heights of Round 18, the fire died and the last four games ended in defeat. As did the inevitable elimination final, a five-point loss to Essendon, by which time key defender Nicholson was hampered by an ankle injury to the point of being crippled, yet circumstances dictated that he play. My clearest memory of that game is Nicholson caught one out with his opponent near Melbourne's defensive goal square. The ball spilled free from a contest and bobbed towards goal; Nicholson, virtually lame, was unable to stop the match-winning goal.

Season 2005 reinforced the experience. After twelve matches, the Demons were in second place with nine wins. Seven weeks later, they were out of the top eight, still with nine wins. Only a one-point win at Geelong stopped the slide out of the finals race entirely. Two narrow wins put the team into the finals, but elimination came in the first week.

Again in 2006, despite losing the first three matches the Demons were third with eleven wins after Round 15 before the collapse recurred. Two wins and a draw in another close finish at Geelong had Melbourne again below the top four and facing a knockout final. The team overran the Saints in the elimination final.

That match remains one of Aaron Davey's fondest memories. 'Finals footy is another level where you just have to go above and beyond what

you've done,' he notes. 'Although we were not overly successful in the 2004 and 2005 finals, one of the greatest memories is the comeback against St Kilda. Byron Pickett kicks a couple of goals and we end up pinching a win that didn't look like it was going to happen.'

The reward, however, was one of football's tougher tasks: a final in Perth against Fremantle. As if to rub salt into old wounds, the team was allowed to train at the Eagles' headquarters in preparation for the final. The players were like orphans let into a mansion, marvelling at the modern facilities that were a world away from the Junction Oval. Fremantle won comfortably by twenty-eight points after an even first half.

Throughout Daniher's time, the off-field churning through leaders and officials continued. In 2004 Paul Gardner became the third president within four years. Former newspaperman Steve Harris, appointed by Gardner, was the fourth chief executive in the same period. Harris discovered he was in charge of a club so financially strapped that it was paying a mere 91–92 per cent of the salary cap, and that its football department spending was less than almost any of its competitors. Its relationship with the MCC had soured over seasons of underperformance and mutual frustration, and many of its supporters, as members of the MCC first, were not being tapped as a revenue source, or even as a database for marketing events.

Over the next three years, and playing regular finals football, the club increased memberships and club generated revenue, enabling the Gardner/Harris regime to report successive profits and to reduce the club's \$5-million debt by more than \$2 million. But the money problems were entrenched. Under Gardner and Harris, the Demons reported successive profits over the 2004, 2005 and 2006 seasons totalling \$1.85 million, yet still reported accumulated losses of more than \$3.2 million in 2006.

Money was always in short supply. As Russell Robertson recalls, every year it seemed someone was taking a pay cut. 'It was always the start of the year and it's "we've got no money, we're in financial crisis"', he says. 'Then you look at Adelaide with their amazing sports science program, trialling GoPros on players before they were a thing, speaking to players as they're playing practice matches through it, and we are sitting back, lucky to get a bottle of Gatorade. That's as sports science as it gets for us.'

Gardner attributed the history of financial losses partly to the fixture. When he publicly criticised the AFL's drug policy, he said he was warned by the then AFL chairman, Ron Evans, that the club could be saddled

with ‘the Gutnick draw’ as a result. Gutnick had been a public critic of the AFL, and ‘the Gutnick draw’ had apparently been a payback. ‘The first year we had the draw I think we had Mother’s Day, a couple of 4 pms on a Sunday, Easter Saturday, just dreadful draws, and they described that – their words, not mine – “you can have the Joseph Gutnick draw or you can have the Paul Gardner draw. You can decide which one you have by the way you act,”’ Gardner recalls.

Mother’s Day games are notorious for low attendance, and late Sunday games are problematic for families. Mother’s Day against a non-Victorian side at the MCG, as Melbourne had in 2003 and 2004, is doubly challenging. To bolster the club’s finances, a home game against Brisbane was signed away to be played at the Lions’ home ground.

O’Connor is careful to insist that for periods the club ran well off-field, but it lacked the financial clout to employ the people best qualified to lead a football club. The club’s finances were fragile and heavily dependent on the team’s performance. Its historical ties to the MCC meant there were many active supporters who refused to buy football memberships. While the MCC returned a proportion of gate takings to the football club for every MCC member passing through the turnstiles, this income stream was unstable and evaporated during poor seasons.

‘The biggest struggle for us was to get those key people in place to create the relationships that were going to make us a successful club, relationships with the critical stakeholders like the MCC,’ O’Connor recalls.

Internally, there were factions and fiefdoms. Harris likened Melbourne Football Club politics to the complexities of the Middle East. ‘So many people had been in one war or another over such a long period – the Norm Smith War, the Merger War, the Gutnick War, the Woedwodin War, the MCC War – there was an oversupply of disappointment, disenfranchisement and disengagement.’²¹⁸

Somewhere in that period beginning with John Northey and ending with Neale Daniher, a premiership went begging and the club’s longest drought grew. Garry Lyon reckons 1990 was the year that could have seen the breakthrough. Melbourne ended Hawthorn’s tilt at a third successive premiership, only to lose to the Eagles in the semi-final the following week.

Todd Viney bemoans the lack of top-four finishes affording a double chance. ‘I definitely think we had enough of the top-end talent,’ he says. ‘Was it the bottom three or four players? Maybe. We just came up against

really strong teams and we did not play to our best. In '88 I knew our team was good enough, we just had a really bad day. Ninety-four, playing West Coast over there, and they had a super team as well, maybe we have just not been in a position to have that double chance. We always had to play elimination finals to fight our way in.'

Robertson thinks of the next great chance. 'All of my mates from '98, Steven Febey, Stephen Tingay, all of those guys, we all shake our heads,' he says. 'We rue that year, '98, because we had a really good balance of young and old, Febey, Viney, Tingay, [and] we still had Jimmy and those guys at the club. I feel great that I had all that around me. As a young kid, playing next to Jeff Farmer, Garry Lyon was still at the club, [I was thinking] this is just awesome.'

Daniher's strength was in his focus, according to Robertson, and in how he offered his players certainty and a system. 'What we had was structures, the structures around stoppages, the structures around our forward line set-up. All of a sudden, it seemed we had something to believe in, something to think about and concentrate on and not get lost in the financial woes, the presidents and the CEOs that would come and go. We had Neale Daniher giving us a true north.'

None of this is to say Daniher was without flaw. He persisted with Jeff White as his first ruck even after a rule change that limited the ruckman's run-up compromised his most effective weapon, his leap. True, White won the best and fairest in Darren Jolly's final year with Melbourne, but that was before the new rule took effect. Meanwhile, the younger ruckman went off to become a dual premiership player with Sydney and Collingwood, and played five years beyond White's retirement. Deploying White in attack periodically, since he was a fine kick of the ball, or even as an intercepting defender, would have allowed Jolly to remain and develop. Instead, both rucks were, in different ways, lost to the club.

In contrast to his persistence with White in the ruck, Daniher's reluctance to put much faith in South Australian recruit Scott Thompson saw him return home after four seasons and thirty-nine games with the Demons. Powerful, athletic and a fine kick, at the Crows he grew into the prototype of the modern midfielder through 269 games. He became exactly what Melbourne lacked. Jolly left at the same time as Thompson, convinced that 'if you weren't one of the star players, or were injured, then Neale wouldn't talk to you at all ... at no point did I feel that Neale

wanted to help me turn into the player I so desperately wanted to be.¹⁹

Still, with six finals campaigns in nine completed seasons, including one Grand Final and two preliminary finals, Melbourne under Daniher punched above its weight, coping with draft penalties, third-rate facilities, instability and poverty. On that score, it is arguable that Daniher should have been given a contract extension beyond 2007 before the season began. But Gardner and Harris decided to hold off.

As the season approached, Melbourne still seemed well placed to play finals football. Or so the paid observers thought, at least. Daniher also believed his group was good enough for one more finals campaign, one last tilt at the golden prize. Melbourne featured in the forecast final eight of every expert's forecast ladder in *The Age* at the season's opening. While nobody in the *Herald Sun* tipped Melbourne as a potential grand finalist, several observers nominated the club as one they would like to see qualify for the last day in September. In other words, Melbourne competing for the title on the last day was not beyond imagining.

I was not there to see how the season played out, since I'd been sent to New York as a correspondent for *The Age* and *The Sydney Morning Herald*. Yet I always knew when the Demons were due to play, and when their games were due to finish. Some part of me was wired to the fixture. I was privileged to live on the Upper West Side, near Central Park, with my employer paying the rent. Depressing, though, was my habit of waking in the pre-dawn to check the results, only to confirm that, week by week, the team was sinking back into mediocrity.

Midway through the season, with Melbourne on two wins from fourteen games, Daniher walked away. He felt the trust between himself, Gardner and Harris that was needed for the club to thrive was gone.²⁰

Gardner said he began to question Daniher's commitment to Melbourne in 2005, when, with the team one game and percentage outside the eight after Round 19, Daniher asked permission to provide special comments for a radio station during the finals series. With a match against the highly placed Geelong at Kardinia Park approaching, the coach reasoned that finals were out of reach. Although Melbourne won its last three games to sneak a finals spot, a seed of doubt had been planted.

Entering 2007, Gardner resolved to hold off on a contract extension, although, he said, he had not ruled out Daniher continuing as coach. 'Neale's contract at the time, like many coaches', had a clause in it that

said sometime by midyear that he had to be told whether he would be coaching the following year or not. I inherited that contract,' Gardner says. 'The reason that [clause] existed, as I understand it, was that most coaches thought that if they were not going to be coaching the following year, it gave them the opportunity to look for another job, but also to look for a job in time where they could influence the draft and trade period. We were conscious of that deadline and his manager was pushing it.

'Neale ... heading into his tenth year, was potentially going to be the longest-serving coach of one club ever not to win a premiership. So the view of the board, as a governance board, was that, "Yeah, he may well stay, but we think we should review it." The discussion which we communicated to Neale [was], "I'm not saying you're not going to get the job but we want to review it. We want to throw a couple of names in there. You should be one of them and we should roll the dice and see how we go."

Daniher was reluctant to reapply for his own job and, after making a presentation to the board, decided to quit. He coached his final game in Round 13: a two-point loss to Essendon, led by his old mentor Kevin Sheedy.

In that period when the team was training at Sandringham, I had caught a glimpse of the player Neale Daniher had been. What passed as my own fitness program was a run along the bayside cliffs. It was a simple thing to drop in and watch training. I arrived early. The oval was deserted but for a distant tracksuited figure who was kicking a football high in the air so that it bounced some distance away, where he could run on and trap it, then turn and kick again. This lanky athlete had a natural poise that caused me to think he was a real prospect – until I moved closer and realised it was Daniher himself.

His playing career had been ruined by knee injuries, and what I was seeing was a shadow of what he had been, but the natural attributes were still there: the physical grace, the eye that told him where and how the ball would bounce, the ease with which he glided over the turf. He was free in those moments, enjoying the connection between his body and the game he loved, but which had not loved him enough in return.

The end did not diminish Corcoran's regard for the coach. 'Make no mistake, Neale Daniher changed the game,' he says. 'The team he got into the Grand Final, it was purely on coaching and uniting a group of young players against a seasoned machine in Essendon and a seasoned

coach in Sheedy, who understood the brutality of what it takes to win a Grand Final.

‘It is nothing short of extraordinary what he achieved, and he should be regarded as right up there with the very best of the premierships coaches, given what he had to endure as coach.’

Chapter Fourteen

The Anatomy of Failure

That was the biggest struggle, those years. They were really bad times, worse than the '70s.

Sue Springfield, lifelong fan

It was August 2007, and Central Park's pathways had become as familiar to me as bayside Melbourne's cliff-top trails. On those bayside runs my red and blue training top sometimes elicited a shout of 'Go Dees!' from a passing cyclist. In New York, however, I ran in football anonymity but for this one time, when, as I turned up the Park's east side, towards the Jackie Onassis Reservoir, an Australian accented shout greets me: 'Battle for the wooden spoon this week.'

I slowed long enough for a brief exchange with the shouter. Brief because he was a personal trainer working with a client who knew nothing of Australian football, and she was paying for his time. He was a Carlton supporter, still in touch with the game – and so with the fact that the Demons and the Blues were to meet in the final game of the year, the loser seemingly poor enough to be deemed 'winner' of football's mythical booby prize, the wooden spoon. But he was slightly out of touch. Richmond, with three wins, was the certain wooden spooner. In Melbourne, the Demons–Blues game was already popularly known as the 'Kreuzer Cup'.

Both teams had four wins. Both stood to gain more from losing than winning. For Melbourne, defeat would deliver a priority pick at the end of the first round of the national draft, giving it three selections in the first twenty. Defeat for Carlton, which had endured a similarly grim season in 2006, would mean a priority draft pick at the start of the first round of the draft, snatching the number one pick from Richmond. And since the standout top prospect was an unusually athletic beanpole ruckman called Matthew Kreuzer, the slur that was 'the Kreuzer Cup' became popular, suggesting neither Melbourne nor Carlton would play to win. In

addition to snaring it a long-term ruckman, a loss for Carlton also meant three picks in the top twenty of the draft for a third consecutive year.

Cameron Schwab lays claim to conceiving the priority draft pick. During his time as chief executive of Richmond from 1988 to 1993, the Tigers were particularly toothless, finishing in the bottom three or four clubs each year. Schwab said he lobbied the AFL, complaining that simply having a single high draft pick in any year was insufficient to rebuild a playing list through the draft. He said clubs that laboured through multiple years at the bottom of the table warranted special help.

The priority pick was the result, but while Schwab's proposed formula had it being handed to chronic stragglers after several years, it came to be offered to any club that won fewer than a quarter of its games in any one year. Cynicism mounted as clubs like West Coast, a finalist in ten of the previous twelve seasons, was able to pick up Chris Judd with a priority pick in 2001. Equally, Melbourne benefited from the rule in 2003, a season that was bracketed by finals appearances in 2002 and 2004, gaining Colin Sylvia with a priority pick.

The Kreuzer Cup was a strange final act. Although the temptation for clubs to continue losing once finals were out of reach was obvious, I sweated on the result. Melbourne broke the game open in the first quarter to lead by five goals at the first change, and ran out comfortable winners in a contest that evidently featured little physical pressure. Waking early in New York, I delighted in the result in any case. A thirty-one-point win was a rare pleasant surprise. It implied, I thought, that the club had too much pride to ease up for the sake of a better draft pick.

'On a day when winning meant losing and losing was winning, Melbourne won and lost, and Carlton lost but arguably had the bigger win,' wrote Michael Gleeson in *The Age*.

Unusual positional moves and rotations were not required to contrive a result. That much was presumed by the 17-minute mark of the first quarter when Michael Newton goaled to put Melbourne five goals up. When Russell Robertson kicked another moments later the margin was 40 points and the contest had the feel of circle work - Demon Travis Johnston and Carlton's Heath Scotland had more than 40 touches each.¹

Daniher's successor was to be named on the Monday after the Kreuzer Cup, before attention turned to the finals series. But Port Adelaide coach Mark Williams upended the schedule by revealing that his assistant,

Dean Bailey, had won the job. If Williams made the announcement a farce, this was merely the lifting of the curtain on a chaotic period on and off the field.

A coaching vacancy often forces a choice between the unproven apprentice who may be a future tactical genius, and the known factor, an experienced senior coach with a track record. Gardner recalls looking at 'a lot of coaches'. The apprentices included former Essendon players Damien Hardwick and Dean Bailey, while the known coaches included four-time Essendon premiership coach Kevin Sheedy and former Melbourne player and Fremantle coach Chris Connolly.

Hardwick interviewed well but was a year or two away from being ready, Gardner thought. Sheedy 'didn't know a player on the Melbourne list'. 'His presentation was all about, "We need a Watson, and we need a Merrett and we need a Daniher,"' Gardner recalls. 'I was astounded. Have we got any of them? Who are they? Bailey knew every single player on our list: [he] had videos of every single player playing either firsts or seconds, and [knew] what their strengths and weaknesses were. He was going to be a teacher. Dean Bailey was the standout, and that wasn't just me. To everyone he was just the standout.'

The Demons finished 2007 with five wins and the club went into full 'youth policy' mode. stalwarts Nathan Brown and Clint Bizzell retired, and Daniel Ward and tagger Simon Godfrey were delisted, taking 550 games of experience with them. Gifted but erratic midfielder Travis Johnstone was traded to Brisbane. Johnstone was that rare player who could turn a game on its head within minutes. At twenty-seven, he was mature and had several years' football left, but the club was frustrated by his tendency to take risks, as if he were testing his sublime skills for the sake of it. He took with him 160 games of experience and the high regard of many supporters.

The thinking was that if a player was not part of your next premiership tilt, it would be better if they made room for someone who might be. 'It was Alastair Clarkson's view when I arrived at Hawthorn,' Todd Viney relates. 'We had some outstanding older players, but we were not going to play anyone who was not going to be in in our next premiership, and that's going to be in four to six years' time. He was pretty ruthless.'

'It's a sound philosophy. The thinking is they all come up through the ranks together. I wasn't at Melbourne at the time but I agree ... that they were thinking the same things. Having a lot of early draft picks and

talent, now we need to develop the talent ... playing them in games and giving them those experiences is only one part of the puzzle. The way they train, the way they are coached is all part of the development.’

In return for Johnstone, Melbourne gained a second pick in the first round of the draft, and used it to recruit Jack Grimes, who later captained the club. Its first pick in the 2007 draft was used to select Cale Morton.

Bailey set to building relationships with his players, inviting them to his home for a meal. He was keen to know them not just as footballers but as young men. ‘He was a laid-back, quiet guy ... very empathetic and caring towards his players,’ Aaron Davey recalls. ‘Me and “Bails” were really good. I was fortunate to have a coach like Neale Daniher who kept it pretty simple for me and I thrived off that. But Bails came in with more of a teaching background.

‘I’ll be honest, I wasn’t too big on reading the game. Most of it I played on instinct. My football ability was always on instinct but Bails gave me a lot about learning the game. It came with new structures and it gave me some passion at the back end of my career. I had the best of two coaches, one that kept it simple and one that was a teacher. Half the reason I coach now is that I had two great mentors.’

Brent Moloney held Daniher in high regard for his clear game plan, his forthrightness and his preparation: ‘he was a really hard worker, the first one in and the last one to leave. You’d arrive and he’d be in his office planning.’ But Bailey impressed too, with his grasp of statistics and new ways of breaking the game down ... As the years went by, our relationship grew and he became a father figure to me.’

Bailey’s position, however, was complicated when one of his close competitors for the job, Chris Connolly, was appointed as football manager. Connolly was a Melbourne original, one of the better players to emerge from its not-so-fruitful Goulburn Valley country zone. A courageous midfielder, Connolly had been identified by some as ‘FMC’ material – future Melbourne captain – before his playing career was ended prematurely by knee injuries.

Connolly was also well connected: he was an established player when Garry Lyon was beginning his career and Cameron Schwab was an administrative assistant to Dick Seddon. He was friendly, extroverted and had plenty of mates. Connolly played eighty-four games under Barassi and Northey, later coached juniors and was an assistant coach at Hawthorn, before becoming senior coach of the Fremantle Dockers. He

led Fremantle into its first finals campaign, but when his team failed to follow up its 2006 preliminary final appearance, he was sacked partway through 2007, freeing him to apply for the Melbourne post.

Bev O'Connor detected the flaw in Connolly's appointment. Superficially, it might have seemed that the club was gaining two astute students of the game, but Connolly appeared to have unfinished business as a senior coach. 'Paul [Gardner] said we are getting two for the price of one,' she recalls. 'I said, "This is not a good idea because Connolly wants to be the football coach." It's these decisions you make that create an environment. On paper that might look to be a clever idea – not to me, it didn't. [I said] this is not going to help Bailey.'

Gardner, however, says Connolly's appointment was Steve Harris's call. He said he and Harris had discussed appointing former Hawthorn coach and umpires' adviser Peter Schwab as football manager. 'I spoke to Steve Harris, which was basically the end of Steve Harris as a result of this, and said, "Listen, what are you going to do?" He said, "We can get the best of both worlds, an experienced coach and a Schwab to be the football manager." I said, "Sounds fantastic, the group had talked about that." The day after, [Harris] rang and said, "Great news, Chris Connolly's accepted the job of football manager." I said, "Chris Connolly? We were going to go with Peter Schwab.'"

But Connolly had been offered the job and the appointment announced, so Gardner reasoned there wasn't much he could do. 'That caused a lot of angst among the board with the CEO,' he recalls.

Harris remembered Schwab as a strong candidate for the job, and said he was close to being appointed until Connolly indicated he was interested. He said at that point nothing had been communicated to the board. Harris weighed the two prospects: both were former coaches, Schwab with experience in other roles, Connolly with a strong tie to Melbourne and knowledge of the club. Harris said Connolly made it clear he would never be a candidate to coach Melbourne while he was employed there. Harris thought Connolly, who was well liked and well known, was the sort of figure who might help unite the club. His strong communication skills with fans, players and the media might also take some pressure off the new coach, Harris reasoned, 'so in the end we went that way'.²

Unfortunately, O'Connor's doubts about the appointment would be borne out.

Meanwhile, Bailey confronted the same problem Daniher had faced: the Junction Oval slum. Connolly recalls that the move there when he was a player was supposed to be temporary, but much later the club was still there. ‘Those facilities, when I got back in 2008, should have been shut down by the health authority,’ he says.

More unrest was to come. Harris was dismissed early in 2008 amid reports of an exodus of senior administrative staff under his watch. Already Bailey’s tenure was marked by off-field turmoil. Yet if the former newspaper executive Harris had seemed an unorthodox appointment, coming from outside the football community, Gardner produced another surprise, naming former tennis champion Paul McNamee to replace him.

McNamee had been chief executive of the Australian Open tennis championship, and more recently of its golfing equivalent, but he was unknown in football circles. Nor was he the first choice. Gardner says he had approached the respected Geelong boss Brian Cook, as well as former Melbourne captain Greg Healy, a successful businessman. Both refused the job.

Gardner’s thinking was that, having appointed a low-profile coach, Melbourne needed a high-profile chief executive, someone with a commanding media presence. That is why he opted for McNamee over another strong prospect, Cook’s deputy at Geelong, Stuart Fox. ‘We needed someone who could talk the club up a bit,’ he says. ‘If Cook had said yes, I’d have had Brian Cook. Same as Greg Healy, I’d have had Greg Healy. It got down to Stuart Fox and [McNamee], and in hindsight you look at what Stuart’s done at Hawthorn and the MCC, he was probably the better choice.’

There is an element of guesswork in appointing senior administrators, O’Connor believes, since football administration is a rarefied field. ‘This is a common problem in football clubs, because where’s the school for football executives? It is one of the hardest jobs, to pinpoint somebody who has the requisite skills,’ she says. ‘Running a bank or a law firm doesn’t prepare you. We could have had Stuart Fox. This is someone who had the background, [but] we take a gamble on someone unpredictable.’

Jim Stynes had been part of the initial selection panel for the chief executive, and he had favoured Fox for the post, but Stynes was excluded from the final decision. As Stynes’ close friend and confidant Don McLardy relates, Stynes was livid when he heard it claimed on radio that he supported McNamee’s appointment. The episode compounded his

growing concerns about the club.

‘It was things like the sacking of Neale Daniher that worried him in terms of how it was handled, although funnily enough Neale sacked Jim as a player,’ McLardy says. ‘Jim wasn’t happy with that, and there were a few things around the club we were hearing that weren’t very positive, concerns about money.’ The use of Stynes’ name without his knowledge to support McNamee’s appointment was the straw that broke the camel’s back.

McLardy admits to urging Stynes to take on the presidency, but also to put together a new board for a clinical handing over of the reins of the club. Stynes viewed the Gardner board as tired, bereft of passion. While they had moved the club’s training base to the Olympic Park precinct and developed facilities at Cranbourne, ‘they struck me as a group who were looking for someone to hand the baton to’, he later wrote in his memoir.³

Essentially, Stynes’ aim became to rebuild and reunite the club without hangers-on from the row over the merger, for example. ‘There was a divisive backdrop. Our recent history had included pro- and anti-merger groups, as well as some polarised views about Joseph Gutnick’s presidency a decade earlier,’ Stynes recalled. ‘The club seemed to have splintered, and had rifts and factions. Fortunately, our group did not carry that baggage.’⁴

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While Stynes was gathering his group, nothing happened on the field to cause him to slow him down. Season 2008 unfolded like an unrelenting nightmare of shame and disgrace. Round 1 featured a 104-point loss to Hawthorn, followed by a ninety-five-point loss to the Bulldogs.

Cale Morton was an unfortunate debutant that year. Selected with pick four in the national draft, he would play nineteen games in his first season, and was rewarded with the best first-year player trophy. But when commenting on it years later, he would echo Stan Alves’ 1974 best and fairest speech on the corrosive effects of supporters satisfied with ‘brave losses’.

‘You lose those two games by so much and as a footy club you start to accept mediocrity, you lose by thirty points and everybody is slightly happy,’ Morton said in 2020. ‘In the first couple of years there was definitely games where people expected us to lose by 100 points, and if we got within forty points or thirty points, I think everyone gave us a bit of a pat on the back.’⁵

Four defeats by an average of almost seven goals followed. In Round

7, the team seemed set for further humiliation, trailing Fremantle by fifty points at half time. With one quarter remaining, the Dockers still held sway, by thirty-two points. But in a confounding reversal, the Demons kicked nine last-term goals to steal a six-point win. The next week, it was back to early-morning misery for me in New York, when Bailey's team reverted to type and lost by seventy-six points.

The situation was worse even than those results suggested. In the fifth round, David Neitz, captaining the club for the ninth year, suffered a neck injury that at first threatened to sideline him for the season, and only weeks later was confirmed as ending his career. The next week brought another blow. Painkilling injections had kept Russell Robertson on the field and averaging two goals a game, but against St Kilda he was crunched in a contest with three opponents and ruptured an Achilles tendon. For a player who relied on his high marking, this too was potentially career-ending.

Robertson said that he took full responsibility for his injury: he should not have been playing. 'I had tendonitis in my Achilles,' he recalls. 'I should've had six months off, but the club was under such pressure to perform. We were going so badly and I felt I could fix it if I could kick goals for the club. That was my mentality. "I need to kick goals."'

Midyear, as in the Gutnick years, there was a change of president, although this was a bloodless coup. Gardner quit as president, handing the reins to Stynes with ten rounds to go. Most of the board went too.⁶

On Gardner's departure, Mike Sheahan noted: 'To him football is more a pastime than a passion. Sadly the modern-day president/chairman must totally immerse himself in the club, particularly when the club is weak.'⁷ For his part, Gardner said he was looking forward to going to games and worrying about the score rather than the attendance.

Bev O'Connor was among those who stepped aside. 'I went with the whole group. I'd been there for nine years,' she notes. 'You know, these new people are coming in and you don't want to be the one sitting in the corner [saying], "Yeah, we tried that, tried that, didn't work."' It's really difficult to explain to people they are walking down a path to disaster.

'Other than a couple of newcomers that Jimmy kept, including Karen Hayes, who has done a fabulous job for the club, you have a brand spanking new board: there's no corporate memory about what they were doing. Everything old was new again.'

More unrest followed. McNamee was sacked, forcing the club to make

a six-figure payout. Don McLardy was at Stynes' side when he decided to break with McNamee. 'It wasn't a specific incident. It wasn't his background,' he says. 'It was more about his approach to the role as CEO, managing the staff, taking the club forward in a way that Jim felt he could support. He didn't feel he could support the way Paul handled himself in and around the club.'

Andrew Leoncelli recalls that other members of the board, most of them business heavyweights, were strongly supportive of Stynes' decision to reopen the position. Eventually, Cameron Schwab, sacked years earlier by Joe Gutnick, was persuaded to return as chief executive, a role he had occupied in the meantime at Fremantle when Chris Connolly coached the Dockers. Schwab's earlier time at Melbourne corresponded with Stynes' playing career.

To outsiders, it seemed that Stynes, with the help of his former skipper Garry Lyon, who was football adviser, was putting the old gang back together. It was not quite that, because Schwab was not Stynes' first choice. He had initially tried to recruit Stuart Fox to the position.

'We actually twice had a verbal and handshake agreement with Stuart Fox, who was at Geelong,' McLardy recalls. 'He was our number one candidate, and we were very disappointed when, as I say, he twice verbally, and shook hands with Jim, [and said] he would join us and the next morning both times he bailed out, so that was disappointing.'

'I think it was [the case] that Geelong didn't want to let him go, and they just made it well worth his while not to go each time, and Stuart handled himself professionally, as you'd expect him to, and politely.'

Fox did leave Geelong eighteen months later to become chief executive at Hawthorn, where he oversaw burgeoning membership numbers and three premierships. He then became chief executive of the Melbourne Cricket Club. In the same period, the Demons endured deepening misery.

Schwab was appointed against the advice of some who remembered his falling-out with Gutnick. He did, however, have a profound understanding of football clubs and culture. Also, as McLardy recalls, his appointment was supported by the AFL.

No one commits to the long hours of working on a football club committee without good intentions. People who think they have something to offer, or who are persuaded that they do, always join intending to help their club succeed. Circumstances, however have a way of undoing the best of intentions. The ancient proverb 'No good deed

goes unpunished' could be cast equally over Jim Stynes' administration as that of Paul Gardner, and yet, aside from missing out on recruiting his first-choice chief executive, Stynes' board starting promisingly.

As football manager, Chris Connolly discovered that the financial pressures on the club were the same they had always been, and they were not going to be easily solved. 'There's always great debate about whether Melbourne should have split from the MCC,' Connolly says. 'I am 100 per cent they should have. I think the MFC has been a lot better for the MCC than vice versa. I even know when I came back to Melbourne we would get 20,000 [spectators] at the MCG and break even, while Geelong would get 20,000 into Kardinia Park and clear \$650,000.

'So when I first went back to Melbourne, I am in the footy department, but the club is going to sink – the more I'm digging, the deeper the debt was. We would have eleven home games and sell one and get \$300,000, [the] Queen's Birthday [match] would make \$300,000, and the other nine games would add up to \$100,000 profit.'

The club was \$5 million in debt. In early August 2008, with the team struggling on-field, the Stynes board staged its first major fundraising exercise, central to its 'Debt Demolition' program. Stynes' experience raising money for his youth charity Reach was the template for an event which was staged in a Kensington warehouse, alien territory for most of those present.

The professed aim was to find 150 'foundation heroes' to save the club. Tickets came with a nominal \$1000 price tag. But it was made clear that everyone attending would be expected to put at least another \$5000 on the table before they left.

Given the club's plight – it was broke and had won just two of its nineteen games in 2008 – it was only Stynes' credibility as a recent champion and a figure of some accomplishment outside football that made such an appeal credible. Some 164 diehards signed up; twenty-four who could not attend simply sent their cheques for \$5000.

Those attending found themselves in a recreation of the Melbourne change rooms. The scene included massage tables, sponsors' boards, training staff and football lockers numbered 1 to 50, with the names of past greats who had worn the corresponding number underneath. Wafting through was the smell of liniment. There, in front of the lockers corresponding to their numbers, were Robert Flower, Garry Lyon, David Neitz, Greg Wells, Hassa Mann and Ron Barassi. In front of number

35 was the club's oldest living premierships player, Noel McMahon, the central figure of two of the newspaper photographs that had decorated our house when I was growing up.

Attendees were assigned one of the greats as their captain, then were issued with a match-day guernsey with that player's number, told to put it on and sent down a corridor, before they broke through a match-day banner accompanied by encouragement from the cheer squad and audio of crowd noise. The point was to engender something like a players' match-day experience before the formalities, which included speeches from Bailey, Connolly and Stynes, who introduced the 'Last Man Standing' pledge.

In fundraising terms, this was the highlight of the night. As McLardy related, with each attendee standing, they were asked if they could tip in not the \$5000 extra promised beforehand, but \$7500. About half the room remained standing. How about \$10,000 then? And so it went, until just two remained standing on a promise to donate \$200,000.

More than \$2 million was raised. Two days later, the team faced Geelong and was thrashed by 116 points. In New York, I knew nothing of the 'foundation heroes' night. But rising to the news of another hiding, I knew the other side of the world was a good place to be right then.

Melbourne ended the year on three wins but had to wait until the end of the first round of the draft for its priority pick. To obtain a pre-draft priority pick, as some had done before 2006, clubs now had to suffer through two consecutive years of fewer than five wins each year. Melbourne did have, however, the advantage of the number one draft pick in any case, which it used to select an outstanding schoolboy who played as a tall forward and occasional ruckman, Jack Watts. He would become the most scrutinised recruit for many years.

Once the global financial crisis threatened to cast the world into economic recession, the newspapers that were paying my rent decided on a cost-cutting exercise and recalled me. I returned in April 2009, as Melbourne's second year of torture under Dean Bailey, and third year of entrenched mediocrity, was unfolding.

There is an argument that once a team cannot play finals, it is best advised to develop young players, trial players in different positions and bring forward any surgeries for those carrying injuries. At Melbourne in 2009, that decision could have been taken with two-thirds of the season remaining. One win and single-digit losses to the Eagles and the Bulldogs

With just three wins in the previous season, a pre-draft priority pick was in the offing if the team continued losing. Cynicism about the system was rampant, as evidenced by the talk of the Kreuzer Cup two seasons earlier. Yet realists also believed clubs had to work within the system the AFL had created. After consecutive mid-season wins, one respected sports journalist told me: 'If your mob stuffs this up and wins more than four games, you'll be the laughing stock of the AFL.' Such mirth at the thought of it: that Melbourne's incompetence might go beyond losing matches to not losing enough of them.

'Melbourne never sat down our coach, Dean Bailey, and instructed him not to win games,' Stynes recalled.

But he, I and everybody at the club knew what an important bearing on the club's future that extra draft pick might have ... it went against the grain to find solace in failure, but that was the system in place ... teams that are genuinely in trouble are faced with a disincentive to win.⁸

Chris Connolly, who was later the subject of disciplinary action for comments he made during this period, remained clear about what needed to be done years after the event: 'My position is as soon as you can't win the premiership, you need to start selling hope to your supporters. My position at the time was any player you're not sure on – and there's plenty of players you're not sure on – give them a good go in the seniors to see if they're going to be good enough, because we can't have people clogging up the list.

'Anyone who needs surgery, get it done, and we had some good young kids, good draft picks, we have to show them that we care about them, we need them to have an understanding of the game at that level, so they need to know what they're training for. Plus, what else can players bring to the table: Mark Jamar'd become a good ruckman, but can he play forward? Can Stefan Martin play midfield? Can Neville Jetta play up the ground? He'd come to us as a small forward.'

Bailey later spoke of the conflicting signals being sent within the club. After the second of those consecutive victories at the MCG, an eleven-point win against then finals contender Port Adelaide in Round 15, Schwab had seemed troubled and Connolly frustrated, Bailey recalled.

'I remember "Schwabby" walking in and puts his head down and, I can't remember exactly what he said, but it was something like: "F—ing Jesus, gee." You know, shaking his head. Oh, I thought we are OK, we

won. He mumbled something about “difficult”, “hard”, what we’re doing to get to the end of the year, “gotta think of the club’s future” ... words to that effect. Chris said something to me about “F—ing Jimmy had just fallen out of his bloody hospital bed” or something.’

On Bailey’s account, he was pressured, and his job threatened many times, by either Schwab or Connolly along the lines of ‘the future of the Melbourne footy club is in your hands and you have to do the right thing by the club’. He also revealed that even supporters made it clear they did not want more than five games won, for the sake of winning the priority pick.⁹

It is a dreadful way to go to the game, finding comfort in defeat, especially since I insisted on seeing every one of them I could. Yet despite seeing every game that it was possible to get to in the flesh, including midyear wins over the Eagles and Port Adelaide, my only strong memory of 2009 is the narrow loss of Round 18.

The teams were evenly matched: Richmond had four wins and a draw to their name; Melbourne still those three wins. The crowd, almost 38,000, was unusually festive. Opposition supporters were strangely less annoying. Beside me was a mixed family: Dad a Demon, Mum and the kids Tigers. The match was tight. Only a few points separated the teams, although had Richmond kicked accurately, their lead would have run to several goals instead of just five points at half time.

At the last change, Melbourne led by three points. The game opened up in the final term, with nine goals scored as the lead changed repeatedly. All within the last two minutes, the Demons lost and then regained the lead when Ricky Petterd goaled on the run. From that point, Melbourne played near-textbook football with at least one extra player in defence, holding up play after marking and passing wide to keep the ball out of the corridor. Crucially, the former West Coast champion Ben Cousins twice won the ball for Richmond out of contested situations: once on the wing to drive the Tigers into attack, and again moments later in the forward pocket.

The casual, good-natured atmosphere evaporated with the lead changes. As the siren sounded, Melbourne was in front, but a smart centring kick after Cousins won back possession found Richmond’s Jordan McMahon, a defender who sometimes went forward and averaged one goal every four games over his 100-games-plus career. Perhaps the siren beat McMahon’s mark, but the crowd noise might have drowned it

out. The umpire allowed him to take the kick.

McMahon's mark was about forty-five metres from goal, on a slight angle. He needed to cover fifty metres. Someone in the family next to me predicted knowingly, 'McMahon can't kick this,' and some part of me felt better. It turned out they were bracing themselves for disappointment. The ball cleared the pack easily and went through for a goal.

It was precisely the sort of last-minute, gut-wrenching defeat that burns long after the moment. Except it didn't. Someone nearby said, 'We can all go home happy.' The victors and the losers were equally satisfied: nothing could better have captured the corrupting influence of the system.

Melbourne duly crushed Fremantle two weeks later and ended the year on four wins, qualifying for a priority pick at the head of the draft. This enabled the club to recruit Tom Scully and Jack Trengove with picks one and two. The pair were seen as the future of the club, compensation for three seasons in which the Demons won just twelve of sixty-six games.

Trengove was mature and ready, capable of winning his own ball and playing 'footy smart' – as he showed in his first season, when against Port Adelaide he opted to punch the ball through for a behind rather than take possession in the dying seconds of a nailbiter. Result: Melbourne won by one point.

Scully was a running machine with unusual endurance, who was expected to complement the dashing speedsters the club had drafted in 2008: Sam Blease, James Strauss and Jamie Bennell. After Scully and Trengove, the club's next selections were Jordan Gysberts and a solidly built defender named Luke Tapscott, both of whom would have their careers marred by injury.

Ultimately, that priority pick would be subject to controversy and an AFL investigation following comments by rugged midfielder Brock McLean, who was disenchanted with how the club came by the compensation, and by Bailey himself in 2011. McLean reckoned the team was sandbagged – that the club, not the players, had 'tanked'. He was traded to Carlton at the end of 2009, when the club's determination to stay the course of its youth policy was undiminished.

Also in 2009, the tough and tireless defenders Matthew Whelan and Paul Wheatley were farewelled, as was Russell Robertson, despite having been the club's top goalkicker from just thirteen games. Partly it was Aaron Davey's run-down tackles that led to new demands being made of forwards to pressure their opponents with the ball. Robertson's all-or-

nothing, high-flying style was deemed insufficiently defensive.

Increasingly, tactics favoured a more defensive game. In 2005 Sydney loyalists had bristled when AFL chief executive officer Andrew Demetriou condemned their high-pressure, contested football, which resulted in low scores and rugby-like mauls. But the Swans went on to win the premiership that year, and contested the grand final again in 2006, only losing narrowly.

In 2007, Geelong triumphed with an attacking style that featured rapid ball movement through the central corridor. But the next year Geelong was brought undone by the Hawks' discipline. Hawthorn employed a mobile zone defence that forced Geelong wide and slowed them down. In effect, every Hawthorn player was a defender until they won back possession of the ball. And in 2010, a defensively oriented Collingwood held sway over St Kilda, first in a drawn Grand Final and then in the replay. Defence was in vogue.

Under Bailey, Melbourne was recruiting for an emphasis on attack with quick ball movement and run – hence the 2008 intake of Blease, Bennell and Strauss. Morton also was an 'outside player', happier finding space in which to run and create rather than defend. Melbourne's future lay in getting 'game time into our young players', Dean Bailey told supporters. He said teams needed the continuity of about fifty games playing together to experience success.¹⁰

Just as Gysberts and Tapscott suffered injury interruptions, serious injuries compromised the speed trio. Blease broke a leg in a schoolyard game of kick-to-kick and missed his first season, although he did recover to secure a Rising Star nomination in 2011. He eventually played thirty-three games. Strauss suffered a horrific broken leg at the MCG, among other injuries that punctuated his career of twenty-four games. Jamie Bennell showed promise early and played fifty-seven games over four years before he was delisted. He later played thirty games for the Eagles. Morton also persisted, playing fifty games in his first three seasons, although with only nine wins and a draw to show for them.

Of the twelve prospects taken in those two 'rebuilding' national drafts, only Watts, Max Gawn (drafted at pick thirty-four in 2009) and Neville Jetta (pick fifty-one in 2009, and a worthy replacement for Whelan) remained at the club after 2014. Jack Trengove was by then in rehabilitation after a serious foot injury.

Amid the darkest winters, there is always hope. From the outside,

were the only bright spots in the first eight matches.

Coaches often have a mantra. Northey's was that his players have 'a red-hot go'. Dean Bailey's was a summation of youth policy: 'We've just got to get games into the kids.' For me, the issue was what sort of games those kids were getting. Barassi, on his return in 1981, had complained that the players he inherited had forgotten how to win. Whenever I heard that it was a matter of the kids getting games, there was that query again: what sort of games? Who wants their players learning how to lose?

'Neale had done a good job but he had milked everything out of that playing list that he could,' Chris Connolly says. 'They were trading out second-round picks for Ben Holland and [Byron] Pickett and all these guys. People in football ask: how long does a rebuild take? You don't play your best football until you're twenty-five. So you want quality players around that age bracket, and it's going to take some time.'

When Barassi and Jordon produced a five-year plan at Melbourne, they had been ridiculed, Connolly continues, but from 1987 for the next twenty years Melbourne won almost as many matches as any club, and 'all the players that were in that '87 group, the majority were recruited by Ron Barassi and Ray Jordon: guys like Jim Stynes, Rod Grinter, Todd Viney, Garry Lyon, Greg Healy, Graeme Yeats, Sean Wight. They'd all come through together.

'In Dean Bailey's defence, within two years we had let go fifteen guys who had averaged 200 games, so the playing list had gone off a cliff. So you're really starting from scratch. So he's playing an attacking brand of footy with a team that didn't have much ability compared to the opposition, because there's that quantity of players [missing].'

In the 2009 season, a new metric was introduced: quarters won. So many games ended in crushing defeats that one of the few measures that might offer encouragement was in counting how many quarters the Demons outscored their opponents. Unfortunately, on four occasions in 2009, the sole quarter 'won' was the last, after trailing by seven goals or more at the last change. For example, in Round 3 Melbourne won the last quarter by four points, trimming the losing margin from sixty-one points at the last change to a mere fifty-seven points. Three weeks later, forty-six points in arrears after three quarters, a three-point final-term 'win' saw the Demons lose by forty-three points. The best was against Brisbane: seventy-four points in the red as the final term began, the deficit was cut to fifty-five points at the end.

season 2010 was the return of football being fun again, largely due to the dazzling talents of Liam Jurrah from Yuendumu, a settlement with a red-dirt football oval about three hours' drive west of Alice Springs in central Australia. Jurrah's uninhibited and intuitive play was a revelation. His potential seemed limitless, especially when he goaled while lying on his back. Recruited from the preseason draft in 2009, he kicked multiple goals in five of his nine games in his first year, and failed to score in only one of his eight games in 2010.

Eight wins and a drawn game in 2010 lifted the team out of the bottom four the first time in four seasons. That did not still the culling of senior players. Yet the deepest cut of all was the extraordinary decision in August 2010 to force James McDonald, now club captain, into retirement.

The announcement, on the eve of McDonald's 250th game, seemed disrespectful and cavalier. Retiring him opened up a space on the list for another recruit, so the club could 'get games into (even more) kids'. But that nagging voice persisted: what sort of games are they getting when the team is too immature to physically match their opposition and they are caned on a regular basis? A future chief executive of the club would later say that this purging of senior players over several years 'took the leadership out of the locker room'.¹¹

Bailey's fourth year in charge was expected to show further improvement over the eight wins of 2010. The season opened with a draw against the well-regarded Swans at the MCG, followed by a forty-five-point loss to the Hawks, and then successive wins over Brisbane and the novice Gold Coast, by ninety points. So far, so good.

A heavy loss to West Coast in Perth was followed by an even heavier win, by ninety-six points, over Adelaide at home. And so went the year. Melbourne either won by plenty or lost by plenty. If there was a sense that Melbourne could grow into a complete unit, it was partly for the unpredictable talents of Jurrah, who in 2011 kicked forty goals in eighteen games, and was kept goalless only twice. His play was so unpredictable that it seemed impossible for defenders to prepare for him. And with his growing effectiveness, and the team maturing, Bailey's group appeared to be making progress.

With six rounds remaining and Melbourne just one game outside the top eight, the team was on track at least to better the previous year's win-loss ratio, if not play finals. The Demons had seven wins, by an average of almost fifty-four points, and eight defeats, by an average of almost fifty-

two points, and one draw. On fire, usually against non-Victorian sides at the MCG, the Demons were unstoppable. Yet once the opposition was on top, there was no fightback. Oppositions did not hide their contempt, suggesting Melbourne was only comfortable with 'bruise-free football'.

Jared Rivers had come to the club in 2003, having played senior football in South Australia. He quickly became a fixture of the defence under Neale Daniher, and under Bailey became part of the leadership group.

'We felt we were starting to make progress,' he says. 'You see it these days that it does take time. It was a young group and I thought we started to make headway with that connection we all want, that culture, and I thought Bails was leading that really well. We had a lot of younger players and I reckon [we lacked] just that consistency each week. It's hard to back up every single week. When we were all on, we were on, but it was frustrating.'

The Demons now faced one of the toughest tasks in the fixture – a road trip to Geelong – with internal troubles mounting. James McDonald had told the board after his forced retirement that the football department was dysfunctional. From within, Connolly and Schwab were convinced the Bailey game plan would not survive the pressure the best teams could impose.

Internal doubts about the game style had firmed since the 2009 season, Robertson's last. When I meet Robertson at a cafe in bayside Melbourne, he is long retired. Asked about Dean Bailey, he is momentarily and uncharacteristically silent. 'It's hard for me to say, because it was my demise time and he got rid of all my mates and me,' Robertson finally begins.

'Bailey to me was under the pump from the club. He wasn't necessarily in control. Neale Daniher, he was in control. Part of me felt sorry for [Bailey]. Neale Daniher wouldn't have copped that. He just wouldn't have allowed it. I guess the whole mentality of the club was let's just work on the next group coming through, and I, and it was Whelan and Wheatley, and the year before Brown and Bizzell, we were all just getting dropped off, and the year after that James McDonald.

'Bad decision after bad decision, but it was always this one with Dean.' Robertson holds his right hand behind his ear and taps his fingers to his thumb, indicating a whispering campaign. 'I don't think I saw a true Dean Bailey because of the pressure that he was under.

'The club was being run by someone else, not Dean Bailey. I am very aware that a lot of coaches change from when they are assistants

to coaches. There's a lot of wonderful press from players that [Bailey] was their assistant coach, and he was a great teacher for them and great confidant, and able to see the game differently. I didn't have that. I copped a coach that was, first up, very excited to have the job and be a senior coach, and then is under a lot of pressure and under a lot of fire from above. So I got a good six months with him as a player, then I was injured. As soon as my Achilles went on me, my papers were signed.'

Brent Moloney, a senior player at the time, enjoyed the responsibility Bailey gave him, but he too harbours doubts about who was in control. 'Dean was on the right track,' he says. 'He was building a list. It was going to take time. Unfortunately there were some things happening. James McDonald and Cam Bruce got moved on. They were great stalwarts. [Bailey] was the one talking to the media, but whether they were his choices ... that was the disappointing thing.'

Andrew Leoncelli, who joined the board not long after Bailey's appointment, says the developing coach faced extraordinarily difficult circumstances. 'Chris Connolly should never have been appointed football manager of the MFC, especially after going for the role of coach and being knocked back,' Leoncelli says.

'It was a poisonous relationship. Dean never felt comfortable, wasn't supported, wanted to play his game style. Chris wanted a different style. Chris is this Pied Piper figure. Everybody loves him. He should have been a community development program guy or a sales and marketing program director. He is a perfect front of the business, banging on doors, getting sponsors in.'

The Stynes board had inherited the structure of Bailey as coach and Connolly as football manager, and recognised it as unusual, given the history, but had hoped it would work. When it was not working, however, nobody was able to force change. And outside the playing group, doubts persisted about Bailey's coaching.

Connolly says he was not surprised to be appointed to the football managing role since Bailey reported to the board and he, Connolly, reported to the chief executive.

'People are entitled to their opinions,' he says. 'There was a lot going on behind the scenes and people who were doing their jobs were blind-sided. That comes back to the board. I never became concerned about the direction of the club under Dean.'

Connolly says his focus became the club's survival: 'Winning for

Melbourne was really important for finances. They couldn't afford to slip back. The other thing was the facilities at the time were really difficult."

Stynes found Bailey a hard man to read and was unsure if his game would hold up against the best teams.¹² McLardy said the coaching position was a constant preoccupation. 'Obviously, the Cameron and Chris versus Dean Bailey really was the big issue all the time,' he notes. 'There was a constant question mark over whether Dean Bailey was the right coach or not, and it's very hard when that's coming from the CEO and the footy manager.'

'And rightly so. You have to be able to ask that question. The amount of hours we spent on that issue was huge. I think it always is at a football club if you're not on top and winning a flag – everyone wants to know how you do it and what you're doing wrong. It's a constant concern.'

'If you go back to the start, what you've got is Chris, who was fresh off the Fremantle coaching job, applied for Dean's job and didn't get it. So it was really set-up for an awkward situation from minute one with Chris as the footy manager and Dean as the new coach. (Chris) was quite open about what he thought were the weaknesses of Dean as a coach. He was also open about his strengths as a coach, but he certainly had concerns, and so did Cameron, about the defensive side of our game.'

'We felt that we were close, but in some ways that put more pressure on, because there was that element saying Dean didn't have a defensive coaching side to him so he couldn't coach to defend. Yes, we were attacking well, and we had a great young list and we were going somewhere, and when we were good we were really good, but – this is what the football heads were saying – we are going to be exposed against the better teams. So we need to fix the defence. So that became a question: can Dean do that? Is he the right person to do that?'

*

Given the conflict and lack of common purpose within the football department, it was inevitable that something would break. It did so in spectacular fashion. The Demons were coming off a heavy defeat to Hawthorn, but had won three of their previous five games as they prepared for a trip to Geelong in Round 19, 2011. They were one game and percentage outside the eight, with six chances to make up the difference in the twenty-four-round season.

I had last been to games at Geelong in 2005 and 2006, witnessing a one-point win and a draw, but I had not been back since returning from

the United States. It was always an inhospitable place. Entry for visitors meant you were corralled into a standing area at the south-eastern corner of the ground. Not only were you shoved into a pocket with a limited view of the action, you spent the day squinting into the winter sun – if you were lucky.

Since Geelong is home to four lower-house seats in the state parliament, and no other regional town has such a concentration of electorates, it tends to do well out of state governments. And governments of both persuasions had found it worthwhile to contribute to redeveloping the Geelong ground into a money machine for the local club. But the effect for visitors was no improvement unless you were willing to shell out much more. So I decided to boycott the game. It was a smart move.

On the Monday prior, club captain Brad Green effectively lit a fuse when he appeared on *On the Couch*. Quizzed about key relationships, Green conceded: ‘We’ve got a bit of stuff going on off-field that we need fixed to get things right at the footy club.’¹³

Alerted by Green’s remark, McLardy walked into a meeting of senior players the next day. Bailey left the room to allow the players to speak freely to the vice president. McLardy organised for the players to inform Stynes of the situation, calling them to a meeting at his home two days before the game. Evidently worried that involving the players in club politics so deeply would disrupt their preparation, Bailey warned McLardy that the players were travelling to Geelong the next day. McLardy insisted that ‘Jim needs to hear this’.¹⁴

Reflecting on that period, Connolly says the players should have been shielded from the discussions. ‘It’s hard enough playing, let alone being brought into the politics of the club,’ he says. ‘This young playing group, probably the youngest playing group in the competition, is meeting with board members on where the football department is going in the week they are playing Geelong at Geelong, arguably at that time one of the best teams in the history of the game. It’s not good.’

Coincidentally, Schwab’s contract required him to be told within days whether he was going to receive an automatic extension of his employment or whether his term would be reassessed at season’s end. Brent Moloney was suffering from a virus and missed the meeting at McLardy’s home, but the senior players left the meeting believing Schwab was finished at the club.

One view was that Bailey and his senior cohort and assistant coaches were ‘playing politics’. Another was that Connolly and Schwab were doing

likewise, convinced that Bailey was not the coach the club needed. In any case, it was a counterproductive preparation for a major game, as Rivers recalled. 'I can definitely see from [Bailey's] point of view he wouldn't have liked that,' he says, 'and looking back, I can see it wasn't a good thing for us to catch up pre-game. But we felt we had to say something so that's why we did it.'

Rivers said the players felt they had prepared well physically for the contest, but on the eve of the game Bailey worried that his players seemed worn down. He was uncertain what effect the week's turmoil would have.¹⁵

He did not need to wait long. Eight goals to nil in the first quarter; twenty goals to one at half time. That Melbourne was playing one short – Moloney played despite his virus and was substituted off without recording a possession – was no excuse for the lamentable performance.

Jordie McKenzie was a young midfielder, twenty-one, and valued for his readiness for the contest. He was later viewed as one who did not stop trying, and was Melbourne's best on a dirty day. 'After half time we went man on man, not to go totally defensive but to make everyone accountable for their opponent,' McKenzie recalls, '[but] it didn't get much better. It felt like they had more than eighteen players. I just remember being staggered by it. Everyone's trying but the goals kept coming.'

After half time, Melbourne was outscored seventeen goals to six. Geelong, on their way to a third premiership in five seasons, showed no mercy. Somehow I sat through it and the television screen remained intact.

It was as appalling as it was galling to see one of Geelong's favourite sons, Steve Johnson, lairising his way to seven goals, while more conventional play saw Tom Hawkins and Cameron Mooney share in ten goals. The final margin of 186 points fell just four points short of the thrashing from Fitzroy in 1979, when, as Ray Biffin recalled, every member of the team had the worst game of his career. But that team had recovered to beat Essendon the following week, and Fitzroy at their next meeting. No redemption was on offer this time.

'The Demons have lost eight games, and seven have been by 41 points or more,' observed Rohan Connolly in the bleak aftermath.

When on talent you're good enough to have won another seven and drawn another, that's mental weakness at its most stark. Melbourne has loaded

Right: When The Age chose 'that awful photo' of Jan Dimmick to portray the ordinary fan's passion for their club, its staff had no idea just how right she was for the image, her father having played for the club in 1901. (Vince Caligiuri/The Age)



Below: Protest signs that had been smuggled into the MCG proliferated among the crowd as the date for a decision on the proposed merger with Hawthorn approached. (Joe Armao/The Age)



Right: The fight to merge Melbourne with Hawthorn featured mass propaganda mailouts. At top: an extract from a glossy brochure – complete with jumper design and team song – which was part of the AFL-supported push on behalf of both clubs.

Below: the front cover and an extract from the Demon Alternative's counter pamphlet.

Bottom: a letter sent on behalf of the Melbourne Football Club to members seeking to counter the Demon Alternative's case.

WHY HAWTHORN AND MELBOURNE SHOULD MERGE.

The Board of Directors of both football clubs recommend the merger. Here's why.

MELBOURNE HAWKS

...the Melbourne Cricket Club and approved by the Director of the Hawthorn Football Club. After the first year the Board of the Melbourne Hawks will require the Chairman from one of the clubs to resign to prevent the Melbourne Hawks with a 50-50 split ownership to merge. This is a major issue for financial security.

...The new club will have "open selection" to choose the best players from the complete list of the two clubs.

...The Melbourne Hawks will be a genuine combination of both clubs and the respective traditions and histories. It is not a subsumption of one club by the other.

19

Home and Away and Trips

merge [mɜːʒ] *v/t* and *t* become completely absorbed (into); lose identity; absorb, swallow up; fade or vanish (into) very gradually; (comm) combine (companies) under one head.

(The Penguin English Dictionary)

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(The Penguin English Dictionary)

To save the Demons from merging you must **VOTE NO** in person on 16 September, or by **IMMEDIATELY** completing and mailing the proxy form enclosed.

If your proxy arrives after last mail Friday 13 September YOUR VOTE WILL NOT COUNT.

"I can't believe how easily Melbourne has rolled over on the merger issue."

- Mike Sheahan, The Herald-Sun

"...The Hawthorn Football Club may well be in immediate danger of joining Fitzroy but Melbourne is not. Not in Ridley's hands and certainly not in Gutnick's..."

It (Gutnick's pledge) buys time. Lots of it. No need to merge this month, next year or even five down the track.

The Melbourne Football Club has been handed a peace plan but is too pig-headed and proud to see it.

One section of the club says to ensure it can win games quickly...it must sell its tradition and take over Hawthorn's player list.

The other section of the Melbourne FC argues that it has money, ...competent people to run the club and has a proud tradition. It will take a lot of hard work, clever recruiting and player management but Melbourne can be a power again in its own right.

To an outsider it is simple - accept Gutnick's money and support, encourage others to join and **fight like you have never fought before.**

Anything else is an easy, soft option...

- Patrick Smith, The Age, 3.9.96
(our emphasis added)

"The Melbourne board says a merger will safeguard the long-term future of Melbourne...and it is obsessed with signing up 20,000 members a year. But there is no guarantee a composite team will attract that many members..."

The irony of all this is that Melbourne does not seem to have to merge."

- Neil Roberts, The Herald-Sun

Melbourne Football Club
ACN 005 696 902

26 Jollimore Terrace
PO Box 254, East Melbourne
Phone: (03) 9592 9999
Fax: (03) 9592 9999

September 10, 1996

Dear Member

Look to the future!

In a week when coach Neil Balme, leading players Garry Lyon, Jim Stynes and Todd Viney have thrown their weight behind the Board, the attitude of the Demon Alternative to you, the members, and our Club has disappointed us.

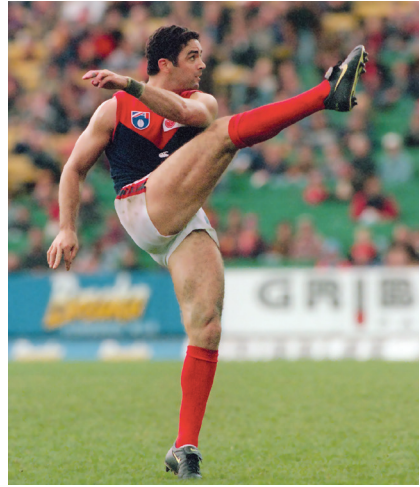
Let us address the inaccuracies they are currently promoting.

Telemarketing

When approaching our members by telephone, the Demon Alternative have said that two of our Directors are 'weakening' in their stance over the merger. Absolutely untrue.

Foundation

Joseph Gutnick's pledge to establish a special foundation has already been queried by the Australian Taxation Office and criticised as 'non-operational' by leading accountants.

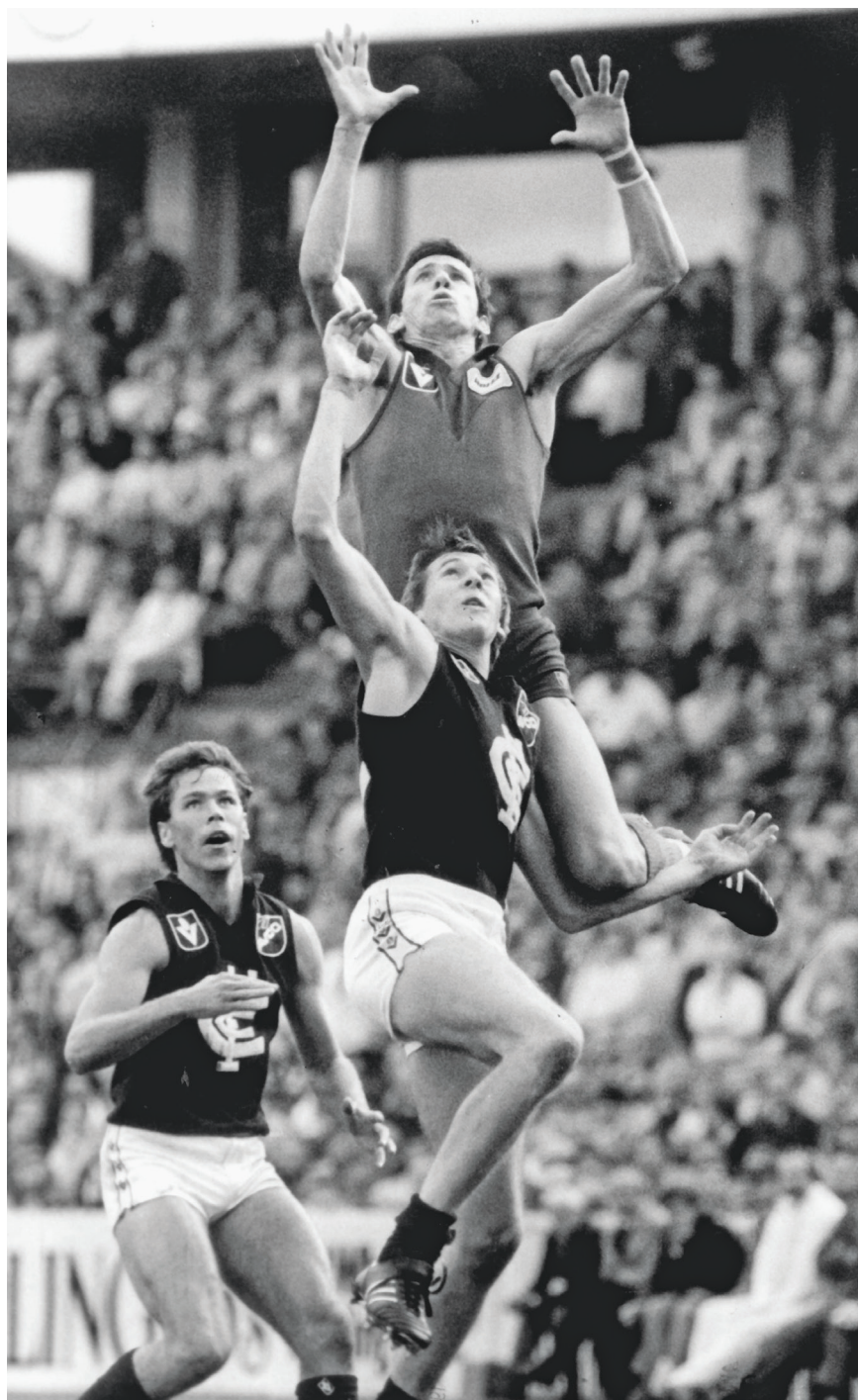


Above: Garry Lyon – the ‘Lion Heart of Melbourne’ – was the only player from the Goulburn Valley zone to gain selection in the Demons’ Team of the Century.

Left: Before the knee injuries: David Schwarz soars to one of his sixteen marks during Melbourne’s 1994 Round 10 demolition of St Kilda which ended in a seventy-four point win. Garry Lyon watches on while Chris Sullivan (4) scouts for crumbs that didn’t come. (*The Sunday Age*)

Below: Brian Wilson (7) and David Williams (15) obscure Robert Flower kicking for goal in my attempt to capture Flower in what could have been his last game at the Western Oval, final round, 1987. (Ian Munro)





As much as he was admired for his agility, his skills by hand and foot and his ability to read the play, Robert Flower was also a superb aerialist, as this leap over Carlton's David Glascott in Round 7 of 1984 demonstrates. (Newspix)



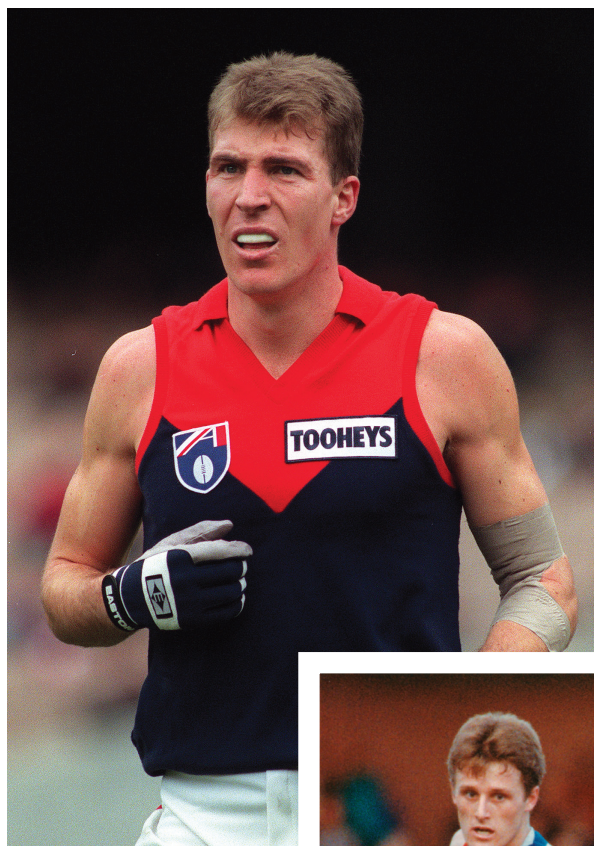
Above: In 1987 John Northy (bottom) led the team to its first finals series in twenty-three years, then to its first Grand Final appearance in 1988. Steven O'Dwyer (top) won the club best and fairest in the same year but was controversially suspended for the Grand Final. (Illustration: Grant Nelson)



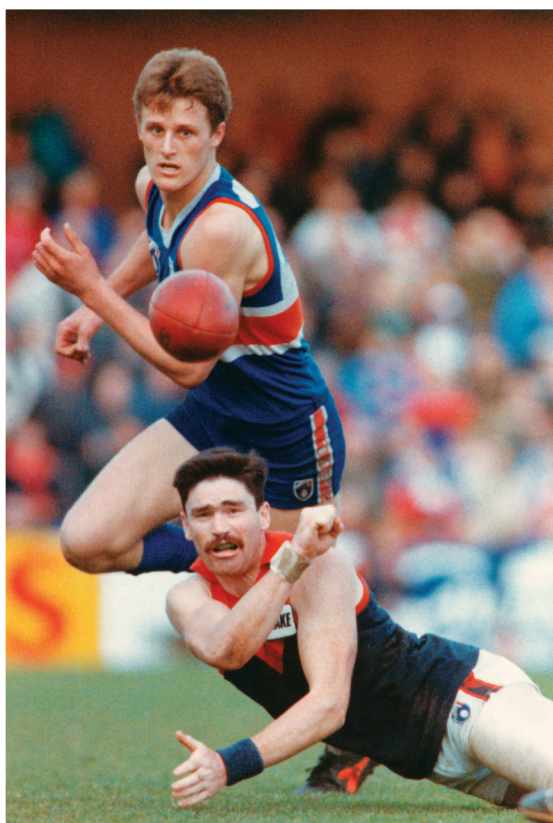
Right: Queen's Birthday 2000 and it was all coming together for Russell Robertson: the high kick forward, the perfect ride on an obliging opponent ... until Jeff Farmer snatched away the mark to register one of his nine second-half goals. (The Age)

Below: David Neitz embraces Neale Daniher after his final game as coach, a 2- point loss to Essendon. At left is Brad Green who will later captain the club. Behind Neitz at right are Daniel Ward and Matthew Bate. (Newspix)





Left: Jim Stynes recovered from a rookie blunder in the 1987 preliminary final to become a Brownlow Medallist, four-time club best and fairest, two-time All-Australian and a member of Melbourne's Team of the Century. He capped a fine playing career by becoming a leader off-field as well, taking on the presidency of the club. Following his death in 2012, he was honored with a State Funeral. (Sebastian Costanzo/The Age)



Right: Another pioneer of the 'Irish Experiment', Sean Wight was a fearless and versatile defender who was decisively moved forward for the second half of the 1988 elimination final. He played 150 games for the club and later served as a director of the club. Tragically, he too was stricken with cancer and died in 2011, aged forty-seven. (The Age)

Left: Four-time premiership player Clyde Laidlaw with a treasured memento: The Argus's account of Melbourne's 1956 premiership. Journalist Percy Taylor wrote that 'All this season Melbourne's "brains trust" has been saying it would be "just a shame" what would happen to the opposition if all eighteen players found form on the same day ... and the Demons picked the grand final for such a day. And what happened to Collingwood was really "just a shame"'. The 1956 Grand Final winning margin of seventy-three points remained a club record until the final kick of the 2021 Grand Final. (Ian Munro)



Right: Harry Laumets was one of the few east coast Melbourne fans able to attend the game in Perth, in his case after quarantining in Tasmania for sixteen days. He began supporting Melbourne after seeing them against the Bulldogs at the Western Oval in 1963, later joining the cheer squad. He is pictured at the final siren of the Grand Final. (Picture supplied)

BREAKING THE DROUGHT...



Back row (left to right):

James Harmes, Harrison Petty, Ben Brown, Tom McDonald, Jake Lever, Luke Jackson, Michael Hibberd, Bayley Fritsch, Christian Petracca, Steven May, Christian Salem, Clayton Oliver.

Front row (left to right):

Ed Langdon, Angus Brayshaw, Alex Neal-Bullen, Kysaiah Pickett, Trent Rivers, Simon Goodwin, Max Gawn, Jack Viney, Jake Bowey, Tom Sparrow, James Jordon, Charlie Spargo.

(Michael Willson/AFL Photos)

2021 AFL PREMIERSHIP

Saturday, 25 September, Optus Stadium, Perth

MELBOURNE	4.5 (29)	5.9 (39)	12.11 (83)	21.14 (140)
WESTERN BULLDOGS	1.2 (8)	7.5 (47)	9.5 (59)	10.6 (66)

Goals: Fritsch 6, Brown 3, McDonald 2, Petracca 2, Brayshaw, Jackson, Langdon, Neal-Bullen, Oliver, Salem, Spargo, Sparrow.

Best: Petracca, Fritsch, Oliver, Salem, Brayshaw, Langdon, Viney, Jackson.

Norm Smith Medal: Petracca 15 votes
Fritsch 10 votes
Oliver 3 votes
Salem 1 vote
Daniel 1 vote

up on talented kids for years now. But it's been a little too enthusiastic in jettisoning the older hands, and not mindful enough of the need to supplement spindly, albeit talented novices with some plain old physical muscle and a decent dollop of aggressive pride.¹⁶

Bailey was sacked the following Monday, having told Brad Green after the game, 'I think I'm cactus.' After all, it was, as another journalist noted, a defeat of nuclear proportions. Stephen Rielly wrote that Bailey was sacked because his teams had won twenty-two of eighty-three matches; because the average four-goal losing margin of 2010 had in 2011 blown out to eleven goals; and because the group lacked 'a warrior culture'.¹⁷

Overshadowing the board's role – overshadowing everything – was the fact that Jim Stynes had been diagnosed with cancer in June 2009 and was gravely ill. His illness was a massive setback to his ambition of remaking the club, yet he persisted. He fought a brave and very public battle, while the presidency gave him purpose and genuine enjoyment in the face of his illness.¹⁸ The foundation heroes dinner became an annual event, wiping out the club's debt. He also oversaw Melbourne's takeover of the Bentleigh Club, an initiative begun by Gutnick. His regular appearances among the cheer squad at matches were symbolic of his push to inspire and unite the club.

According to McLardy, the board's capacity to resolve conflict within the football department was compromised by the personal relationships involved. He says Stynes' debilitating illness diminished his ability to force change. It was an enduring issue as Stynes resolutely explored every option for his recovery, including chemotherapy, surgical interventions for the removal of more than twenty tumours, and novel treatments such as coffee enemas. His was an odyssey of courage and resilience lasting almost three years.

But that big issue 'Cameron and Chris versus Dean Bailey' persisted, McLardy said. 'We were aware of that [conflict] at the time. That was the major issue, but again Jim is close to both of those people. Jim is sick and not able to have the impact he might have. It became a very messy situation. We were hoping it would work out. It didn't. In hindsight...from a board perspective we probably should have forced the hand there, yes.'

Before the crunch came at Geelong, Stynes had been prepared to let Schwab go. He was concerned that Schwab had ignored a request to resolve problems within the football department, or at least to recommend changes. But once the decision was made to sack Bailey, he decided that

to farewell the coach and chief executive simultaneously would only confirm that the club was imploding.¹⁹

At a press conference to announce his sacking, Bailey said he had the support of the players, but did not mention either Connolly or Schwab. In comments seen as orchestrating losses for the benefit of high draft picks – that is, tanking – Bailey said: ‘I had no hesitation at all in the first two years of ensuring this club was well placed for draft picks. I was asked to do the best thing by the Melbourne Football Club and I did it ... I put players in different positions to enable them [to develop] ... I think the whole football club agreed we wanted to develop our players so we did.’²⁰

An AFL investigation was triggered two years later, when Brock McLean said he left Melbourne because the club was tanking. That investigation exposed the depth of conflict within the football department and centred on events in mid-season 2009. McLean later told the investigators that, ‘for me, the issue was players being played out of position. You know they were told it was for their development and stuff like that, but for me that just never gave us the best chance of winning a game of footy which didn’t really sit well with me.’²¹

On the Monday after the surprise win over Port Adelaide in 2009 that prompted his comment that Stynes had fallen out of his hospital bed, Connolly interrupted a coaches’ meeting in a space known as ‘The Vault’. Bailey told AFL investigators that Connolly wrote the names ‘Scully’ and ‘Tregove’ on a whiteboard and ‘erupted’. While he was given no clear direction to lose games, Bailey said he understood that if the club did not qualify for a priority pick, he would lose his job despite being contracted for 2010.

‘Sometimes Chris has a joke and a laugh but he was not in a joking mood that day,’ Bailey said. ‘We just thought “F—ing hell, is he serious?”’²²

An assistant coach described Bailey as distancing himself from Connolly’s remarks, shaking his head and, once Connolly had left, telling the group not to worry about what was said.²³

‘I had accepted the fact that if we won the games I would get sacked,’ Bailey said, ‘so I thought I will move [players] around. If we win the game terrific, and if we don’t then development was always the base we were going to go. I was threatened, yeah, I didn’t like it, I think it was a terrible thing to be bullying and harassing not only me but the rest of the staff, absolutely.’²⁴

In 2010, on Bailey's account, Connolly rounded on him again during a talk about support for the coaches. Referring to the draft picks, he supposedly said: "You f—ed it up, you reckon you know everything and you're f—ing no good" ... he knew I was very much against what he wanted me to do, and for some unknown reason he wanted the kudos, he wanted to be the one to do it,' Bailey said.

In their interviews with the AFL investigators, Schwab and Connolly denied threatening Bailey. Connolly said he did not remember a meeting in which he turned on Bailey, telling him 'he f—ed it up'. Instead, he said Bailey was gunning for him. 'Dean Bailey in the end, tried to get me sacked from Melbourne Football Club. Dean Bailey went to the board and said that I've got to be moved on as manager. There was leaks going to the media left, right and centre. I was getting lined up full time and Dean was heavily involved in that.'²⁵

Ultimately, the AFL suspended Connolly for twelve months and suspended Bailey, by then an assistant coach at Port Adelaide, for sixteen matches. Officially, the suspensions were for acting in a manner prejudicial to the game's integrity. Bailey's punishment related to resting players and playing them out of position. Connolly's offence related to his comments during the 'Vault' meeting. Melbourne was fined \$500,000 because it employed and was responsible for the pair. The club was cleared of deliberately losing matches – but by then that pride I had felt in 2008 seemed badly misplaced.²⁶

Four AFL clubs were looking for a new coach when a crisis-struck Melbourne set out to find Bailey's replacement. Nothing brings home the impotence of the ordinary supporter so much as times like this. The club is broken, and all that remains is to lock on and hope the people in charge know what they are doing.

A panel led by Garry Lyon explored the coaching landscape and settled on a Collingwood assistant coach, Mark Neeld. He came strongly endorsed by the Pies' senior coach, Mick Malthouse, who had taken Collingwood to the premiership twelve months earlier. Neeld had had an undistinguished playing career at Geelong and Richmond, but ordinary players who had to work at their game often made fine coaches. Neeld had for a time been Malthouse's defensive assistant coach, specialising in the precise attribute the footy heads said was Melbourne's biggest failing.

But it was a rushed decision. Neeld was appointed just days after his first serious interview. He told Lyon he would coach either Adelaide or

the Demons, whoever offered him the gig first.²⁷

But according to the ‘inside story’ on Adelaide’s coaching decision, Neeld was not in the running for the Adelaide job: the Crows had rejected Neeld when he was but one of four on their shortlist. Neeld reportedly rang Crows’ boss Steven Trigg claiming to have been offered the Melbourne job. ‘The tone of the call was obvious. Were the Crows prepared to offer Neeld their job? Adelaide passed on Neeld,’ wrote journalist Michelangelo Rucci. The Crows wanted their former player Brenton Sanderson for the role.²⁸ Later, Melbourne supporters would ask: were we spooked into a hasty decision?

Cancer took Jim Stynes at the onset of the season, in March 2012. He had stepped down as president weeks earlier. He was honoured with a memorial service in Dublin and a state funeral in Melbourne. Mourners filled St Paul’s Cathedral to capacity, and thousands more occupied Federation Square. Don McLardy had already succeeded him as president and would bear the burden of what came next.

Under Neeld, the club sank to its lowest ebb. He tried to implement the defensive game employed at Collingwood, working the ball along the boundary, kicking for distance to each new contest. Perhaps it was too alien to the attacking game Bailey had been developing, or perhaps it undermined the players’ confidence so they could not play a natural game; whatever the cause, it was a rank failure. Whenever a team becomes a chronic failure, the first question asked is whether the coach has ‘lost the players’. Neeld never had them.

Neeld’s approach to the players was harsh. Possibly he was working on Newton’s third law of motion: that for every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. But if he anticipated defiance, it had the opposite effect.

Russell Robertson was still close to the playing group and recalls that there was little good said of the new coach. ‘He came in extremely heavy-handed, and young players today don’t respond well to that,’ he observes. ‘He thought, “From the outside looking in, Melbourne are soft, so I need to make them hard.” So he came in and brutalised them with words and truths, and the players just said, “This guy doesn’t get me, hates me” – and how’s any player going to play well under that? That’s the MO, but the players would look at him and say, “What’s your motive? Just to tell me I am a weak ‘c’?” Because that’s what he would do.’

Controversially, Neeld appointed two of the youngest players, Jack Grimes, twenty-two, and Jack Trengove, twenty, as joint captains. The

form of both appeared to suffer. In 2012 the side won just four games, all but one of which were against the new franchise clubs, the Giants – now with Tom Scully on board – and the Gold Coast Suns.

At the end of the year, a senior player exodus occurred. Brad Green, best and fairest in 2010 and captain in 2011, retired. Brent Moloney, who had won the best and fairest in 2011, transferred to Brisbane.

‘Whenever I talk about my career it always comes back to Neeld,’ Moloney remembers. ‘The first time I met him was the 2011 best and fairest night. We are in a room together. I tried to have a yarn; he gave me nothing. I was, “Okay, a bit strange.” He came in with this Collingwood game style. He could not build relationships with people, and that’s what the game and coaching is about, building relationships with players and players believing in the coach. I never wanted to leave the Melbourne footy club, but I couldn’t stay. I knew he wouldn’t last, but I couldn’t go through one more preseason with him.’

Cale Morton found that his reluctance to play a defensive role did not fit with Neeld’s expectations. Neeld did not soften the message or try to win over the players.

‘Dean Bailey was a huge fan of mine,’ Morton recalled in 2020, ‘and to this day one of the best coaches I have ever had, because he believed in me and he acknowledged, yep, that everybody’s got their strengths, but we do all have weaknesses as well. Whereas Mark Neeld and a couple of other average coaches, they focus on your weaknesses.’

‘When Neeld took over, if it wasn’t on my first day it would have been the first week he was there. He called Wattys, myself, individually into his office and said, “Look, I don’t rate ya. I just don’t think that you’re a good player.” It’s a rough start coming off playing forty games in your first two years and then sort of going, “You know what, this guy doesn’t like me and I’ve got to put up with it.”’²⁹

Every day at the club was uncomfortable and threatened confrontation, Morton recalled. It was not an atmosphere conducive to developing young players. As it was for Moloney, 2012 was Morton’s last season with the club.

Jared Rivers left as a free agent. By the end of Neeld’s first year in charge, he felt unwanted in red and blue. ‘First impression, he came in with, I think, the wrong approach, to be honest,’ he remembers. ‘All us senior players were stood down. From that we felt we had no confidence from a new coach coming in.’

Rivers said Neeld later changed his approach, but the damage was done. 'It was just a time in my career I did not feel valued as a senior player. I got offered a contract at Melbourne and I wanted an extra year and they wouldn't give it to me. Geelong came to the table, and you see a successful team and they want your services, that makes you feel valued and you get that confidence back. I was still chasing to win a premiership and to play finals footy, which I hadn't done for a while. Clearly a tough decision – ten years at the club – but I felt it was the right one for me.'

Aaron Davey was another senior player who did not enjoy the change, but played through 2013. He says he and Neeld simply had different views about where the club was going.

'There's probably not too much to talk about,' he admits. 'It was a tough last three years. After Bails left, there were a couple of years I didn't enjoy our football club due to personnel, but I learned from those experiences and I am coaching a footy club up here [in Cairns] and ... I've made it pretty clear here, I am the coach and the administration, as long as we all play our roles the club goes forward. And that wasn't the case there. It became about individuals.'

Among the younger players, Jordie McKenzie said he had a good relationship with Neeld, and he enjoyed the 'gruelling preseasons' but for all Neeld's hard work, the team built no momentum in a challenging season and a half.

Fans dropped off too. People who had ridden out the disappointing grind of the post-Norm Smith era, through the unrewarding 1970s and the failure of Barassi's return, who had gritted their teeth through the disappointments of near things under Northey and Daniher, and who had remained stoic during the Dean Bailey rebuild – finally many had had enough.

'That was the biggest struggle, those years,' says Sue Springfield. 'They were really bad times, worse than the seventies.'

Another cheer squad veteran agrees. 'I started not going to games,' Harry Laumets says. 'People were horrified I wasn't going. Whenever a new coach came along, I was right behind them. But I stopped going to games because it was not doing me any good at all personally. I had been there at Waverley when we got thrashed by Fitzroy. I sat through it all. I just saw no light at the end of the tunnel.'

During this long winter, one weekend morning I encountered a work colleague, an Englishman committed to soccer, who despite several decades in Melbourne has not acquired a strong Australian Rules

attachment. Liverpool and Wimbledon are his teams. But you did not need to follow the game much to know how poorly the Demons were faring. He asked what I was up to, and for all his lack of interest in the AFL, once I told him I was going to the football he did not ask who we were playing. Instead, he quipped: ‘Who’s beating Melbourne today?’

For the record, it was St Kilda, by thirty-five points.

When we connect through a Zoom interview during Melbourne’s coronavirus lockdown, I ask Don McLardy whether Neeld’s riding instructions were to toughen up the players like a drill sergeant.

‘No, I wouldn’t say that,’ McLardy replies. ‘It was his approach. He certainly wasn’t told to be like that. He came to us with “this is the game style I want to play”, which was endorsed. That was fine, but the unwritten thing is you’ve got to be able to take your players with you. They had to believe in what you’re saying and believe in the journey. That’s something you’ve got to hope the coach can do, and that’s where he fell down.

‘I think if he had his time again, he’d approach it a whole different way. I think he’d try to win them over first, rather than ... you almost got the impression he was saying, “You guys have to prove yourselves to me before I am going to accept you”, and I don’t think that was the right way to do it.’

Neeld’s second season in charge began disastrously: a 148-point defeat to Essendon in the second round came after a twelve-goal loss to Port Adelaide. Cameron Schwab resigned as chief executive and was followed by McLardy a couple of months later, along with Neeld, who was sacked when the team was anchored to the bottom with just one win from eleven games.

The ambitious project Jim Stynes and Don McLardy had launched to revive the club, a full club rebuild, had foundered. The debt was gone, but so was much goodwill. And the strategy of reviving the list through bottoming out and gathering multiple high draft picks was fool’s gold.

‘There’s absolutely no doubt that the system was a bad set-up,’ Robertson says, ‘the best thing that ever happened to playing to lose was we have shown that it didn’t work, doesn’t work.’

Sydney premiership coach Paul Roos, who was brought in as coach to rescue the club, conceded that ‘the carrot was there and we all know that teams were playing for ladder positions in reverse order’. Roos admitted to thinking, along with half the footy world, that it was good management. But he added that Melbourne’s example meant it was unlikely to happen again. ‘The positive is where we are as a club now is that other clubs will

look and say “Is the risk worth it to teach your team to lose?”³⁰

Dean Bailey died in 2014. Cameron Schwab would not comment on Bailey’s time as coach, because his untimely death left him unable to speak for himself. But Schwab does defend the Stynes/McLardy club rebuild.

‘Jim’s health had a major impact,’ Schwab says. ‘One thing you want always to have as an organisation is a line of leadership, and despite a lot of really good intent that became vague. It was major. And also a lot of the reason people got back involved with the club was because they were excited by the prospect of Jim’s leadership. And it happens very early: he gets sick six months in. He was the only reason I came back into it. Really, there was this sense of obligation among people who the Melbourne Football Club had been very good to, and that’s despite that I had a challenging period as well.

‘It’s going to be seen as a not successful period, but financially we rebuilt the organisation. The club ended up with a really good asset base. Women’s football came out of that period. Foundation Heroes was really powerful.’

Schwab adds that many of the football department appointments made during the rebuild were lasting: Todd Viney as list manager; Jason Taylor as recruiter; David Misson as fitness coach; Josh Mahoney, who became football manager; Robert Jackson as weights coach. ‘The only thing we got wrong was the coach.’

Decades earlier, some of the game’s administrators had plotted to bring the Demons down by introducing Victorian country zoning. Our revenge was to become so bad, such a drain on the competition, that a new generation of administrators had to throw us a lifeline. The AFL installed respected former Essendon chief executive Peter Jackson at Melbourne. He set about recruiting the club’s next coach by laying siege to Roos.

Todd Viney, who had returned to the football department during Dean Bailey’s tenure, said the club’s fundamental mistake was to lose its identity, its sense of how it wanted to play the game. Bailey’s emphasis was on players with pace who could kick well.

‘It was all about offence. That’s one part of the game, but to be really good you have to be good in all three phases,’ Viney says. ‘If you don’t have a master plan in place, you lose continuity in building a list and building a style. We didn’t know who we were or what we stood for, and

Mark [Neeld] was trying to coach a completely different way to the way Dean had coached, and then you get this in-between brand of footy that no one really understands, and we haven't got the players to execute.

'We have flip-flopped. If you try to build a list for Dean Bailey and the next coach says, "These are shit players, I want players who can do this, none of [what you've done] is important," then for four or five years that's been a waste of time. Trying to develop a game plan takes a period of time.'

Following Neeld's sacking, there was a reckoning, Viney says. He draws a parallel with South American soccer clubs, which would never appoint a German coach. The Latin American game was attacking, inspired, free-flowing, whereas German soccer was controlled, predictable and disciplined. A club needs a sense of how it wants to play the game.

'We looked at the best sporting clubs in the land and what do they have ... a really solid belief in who they are, what their product is, and continuity of good people over time so they can execute a plan,' he explains. 'We have had too much change in too many positions. We have not had enough continuity with key people. You have to have a DNA. You have to understand who you are. How you want to be perceived. What type of culture you want to have. It needs to be indoctrinated over a period of time.'

'You have to have a sense of how you want to play ... then put people in place to be able to continue that when people move on.'

Chapter Fifteen

Revival

I just want to be treated like a human being.

Jack Watts

As if to confirm that Melbourne had cut too deeply into its senior corps, Paul Roos' initial moves as coach included recruiting discarded Bulldogs veteran Daniel Cross and Adelaide's Bernie Vince for the 2014 season. Cross had more than 200 games to his name, and was regarded as an elite athlete who would show the young Demons how to train. Vince was an accomplished player and the sort of larrikin that brings fun to a club. Both had won best and fairest awards at their previous clubs.

Vince was special guest at an event for diehard supporters at the end of 2014, 'Roosy's Pie Night', at the Duke of Wellington Hotel. Quizzed by Russell Robertson on how he was adapting to life with Melbourne, Vince offered: 'The town's alright ... but I don't like losing.'

It was irreverent, undiplomatic and funny. He had softened the punchline with a boyish grin, and it broke up the audience, but still it reflected an unvarnished truth.

Roos' first year in charge had delivered just four wins from twenty-two matches. The coach's mantra that year had been about remembering where the team was coming from. Its record in 2013 had been two wins and a percentage of 54, which indicated that opposition teams had, on average, almost doubled Melbourne's scores. In Roos' first year, the percentage lifted to 68 per cent.

That Roos was at Melbourne was almost entirely due to Peter Jackson's persistence. Several telephone calls between the pair confirmed Jackson's interest, but it was when Roos emerged from a regular appearance on Fox Footy's *On the Couch* to find Jackson waiting for him in the foyer that he understood the Melbourne CEO's determination.

'We did speak a lot during the year,' Roos recalls. 'To be honest, I just enjoyed the conversations with Peter. We talked about footy and values

and culture, those sorts of things. It was a long process. Some were “will you do the job?”, others were just conversations. When he was in the foyer he said he really wanted the club to be successful.’

Before Roos agreed to the role, he sounded out David Misson, who had worked alongside Roos during the Swans’ Grand Final seasons of 2005 and 2006, and who had been at Melbourne the previous two seasons. Misson told Roos that the team’s performances were down to disunity, negativity and a chronic lack of belief.¹

Roos also spoke to the senior players, virtually interviewing them before deciding whether to coach them. He was impressed with their willingness to improve. The players acknowledged their role in the club’s plight, but Roos was surprised by the extent to which the players were hurting.

At one point, Jack Watts spoke up. He said: ‘Roosy, I just want to be treated like a human being.’ His words stunned Roos, who said it was something he never expected to hear from a player. He decided the players needed ‘more nurturing and less negativity’.²

‘We were really starting to talk about who took ownership and what was happening, we were getting very specific about who was taking responsibility, and it was pretty confronting when he said I just want to be treated like a human being. Wow!’ Roos remembers. ‘And it was a semi-common theme. You could tell the players were a little beaten down. Really disappointed in their own performances but also ... they felt like the club had let them down in some way, shape or form.’

Roos’ defensive style, which had famously drawn Andrew Demetriou’s ire, underpinned his approach at Melbourne. Training concentrated on winning contests and running to assist teammates. The basic, unglamorous things that relied on effort and commitment – such as tackling and chasing – would be the cornerstone of his team’s approach.

Roos’ first recruiting focus was competitive midfielders who could win their own ball and create more scoring opportunities, as well as push back to support their defenders. Fundamentally, the team needed to learn how to defend, and how to stop the opposition from scoring. The facts that most concerned him were that the team was routinely well beaten for contested possessions and for entries into the forward fifty-metre zone.³

‘Ours is one of the few games in the world where it pretty much goes from contest to contest,’ he says. ‘Even rugby and rugby union, as physical as they are, you either have the ball or you don’t have the ball.’

In Australian Rules it's in dispute a lot, so your ability to win one-on-one contests – we talked about that a lot.' And defence, he adds, is a mentality. Not everyone can kick like Lance Franklin, but anyone can chase, smother and spoil.

'We did defensive transition drills, pick up your man as quickly as you can, don't be lazy from stoppages, run your first five or ten metres as hard as you can, and cover a man because if you don't you are going to run 100 metres because you'll chase them anyway, so you might as well run hard for the first five or ten.'

The players were fit, and included some elite runners, but the problem Roos found was that they had not been taught how to run in a game.

He could not have been more explicit in faulting the approach Melbourne had taken to its rebuild in the years before his arrival. He contrasted it with how players had been groomed for the game during his time at Sydney. There, he had made young players earn their first game by doing in the reserves the fundamentals of accountable football that would be expected in the seniors.

'It's a ridiculous notion to think you can just play your kids and they're going to be good,' he says. '[As a young player] at Fitzroy, I was made to earn my spot. At Sydney, no one was ever given a game of footy just because you were a talent. The system we created at Sydney was dramatically different to what was at Melbourne.'

Like Roos, Vince looked before he leapt. He had one year left on his contract at Adelaide. Todd Viney, who had been the Crows' midfield coach in 2009–10, approached him at the end of 2013 with an offer to return primarily to midfield duties with Melbourne. The Demons held out a four-year contract.

'I was down to about 30 per cent to 40 per cent time in the midfield, and playing half-forward, and Todd had noted that,' Vince recalls. 'I was...starting half-forward and coming into the midfield after that, and I probably needed a new challenge. Adelaide were looking to get back into the draft. They'd lost their first two draft picks for two years, which was pretty major. They threw a few names around and my name got a pick they were pretty comfortable with getting for me, and Melbourne was looking for players like myself. It worked well both ways.'

But before he committed, Vince examined the playing list and selected what he thought was the best potential side, regardless of injury. He was left wondering why the team had performed so badly.

Playing for Roos was another factor. ‘Roosy coaching was a big part of it,’ he notes. ‘The club did not sell that, like “Roosy’s gunna be this saviour”. It was more I felt like the club was under-achieving for what it had. And there was a lot of change at the club. He overhauled the list.

‘When I arrived, [his coaching] was all about the competitive side, all about the contest, which I loved. I love coaches coaching from the contest out. In the end, he drafted players to the club that love the contest. I know you need to get a blend of types and Melbourne have copped a bit for not having outside run, but when he first came we just needed competitors. I like that one-on-one style of football, and beat your opponent. He really valued players that were good at the hard ball.’

Of the flaws Misson saw in the list – disunity, negativity and a chronic lack of belief – it was the latter which Vince witnessed in his first year at the club. ‘It was almost like everyone was frightened to make a mistake when I got there. I have never been in that position. I always want the ball in my hands, I always want to make the final play. But when I first got there, especially early days, we had players that worried about making a mistake. Players in the end did not want the ball in their hands so they’d just give it to someone else, and it was always to someone who had been around for a while, but it wasn’t best for the team.’

Vince was impressed by the players’ fitness and running ability. But only on the training track. More than a few on the list could run a sub-ten-minute three-kilometre time trial, and their repeat running ‘cone to cone’ was elite. ‘They would run when they were told to run,’ Vince said. ‘[But] the GPS numbers were down in games compared to capacity.’

Daniel Cross, too, was struck by the running ability and physical strength of the players, but they seemed not to know how to use these attributes. Cross had been cut from the Bulldogs’ list in the same way Melbourne had slashed into its experienced players years earlier, but he knew he had more to give the game. As he put it, he was recruited to ‘help stamp a new culture in the place’.

‘I would always win the time trials and the longer running at Footscray, but at Melbourne there were three or four of them that absolutely blew me away,’ he recalls. ‘Across the board they were a really fit group. The other thing that struck me was when training finished, no one hung around to grab a coach to do extra work on their technical skills. The whistle would go and everyone would walk off, whereas I would love to spend an extra twenty or thirty minutes with a coach on an area I wanted to improve

on. That struck me – that they were really fit but I wasn't sure they were working hard in the right areas.'

Cross also proved a role model on the field, in real time. Another midfielder, the GWS Giants' Dom Tyson, added to the rebuild, while Melbourne drafted yet another 'small', the highly skilled Christian Salem. Exchanging high draft picks for Tyson was an example of the club forgoing an unknown quantity in the draft and gaining an experienced player who could fill an immediate need.

The effect of Roos' coaching was soon evident, Cross says, when the team won its first preseason game, then challenged the strong Geelong outfit in another, only to be hammered by Hawthorn before the season proper began. Roos took the opportunity to thank Hawthorn coach Alastair Clarkson for showing the players how far they had to go.

The disparity between running capacity and running performance showed up in just the second game under Roos. A first round respectable seventeen-point loss to St Kilda was exposed as a false dawn as the Eagles ran riot on the MCG in Round 2, thumping the Demons by ninety-three points. Cross had run fifteen kilometres during the game, much further than any of his younger teammates.⁴ Underlying that lack of run was a fragile confidence.

But despite this inconsistency, Cross says, there were patches of real improvement.

'We beat Carlton in Round 4, Richmond in Round 7. That's the thing with struggling sides, there's always inconsistency, but there were patches where we were starting to show progress,' Cross says, 'but we let ourselves down for a quarter, or a quarter and a half, and that was the difference in the game. But almost straightaway he had a strong presence on how we were performing.'

The example to the other players offered by Vince, Cross and Tyson was that they would need to run harder for longer, and with purpose. Roos reckoned his players were giving their opponents too much latitude, hoping that would leave them free to attack, should their opponent turn the ball over. If a turnover did not eventuate, they would have to run harder to make up ground on their opponent. They needed to learn that if they ran hard initially, maintaining pressure on the opposition, their opponents were less likely to win the ball in the first place.⁵

The thrashing at the hands of West Coast was the single uncompetitive performance in the first half of 2014. After twelve games, Melbourne had

four wins by an average of eleven points, and eight losses by an average of five goals. True, two of the wins were steals aided by the opposition kicking inaccurately, and two were by less than a goal, but there was clear improvement.

The second half of the season, however, was a step back. The team lost its last ten games – four of them by more than ten goals – and only two losses were close finishes. As the losses mounted, Roos stressed that change would come if the players applied their lessons. They were told to disregard the scoreboard and concentrate on their role.⁶ It was a variation on a message Daniher had used, which was for the players to ‘live in the moment’.

It was this lame finish that caused supporters to forgive Vince his pie night jibe about a dislike of losing. ‘In crunch times in games we did not have enough players that stood up and really wanted to win, didn’t really know how to win,’ Vince recalls. ‘Sometimes you want the moment to come to you. We had a few players who really worried about losing it rather than going and winning it. It was not a lack of wanting to win, but it didn’t feel like a habit to win. It’s easier to go out there and lose rather than to put yourself in a winning position. We found it tough in my first year. We were in a winning position a fair bit, we just didn’t take our opportunities at the crunch moment.’

‘It was almost like some were happy just to go okay as a group. Roosy’s not from that background and neither am I. It was not everyone, but if you just have one in the side that hurts you.’

The club continued its midfield rebuild at the end of Roos’ first season in charge, drafting Christian Petracca with pick two and Angus Brayshaw with pick three, which was compensation for the loss of full-back and 2010 All-Australian James Frawley to Hawthorn. The bolstering of the midfield continued with the drafting of tagger Alex Neal-Bullen and Billy Stretch, the son of the dashing Northey-era wingman Steven Stretch.

Roos had agreed to coach Melbourne on condition that he could bring in his own choice of assistant coaches, and on condition that there was a clear succession plan, since he was signing on for three years only. Roos’ plan was for a senior assistant to be groomed to take over his role.

The first target as designated successor was former Port Adelaide and Hawthorn utility Stuart Dew, who turned down the offer, believing he was not yet ready. In late 2014, Melbourne announced that former Adelaide captain, dual premiership player and Essendon assistant coach

Simon Goodwin was the chosen one. In the meantime, he was responsible for ball movement and forward coaching.

*

Over the previous decade, Melbourne had acquired a new bogey team: the Saints. Years earlier, when the Demons were playing finals and the Saints were struggling, I had seen a man at the football with two young kids, maybe four and three, kitted out in red, black and white, and indulged in thinking what a harsh life that father was ushering his sons into. St Kilda, with one premiership to its name, did not even have Melbourne's comfort of history. Yet by the time Roos was in charge of the Demons, they had become a team Melbourne could not beat. Even when both finished at the bottom of the table in 2013 and 2014, Melbourne was the team the Saints could count on beating each year.

In fact, when they took the field at Docklands in June 2015, St Kilda's winning streak against Melbourne stretched all the way back to the elimination final in 2006. It proved a tight struggle: one point the Saints' way at quarter time, six points their way at the half; scores level at the last change. With maybe twenty seconds left to play, Jeremy Howe marked and kicked truly to put Melbourne four points in front.

In the stands, it seemed the long streak was about to end. The place was a cacophony, spectators alternately screaming or holding their breath. On field, the Melbourne midfielders were giving instructions to the emerging Demon ruckman Max Gawn: make sure the ball does not clear the next centre bounce. They would kill it, and go on killing it to soak up the remaining seconds.

Max had another idea. Winning the ruck, he punched the ball forward into open space, where St Kilda gained possession and made one last, desperate attack. It ended up in the hands of St Kilda veteran Leigh Montagna, but only after performing a wicked off-break to beat the grasp of Tom McDonald at full-back. Montagna was unmarked and goaled with only a few seconds left.

To my eyes, Gawn's hit into open space was decisive, but Cross remembers a more complicated finish.

'It wasn't just Max. There was a lot of us across the team responsible,' he says. 'I was on the bench at the time and our runner was out on the ground. They wanted to get a message to make sure we had a plus one down in the backline. The runner was out there and couldn't organise the plus one, so it was my job to go on the field and make sure we had the plus

one. So I organised that, and that was fine.

‘Then I saw on the wing they had a player spare, and I am thinking, “Why is he on his own?” So I sent one of the guys back. I think it was Viv Michie, and I ended up taking his man, but there was a whole heap of players in together and we ended up being an even number. That was one part of it. One of the forwards should have rolled down to the wing, instead of one of the defenders rolling up to grab him.

‘Jimmy Toumpas had done a really good job on Montagna for most of the day, but he took his eyes off the ball for a second and went to the wrong side of the contest and it fell into Montagna’s hands. As you said, Max hit it to the wrong side. It was a pretty frantic last minute.

‘Roosy let me know about it after the game. We had played really well. We should have won. It haunts me as well.’

The Saints’ streak continued, but some solace came the next week at Geelong, when the Demons lived up to their moniker to win by four goals at one of the toughest venues in the competition. It remains one of Cross’s fondest on-field memories of his time at Melbourne. Small forwards led the way: Jeff Garlett, having transferred from Carlton, kicked four goals, while Neal-Bullen in his second game booted three goals. Gawn, with forty-four hit-outs, eight marks and one goal, was supported by Jake Spencer, with twenty-five hit-outs and a goal.

‘That was an amazing win,’ says Cross. ‘It was Corey Enright’s 300th game and we were about 20 to 1. I think it was Max’s coming-out game. He absolutely dominated that day. We played like we were a finals team. We had control the entire game.’

Roos’ message was very simple, Vince remembers. Stop the opposition scoring and you don’t need to score so much. ‘It’s really basic, but it makes sense,’ he says. ‘We were keeping good teams to reasonably low scores but we were not scoring ourselves. Then, when we learned how to defend, that’s when we could implement a few things so that we would be able to score a bit better.

‘The number one thing we needed at the time was defence, and it showed: every now and then we would beat a really good team, which showed we were capable, but ... when we did win, people were very happy, but then we’d have a poor game the next week. They were like we had achieved something and the next week we’d let ourselves down.’

Jordie McKenzie remembers likewise. Roos did not reinvent the wheel. His message was to create a contest, be clean with the ball and

maintain pressure. A key phrase – the big one – was ‘win the ball or make the tackle’.

The team’s incremental improvement brought seven wins in 2015, and the following year, Roos’ last year, ten wins. Cross retired after two seasons with the Demons, but stayed as match-day runner and to assist with training.

‘The thing that really impressed me about Roosy, at no point did he ever try to make his coaching sexy,’ Cross recalls. ‘He kept it as simple as possible. It really was just stick to the basics of what he believed would win games, and that was whatever your role was on the day, he wanted you to smash that role – so if I was given a tagging job, it was to worry about winning that job, come off and help when you can, but make sure you win your battle.’

‘He was all about building a culture and building that up, and that was the reason he was brought in to start with. He did an amazing job in Sydney. I always remember at the Bulldogs there was this aura about Sydney, there was almost a love they had for each other and their jumper, and you could feel that when you played against Sydney. That’s what he wanted to bring to Melbourne, that strong culture, being a professional. It was very basic, very simple, just getting the ball forward and winning as many contests as you could.’

Jordie McKenzie’s time with the club ended as well. He was forced out after seventy-nine games by the newly strengthened midfield, but reflects fondly on his time.

‘In 2015 I played good VFL footy, but I could not break into the side,’ he says. ‘I was emergency a few times and played that one game. I don’t look back and think negatively and what could have been. I look back and think it was an amazing experience. I loved my time in the AFL. It was always a dream of mine. I mightn’t have been in the top thirty most talented blokes on the list, but I was always very grateful for being on the list and having had that opportunity.’

As match-day runner and part of the fitness and conditioning team for the next four seasons, Daniel Cross saw the transition from Roos to his protégé and successor, Simon Goodwin, at close quarters. Bernie Vince would eventually play 100 games for the Demons, and he says the transition was seamless.

‘When you have a coach come into a club, it takes a year to realise the basic daily habits you don’t see from the outside, like how they train,

before they know the players. For [Simon] to be there for two years, he knew everyone. He was involved in list changes and people coming into the club. He was part of the club. It was a really good position to be in.

‘When Roosy was there, he was more involved in ball movement and as a forward coach. He’s a really good reader of the game. Roosy, to me, in that last year [2016] was like a senior assistant overlooking in parts of the year. [Roos and Goodwin] had similar views on the game. They worked well together.’

Goodwin’s first season in charge began with observers trying to discern shifts in playing style, and with a pair of wins before a succession of losses Melbourne was tipped out of the top eight. But after sixteen rounds, a combined seven goals from Tom McDonald and Jeff Garlett saw a more accurate Melbourne sneak home against the Blues. Now finals seemed near certain. The Demons had nine wins and were in the eight, with the buffer of a game and percentage, and there were six matches to play.

A loss to top-placed Adelaide was no disgrace, especially once it was followed up by a win over Port Adelaide. The iceberg struck the following week. Playing second-bottom North Melbourne, the Demons should have been a certainty, but the Roos claimed only their fourth win of the year at a windswept Bellerive Oval by less than a goal.

A month later, the Demons were clinging to a place in the eight when they confronted Collingwood at the MCG. The Magpies were out of the race in thirteenth spot, with only malice and pride to play for. West Coast was the main threat to take Melbourne’s place, but they needed a win over Adelaide at Subiaco to do so. Adelaide, on top and assured of a home final, had little motivation.

Whether it was superstition or bitter experience, Melbourne supporters approached the game with trepidation. And since Collingwood jumped the start, scoring a succession of early goals, that view was justified. With each successive goal, the Magpie supporters around me roared louder, one in particular turning to scan the mute Melbourne fans around him. Gloating was a rare indulgence for the Pies that year.

Although Melbourne trailed by thirty-two points at the first change, an Essendon supporter beside me remarked, ‘You’ll be in front by half time.’ So it seemed, as Melbourne took charge in general play but failed to convert enough chances. In fact, the Demons outscored their opponents in each of the last three quarters without ever looking like winning.

Collingwood had their fun with a sixteen-point victory. Melbourne's future hung by a thread as they waited on the result of Adelaide and West Coast the next afternoon.

West Coast stole the show, with a winning margin just big enough to edge Melbourne out of the finals by 0.5 per cent. Two fewer goals and the Eagles would have fallen short.

The reviews were scathing. Were Melbourne overawed? Complacent? Or simply outplayed by a vengeful opponent with nothing to lose? I favoured the latter. Hindsight said the loss to North Melbourne was the really costly one. That the club had continued its incremental improvement – from two wins to four, to seven, to ten and now to twelve in successive seasons – was little comfort.

The finals drought broke in 2018, Goodwin's second year. The Demons clinched their finals place with a seventeen-point win over the Eagles in Perth, and in the final round accounted for the highly regarded Giants by seven goals to finish fifth. That meant a sudden-death final against eighth-placed Geelong.

Geelong was a seasoned finalist, and no one expected Melbourne to dominate as they did in the first term. Tom McDonald, who was enjoying his best season as a forward, set the scene with the opening major. Once Sam Weideman goaled after the quarter-time siren, Melbourne led 5.3 (33) to 0.2 (2), yet a goalless second term – the Demons added six behinds only – meant the game tightened.

It then devolved into a battle of attrition, with both teams adding one goal and four behinds in the third quarter, and Melbourne led by twenty-three points at the last change. Not until midway through the final term, when Mitch Hannan kept his feet on the wing as his opponent fell, was the game made safe. Hannan took off like a hare, sprinting over that same space Ray Gabelich had covered in the 1964 Grand Final. Unlike Gabbo's futile dash, Hannan's goal from fifteen metres out put the game out of Geelong's reach.

More than 90,000 people witnessed Melbourne's first finals win in more than a decade. It seemed that two-thirds of the crowd were on the Demons' side. This was brought home when Gawn was rotated off the ground late in the final term. He stood just inside the boundary near the interchange gate, gazing up at the serried ranks of spectators in red and blue, as if discovering for the first time the deep reservoir of support the club had.

Another 90,000-plus crowd the next week provided further evidence

of that, as Melbourne took on a battle-hardened Hawthorn side that had completed a premiership hat-trick just three years before. The game seemed to swing Melbourne's way late in the third term, when Hawk sharpshooter Jack Gunston missed a goal on the run and moments later Neal-Bullen ran in to goal at the other end. It was Melbourne by twenty points, soon to become thirty-two points at the last break. Early goals to Hawthorn in the last meant it was not until the final ten minutes that Melbourne supporters could begin to enjoy what was left of the night. The thirty-three-point margin was deceptive: the contest had been tougher and tighter than that.

The Demons' win, their sixteenth of the season – the club's most in any one year since 2000 – set up a preliminary final in Perth against the West Coast Eagles.

Melbourne had won the two previous meetings in Perth, and so no one was prepared for the disaster that unfolded. The vaunted, powerfully competitive midfield was overwhelmed from the first bounce. Contest was non-existent. The result was clear long before half time, which saw Melbourne without even a solitary goal, and trailing by sixty-three points. Even seven second-half goals failed to achieve respectability: the Eagles had added another eight goals in what for them was an extended training run.

That humiliation aside, Melbourne was expected to return to finals action in 2019, but failed, winning just five matches in a year plagued by players recovering from interrupted pre-seasons. The promise of 2018 was in ashes by July 2019, when Steven Smith and I met in the city as I researched Melbourne's fall from grace. As we concluded the interview, I confided in him that I did not want to publish an account of Melbourne's wilderness years until the club had, phoenix-like, won its thirteenth premiership. His response was a wry expression that suggested he was beginning to think he could have made better use of the past forty-five minutes.

Within months, however, I would feel slightly vindicated, as the club announced a strategic plan which included a premiership within the next four seasons. It was a bold declaration but not unprecedented: both Hawthorn and Richmond had done likewise and, improbably, each had delivered a premiership to its fans. Would Melbourne do the same?

Meanwhile, the 2020 season was compromised by the appearance of a coronavirus that triggered a pandemic. As the season dawned, a former

senior player told me: ‘The club is sitting on a powder keg.’ Another failure, he meant, and the place could implode. But even before it began, this season was already like no other.

As the West struggled to deal with rising COVID-19 case numbers, the public was taught lessons from childhood, like basic handwashing techniques and how to stifle a cough, countries closed their borders, non-essential travel was halted, travellers returning home were quarantined, entire cities were locked down with even healthy people confined to their homes, workplaces were shut and restaurants and hotels closed down.

Sport, too, ceased. Spectators were barred from attending major events. Tennis players lost their livelihoods overnight. The Toyko Olympic Games were rescheduled. The AFL season was suspended after Round 1, and would not resume until twelve weeks later.

For Melbourne, a season like no other ended like several others. Finals were in prospect right until the last round, in which the Demons accounted for Essendon. But two losses in appalling conditions of high winds, humidity and rain in Cairns to also-rans Sydney and Fremantle had left Melbourne reliant on other results if they were to play finals. It was 1976 and 2017 revisited. Finally, Melbourne fell just short of finals action.

Season 2021 loomed as a make-or-break year for Simon Goodwin and for the team. Off-field, the football department was recast, with club favourite Adem Yze recruited as midfield coach. For those watching Hawthorn games in 2019, it was clear that Yze, with his hands gesturing and pointing alongside Alastair Clarkson, had become an important match-day influence under the four-time premierships coach. Port Adelaide premierships coach Mark Williams, recently coach of VFL side Werribee and the man who ‘announced’ Dean Bailey’s appointment years earlier, was appointed to take charge of player development. Former St Kilda coach Alan Richardson remained as director of coaching.

When two small forwards – neither Jake Bowey nor Bailey Laurie stood taller than 178 centimetres – were drafted with picks twenty-one and twenty-two in the 2020 national draft, the club continued to address its recognised list shortcomings. Under Goodwin, Melbourne had first targeted key defenders, recruiting Jake Lever for the 2018 season and Steven May the following year. Next targeted were the wings, for which Ed Langdon and Adam Tomlinson were added to the list for 2020. Langdon’s dash brought some much-needed speed to the team, while

Tomlinson ended the season as a strong defender; his intended place on the wing was eventually occupied by Angus Brayshaw. Also in defence, first-year player Trent Rivers added pace and quality exits from the back half. His impact, for a novice, was outstanding. At the other end, the athletic ruckman and forward Luke Jackson added flexibility to the side.

The list had been rebuilt in a studied and deliberate fashion. It remained to be seen how it would all come together, but we lived in hope. Often, it seemed, that was all we had. The team's needs seemed to have been recognised, the senior coach was no longer a novice, and a new, strategy-smart coaching panel had been built. Season 2021 would either bring progress or big change.

Chapter Sixteen

The Road to Redemption

If you're wondering if the Dees' lid is off, I just saw a bloke going for a run in a full Melbourne playing kit. I live in Brooklyn, New York.

Social media post, 6 June 2021

Paul Roos was only half-right when he spoke late in season 2015 of Melbourne supporters shrouding the club in a veil of negativity; there was plenty of negativity directed at the club from without as well.

In early 2021 the phrase 'guilty until proven innocent' was a giggle for sports commentators. That was the Demons – more likely to let you down than stand themselves up. It was a club that trended towards mediocrity, as one put it. Not to be trusted.

Among the knocks: as good as that blue-collar midfield was, its actual output was lessened because of the players' poor skills. And as worthy an addition as former Kangaroo forward Ben Brown might be, he was a one-trick, lead-mark-kick pony running in straight lines with no defensive skills, and anyway, he needed knee surgery and might never play. Weideman too would be missing for weeks with stress fractures in his femur – so where would the goals come from?

Forecasts of where Melbourne would finish the season varied from, in the case of a panel of former AFL players, the lower reaches of the eight to as low as fourteenth. The expert consensus was that the year's premier team would come from Richmond and Geelong – grand finalists of 2020 – or the improvers of that year, Brisbane and Port Adelaide. West Coast was viewed as a less likely but still threatening prospect. St Kilda, on the back of two years of recruiting experienced players from other clubs, Carlton and the Bulldogs were expected to round out the eight.

Football clubs hold many secrets. Melbourne's big secret as the season approached was the target Goodwin had set for the players. 'Day one of preseason, I put a slide up about the plan, that the mission was to play a certain way on Grand Final day. It was our mission from day one, and

what it did, it lifted, it rose the bar about what we were trying to achieve. It wasn't about just playing finals, it wasn't about improvement, it was we are going to play Grand Final day, and this is the way we are going to play.'

Goodwin drew encouragement from those last two must-win games of 2020 against Essendon and the Giants. The side had kept their finals hopes alive under real pressure. 'That was, I think, a really big stepping stone for us as a footy club. At the end of preseason, I was incredibly confident with where we were going as a footy team.'¹

No one outside the club suspected it, but the Max Gawn-led Demons were on the road to redemption.

Supporters first saw that road in the 2020 preseason in a video posted on the club website of the playing group sprinting uphill towards the Shrine of Remembrance. Conditioning coach Darren Burgess was charged with rendering the squad fitter, stronger and more resilient. The plan was to run games out stronger than the opposition. Among much else, he punished – or, more properly, prepared – the players with repeat run-throughs on the grassy hill approaching the monument.

When season 2020 was shortened to seventeen matches, and the games themselves reduced to sixteen-minute quarters, Melbourne's heightened fitness lost impact. But it remained a base for 2021, and during a series of players' meetings the redemption road took a turn. It started with players asking themselves why they had fallen short after the promise of 2018. They had no shortage of talent: what separated them from, say, the reigning premier Richmond?

The answer came in talk about the need for players to play for each other. It suggested that the players thought their time was passing too quickly – that the last two years had not done justice to their talent and could not be repeated.

Captain Max Gawn said the players needed to be selfless. 'Mentality is the critical shift for us,' he told the *Herald Sun*. 'We have real talent and we are not using it, we are not using it in the right way. Richmond had talent and didn't become a selfless team with a click of the fingers. It took time and work and we have been working at that.'²

It was a message aimed at the midfield, one of the most talented in the competition, but seen as lacking variety and trying to do too much as individuals. Central to the message was the need for players to 'park their egos'. Another was to 'trust the tackler' to do his job, in order to maintain space and create opportunities.

It takes time for young players to come to these sorts of realisations. 'At eighteen you're thinking about yourself. You're trying to find your feet, get a game, so as a club you're just waiting for them to mature,' says Todd Viney. 'That's why the messaging is so important. The messaging about the culture and what we have to do to be a great team has been the same for a long while now, and I've heard it and heard it and heard it, but until they are willing to mature as a group and to make those sacrifices as a team ... that's what you are waiting for.'

A visit to Casey Fields in January offered a hint of how thoroughly the playing group was being tutored. Health regulations prevented supporters from entering the ground, so I stationed myself outside the perimeter, with binoculars to glean what I could from the scene.

Newly arrived development and skills coach Mark Williams had a group of players in pairs, simultaneously turning and short-passing across their bodies to one another, then gradually increasing the passing distance to thirty metres, forty metres, and finally kicking to goal. Nathan Jones and Trent Rivers comprised one pair; Harrison Petty and Clayton Oliver another.

Williams was apparently instructing them about balance, showing them how to take short, steady steps before kicking, how to hold their heads over the ball, keeping a line through their body to the kicking leg. At one point, walking alongside Jones, he gestured to his head and kicking leg, as though talking about where Jones was looking as he moved in to kick. It was clear that some fundamentals were being revisited, and even the most experienced players on the list were not exempt from instruction and improvement. Then Williams grabbed Oliver and did this short-stepping move, possibly talking about balance. This went on for some time until the group enlarged to include Petracca, Kade Chandler, Salem, Kobe Farmer (son of Jeff), Lever, Toby Bedford, Jayden Hunt and Neville Jetta.

Next they started a drill with the ball kicked thirty metres to one player, who was then marked by his opponent, who gave him a light shove in the chest. The player with the ball pushed away and kicked quickly to an opposing pair, who did the mark, push-off, quick kick thing again. It was quick movement and controlled, accurate use of the ball.

About that time, the club invited past players to join a training run with the current group. The motive was partly to bring the players who had been isolated in COVID hubs during the 2020 season together with

the wider club. The chair of the past players' group, Rod Grinter, saw it as emphasising a message of selflessness, of the players being part of something that would always be bigger than themselves.

'We had about twenty-five past players turn up and join in a bit of a session, then we went to a cafe and had breakfast and coffee with them,' Grinter recalls. 'I think that was a big message from the end of last year leading into this year [2021], that we were going to be all about us and not me. "It's we, it's everyone else, it's not me", and that came through in the way that they were playing. I saw early in the year they weren't all bees to the honeypot – "I've got to get this, I've got to get the most possessions" – it was them playing their roles and holding their structures.'

None of the talk about selflessness, the heightened fitness of Burgess's regime or the painstaking attention to kicking skills counted for anything in preseason. Compounding the negativity from without was the death watch the football media put on the career of the Demons' coach. Speculation about which coach will be the first to be sacked is a seasonal event, and Goodwin featured prominently as one whose position was vulnerable if the team started the season poorly.

*

The first three rounds pitted Melbourne against a likely improver in Fremantle at the MCG, and against two expected finalists in St Kilda and the Giants, at Docklands and Manuka, respectively.

Against Fremantle, Melbourne took charge midway through the first quarter with four goals in ten minutes through a mix of opportunism and marking inside fifty, and were never really threatened. McDonald, who had trained during preseason for the wing, returned to the forward line in the absence of Brown and Weideman. Charlie Spargo and Kysaiah Pickett injected pace and pressure to the attack, Oliver dominated in the middle and Luke Jackson shone with a series of contested marks.

Against St Kilda in Round 2, the club returned to the Docklands ground, which had been a competitive wasteland. After an even first quarter, the Saints kicked away to a fifteen-point lead in the second. Petracca and Oliver were again prominent, and the Demons slowed the game and took control. The second half was more of the same, Melbourne mixing controlled run with measured ball use to maintain possession and probe St Kilda's defence. Five unanswered goals – featuring Pickett magic, as the youngster somehow flowed through a pack of opponents to goal, and steadiness from Bayley Fritsch – saw Melbourne take charge.

A couple of defensive errors gave St Kilda an opening, but a juggled mark by McDonald at the start of the final term, and clever scouting by Pickett, delivered two steady goals as Melbourne closed out the game. Jack Viney played his first game of the year, returning from a foot injury, and was prominent, kicking the opening goal of the game inside the first minute. Melbourne's poor goal conversion – the final score being 12.19 (91) to 11.7 (73) – prevented the game from proving a percentage booster.

Simon Goodwin dismissed that as a problem: 'We're rapt to get the win. It's an important night for our footy club in terms of starting to build some momentum, and also in terms of starting to build some consistency in how we play.'

By the next match day, Melbourne's opponent, the Giants, are on the sort of edge some were predicting for Melbourne: winless with a long-term coach under scrutiny. After a narrow loss to St Kilda in Round 1, the Giants were poor in losing to Fremantle by thirty-one points in Round 2. The acid would come on them should they lose, while for Melbourne there was the prospect of firming up its season, with a potential blockbuster against Geelong to follow. It was only week three, but already seasons were riding on this contest.

The Giants started well, with overlapping run out of defence that several times sliced through Melbourne's defence. Melbourne adjusted, holding back several defenders, some combination of Lever, May, Tomlinson and Jetta. The game devolved into Melbourne versus Toby Green, whose two goals at the start of the final quarter revived the contest, but with Pickett kicking four, Fritsch three and Gawn a couple, the Demons finished strongly to win by thirty-four points. I thought back to all the years Melbourne could not win an opening round; this year was already better than most.

'Guilty until proven innocent' was still used as a cautionary message after the team had made this flawless start to the season and occupied third place on the ladder. One commentator distinguished himself by declaring that not only did he not trust Melbourne, he wouldn't trust them until they had won a premiership.

Three consecutive wins was normally all it took to instil mild delirium among rusted-on Demon fans, but even among us there was a guarded sense of 'enjoy it while it lasts'. Maybe that was the negativity at work.

Over the next three weeks, the season continued to exceed expectation and fantasy alike. Round 4 had Melbourne in control over Geelong

almost throughout, with a mix of forward-half pressure that locked the ball in the Demons' attacking zone and deliberate controlled tempo footy. Inaccuracy in front of goal limited the margin to twenty-five points. Two weeks later, on the eve of Anzac Day the Demons accounted for Richmond by thirty-four points, scoring ten goals to three after quarter time. In between, a seven-goal final term saw Melbourne run out to a fifty-point win over a rebuilding Hawthorn. The big story, however, were the wins over the previous year's grand finalists.

The club's depth was on show after Steven May suffered a fractured eye socket against Geelong. Harrison Petty, a lanky kid from outback South Australia with eleven games under his belt, took May's place in defence against Hawthorn. Petty had showed promise a couple of years back, with several contested marks and three goals while playing as a forward against the Bulldogs, but had since been reinvented as a defender. He settled quickly into the defensive unit.

Off the field, club president Glen Bartlett stepped aside and was replaced by Kate Roffey, only the third woman to lead an AFL club. It was a seamless transition, uncharacteristically neat, but still odd, given the team's standing.

It was clear now that Melbourne's kicking had improved markedly. Spearing passes from Oliver, Petracca, Langdon and Hunt were punishing opposition defenders. Langdon attributed the gains in his kicking to the coaching of Mark 'Choco' Williams. 'It's nothing technically speaking, I have always kicked the same way, but what Choco instils is a sense of calm when you are kicking,' Langdon told the *Herald Sun*. 'There is a lot going on in AFL footy, and for that split second when you are kicking, you need to be as calm as you possibly can be. It's funny how far that goes. It's such a little thing.

'He puts you under so much pressure at training, he starts yelling at you to put you in that position you could be on in the field, but the implication is that you are still calm and still manage to hit a target.'³

An old friend, a Carlton supporter, sent me an unprompted message which ended: 'Dees nowhere near good enough.' It was unprompted because we had not been talking football, and I had said nothing about Melbourne's flawless start. Most seasons, some unfancied side makes a surprisingly good start before collapsing in a heap as the heat comes on. Maybe he reckoned that would be our fate in 2021. But why *nowhere near* good enough? If asked, I'd have said the side had had a good start.

Nothing more. No titles won. So I responded as evenly as I could muster – ‘Thanks for the reality check’ – but I wouldn’t forget the jibe.

The team structure remained a work in progress, with neither of the expected tall forwards making an appearance yet. Goodwin resisted temptation, saying both Weideman and Brown needed more match conditioning before they could be considered for senior selection. There is more improvement in the group, he said.

Against Richmond, Nathan Jones became only the second Melbourne player to reach 300 senior games. ‘I have to pinch myself we are in this position and I am still here,’ Jones said post-match. ‘The season’s only pretty young and we have got a long way to go. You don’t want to think too far ahead. Our mentality is enjoy the win, celebrate with our families ... once we get back to training, it’s zero-all again.’

Internally, however, the win over Richmond – premiers in three of the previous four seasons – had laid a foundation of confidence that would sustain the team through the year.

For the first time, newspapers began linking the words ‘Demons’ and ‘premiership’ in the same sentence. Supporters I knew were too guarded to think about such possibilities, but the media played it up. Certainly, with six wins and no losses, finals must now be the least we could expect. Something like a top-four finish seemed fitting. Beyond that did not bear thinking about. The Bulldogs and the Demons shared the top two ladder positions, separated by percentage from Port Adelaide with five wins, and Geelong, Sydney and Fremantle with four.

Salamanca Wharf was awash with red and blue on the morning of our game at Bellerive Oval. A surprising mob of Melbourne supporters was out, considering our three previous games at the ground had resulted in three equally frustrating losses – by five points, five points and four points. A chance meeting with some Melbourne fans had tipped Anne and me off to the ferry service that runs from Hobart’s tourist precinct across the Derwent River to a jetty a few minutes’ walk to the stadium, which was how we came to join the throng.

This, in the common vernacular, was a danger game. Everyone was tipping Melbourne, undefeated, against the Kangaroos, winless. Perfect. And so it began, with early goals to North over a sluggish Melbourne outfit, who seemed unable to win a centre contest. Viney had withdrawn from the selected team with the recurrence of a foot injury. Tomlinson went down with what would prove a long-term knee injury in the opening

minutes, which unsettled the defence. Fritsch levelled the score with two goals in a minute, but still the Demons looked seriously off their game.

The team was notable for the inclusion of Ben Brown for his first game in red and blue, and he helped Fritsch to one of his early goals but otherwise struggled to find space. Gawn battled against North's combination of Todd Goldstein and Tom Campbell, lowering his colours. But ruck relief from Luke Jackson helped Melbourne take charge in the second half. Ten goals to two after half time saw Melbourne roll over their opposition the way good sides do. Fritsch, who was given the job of quelling Kangaroo captain Jack Ziebell in the second half, finished with a career-best six goals.

Asked if he was angry at half time, Simon Goodwin said: 'That's AFL footy. You're not going to be at your best every single week. I thought the Kangaroos were outstanding ... they came with a clear plan and they were executing it to a really high level, and that made the game challenging for us. For our ability to reset and come up with some solutions to get us back into the game was a credit to the players.'

'What we've built ourselves around is our ability to defend, our ability to win contests at each end of the ground, and early in the game we were quite poor in that. They were the areas we needed to fix and we did that really well.' He said Tomlinson, facing a knee reconstruction and a year on the sidelines, was 'shattered'.

On the ferry back to Salamanca, someone broke into a rendition of 'Grand Old Flag'. Maybe they'd heard the news: Melbourne sat a game clear on top of the ladder. The bars of Salamanca beckoned.

There were several threads to the Demons' resurgence. Among them was Clayton Oliver's outstanding form. Gone were the reflex handpasses that in earlier times minimised his impact. He was now relying on his pace to clear congestion and win time, which allowed him to better use the ball. Oliver formed a midfield double act with Petracca, whose explosive bursts and powerful kicking put opposition defenders under unrelenting pressure.

And there was the resurgence of Tom McDonald. Available for trade in the off-season but unwanted, he returned to Melbourne. Having previously gained kilograms to wrestle with the gorilla defenders, he shed the excess weight and hired a personal trainer to develop his agility. He changed his diet and confessed to eating 'a few vegetables' among up to four kilograms of steak and one to two kilograms of chicken and fish each week.

If this sounded extreme, no one was arguing, because it was working. He was averaging seventeen disposals, six marks and almost two goals a game, and consuming the time of one quality defender each week. McDonald's four goals against Sydney in Round 8 were crucial in a game where Melbourne was overwhelmed in centre clearances, while he and Fritsch kicked three goals each in the following week's win against Carlton.

At 9–0, the talk was different now, since on the five previous occasions Melbourne had made a 9–0 start to a season, they went on to win the premiership. Among the supporters, there was only muted satisfaction with the results so far and pleasure at being able to anticipate a victory, or at worst a proper contest, rather than inevitable defeat.

But more than that, there was a sense that until a premiership was delivered, none of this counted for anything. If it was possible for us this year, it was also possible for the Bulldogs, Brisbane, Richmond, Port Adelaide and Geelong. And three of those clubs knew well what the achievement demands. We were just speculating.

Every year when the fixture was issued, the second thing I did was check to see when we were playing in Adelaide. *Zen and the Art of Motorcycle Maintenance* was a cult literary hit as I took up riding in the grim 1970s, and among its lessons was that the best riding is on secondary roads. Forget the freeways laid down to dominate the landscape; instead take those roads that bend and twist and rise and fall with the land. That is where the riding groove will be. Our match in Adelaide gave me a chance to connect with my younger self and take the classic Great Ocean Road, which unravels like a spool of ribbon along Victoria's ancient and crumbling coastline.

The GOR really begins with a sweep out of Lorne on the right-hander under the old Pacific Hotel. From there it is 160 kilometres of corners tight and tighter, with occasional straights and sudden spectacular seascapes, mixed with mysterious plunges into the Otway Forest and the company of wallabies heedless of traffic. Overnighting at Mount Gambier leaves a second day's ride through wine country, or along the Coorong with glimpses of sand dunes and blue water inlets, before arriving a couple of hours before game time.

One of my first rides here was in 2017, when a midfield led by Jack Viney, Clayton Oliver and Nathan Jones ran amok in the third quarter to set up a seven-goal win. Sitting behind the goals with the Demon army, it was striking how quickly the ball came our way time and again out of the

centre bounce contests. That was one of those turning-point games when it became clear that the team was developing into something of promise. Into what they had now become.

At the Strathmore Hotel on North Terrace, the pre-game meet-ups were in force and Melbourne colours dominated: a rarity, in my experience here. A young bloke, a supporter in his late twenties lured into following the Demons by his dad, told me he wanted to see a thrashing. ‘That’s one thing we haven’t done [this year],’ he said passionately. ‘Let’s really flog them.’ At least he was not satisfied with merely winning.

Away from the pub, Adelaide was genuinely hostile territory. Raucous videos introduced every Crows player. No mention was made of the opposition, or of the fact that Christian Salem was a late withdrawal, replaced by Neville Jetta. ‘Nev’ had been a great player, a superb defender able to lock down on an opponent and beat him one on one. But he was not the creative ball user that Salem had become. Salem was integral to our attacks out of defence and offered controlled use of the ball. He was a loss.

Melbourne started well, with Gawn dominating. Langdon hit the scoreboard with a clever snap goal. Taylor Walker replied for the Crows, but Melbourne kept coming, and late in the term led five goals to two. There was an air of fatalism in the Crows crowd behind me. One relatively sensible observer allowed some praise for the Melbourne skipper, and said admiringly, ‘Gee, he’s good.’ But two late goals to James Rowe, one for a deliberate out of bounds free against Jake Lever, brought the Crows back into it. Sensible Observer and his mate seemed satisfied to be within a goal.

Clayton Oliver, on his way to thirty-eight possessions and surely three Brownlow votes, kicked Melbourne’s sixth soon after the restart, and we looked ready to roll. Except we didn’t. Twice the Crows kicked goals within seconds of Melbourne scoring. It was an ominous sign, as though we were not really ‘on’. The Crows kept numbers back and scored with overlapping runners kicking and handpassing out of defence.

When a Demon forward took a deliberate shot at goal, even Sensible Observer joined in with the generalising howling, but his contribution was unique: ‘Oogle-oogle-oogle!’ And amid the rabid home-town mob, he was the sensible one.

Melbourne constantly threatened to break away, but the Crows’ efficiency in front of goal kept them in touch. Leading by sixteen points

deep into the final quarter, we looked to be safe – but after a late surge, a Taylor Walker goal put the Crows ahead by a solitary point.

Someone behind me said there were forty-three seconds left. Petracca powered out of the centre square contest and drove the ball forward. A Crows defender punched the ball directly out of bounds, metres from Melbourne's goals. This was it. A chance to win, or at least draw. Except, unlike the call against Lever earlier, the umpire did not rule against the backman. Boundary throw-in. The crowd kept silent and made the call on the umpire's behalf.

The streak had to end somewhere, and in old Melbourne fashion it came against a struggling Adelaide side. Maybe it was a good one to lose. That was a thought for the ride home, and in a year that would see most games played without a crowd, even a loss witnessed live was a good memory. There were lessons there, reminders that nothing could be taken for granted. Adelaide scored seventy-six points from turnovers, showing a breakdown in Melbourne's use of the ball and contest efficiency. The Crows' fifteen goals was well above the average of nine the Demons had conceded to that point.

Meanwhile, the next week's opponents, the Bulldogs, tuned up by dismantling St Kilda. The Dogs were in hot form, displacing Melbourne from top spot. Next week, for the first time in a month, we would not start favourite. Sadly, renewed COVID restrictions meant that the most important Melbourne–Bulldogs game in more than a quarter of a century – since the 1994 semi-final – would be played without a crowd.

But it would have a plan: Melbourne's was to stop their opponents' ball movement at the source. Instead of clamping down on the inspirational Marcus Bontempelli, James Harmes put a hard tag on contested ball winner Tom Liberatore, sharply limiting his output.

The Demons made a fast start, with six first-quarter goals on the back of controlling clearances from centre bounce contests and pressure inside the attacking fifty. And against one of the best-starting teams in the competition, that counted for plenty, and enabled the Demons to dictate terms for much of the match. Through the second and third quarters, Melbourne threatened to take the game away, breaking out to a thirty-two-point lead on the back of two McDonald goals shortly before half time, before the Bulldogs closed the gap to nineteen points at the half.

In a tight third term, Melbourne broke away to a thirty-six-point lead as Weideman, playing just his second game of the year, marked twice

within a minute, kicking truly each time. Otherwise, the game was an arm wrestle between and within the arcs. Melbourne's depth was on show, with youngsters Rivers and Jordon strong in defence and midfield. The final term was an anti-climax: the Demons registered their last goal four minutes into the quarter, and the defensive arm wrestle resumed. Melbourne was unthreatened even as their opponents registered the final two goals of the match.

Facing up to Brisbane in a forced relocation at Giants Stadium in Western Sydney rather than Alice Springs completed a demanding fortnight. Melbourne finally put to rest the cynical cries of 'who have they beaten?' by despatching the Lions. This after Brisbane started strongly and led by twenty points at half time, recording forty-three more disposals and fourteen more inside fifties. Melbourne had to reset, and they did through Petracca and Oliver, who accumulated thirty-three possessions between them in the second half.

Twice in the third quarter, as Melbourne narrowed the gap to one point, Brisbane steadied, first through their captain, Dayne Zorko, and later through Zac Bailey, who kicked his fourth. Finally, as Oliver kicked long into attack, Pickett roved a front-and-centre spillage from a marking contest to snap truly and set up what appeared to be an intense final term. Instead, it was one-way traffic Melbourne's way, as they outlasted the Lions, producing a forty-two-point turnaround and twenty-eight-point victory.

Which was more impressive: coming from twenty points behind to run over the Lions, or taking the Dogs by the collar early and holding them at bay? Both showed character and a recognisable style: a tight defensive effort with rapid breaks out of defence to score. Petracca and Oliver were at the top of their game; Rivers and Petty were improving by the week; Spargo was winning new respect for forward pressure and scoreboard impact; and Neal-Bullen was in career-best form. Pickett continued to punish the opposition.

After the Brisbane win, social media carried a message that read: 'If you're wondering if the Dees' lid is off, I just saw a bloke going for a run in a full Melbourne playing kit. I live in Brooklyn, New York.'

Melbourne's next contest, the Queen's Birthday fixture against Collingwood, seemed somewhat ironic now, given the speculation about Goodwin in the preseason. The coaches' curse had settled instead on Collingwood, with coach and favourite son Nathan Buckley announcing

he was quitting amid a difficult season. This set a huge emotional challenge in front of the Melbourne players. The Pies were desperate to give him a winning farewell, and to deny the Demons, as they had in the last round of 2017. It brought an unexpected edge to the contest.

The Demons started well enough, leading by a few points after a first quarter in which the teams seemed to be feeling each other out. Ominous, though, was the number of interceptions and smothers Collingwood put on Melbourne's disposals. In the second term, Collingwood's intensity bore fruit. Winning the midfield clearances with their forward-cum-midfielder Jordan De Goey strong, Collingwood took no fewer than eight marks inside their forward fifty, while Melbourne's attack relied on opportunist goals from Oliver and Jackson after forcing forward-half turnovers. Luckily, Collingwood failed to take full advantage of their opportunities, while at the other end the Demons' attacks broke down, with none of the forwards able to clinch a mark.

For much of the third term it seemed as though Melbourne would escape with a win. Gawn went forward and Jackson took on the ruck duties, and when Max marked and kicked truly from the pocket, the Demons closed the gap to eleven points. A running goal from a determined Petracca followed minutes later, and Melbourne then grabbed a wafer-thin lead as Fritsch roved a goal-square marking contest and kicked over his shoulder. The quarter ended with Collingwood's Brody Mihocek taking yet another mark inside fifty and the lead changing for a fourth time in half an hour.

Collingwood's midfield dominance saw the last quarter played in their half. Melbourne's solitary goal came after twenty-three minutes, by which time the Demons were three goals in arrears and lacking momentum.

It was a strangely low-energy performance, which left fans wondering if there was a mental letdown after the stirring wins over the Bulldogs and Brisbane. And did the switch to the relatively narrow confines of the SCG contribute to Melbourne's inability to find a path through the corridor, since so many forward thrusts broke down under Magpie tackling pressure at half-forward? Simon Goodwin lamented his team's lack of defensive pressure across the field, which allowed Collingwood those searching, low-trajectory passes into their forward fifty, resulting in no fewer than eighteen marks.

Whatever the answer, the upside was that the pundits wrote

Melbourne off as a premiership prospect. Now Geelong was the team everyone wanted to talk about.

A narrow win over Essendon, who lay mid-table with six wins, followed by a similarly narrow loss to the Giants at the MCG, continued the Demons' patchy form. Over three matches to Round 16, Melbourne scored nine, nine and seven goals. All season the forward structure had been a work in progress. Without Weideman and Brown, then with Brown and later with Weideman, the issue remained unsettled.

As the small forward line was not generating goals, Brown was given another chance, but he spent most of the match against Port Adelaide pushing upfield to provide a marking target outside the forward fifty. Tom McDonald stayed deep, kicking three goals. Led by Petracca and Oliver, who dominated clearances, Melbourne overwhelmed Port Adelaide by thirty-one points, only to play out a draw against a determined Hawthorn, a goal in the final minute to Luke Breust enabling the Hawks' escape.

It was the first ever draw between the clubs in 167 contests, but in truth there was a winner and a loser, and there was no mistaking them. At the siren, the Hawthorn players were beaming, as was their fiery coach, Alastair Clarkson, while the Demons were downcast. Statistically, the game was a mystery. The only category Hawthorn won was free kicks: twenty-two to fifteen. To long-suffering Demons supporters, this was old Melbourne, unable to win the games they should.

About this time a Collingwood supporter told me how surprised he was by the lack of anticipation and excitement among Melbourne supporters. 'If this was Essendon or Carlton or Collingwood, people would be jumping out of their skins,' he said, 'but Melbourne supporters are sort of ... "it was good while it lasted".'

Well, there's a lot of scar tissue, I told him, but the reality was that the Dees' campaign was foundering: the past five weeks had delivered just two wins and a draw, and revealed an inability to score heavily that was leaving the team vulnerable.

Defeat by the Bulldogs in Round 19 highlighted just how much the earlier success was reliant on a dominant defence and a productive (although not always winning) midfield. This game, first versus second, opened in torrents of rain. The intensity was there as players threw themselves into the contest in a manner that reflected the game's importance, but Melbourne's finishing was again deficient. A tight summary of this contest would say the Dogs were cleaner with their

skills, while Melbourne was untidy.

Ben Brown's mission to broaden his game was evident in the way he continued pushing upfield, McDonald-like. Nearer goal, however, his former unerring accuracy – which was how it seemed to me – had deserted him. Just five minutes in, he marked the wet ball strongly twenty metres from goal, and from directly in front his kick slewed left. Minutes earlier, Oliver had missed a snap from a similar distance. From the restart, the Bulldogs took the ball forward and, from a boundary contest, a handpass to Bontempelli resulted in a stoppage goal – the first of six they would score for the night.

Those early moments encapsulated all that was to follow. The Bulldogs seized their opportunities and Melbourne failed to convert most of their own.

A five-goal third quarter and a strong opening in the last saw Melbourne close the gap to four points with eight minutes left, but then Bontempelli went full Brownlow, snapping another clearance goal before winning the centre bounce clearance to set up Jamarra Ugle-Hagan with yet another, and the game was done.

Melbourne had no answer for the busy small defender Caleb Daniel, who set up many of the Bulldogs' thrusts, and the previous success of Harmes quelling Liberatore was not repeated. Instead Liberatore was his usual hardworking self.

Another week brought another challenge, with a road trip to face the Gold Coast Suns. Hardened Melbourne supporters knew to look on this as a danger game. The Suns were exactly the sort of opponent to embarrass Melbourne: capable enough at their best – they had beaten Richmond – but outside the eight and the finals race. With four rounds remaining, the Demons had to keep winning to hold on to a top-four spot and a realistic chance of breaking their premiership drought.

A couple of days before Melbourne set off for the Gold Coast, the Delta variant of COVID-19 was found north of the Tweed River. On the morning of the game, with the Demons airborne somewhere over New South Wales, the Queensland government announced it was shutting down the south-east of the state from 4 p.m. The game was scheduled for 3.10 p.m.

The players spent a day in the air, flying to Brisbane and then returning to Melbourne. Behind the scenes, the AFL urged Melbourne

chief executive Gary Pert to agree to playing the match during the pre-finals bye. He refused. The club was building for the finals. Losing the bye would put Melbourne at a clear disadvantage.

Well, how about playing in Darwin, then?

Again Pert refused. Ultimately, the contest was moved to Docklands in Melbourne – apparently a ‘win’ for the Demons – but the match would be played just after noon the next day. Surely that made it a ‘win’ for the Suns, whose opponents had been airborne and plane-bound for seven hours on the eve of the match.

As it happened, Melbourne settled early, dominating the clearances, inside fifties, hit-outs and every other metric but the scoreboard. Oliver was in everything, and the new kid, Jake Bowey, was composed and efficient. After seven minutes, Tom McDonald had the first goal; it was followed six minutes later by Fritsch, and then by Brown. Three goals to nil settled everyone’s nerves, but with three of the next four goals, the Suns robbed Melbourne of a deserved lead until Jackson goaled twice around the thirty-minute mark.

From that point, the game was a procession. Oliver took an intercept mark on the wing, played on with a handpass to Langdon, who returned it to the running midfielder, and Oliver then found Jackson on a lead inside fifty. The young ruckman kicked his fourth goal and the team’s twelfth. Melbourne’s half-time total of eighty points exceeded its full-time tally for all but one game in the previous six weeks.

Jackson’s goals resulted from clever reading of the play and one-grab marking. Brown showed his characteristic strong leading, but also neat skills below the knees, which saw him handing off multiple goals as well as kicking four himself. Brown mixed his forward work with runs far enough upfield to make defensive interceptions. The early criticism of his recruitment had been that his game was too one-dimensional. If that was true then, he had certainly added to it since.

In the back half, Lever roamed wide to make his customary interceptions, and May seemingly did as he wished. Petty was prominent with clean skills, having grown into his role. Oliver finished with thirty-five disposals. Petracca with thirty-two. The inside fifty count – seventy-one to twenty-seven, Melbourne’s way – was as lop-sided as the final score: 18.20 (128) to 4.6 (30). At last the young bloke from the Strathmore Hotel should be happy.

*

As strange as a day spent on a plane with unknown destinations and unknown playing times was for the playing group, things were about to become even weirder for the Demons. In a quirk of the AFL fixturing system, Melbourne had not hosted the West Coast Eagles at the MCG since 2014. Apart from two 'home' games played in the Northern Territory, the previous nine contests had been decided on Eagle turf, with only two won by the Demons. So the odds were against us on a trip west for a Monday-night clash with an Eagles outfit desperate to stay in the top eight.

The previous day, the Bulldogs had suffered a surprise loss, opening the way for victory to return Melbourne to the top of the ladder. About ten minutes into the final term, that's where it was heading: the Demons leading by thirty-two points, thanks to a third-quarter burst of five goals to one. Melbourne remained in control, continuing to press the attack.

Cue rolling thunder and an electrical storm. Unbelievably, with Melbourne poised to put the game away, play was suspended because of the risk of lightning. This sent commentators scrambling for the rulebook, and put the players in an indefinite holding pattern in the rooms.

To this point, both sides had suffered losses. The Eagles' veteran defender Shannon Hurn was sidelined with a hamstring injury, and Melbourne's Jayden Hunt with an ankle. McDonald had been a pre-game withdrawal for Melbourne, the second loss after Viney was suspended for two matches. Jake Melksham took Viney's place. With rain expected, James Jordon was reinstated for McDonald.

Melbourne's decisive lead was built on a solid first quarter, with Brown notching two majors on the back of a winning midfield, where Petracca and Oliver were dominant while Gawn and Jackson battled Nic Naitanui of West Coast. Despite teeming rain, the Eagles, with established stars like Elliot Yeo and Tim Kelly asserting themselves, wrestled their way back into the contest. Only a 'Kossie' Pickett goal from almost fifty metres on the half-time siren preserved Melbourne's lead at the main change.

In the third term, with the skies clearing, Melbourne dominated contested possession, clearances and scoring: Neal-Bullen celebrated his 100th game with a second goal, Harmes jagged one, Melksham snatched two opportunist goals in quick succession, and Brown kicked his third with a snap from forty metres. Game done, almost. Until the lightning break.

After the thirty-minute interval, the revived Eagles threw everything

at the Demons, who needed only to hang on. Four successive goals to the home side were matched with only a couple of flailing points from Melbourne. With a minute and a half left, Jack Darling cut the lead to nine points. The home crowd was doing all it could to get the Eagles home – and so, it seemed, were the umpires, who awarded the Eagles ten frees to Melbourne’s two for the term.

The crucial last play saw Oliver charging towards the Eagles’ goal as the ball ran free from the centre bounce. He swept up the ball at half-back and launched it over his shoulder to the wing, where Spargo marked and slowed the game. From there, the Demons closed it out.

When the heat was on, a standout in defence was Bowey. He shone in his second game with clean ball use under pressure. With twenty-one disposals and ten contested possessions, it was clear after just eight quarters that we had found a player.

A thought best suppressed at that moment was that everything seemed to be falling into place for Melbourne. A season-ending injury to Eric Hipwood had compromised Brisbane’s prospects significantly. Geelong had lost their star forward recruit Jeremy Cameron to a hamstring injury, and while he would be back, his preparation for the finals would be sub-optimal. Now we learned that Bulldog key forward Josh Bruce would be out for the remainder of the year, and for much of 2022, with a knee injury.

Meanwhile, Melbourne was locked into the top four, with a buffer of ten premiership points over Sydney in fifth place. McDonald would presumably be back in a week or two. In my post-1964 lifetime, we had never been so well placed to challenge for a flag. Unlike in 1988 and 2000, there was no standout team in our way. We were as likely and as vulnerable as any other. Someone even used the word ‘destiny’. Talk about tempting fate.

There was too much on the line for me to get too excited about the win in Perth. With the city of Melbourne still in lockdown, we were weeks away from being able to attend games in person. And there was no certainty where the finals would be played, or if we could attend. What if the Demons won the flag and no one was there to witness it?

Round 22 brought a return game against Adelaide. I felt unusually positive about this. We owed them for the one-point steal in Round 10. This time, however, the Crows would be without Taylor Walker. By way of

a balancing item, McDonald missed again, while Steven May was rested. Hunt's ankle injury, we learned, would sideline him for four weeks. Joel Smith took May's place.

Melbourne's newfound efficiency saw them outscore the Crows in every quarter to lead by nine, twenty-one and twenty-three points at each break. Fritsch, with three goals, and Brown, Jackson and Petracca, with two goals each, shared the burden up forward, while Salem and Langdon were big possession winners upfield.

The final term was played almost entirely in Melbourne's forward half. The Crows dominated possession, particularly uncontested possession, but the Demons defied their attempts to go inside their attacking fifty. Midway through the term, Fritsch read the flight of Rivers' long kick forward better than his opponents to mark virtually uncontested and put the issue beyond doubt. A quarter of an hour later, Fritsch closed the game with three goals in two minutes' play for a personal best of seven. His feat was barely remarked upon, as interest centred on where the finals would be played, but it said something about Melbourne's ability to score quickly.

Promisingly, the team had finished off a beaten opponent rather than conceding 'junk time' goals. The final margin was forty-one points. I took this as a positive sign. There was no easing up. The Crows were not disgraced. They had challenged, and Melbourne rose to meet them.

In an odd quirk of circumstance, the top four sides were drawn to meet one another in the last round of the home and away season: Melbourne versus Geelong; the Bulldogs versus Port Adelaide. If Melbourne won, we would finish the regular season on top for the first time since 1964.

Fans looking for omens noted that was the year of the Tokyo Olympics – just like this year, when the 2020 Olympics were rescheduled because of the pandemic. Depending on results, the Demons' first finals opponent could be Geelong, the Bulldogs, Brisbane or Port. What was now certain, unfortunately, was that no Victorian fans would be there to see it.

The AFL's fixturing had saved the best for last. I don't mean Melbourne in top place to play Geelong in second, with the winner to claim the minor premiership. I mean Melbourne's obligatory annual trip to Kardinia Park, where the Cats had won eighty-nine of their past 100 games. The home side losing consecutive games there was almost unheard of – the only instance in the past 100 matches was sixteen years ago, when the

Kangaroos and Melbourne doubled up, beating the Cats by sixteen points and twenty-four points, respectively, in April and June 2005.

That formidable home ground record, however, was not quite as impressive as it first read, since the Cats were served up a regular diet of relatively vulnerable visitors – non-Victorian clubs and local stragglers – for consumption at their oddly shaped home.

If Carlton supporters needed official notice that they had joined the stragglers, it came in May 2018 when they headed down the highway for the first time in twenty years. Essendon was sent to Kardinia Park in 2021 for the first time in twenty-eight years. Hawthorn, until recently a powerhouse, visited in 2020 for the first time in fifteen seasons. Collingwood has not been there since last century, and only three times in the past thirty-three years.

Melbourne's recent record in Geelong was two wins and a draw from twelve visits, so the dice were loaded against us. For all that, supporters were looking to the match with anticipation. It promised to tell plenty about how ready the Demons were for the finals series.

The way the team had reset itself since the loss to the Bulldogs suggested a new maturity and commitment. It was that resolve and maturity that brought us to Max Gawn, he of the fluky kicking style, kicking for the game. Geelong led by two points when the final siren sounded, but Max had already marked at the top of the goal square. He paused at the sound of the siren, gazed upward and took a breath. His naked scalp gleamed with perspiration. The game, and with it the minor premiership, were on his shoulders. All that and the burden of history.

All around the country, Melbourne fans were thinking of the first round of 2018, and Max kicking for victory over Geelong after the final siren. His miss then had become one of the most celebrated shanks of all time because he was so close to goal, more or less directly in front, and the game was on the line. This time he was again close to goal, but on a slight angle, and the Geelong players were quick to remind him of his record.

In a sense, Melbourne had already won this game. They had recovered from a forty-four-point deficit late in the third quarter, and outscored Geelong in three of the four quarters. Starting with those runs at the Shrine, Burgess had built them for strong finishes. Indeed, the Demons had outscored their opponents in the second half of all but five games this season.

What had begun as a dour, intense struggle early was ripped apart by the Cats in the second term. Eight goals to one for the quarter seemed to spell the end of the contest, but in the Melbourne rooms at half time the players were told to keep to their strongly contested game. By the last change they had trimmed the deficit to thirty-two points. Two goals within two minutes of the restart – one to Pickett, who marked from the first centre clearance, and the other to Spargo, who pounced on a loose ball to soccer a goal centimetres from the line – revived the Demons.

With Melbourne dominating contested possessions in the final term, Viney crashed through a contest to find Oliver, who trimmed the lead to thirteen points with a quarter of an hour remaining. Spargo snapped truly from a half-chance, then Fritsch outbodied his opponent to run onto a loose ball and dribble a goal and the margin was just three points with more than six minutes remaining.

Now, neither side was able to score until a fifty-metre penalty left Lever just outside the attacking arc. Not tempted to kick for goal, he placed the ball for Gawn to mark almost uncontested fifteen metres out. Cat defenders glared at each other.

And so it had come down to this. ‘Not again, Max,’ Geelong players taunted. A pause, that gaze upward and Gawn restarted his approach.

This time his kick was straight, or at least straight enough. Six goals to nil in the last term and Melbourne got home by four points. They were the minor premiers for the first time since 1964, with seventeen wins and a draw from their twenty-two matches.

Across the locked-down city, supporters leapt from armchairs in some version of calisthenics, accompanied with fist pumps and shouts of ‘Max, you ripper’. From all points Gawn’s teammates sprinted to congratulate him. Kardinia Park was normally where hope went to die, but tonight it hosted a joyous, seething human pyramid of red and blue. Now anything seemed possible – but whatever happened in the finals, this would always be a famous victory.

‘Fifty-seven years, that’s something the club’s been building for a long time,’ an emotional Christian Petracca explained. ‘That’s for every Melbourne fan that’s been embarrassed to wear the Melbourne footy club logo, and to put the club back on the map and be first is something we have strived for a long time. It’s unbelievable really.’

But it was still just one more step. A great win, a few moments of jubilation, and then it was back to pondering next week’s opponent:

Brisbane. With no end to the pandemic restrictions in prospect, what should have been a hostile environment for the Lions at the MCG would instead be at the Adelaide Oval, neutral territory. The choice of ground was Melbourne's, a right afforded the club for winning the minor premiership.

Chapter Seventeen

The Finals Campaign

It's easy to sacrifice when we can tangibly see the results.

Angus Brayshaw

During the last few weeks of the season, as the team swept away the Suns and the Crows and eclipsed the Eagles in Perth, even this fan, scarred by decades of failure and missed opportunity, began to suspect the team had become greater than the hopes of its supporters. We weren't sustaining them; they were dragging us along in their wake.

In the normal course of things, we live on hope. That is what keeps us coming back, although experience says hope of what the team might achieve in any year goes beyond what is realistic. Yet in the final weeks of the 2021 season, Simon Goodwin's side did everything demanded of it. After the classic midseason slump gave us just two wins, a draw and three losses to teams without finals prospects, the Demons recovered to record four successive wins, capped with the great Kardinia Park escape.

Goodwin saw the recovery emerging from the deep disappointment of 2019. '[In 2018] we took a leap that not many thought we'd take and we were still very young and raw and didn't quite understand what it took,' he recalled. 'There's no doubt [in] '19 we got a lot wrong, from myself all the way through our department, through to the playing group. When you win five games in a season it's a long way back in terms of recovery, but in some ways it was a bit of the making of us. In terms of our learning what was required to train to the level, to hold people accountable, to build a program that's going to be sustainable for success.

'I thought we took some significant steps [in 2020]. Although we didn't play finals, to win nine of seventeen, in the positive side of the ledger again, but to still see a department and a playing group that wasn't satisfied – there's no question, I think, that ate away at people and they wanted more ... the ownership required from everybody right through our department, and the ability just to execute a role and build that

cohesion and chemistry was really strong. I think we parked a lot of ego right through our club.¹

All the talk around selflessness seemingly had amounted to something. It was personified in the way Angus Brayshaw had surrendered his place in the midfield. In 2018 he ran third in the Brownlow Medal, but now was playing as a defensive winger. Brayshaw was often deep in defence, but also responsible for the long kick inside fifty to the forward pocket where it could be locked in for repeat contests. From averaging twenty-six possessions a game, he was now averaging eighteen possessions a game. In 2018, he had kicked fourteen goals from twenty-four scoring shots, compared to two goals from eight scoring shots so far in 2021.

Brayshaw's reassignment allowed for players like Tom Sparrow and James Jordon to rotate through the midfield. One observer I count as unusually astute reckoned the reason Brayshaw was selected for the role on the wing was that while he could be as effective as his teammates in the middle, he was more adaptable to other roles and had stronger endurance. In any event, he accepted the move out of the brightest spotlight to do a job for the team's success. 'It's easy to sacrifice when we can tangibly see the results,' is how the player himself put it.²

Likewise, Gawn was increasingly sharing the ruck load with Luke Jackson. They were different styles of ruckman. Gawn was more the traditional tap ruck, looking to set up Oliver or Petracca or Viney, although as the year progressed he developed his signature move of snatching the ball in midair and throwing it onto his boot for a rapid chaos ball into the forward line – or, from a forward pocket boundary throw-in, for a snap at goal. Jackson's impact was greatest after the ruck contest, since he was athletic enough to present as another running midfielder the instant the ball went to ground.

Meanwhile, the forward dilemma was settled. After Brown's return in Round 17, he scored fourteen goals and was competing strongly alongside McDonald and Fritsch. Numerous players, including Viney, Alex Neal-Bullen and Ed Langdon, showed better use of the ball. Kicks into the attacking arc were no longer the default long bomb to a contest in the goal square.

Also striking was how the group adapted to missing personnel. Petty had grown into the role that had been filled by Tomlinson, and with May missing late in the season, Joel Smith slotted easily into defence. Jake Bowey, newly arrived with only four games to his name, had shone from

the first, with quick decision making and precise disposal.

In the week prior to the first final, five Demons were named to the All-Australian side: the midfield trio of Oliver, Petracca and – for the fifth time – Gawn, and defenders May and Lever. Jackson was the year's Rising Star. Oliver clinched arguably the most sought-after award, the Coaches Association Player of the Year, ahead of Marcus Bontempelli and Ollie Wines, who tied in second place.

Yet it all counted for nothing if the Demons didn't go on from here. Melbourne had progressed from 'guilty until proven innocent' to the premiership favourite. Some journey. We should enjoy it while it lasted, people said – except I couldn't. I'd enjoy it when it had run its full course, even if none of us could be there in person. Since the finals were to be played in COVID-safe Tasmania, South Australia and West Australia, we'd take what we could get.

The Round 23 results produced a top four of Melbourne, Geelong, Port Adelaide and Brisbane; the Bulldogs slipped to fifth after timing their slump badly, although they remained a threat. Then followed the Giants, Sydney and Essendon. Melbourne's record against the seven other finalists was a healthy eight wins from ten matches. The honours were split evenly with the Giants and Bulldogs, although the Bulldogs had also taught us a lesson in a preseason game in which their midfield ran amok.

Port opened the finals with a Friday-night demolition of Geelong, then the Giants eliminated Sydney in a thriller. For Melbourne, the Lions awaited. Although the Melbourne players had said the right things – along the lines of 'we've done nothing yet' and 'the season starts now' – it was a nervous time as we waited for the start. The Lions were in familiar territory, playing their third finals series in succession. Nine Melbourne players would be in their first final.

The Lions had been bundled out of those previous series without winning a final, despite finishing second at the end of the regular season. They would not lack motivation. At least the venue held no terrors for Melbourne, with eight wins in thirteen appearances there, most recently over Port Adelaide seven weeks earlier.

Brownlow medallist Lachie Neale sought out Petracca at the first bounce, but when Lever sent Melbourne forward, Petracca somehow found metres of clear space. His long kick to the square was spoiled from Fritsch's grasp, but Brown seized the loose ball and goaled. Just thirty

seconds in, this was a nerve settler. At the other end, Daniher marked for Brisbane but his kick fell short and was punched through. Moments later, Neal-Bullen found McDonald on a lead, and the big forward swung the ball wide to Brayshaw. He kicked long to the square, where Brown just missed a chance. Back down the other end, Brisbane small forward Charlie Cameron found himself on the end of a pack-clearing handpass and goaled. Minutes later, Cameron, seizing on a loose ball, goaled and again the Lions led. On the resumption, Melbourne ran the ball out of defence to Tom Sparrow, who goaled to level the scores.

So went the first term, a frenetic series of punches and counterpunches, with neither side able to grab a clear advantage.

Melbourne's play-on game paid dividends after Jackson soared to a screamer on the defensive side of the wing. Oliver, who was at the same marking contest, ran to create position thirty metres upfield and the young ruckman honoured his lead. Oliver then played on instinctively, swinging onto his right and finding Brown inside fifty. Maintaining the pace, Brown chipped forward to the running Langdon, whose 'wing' seemed to span the length of the ground. He racked Melbourne's fifth goal, and the ninth of an engrossing quarter.

The opening term told us the Demons were up for the occasion. The second term propelled them towards a preliminary final. With Petracca, Oliver and Langdon dominant, the Demons took charge, with players constantly making position ahead of the ball. Fritsch, Pickett and Spargo rewarded the work upfield, and then Fritsch again, although as many chances were missed as taken.

Melbourne headed in at half time with a lead better than five goals, but knowing that the opportunities created in the second term could have secured them the win. The defence of May, Lever, Rivers and Salem had been dominant, Lever with eleven interceptions. The forwards were consistently threatening but wasteful. The midfield – led by Oliver and Petracca, with Sparrow, Viney and Harmes in support, and with Langdon roaming deep at both ends – appeared irresistible.

The Lions, already missing tall forward Hipwood, lost another when Daniel McStay was concussed after accidental contact in the first term. Cameron became their only effective forward.

Yet the missed chances left the door ajar. Melbourne created early chances to consolidate in the opening minutes of the third term, but added only two behinds. At the other end, Brisbane also recorded only

minor scores, but the contest had evened up. Joel Smith managed to nullify Cameron through several contests, but the small man proved irrepressible. Just as the term seemed to be devolving into a lengthy arm wrestle, Cameron broke clear to spark the Lions with his fourth major. Hugh McCluggage scored another, and Brisbane did just enough to stay in touch with the only two goals of the term.

Two minutes into the frenetic final term, Fritsch ended Melbourne's goal drought – but the Demons were immediately defending again as the Lions dominated centre clearances and Lincoln McCarthy goaled for Brisbane. Melbourne almost clinched the game when Rivers again dashed along the wing and kicked deep forward, where Fritsch floated in the middle of a five-man pack to take a mark he had no right to claim, turning mid-flight to protect the ball. But his fourth goal didn't make the game safe yet. Brisbane made repeated forward entries until a free to Cameron saw him kick his fifth goal and the margin was reduced to nineteen points, as it had been at the final change.

With less than ten minutes remaining, Sparrow intercepted Daniher's pass in midfield and kicked to Gawn, who, although surrounded by three opponents, leaped to mark on his chest. He passed to Petracca, forty metres from goal on the boundary.

Petracca began his approach at the point the fifty-metre arc met the boundary. From the left pocket the angle was tight, but it suited a right-footer. Laser-straight and unerring in flight, with this kick Petracca made amends for earlier misses. It was a goal from the moment it left his boot.

Moments later, Melbourne attacked again, and when Gawn's long bomb from fifty metres cleared a pack, Petracca was there, taking the ball in midair and running across the face of the goals to score for the second time in as many minutes. This finally settled the result: Melbourne were thirty-three points ahead with seven minutes remaining.

As the match ended, Melbourne's bench was an All-Australian lineup of Gawn, Petracca, Oliver and May, briefly in cottonwool ahead of a two-week hiatus to await the next opponent. It would be either Geelong or the Giants. From Adelaide the Demons departed for Perth and isolation, to comply with Western Australia's quarantine requirements.

The following day, the Bulldogs trounced Essendon, keeping the Bombers goalless after half time. A week later, they overran Brisbane to snatch a one-point win. For the third successive year, the Lions were eliminated without a finals win. There was a lesson there. After

two previous fruitless campaigns, the Lions could not have lacked for motivation or experience, but were handicapped by injuries to key players. Their circumstances highlighted the importance of seizing opportunity when it presented. The Demons were well positioned, but nothing is ever guaranteed.

In the other semi-final, Geelong comfortably despatched the Giants by thirty-five points, setting up a third meeting with the Demons for 2021. When, if ever, had Melbourne beaten Geelong three times in one year? It seemed a big order. Over recent years, few teams had punished Melbourne as severely as the Cats, who relished nothing more than taking an opposition by the throat.

West Coast had stopped a series of Demons finals runs, and Hawthorn showed no compassion at their various peaks, but for massive hidings the Cats had no match. Short memories thought of 2012 and that 186-point margin at Kardinia Park, but others could not forget 1998 at the MCG, when Geelong kicked the first fifteen goals of the game to romp home by ninety-five points. Garry Lyon had scored Melbourne's first goal that day on the half-time siren. A few years earlier, in 1994, Melbourne had seen off Geelong by sixty-five points at the MCG; their response, two years later, was to hand Melbourne an utterly excessive 127-point hiding. There was no mercy in them.

None of this concerned the 2021 playing group who were reassured by their recent record. It is the role of supporters to bear the burden of history, which is why the phone calls started in the days before the preliminary final. Friends, former workmates and even veterans of The Demon Alternative called to ask, unnecessarily, 'How are you feeling? Nervous? Me too.' I lost count of how many conversations I had like that.

Two weeks is too long between games. There was too much time for speculation.

The Cats were on their last roll of the dice, having brought in Jeremy Cameron to bolster their attack at a cost of three first-round draft picks. The Cats' prime midfielders, Joel Selwood and Patrick Dangerfield, were now thirty-three and thirty-one years old, respectively. Isaac Smith and Shaun Higgins were thirty-three, Lachie Henderson was thirty-one and so was Zach Tuohy – even his moustache had reached double figures. Mitch Duncan, Gary Rohan and Rhys Stanley were thirty. There were many kilometres in those old legs; the bingo hall beckoned. Our mids were in their mid-twenties and Burgess had made us the fittest team in

the competition. However the game goes, we should finish the stronger.

Another senior citizen was Tom Hawkins, also thirty-three years old but in his case it did not matter: one on one, he was still almost unstoppable. Steven May would be some match for him, and with Lever or Petty in support, his impact could be diminished. The Cats had also been hit by injury, losing one of their best defenders in Tom Stewart.

Midweek, Joel Smith was ruled out due to a hamstring injury suffered at training. The door opened for Michael Hibberd to return as a lockdown defender. Briefly, there was speculation about whether the club would look to find a place for Nathan Jones in what was certain to be either his last or next-to-last game. But sentiment was not allowed to play a role in selection. All year, the match committee had been reluctant to change a winning unit. Ten players had played every game; four others had missed only one due to short-term injury. Both Jones and another much loved stalwart, Neville Jetta, would remain onlookers.

In Perth, it seemed every Melbourne supporter west of the Grampians had turned out. It was an impressive red and blue crowd.

It was an even more impressive Melbourne that made a mockery of our nervous pre-match conversations. Led by Max Gawn with five goals – including four in a historic ten-minute passage in the game-breaking third quarter – the Demons dominated this game for all but a handful of minutes before half time.

The contest opened with the expected finals intensity, and Melbourne was immediately pressing the attack. Only early misses slowed the Demons' momentum. Against the initial flow of the game, Geelong registered the first major when Cameron stayed down as all our tall defenders flew to compete.

But the Demons' response was immediate: Petracca broke clear of the centre bounce contest and found Neal-Bullen, who delivered cleanly to Brown. Brown hit the target and the Demons were deservedly in front after dominating the first ten minutes.

From there, it was all Melbourne as Harmes with a snapshot, Neal-Bullen with a SA-style checkside shot from forty metres and Petracca, who with sheer strength wrenched the ball from an opponent and sidestepped another, all found the goals. It was unbelievable, the start you always want but almost never have, but amid this scoring domination May left the field. Nudged in the back by Hawkins in a marking contest, May landed awkwardly and had apparently twinged a hamstring. The

umpires allowed both the contact and the mark. Hawkins missed the goal attempt but the bigger worry was May's fitness. And then Lever's fitness was clouded when he was seen hobbling after an attempted smother put an unexpected strain on his kicking leg.

As the quarter progressed, however, it was played increasingly on Melbourne's terms, with Salem winning repeat possessions and turning defence into counterattack. Oliver was being closely tagged by Selwood or Guthrie, but Petracca took advantage in his place. Viney, too, was strong in the midfield contests and Brayshaw was busy. Spargo joined the goalkickers shortly before the quarter closed.

What Melbourne had done with its frenetic tackling and constant pressure was prevent Geelong from playing its highly controlled, stop-start game of retaining possession and frustrating the opposition. It worked against us in 2020, but that control was not there for them this night. In the first term, Geelong were held to six marks, where most weeks they averaged more than 100 over four quarters.

The second term was Geelong's best, but each time they scored, Melbourne created an answer. Gawn, alternating with Jackson, and Petracca and Viney continued to outplay the Cats' experienced and renowned Dangerfield/Selwood-led midfield. The quarter's highlight came midway. Gawn, playing forward, 'marked' a touched ball and played on, running across the goal front forty metres out to swing onto his right foot. Everyone knew his goalkicking history, but they didn't know he could move like a gazelle. He surged into space and launched goalward, and seeing the trajectory shifted instantly into celebration mode. Next it was Pickett's turn to goal after scrapping out a ground-level contest.

It was striking how relentless Melbourne was at ground level. If a ball could not be cleared from a contest, the Demons forced another one, deflecting opposition handpasses, smothering kicks and pushing the ball forward so even if a clean possession could not be won, some ground was made.

With Melbourne leading 9.3 (57) to Geelong's 3.1 (19), a hint of trouble appeared. Petracca, who was dominating possessions and clearances, and Fritsch each missed from deliberate shots. Brown then missed from a clever snap that bounced just the wrong side of the goalpost. The quarter ended with Geelong scoring consecutive goals for the first time to narrow the gap inside five goals. Melbourne had outscored their opponents, but the Cats' five goals from six scores had them within striking distance.

Geelong's forwards had been starved: Hawkins, Cameron and Rohan had just nine possessions between them. Viney led the contested possession count with eleven, and Petracca was on his heels with nine. There were no nervous phone messages from other supporters at half time. Everyone was pacing like me, I suspect, restless, waiting for the restart.

Half time is always a hinge point, and the first goal of the third term was crucial. It came in the first minute. Viney dispossessed Dangerfield in Melbourne's forward half, where Petracca seized the loose ball and handpassed overhead to Oliver. His long kick into space allowed Brown to run in and take an uncontested mark thirty metres from goal. Brown set off on his distinctive jogging run and his kick bisected the goalposts.

Fritsch scored Melbourne's next goal after marking a low Petracca pass forty metres from goal. A fifty-metre penalty against Selwood made a certainty of it, signalling another rapid goal storm.

Within fifteen seconds of playing time, Gawn tapped to Viney and had the ball returned to him by Petracca, as he made off through the corridor towards the beckoning goal face. Gawn brought the crowd to its feet as he sprinted to fifty-five metres and kicked truly. Even Max himself seemed stunned, thrusting his arms skyward as Viney hoisted him in triumph. The next centre clearance? Oliver trapped a ground ball and kicked from inside the centre circle to centre forward, where McDonald competed for a mark, knocked the ball to the ground, recovered the crumbs, turned onto his right side – and goaled from fifty metres. It was Melbourne's fourth goal for the quarter, and its third in less than one minute of playing time.

From the other side of the continent, it seemed the stadium was in pandemonium, the spectators awed by the demolition of experienced finals practitioners, who were now trailing by fifty-two points. But what we had seen was just the opening act.

Gawn was freed for high contact in a ruck contest just outside Melbourne's attacking square and booted his third goal. Now May came off. With the game won, the big defender was rested and the medical substitute, James Jordon, began to warm up. The ball was back in Melbourne's attacking zone, and Fritsch created a stoppage with a crunching tackle on Geelong backman Henderson. Gawn, on fire now and unable to do wrong, wrestled Mark Blicavs aside in the resulting ruck contest, took the ball from midair and threw it onto his boot. Another

improbable goal.

The crowd was electric, totally into it. They knew they were witnessing something extraordinary. This was not the sort of tight contest that impartial observers might have been hoping for, but a rare, unrepeatable performance from a beanpole ruckman was setting the place alight.

As if to roll a season's luck into one quarter, Rivers launched Melbourne's next attack with a penetrating kick to Gawn, stationed at full-forward, who outmarked three defenders. Through the random roar of the crowd, an organised chant of 'Gawnee ... Gawnee' started up. He kicked from forty metres, and the man with one of the most famous shanks of all time registered his fifth goal, four of them in the space of six minutes of playing time.

Before the quarter was done, Pickett returned to the party, marking a high ball in the goal square, juggling it on the run and dashing in for his second. The carnage was summed up by the three-quarter-time scoreboard: 17.8 (110) to 5.2 (32).

The final term was an anticlimax. This had been Max Gawn's night, the best of his 158 games, but he'd had the support of a committed, disciplined team that won on every line. Lever, Salem and Petty combined well and, with Rivers and Langdon providing run, defied Geelong's attempts to attack and move the ball with any purpose. Midway through the term, Gawn was benched as the Demons packed away their big stars, ending the game with the five All-Australians on the bench, including the injured May, who would be nursed through the next fortnight.

This demolition of Geelong's aspirations ended in an eighty-three-point blowout, confirmation that the 2021 vintage Melbourne Demons had grown far beyond what even the most optimistic fan might have hoped. For almost twenty-four hours, we looked to the future in blissful anticipation of what this group might do.

Then the Bulldogs, the team I least wanted to see make it through, destroyed Port Adelaide as completely as Melbourne had Geelong. Port's home ground advantage had counted for nothing once the Bulldogs were rolling.

This was the most anxiety-inducing of outcomes. The Bulldogs knew what it took to win a premiership from outside the top four, having strung together four perfect weeks of sudden-death football in 2016 to end their premiership drought. Their late-season slump aside, they had performed well throughout the year, occupying a top-four placing for all but the

last few weeks. They were a quality unit with the capacity for magical thinking to create their own reality.

They matched up well with us too. For Petracca they had Marcus Bontempelli; for Oliver they had Jack McCrae; for Viney they had Tom Liberatore. With Josh Dunkley, Adam Treloar and Bailey Smith, their midfield ran deep.

Our defence was the best in the business, and probably all the stronger for being a unit that had played together most of the season. Their forward line had been weakened by the loss of Josh Bruce, but it still had unpredictability with two striking aerialists: the kid Cody Weightman and Aaron Naughton. Weightman had already launched a mark-of-the-year contender over Gawn earlier in the year.

And how would Melbourne counter the Dogs' playmaker, Caleb Daniel? He had seemingly played without an opponent when the clubs last met, setting up repeated forays forward in what was Melbourne's most recent loss. And would Harmes again run against Liberatore? It had worked once this year, but not the second time.

Gawn would win the ruck contests but he could not play another game like the preliminary final. There was talk the Bulldogs might attempt a heavy physical game against Gawn, with players blocking his run to contests. It was a tactic Port Adelaide had used against him successfully, but it relied on the umpires turning a blind eye to the interference. Would they allow that on the game's biggest day? Bulldog ruckman Stefan Martin, a former Demon and teammate of Gawn, was expected to bring an aggressive edge to their contests, freeing Tim English to play as a marking target in attack. At least Jackson offered an option for our ruck contest when Gawn went forward to stretch their defence.

I braced for two weeks of broken sleep and tried to engender some faith by recalling images of Petracca bursting away from contests, Oliver inventing new ways of clearing the ball with those quick hands of his, and Brown marking the ball at its highest point, giving defenders no chance of spoiling. Meanwhile, with the injury list almost clear, Nathan Jones was squeezed out of the best twenty-three. He returned home to Melbourne to be with his wife, who was about to give birth to twins.

But my nervousness never subsided, for the simple reason that this was the best chance by far for the Demons to break their long drought. This team was the best performed of the season, with a winning percentage matching that of the best of the golden-era teams. It remained fit and

its players healthy, but for a secret, six-centimetre tear in Steven May's hamstring, which even he did not know about. It was in the belly of the muscle, and the judgement of the medical staff was that he would get through the game.

The AFL had done away with the pre-finals bye, shifting it to the week before the Grand Final. So we were in uncharted territory: having won a qualifying final with the reward of a week off, Melbourne would be playing just one game in twenty-eight days before the decider. To try to offset any disadvantage, the players were put through modified match play. Additional rules for these match simulations were 'no jumping into backs and no sling tackles'. There remained a suspicion, though, that Melbourne might be disadvantaged by their high ladder finish and early finals success. The Bulldogs, however, had been travelling around the country, playing games in Launceston, Brisbane and Adelaide before the decider in Perth.

The long break allowed time for reflection on Melbourne's fifty-seven-year premiership drought, and to some of the deeper tragedies the club endured: the premature deaths of champions Robert Flower, Jim Stynes and Sean Wight; the loss of promising young defender Troy Broadbridge, who was swept away in the 2004 Boxing Day tsunami; the death of Colin Sylvia in a road smash; and the loss of Dean Bailey, who within two years of leaving the club was diagnosed with lung cancer and died in 2014.

As well, respected former coach Neale Daniher was dealing with the ravages of motor neurone disease, while continuing to raise money for research into the condition. Happily, although Essendon was the club to which his family had a deep attachment, he continued to publicly support the Demons, appearing in the club's navy blue and red colours.

As did his former president, Joseph Gutnick, who told *The Age* that he had long forgiven those with whom he had feuded at the club. He had been 'angry a bit' in 2001, he conceded. 'I put a lot of money in and I don't think I was treated correctly, but I've long forgotten. Anyone I had a fight with I've long forgiven, maybe I was too temperamental at the time, maybe I was too sensitive at the time, but I couldn't be more excited.'

He was 'deliriously happy' with the team's progress. 'When I came from Sydney in the early '50s, it was Melbourne's glory days. And of course when you come to a city as a young kid, you barrack for the best team, and that's what Melbourne was. And if anyone knows me in life I'm very loyal. I've been a member for 25 years. I had a good feeling about

this year.³

During the long wait for the game, there was also plenty of offhand comment about the ‘Norm Smith curse’, as though it really existed. Its origins lay in that remark Smith made once he was thwarted in his bid to be elected to the club committee and cut his ties to the club: ‘It will be many, many years before Melbourne play in the finals again, let alone become a force.’⁴ The notion of a curse was borrowed from American baseball, and the ‘Curse of the Bambino’ that supposedly plagued the Boston Red Sox after the club traded the great slugger Babe Ruth to the New York Yankees in 1919. Ruth helped elevate the Yankees to the supremacy the Sox had until then enjoyed.

Students of baseball argue the real reason behind the Sox’s decline had more to do with its recruitment policies than with any curse: their narrow preference for batters suited to their home stadium, their refusal to recruit African Americans until long after the sport desegregated, and their failure to develop strong batteries of pitchers.

Equally, a failure to actively recruit, combined with relatively unproductive country and metropolitan zones, shaped Melbourne’s decline, along with the fact that the club remained an amateur outfit long after the game grew steadily more professional. You don’t need a curse in order to fail.

As Grand Final day approached, football talk reverted to the traditional speculation about team selection, May’s hamstring, Spargo’s ankle and whether Jordon or Hunt would be the medical substitute. Melbourne, true to form, made no changes.

The day itself, waiting for the game to begin at 7.15 p.m., was too long. Hundreds of Melbourne supporters, under lockdown rules and stranded in their hometown, filled a few hours kicking footballs and picnicking outside the MCG. They posed for selfies with the statues of Norm Smith and Jim Stynes, and broke into sporadic verses of ‘It’s a Grand Old Flag’. One fellow walked among them, offering 1964 pennies as souvenirs. No one turned him down. Then we all went home to wait.

Chapter Eighteen

Breaking the Drought

After fifty-seven years of pain, it's coming home!

Max Gawn

As a symbol of the state of play, the sight of the smallest man in the game standing over one of the biggest could not have been more appropriate. Midway through the third quarter of the Grand Final, Caleb Daniel, at 168 centimetres, paused as if wondering what he might next do to Max Gawn, the 208-centimetre Melbourne captain sprawled at his feet.

The ball was crossing the boundary when Daniel grabbed Gawn, as if he assumed the ruckman was taking possession of the ball, and threw him to ground. Gawn went down too easily, in some minds. Christian Petracca later said he laughed in that moment, while Gawn looked expectantly for a free kick. Daniel stared down at Gawn and lingered for a second before turning away.

With the Bulldogs surging to a nineteen-point lead, their biggest of the game, and approaching three-quarter time, the incident was emblematic for what was happening on the scoreboard: the rise of the underdog. The upset was on.

Melbourne held sway early, from the moment Petracca kicked the opening goal of the match after he scooped an attempted pass from his bootlaces and from a standing start roosted the ball from the fifty-metre arc. What power is in those legs. From there, the first term had been mostly one-way traffic: Fritsch marking on the goal line for his first, then pouncing on a defender's bungled marking attempt for his second, late in the term. In the meantime, the Bulldogs registered their only goal of the opening term when Roark Smith recovered best from a marking contest, while for Melbourne, Spargo finished off the forward pressure of Pickett and Jackson.

'We knew that we would be challenged. We spoke about it to the players in the team meeting leading up, that there would be momentum

shifts. But just our ability early to settle and take away those nerves and really be in the game was really important to us,' Simon Goodwin would say later.

Apart from two opportunities late in the quarter that resulted in only minor scores, it was close to the perfect start for Melbourne against a side known for strong opening quarters. Melbourne's intensity at the contest and organisation behind the ball, with Salem and Lever turning back the opposition's attempts to clear their back fifty, and their ability to mop up their own errors had them in control. Michael Hibberd, too, was outstanding in defence, refusing to concede in one-on-one contests. Overlapping run through the corridor made this a whole-of-team effort of attacking football. The Bulldogs appeared nervous, and below their best selves.

Harry Laumets, veteran of the 1970s Demons cheer squad, was a rarity, a supporter from the east coast who reached Perth for the game. Now living on the Gold Coast, he had flown to Hobart to quarantine for sixteen days, and then passed muster for entry into Western Australia. From his seat on the wing, he was encouraged, but also dissatisfied in the way of serious football fans.

'I felt relief we are having a good start because the Bulldogs are known to be good starters,' Laumets recalls. 'I felt we could still have improved, but that didn't eventuate. There was so much fumbling in that quarter and we weren't kicking straight.'

Todd Viney was another who was enjoying a quiet confidence. 'Leading into the game, I was confident we would win, more so than in 1988 or 2000. In those years we were underdogs coming up against really strong teams.

'I felt we were evenly matched. We were one-all against them this year. We played really poorly the one we lost. They got six goals from our defensive-fifty stoppages, which is unheard of. No way would that happen again. I thought we would be in a good position on the day, so [I was] quietly confident, but you never know what's going to happen on the day. We were young, had eight players twenty-one or younger, so there was some inexperience there. You never know how those players will handle a Grand Final, so the first quarter we got away to a flyer and the Bulldogs looked like they were the ones under pressure.'

Yet any semblance of a decent buffer was gone within five minutes of the second term commencing, as the Bulldogs brought their own forward

pressure. They shifted their approach to goal in these opening minutes of the second term, sending the ball wide to the flank, where their star wingman Lachie Hunter was able to centre it to the hotspot off his hot left foot. A marking contest leading to a ground ball and strong tackling kept the ball alive for Treloar to twice finish off. Two more attacks through the central corridor resulted in a goal to Naughton, and an attempt from Bailey Smith that drifted wide.

The game had turned the Dogs' way, because they had control of centre clearances and were creating rapid entries to the forward fifty. Treloar, Bontempelli and Liberatore all had a hand in the surge.

Brown replied for Melbourne after Jackson marked strongly on the wing and sent the ball deep forward, where Gawn provided a shield for his full-forward in the marking contest. Minutes later, Gawn, now in a deep forward role with Jackson rucking, had a chance when he found space thirty metres from goal and marked uncontested. The angle was tight and did not suit a right-foot kick, yet Gawn's attempt looked good. But it was called wide, suggesting the late swing to the left came after the ball crossed the line. Gawn looked mystified at the decision. Momentum remained with the Bulldogs.

As a coordinator with the Demon Army, Sophie Galer was among those who had spent the previous fortnight working with the Fremantle cheer squad to ensure that the players had a banner to run through. 'What was worrying me was that it was going to be a really close game, and I wasn't equipped to deal with losing a Grand Final by a small margin,' she says. 'The other Grand Finals I have seen have been complete blowouts, when within the first ten minutes it wasn't going to be Melbourne's year. But I don't know if I am mentally equipped to deal with a close match, when we could have won it.'

Sophie and her son Ben settled in to watch the game with their lucky charm, a block of Top Deck chocolate. Crunching through the sweet stuff had worked earlier in the finals series, but now it seemed to be losing its magic. 'By the second quarter Ben is saying it's not looking good,' she recalls.

Several more half-chances went begging. From late in the first term to midway through the second, the Demons added just one goal from seven scoring shots. At the other end, Bontempelli twice drifted in front of his own forwards to mark and goal. Again, the Dogs seemed to be working to a plan. The obvious marking targets of, in the first instance,

Naughton and, secondly, Mitch Hannan, formerly a hero of Melbourne's 2018 campaign, shaped to impose themselves on the aerial duel but effectively protected the Bont's flightpath from Lever and May. The Bulldog champion lifted them into the lead.

The Bulldogs' efficiency was devastating, with four goals and one behind from five forward-fifty entries at one stage of the quarter. At half time, the Dogs led by eight points, 7.5 (47) to 5.9 (39), having earlier trailed by twenty-one points.

During the half-time break, with the game back virtually at square one, the Demons took comfort from the fact that, statistically, they were competitive, although they trailed narrowly on the scoreboard. Goodwin spoke to the players about the times they had been in similar positions – against Brisbane, and against Geelong in Round 23 – and how they had been able to generate a run of goals.

'We spoke about the ground ball game and the importance of winning contests behind the ball, and our mids' ability to work back and support that,' Goodwin said later. 'We needed to toughen up and work harder in a few areas, but we knew that our run and our fitness within the team would come out strong.'

'We spoke about the fact we had been in this position a few times throughout the year, and that's what you have to draw on as a coaching group. Throughout the year we had experiences where we were down at half time. One game that stood out really clearly for me was against Brisbane – they had won six or seven games on the trot. We were playing them in Sydney and we were twenty points down at half time. We spoke at half time about [how] we have been in this position before [and] we know what momentum looks like. It's just about resetting and understanding what the game needs.'

'We had spoken about Caleb [Daniel] and his impact, and some structural changes that we were going to make to take some advantage back in our favour, and obviously Bont was on fire. He is a quality player. He was pushing forward. He was pushing deep, especially on slow entry and he was having an impact on the scoreboard.'¹

Despite having the dominant ruckman in the AFL, Melbourne did not necessarily count on winning the centre clearance battle in 2021. As much as winning clearances, the team relied on winning back possession. Midfielders were relied on to push back into defence to support the back six. This mattered because the introduction of starting zones limited how

teams could set up at centre contests.

The ideal shape of Melbourne's defence during general play had May playing deep, in a kind of goalkeeper role, with Lever able to leave his opponent to make interceptions. That licence relied on him having support from upfield to guard territory and to pressure the opposition's forward entries. Having regained possession, Salem, Langdon, Brayshaw or Rivers relied on their pace and clean disposal to set up attacks. A tight defence offered the licence to be more aggressive in attack.

During a finals campaign online briefing to supporters, defence coach Troy Chaplin outlined the approach. 'Now we have got great stability behind the ball with Maysie and Jake in particular, [so] going into this preseason [it] was about how can we get more aggressive?' Chaplin explained. 'We had trust in all our defenders in beating our men, so it allows our midfielders to be more aggressive in the way they get forward and help our forwards defend our forward half.'

That forward pressure conceded little time to opposition defenders to set up, so they were usually 'dumping' the ball out of defence, which allowed May and Lever to control the back half. 'That's when you know we're in a real good space here,' Chaplin said. 'I have great trust in Steve and Jake controlling match-ups.'²

For the second half, Oliver was assigned to quell Bontempelli. The early minutes of the third term were tight and contested. Melbourne attacked first, but again registered only a minor score. It had become a habit. The Bulldogs kicked the first goal of the half after Jason Johannisen soared above Bowey on the edge of the goal square. Had 'JJ' planted both hands on Bowey's shoulders to achieve his lift for the mark? Absolutely. Once upon a time, Johannisen would have been penalised, but momentum was with the Bulldogs – and besides, umpires always seem to want to reward the spectacular.

Goodwin saw positive signs, however. 'I thought our first ten minutes of the third quarter, when we were under a little bit of pressure behind the ball, I thought [our players] stood up in their contest work and just steadied the ship enough.'³

Still, the breaks continued to run the Bulldogs' way. Soon after, Bontempelli found space to receive a handpass inside the forward fifty, and kicked his third goal, this time on the run. At this point the Dogs had mastered a forty-point turnaround to lead by nineteen points. Moments later, Daniel and Gawn clashed on the wing, and Gawn was sent sprawling.

Daniel's body language seemed to say, 'We've got your measure.'

At least one independent observer reckoned Melbourne was on the brink of an ignominious capitulation.⁴

*

From armchairs and sofas across the country, Melbourne supporters were bracing themselves. I always imagined witnessing Melbourne's drought-breaking premiership sitting in spring sunshine under a cobalt sky at the MCG. Instead, we watched anxiously a television screen from under LED downlights and a ceiling finished in Antique White USA. Nothing was how it was meant to be. I sensed the first flickering twinges of resignation. Anne and I exchanged one of those 'this doesn't look good; get set for a letdown' looks.

Jan Dimmick had decorated her lounge room in red and blue and draped a club scarf around a framed photograph of her father. It was 120 years since he played for the club as a schoolboy. 'I was very nervous in the third quarter, but I hadn't given up,' she recalls.

Dick Seddon had been thinking the second fortnight's layoff was no advantage, and now felt the tide had turned against his old club. 'I thought they had us in the third quarter, because a 19-point lead in a low scoring game, which it was at that stage, was a big lead.'

Rod Grinter would normally have been at the game with some of his former teammates, like David Neitz or Paul Hopgood, but under COVID restrictions he was, like most of us, at home. 'I have been bullish all year, and that didn't wane at all,' he says. 'I was nervous, like everybody's nervous, but I felt they were the fittest team in the competition, they were the healthiest team in the competition. I thought about Round 23 against Geelong and how they came back.'

Phil Reed is a former cheer squad member who cut his teeth weathering the insults of opposition fans for a team that lost more than it won. He was keeping the faith. 'I didn't feel we were gone, and the reason is that whereas they were slotting them we were having misses at the time,' he says. 'The nineteen points flattered them, and didn't necessarily show appropriate reward for our effort either. It was a matter of degrees here and degrees there, and things went right for them.'

After that bright start, Harry Laumets, sitting on the wing in Perth sunshine with a Richmond supporter and a Hawthorn supporter who were both wearing red and blue for the day, had to concede it was looking grim. It was not that the boys were playing badly, but the goals just weren't

coming.

‘I had mild concern at half time, but when they got to nineteen points up, I had my head buried in my hands,’ he recalls. ‘I knew that we were fit. We had been running over teams in the second half, but I didn’t really have that in my head at the time.’

Sue Springfield was more entitled than most to be surprised at how she was witnessing the Grand Final: not at the MCG, not even at home, but in a hospital bed. Sharing a room with a stranger, she was unable even to barrack. As the Bulldogs scampered to the lead, dark memories returned. ‘I was very worried,’ she remembers. ‘I did not think we were playing badly, but I was definitely thinking, “Please don’t let this happen again.” After being there in ’88 and 2000, I didn’t want another huge score kicked against us, and an embarrassing defeat.’

In another part of town, a friend of mine, a Bulldogs supporter, was beginning to feel comfortable. ‘They need four straight kicks to catch us,’ he told himself, as though that task would be too great. Later, he would blame himself for tempting fate.

Simon Goodwin was shaken. ‘We had a very similar game in the preseason, and they smashed us by forty or fifty points at Marvel Stadium, and the two players who killed us that day were Bont and Caleb Daniel. I remember thinking at one stage, “Please, this can’t happen again. These two guys that we have learnt so much about in our preseason game against the Dogs, they can’t get it done against us once again.” We had to tidy a few things up,’ he said.⁵

But there were positive signs too. ‘I knew we had started to absorb down back. I think it was a period of about nine minutes in the quarter where the Dogs had the majority of the time in their half and we started to stiffen up behind the ball, and we just needed to start to win a few clearances and get the ball back down the other end.’⁶

On the field, Charlie Spargo had the thought that Bontempelli could win the game off his own boot. Trent Rivers was thinking, ‘We didn’t come all this way to lose,’ while Oliver was also flattened by the moment. ‘I was just thinking we can’t waste a whole year, like it was too much hard work, too much effort to lose, I guess,’ he later recalled. ‘We just dug in and got back to our basics.’⁷

The incident between Daniel and Gawn was no turning point. Nothing else came of it. But soon afterwards, everything did change. Gawn went forward, allowing Jackson to take the boundary ruck contest, from which

Rivers won possession and kicked to half-forward. Another contest for possession and another boundary throw-in resulted.

At the throw-in, Jackson won front position and tapped towards Viney, who could not take clean possession but bullocked forward, hustling the ball towards Melbourne's goal. The Bulldogs' Bailey Smith missed its flight and Harmes ran from the boundary side, gathered the midair ball and set off at pace. Harmes took maybe six steps towards the true centre half-forward position, pursued by Roark Smith, who made a despairing lunge to rein him in. Too late – the kick, long and to the opposite flank, was flawless. It dropped into open space, where Fritsch, a metre ahead of his opponent, took it on his chest thirty metres from goal.

Time slowed as Fritsch settled over the ball and moved in. Did anyone breathe while this was going on? As I watched on from home, the kick appeared to be going wide, but the crowd behind the goal and Fritsch's reaction made clear it was good. It was Melbourne's first goal since eight minutes into the second quarter.

At the centre bounce, the line-up now was Oliver versus Macrae, Viney versus Treloar, Petracca versus Liberatore, and Jackson and Martin doing battle in the ruck, but the outcome was inconclusive. Martin went to ground and Jackson created space for Oliver to gather and clear the circle. Oliver handpassed wide to Petracca, who had separated from Liberatore and now kicked for the goal square, where Gawn shaped to mark against Zaine Cordy.

Behind the Gawn–Cordy contest was Easton Wood, who left Fritsch to attempt a spoil over Gawn. Fritsch was fourth man up at the back of the pack, and was free to time his jump, which sent Wood sprawling. Fritsch had leapt up like a kelpie onto a sheep's back, and now he landed like a cat. The ball had beaten all comers but bounced up for Fritsch, who spun towards goal. He gathered and kicked, keeping the ball low and straight. All of thirteen seconds of playing time had passed but the game had been transformed.

Melbourne trailed by seven points and had reversed the momentum.

At the ruck contest restart, Petracca wrenched the ball out of Liberatore's grip and burst from the centre. Once again, the Demons were winning centre clearances on their attacking side. Petracca kicked long, this time to the right forward pocket, where Brown, with the lightest nudge, edged his opponent, Cordy, under the ball and took an uncontested mark. For a half-second there was doubt; the rule governing

contact in the back seems to change annually. What was it this year? Whatever it was, the mark, like Hawkins' two weeks before, was allowed. Cordy did not protest.

Brown went through his customary long run, which, as risky as it looks, with the ball jiggling and shifting in his grip, works more often than not. And it worked. Just sixty-seven seconds of playing time had elapsed since Fritsch broke the goal drought, and now the Bulldogs led by a solitary point.

The game had become a neutral observer's delight with this dramatic shift in fortune. Five minutes passed before the next score came. Bontempelli threatened but was wrapped up by Oliver. At the other end, Daniel made a rare mistake, scrubbing his kick along the ground, where it was intercepted by Brayshaw. In turn, Brayshaw appeared to attempt a short pass but also miskicked. The boundary line was the Dogs' friend right now, but their attempts to find it ended with Bowey, who chipped over the pack into clear space, where Brayshaw pitched full-length forward and marked comfortably inside the forward-fifty arc.

From his home near the MCG, Phil Reed revelled in this play. 'One of the moments that stood out for me [was] Bowey and Brayshaw in the forward pocket,' he says. 'Bowey got the ball, Brayshaw signalled to him he was on the other side of the pack and just waved his hand, and Bowey did this little chip pass of fifteen metres, which I think "Fritter" thought was for him but Brayshaw ended up marking it. Fantastic play. Brayshaw was part of the play, but ran forward to make the next play. I thought, "Wow, a great moment of desperation."'

Brayshaw was on an angle of something like 45 degrees. Conscious of his less-than-reliable deliberate kicking for goal this year, I consoled myself with the thought that, at worst, he would level the scores. But no, his kick was perfect. Melbourne took the lead, and in all those lounge rooms the words were whispered: 'We can actually win this.'

Brayshaw was central to the next play after the Bulldogs went forward from the centre contest. May and Lever together outhustled Naughton, but Lever's spoil produced a ground ball. The Bulldogs shared it among themselves and attacked again, kicking to where Josh Schache and Lever were set to compete – only for the Melbourne wingman to hurl himself into the pair to complete the spoil. All three sprawled on the turf, Brayshaw on his back and apparently winded. Instantly, someone hauled him to his feet.

This was a second moment that thrilled Reed. ‘There was this vision, I don’t know who the player was, all you saw was the arm come in and pull Brayshaw back up,’ he marvels. ‘It was the speed with which they did it – the sense was, “You gotta keep going here.” I had the sense, “Wow, we are really on fire here.”’

What came next was scarcely believable. The game had changed so much since Melbourne last won a premiership that no one kicks drop kicks anymore, let alone its little brother, the bullet-like stab pass. But now they did things like this.

Petracca gained possession of a loose ball in the forward pocket and Pickett won him a half-second’s grace with a block that upended Bulldog Josh Dunkley. Petracca could not open up the angle to goal, since he was boundary side of a pack of players. Instead, he slid the ball onto his boot so it skimmed low, as if to pass in front of the goal face. It bounced once, twice, and then turned sharply enough to scoot by the goal umpire’s legs. Melbourne led by twelve. Pandemonium broke out among the crowd.

His celebration said plenty. It was short and emphatic, a triumphant display for the fans nearby, and then he returned to the centre for the next contest. He looked determined, focused, possessed with the thought of unfinished business – mad, but in a good way.

Unbelievably, at the centre bounce it was happening again, Melbourne exiting goal side with the ball. Viney fired a handpass to Petracca, who had Oliver running out of the middle. As Oliver charged forward with two Bulldogs in pursuit, the little man Daniel left his opponent, Sparrow, to confront the ball carrier. Sparrow pushed back closer to goal, where Oliver’s looping handpass found him unguarded on the arc. With three opponents descending on him, and off one step, much like Petracca in the first quarter, Sparrow thumped the ball goalward. In the goal square, McDonald wrestled Cordy out of its path and the ball passed the line unmolested. Melbourne now by three goals.

‘It was definitely a very spur of the moment sort of thing,’ Sparrow later recalled. ‘I just saw the opportunity, and I took it, and yeah, pretty happy with it.’⁸

The Bulldogs looked shell-shocked. We were delirious. If we’d been at the MCG, we would be on our feet, howling like timberwolves. Instead, we were on our feet in in our lounge rooms, letting the neighbours know all about it. Sue Springfield still could not cheer from her hospital bed. She was weeping tears of pride and relief: ‘I was like, even if we lose, we

have put up a good fight; I can deal with that.'

Gawn had conceded the ruck duties to Jackson, telling the coaches' bench that while the young man was running hot, he should be left to keep running. And run he did, even though this could have been the time for a team to slow the game, see out the quarter content with an eighteen-point margin and all the momentum going into the final term. But that was not how it played out.

The ruck contest was again inconclusive, but Viney soccered the ground ball clear of the circle. Jackson's unique athleticism enabled him to become a midfielder in a single step. He led the race for the loose ball, gathered cleanly and handpassed into the corridor ahead of Oliver at full pace, who, without breaking stride, telescoped his left arm out to take possession. Viney was running as defensive escort so Oliver had no one to pressure him. Also with him was Sparrow, shouting encouragement as Oliver passed over the arc and put a dagger into the Doggies' hearts. It took all of thirteen seconds playing time and was the fourth goal scored directly from a centre clearance.

This is how a drought breaks – not with a trickle, but with a flood.

Melbourne had made a freeway of the space forward of the centre circle, and now led by four goals. Seven major scores in eleven minutes of playing time had devastated the opposition. With fifteen seconds left, there was, unbelievably, a chance for another goal as Petracca took possession from the centre bounce and looked set to launch yet another attack, but he was forced to change direction and was caught by Bontempelli. The siren for three-quarter time was a chance for us all to take a breather.

There were no looks to be exchanged between Anne and me now. My assessment: 'I reckon three goals this quarter will make it safe. Then they won't be able to catch us.'

Melbourne had scored seven consecutive goals through the final ten minutes of the third term. Within the huddle, Goodwin told the group to take a few deep breaths, settling down the players after the adrenaline rush of the goal storm. With momentum running their way, one of the messages around stoppages was simply: 'Get it and boot it!'

In the last quarter, the Demons reassert their authority almost instantly. Although the Bulldogs won the first clearance through a Bontempelli handpass into space, Brayshaw was onto it, and via Petracca, Jackson and Neal-Bullen it ended with Sparrow, with time and space at right half-forward. Sparrow sent the ball wide to the opposing forward

pocket for Brown to mark and goal – and set us on our way.

Overlapping play-on football next saw the ball transferred from Langdon to Salem to – of course – Petracca, who played on with a looping handpass to Spargo, who kicked short to Fritsch. The game, already a rout, was turning into a clinic, with the ball in the hands of one of the most reliable kicks in the team. Fritsch kicked his fifth goal, and the prospect of a premiership, once imagined, a hope, a dream, is now almost real.

Several minutes later, Neal-Bullen – another whose kicking enjoyed a new reliability – provided the third goal that delivered impregnability.

This would not be a heart-stopping final quarter at all. It would not be like those times you suddenly become aware of a thumping in your chest, and quietly hope that it doesn't suddenly stop before the game does. Nor would we experience the explosive elation of a siren settling the result with less than a goal between the combatants, let alone the knife-edge of extra time.

You blink and the game was over, Todd Viney says. 'Our pressure was really good. I was very confident through the first quarter thinking this is going to be the year, and then I became quite nervous throughout the second and early part of the third.

'We just lost all momentum and couldn't move the footy, and then they really got going out of stoppages, and our boys blitzed them out of stoppages and with scores from stoppage. It was some of the best footy I have seen, and in context to be able to do that in a Grand Final, as they did in the prelim final – two of the hardest games to win – was something I haven't seen before.'

Instead of the expected tension, there was now the satisfaction of an unbeatable lead over a worthy but beaten opponent. Ours was the best team of the year, and against the second-best the outcome was decisive. A quarter of an hour remained to savour the experience of a premiership still in the making.

'Once it was obvious in that last quarter that it was going to be us, it was time to just let it sink in,' recalls Sophie Galer. 'There was time to pay attention to other things. There was definitely the fitness. There were players who were good last year who were able to step up a level this year, like Oliver and Langdon, and Petracca was able to win games this year. They seemed so focused. They had a sense of belief.'

Jan Dimmick suffered not just from pre-game nerves but from a long memory of the Bulldogs' 1954 thrashing of a young Melbourne side – the

supporter's curse. 'I was thinking of what they did to us in 1954,' she says. 'I thought I'd have a heart attack at one stage. I could see [the Bulldogs] coming on in the second quarter and I thought, "They are going to challenge us now. They're fast and they're tall." I got very nervous but I did sit it out. The last quarter was magnificent.'

Sue Springfield, who endured the worst of those years, including the 1979 Waverley massacre, speaks for generations of supporters: 'It's meant so much. It's not just the premiership. They have played brilliantly all year. It's instilled a different level of pride in the club. It's meant all the pain of those terrible years that we went through has been worthwhile.'

On field, the players let themselves feel it too. Petracca revealed that Steven May rebuked him for smiling during the final term; when he was on the bench, the 'Tractor' spent his time dividing the number of goals between the teams by the number of minutes remaining to know when he could smile again.

'The fourth quarter was awesome because we could feel that feeling of winning,' Petracca said later. 'It was good to know you were going to win the premiership with ten minutes left. It would have been nerve-racking if we were closer, but to have that feeling of winning is something I'll never forget.'

With about seven minutes left, even May shared an on-field celebration with Lever and Petty. 'It got to about ten goals up. I looked across at both Steven May and Harrison Petty and we just all had smiles on our faces,' Lever said. 'I think that's when it started to sink in, about halfway through the last quarter.'

Michael Hibberd could not believe the goal storm at the other end of the ground. 'I said, "Is this real?" It ended up being real and we're a premiership team. I still can't believe it.'

Trent Rivers was mates with Jackson before they were drafted together in 2019. 'Me and Luke walk up to each other and we were like, "We're about to win a flag, it's going to happen,"' he said.

Angus Brayshaw struggled to describe his reaction. He had played some of the best football of his career in the finals series, but the realisation of their achievement was still not fully settled in his mind. 'I was so desperate not to lose that game,' he said. 'It would have been so heartbreaking after all we'd been through. I'll never forget that last quarter ... it's hard to put into words.'

There is no secret to rebuilding a club, one expert offered. Just make

good decisions. This is both true and too simplistic. There are so many decisions that had to be right, beginning with the one that lured recruiter Jason Taylor from Collingwood in 2012. Taylor's decisions included his first draft pick for the club, the small defender Christian Salem with pick 13, and plucking Clayton Oliver far ahead of expectations at pick 4, and Kysaiah Pickett, who, even with his impeccable pedigree, was seen as a gamble at pick 12. Anyone would have had Petracca at pick 2, so no kudos there, but the Luke Jackson and Trent Rivers double in the 2019 draft with Pickett now appeared inspired. Taylor had some misses, of course, but far more hits: Hunt and Harmes, Sparrow and Spargo, and, most recently, Jake Bowey, whose composure in his debut year of seven games was that of a veteran.

So many good decisions.

Then there was the clinical decision making of the coach and football managers, which saw the gaps in the playing list filled with established players from other clubs. Lever was drawn from Adelaide and May from Gold Coast in consecutive years, followed by Ed Langdon from Fremantle and Adam Tomlinson from the Giants. The final piece was Ben Brown, unwanted by the Kangaroos for 2021, and who filled the key forward post through the finals, averaging two goals a game.

Recruiting Darren Burgess to oversee fitness and physical conditioning at the end of 2019 was another of those good decisions. Burgess inherited a list that had undergone seventeen surgeries in the previous preseason, so he set out to build the players' resilience. Players were urged to train on consecutive days, and helped to train through soreness. No excuse was acceptable for missing a training session, so much so that it became a matter of pride to complete a full preseason, as Max Gawn insisted on doing in 2020–21.¹⁰

The proof of Burgess's method would seem to be in the healthy end-of-season list.

Crucially, among the good decisions was a decision not taken: the one to sack the coach at the end of 2020. Two years of missed finals after two years of growing promise had Simon Goodwin entering the year with a metaphorical black raven on his shoulder.

A football department review instead decided to restructure the coaching department under Alan Richardson, while adding Yze and Williams. Earlier versions of the Melbourne Football Club would have sacked Goodwin and the club would have started over. Instead, in the

space of six months, the man known universally as ‘Goody’ transitioned from coach-most-likely-to-be-sacked to coach of the year.

Goodwin attributed the team’s Grand Final comeback to their return to the Melbourne way of hardworking midfielders supporting the defence in order to counterattack. ‘[In] the second half, I thought Clayton Oliver, and Christian and Jack and the boys, Tommy Sparrow, they worked incredibly hard to get back and support our defenders, and that’s where the game started to shift,’ Goodwin said.¹¹

Melbourne’s last term ran right to the siren and then some, delivering nine goals to the opposition’s one. The siren sounded as McDonald was lining up fifty metres from goal, courtesy of a bullet pass from Petracca. The team led by sixty-eight points. The club’s biggest winning margin in a Grand Final was seventy-three points, in 1956. McDonald paused at the siren blast, reset himself and drove home one final goal.

McDonald’s second goal was an exclamation point to everything that had gone before, and it set a new record Grand Final winning margin for the club of seventy-four points: 21.14 (140) to 10.6 (66). The scoreline from that moment when Daniel challenged Gawn was sixteen goals and four behinds to one goal and one behind: 100 points to seven in a quarter and a half of football. Langdon, Salem, Jackson and McDonald all hit the scoreboard in the final term as the team’s domination was complete.

The Perth crowd roared its approval – although it was not quite the real thing, so far as Harry Laumets was concerned. ‘The atmosphere, it was okay at the ground. You know, the crowd were happy, but that passion didn’t really seem to be there,’ he says. ‘Had it been at the MCG, the Melbourne supporters would have been absolutely feral and passionate ... To Melbourne’s credit, they went for it. They did not stop. I’m just very, very happy and relieved. There’s a future there. Who knows how far this team can go?’

Former Bulldog and Demon Garry Baker agreed. Baker played two seasons at the Western Oval after he was recruited from Meeniyandumbalk, in Footscray’s country zone, before embarking on a 127-game career with Melbourne. Living in Hobart, he and his daughters were able to travel to Perth for the game. The only thing the occasion lacked, he says, was the MCG.

‘People ask me that all the time [which team I was supporting], because I love Footscray, but I was a mad Melbourne supporter growing up. My heart was well and truly at Melbourne. I do love a new team winning the flag, but

I wonder how it would have been if it was Melbourne that won in 2016.’

On the day, he rode the game’s barometer like every other Melbourne fan. ‘At quarter time I said, “I’ll think we’ll win this.” At half time I said, “We’re in a little bit of strife but we can still win this.” After that [Bontempelli] goal, I said, “It’s great we have got to the Grand Final, but there’s no way known we can win this.” That was not because we were nineteen points down, but because the Bulldogs had kicked eight of the last nine goals. They were so dominant I did not think we had a hope in hell of turning it around.’

As a former ruckman, Baker revelled in what happened next. ‘The way young Jackson was getting the ball out of the centre, you knew the midfielders were going to get it and take it down for a goal. The extent of that turnaround in a game was something we have never seen before and I don’t think we’ll ever see it again.’

Finally, in Christian Petracca, Melbourne had a player of its own awarded the Norm Smith Medal, first struck in 1979. Second in the award was Bayley Fritsch, who finished with six goals, one fewer than Norm Smith himself in the 1940 Grand Final. Nor were Fritsch’s ‘junk time’ goals: his first consolidated Melbourne’s strong start, his third and fourth transformed the game, reversing its momentum midway through the third term, and his fifth goal confirmed the Demon’s final-term dominance. He outran and outmarked his opponents to find space and opportunity, but it was not enough to win him the medal.

Petracca was dominant in shifting the game Melbourne’s way at centre contests, and up forward he was irrepressible. And modest with it, tucking the individual medal under his jumper and out of sight after the presentation. ‘We won a premiership. That’s what matters the most,’ Petracca said in his post-match interview. ‘The Norm Smith Medal is a reflection of this group. I just get to go out and play my role and have fun with what I do. There’s guys behind the scenes that do the dirty work a little bit for me. Tom Sparrow and James Harmes.

‘[The premiership] means everything to me. I got drafted here in 2014, as a high draft pick. The ambition was to win a premiership at this footy club. We haven’t won one in a long time, and to be here today is awesome.’

Max Gawn paid tribute to the supporters locked down in the east. Holding the trophy aloft, he declared: ‘After fifty-seven years of pain, it’s coming home!’

Later, he added: ‘This is pretty special. I am a big history nuff and I

love this footy club and I love what I have been drafted into. Obviously, eleven years of misery, fifty-seven years of misery for the people who have been here for a while.'

*

The forces that pitched Melbourne into that misery are no longer in play, and the excesses of professionalism have been moderated by the salary cap and the national draft. Country zoning is a footnote in history, although it will retain a faint echo for as long as father-son recruit Tom Hawkins – the son of Jack, who was recruited from Finley, New South Wales, then in Geelong's country zone – remains at senior level.

The competition is tighter now than it was in the country zoning era too. In the twenty-two completed seasons since the turn of the century, a majority of clubs – eleven of eighteen, or 61 per cent – have won premierships. Go back two further years to 1998, and the Kangaroos and Adelaide take the number of premier clubs to thirteen of eighteen, or 72 per cent. In the same period, only two clubs have failed to appear on Grand Final day – and one of those, the Gold Coast Suns, has existed for only half that time.

For those who do not know, a premiership changes everything. It is a reward and a vindication. The club sometimes derided as 'the Dream-Ons' now warrants the title 'Demons'. This cocktail of elation and quiet satisfaction I never imagined. It must be something like this that my father was trying to capture when he began collecting those newspaper photographs all of seventy-three years ago. Today we will have other options – commemorative T-shirts, DVDs, bar mats, pennants, scarves, caps and signed footballs – but the feeling of unconditional triumph will be the same.

It is only one premiership in fifty-seven years, but it is a redemption for those who maintained the faith. It is a new reality for a club that, in Dick Seddon's words, has finally shed the 'loser' tag. 'They've got rid of that sort of loser mentality for good, this lot, and I think this group will win another couple of flags,' he says. 'I think they've set the club up again. It's back in the business of being a really strong, competitive club.'

Within a minute of the final siren, Sue Springfield, sitting in her hospital bed, with a finals-issue 'Give 'Em Hell' T-shirt over her pyjamas, answered a phone call from her best friend, also a Melbourne supporter. Neither could speak much. Mostly, they wept together, shedding tears of pride, joy, relief. 'We just cried,' she says. 'Then I got frustrated because I

couldn't watch the replay.'

It has been such a long time coming. Entire lifetimes have been spent explaining the allegiance to this struggling club that sometimes promised success, but never quite delivered anything but disappointment. For decades, all we had was a history growing ever less relevant, and a determination to persevere. We had been patient long enough, as Neale Daniher said all of twenty-four years ago. The tie many of us felt was never logical. It was in the blood, in the family, an inheritance that, once adopted, had to be endured. Bond with it long enough and it becomes part of who you are.

Now, a new generation has added to that history a page of their own. Nine goals to one in the final term was such an emphatic conclusion that it took me days to properly grasp how comprehensive the victory had been.

This was unlike what Clyde Laidlaw had experienced in four winning Grand Finals. His experiences were of a team that usually took charge early, including in 1956, when they led by twenty points at half time on the way to creating that record winning margin.

'This one could be likened a little bit to 1959, I suppose,' he says. 'We did get behind in that Grand Final and it was the day Ron Barassi starred. We were struggling as a team, but he was standing out taking marks and kicking goals, and in the last quarter we did run over Essendon, so there could have been a little bit of a likeness there.'

'But this one was very emotional, and it had Melbourne supporters thinking they were going to lose, and all of a sudden that excitement as they took that initiative back and won in fine fashion. It's a little bit unique in that respect. I am just pleased the spell is broken.'

Among the players, Jack Viney was unique, a lifetime supporter turning out in his milestone 150th game on Grand Final day. His talent was evident at a young age. As long as he could remember, there had been an expectation that he would play at the highest level, but winning a premiership with the club that held his family ties was a dream come true, even if his early days there had resembled a nightmare.

'I had started my AFL career so half of me was like, "I am playing AFL football, I am playing on the MCG, I am playing Chris Judd, Sam Mitchell, my idols," but on the flip side we are getting smashed every week,' he reflected. 'I am coming off the ground with supporters throwing

their scarves at us. I am in the change rooms and my teammates are being brought to tears. I am coming to training and there's media doorstopping us, asking us why we are so bad.

'To have experienced that and to have come full circle, and be not only premiers, but the way we went about the whole year – we won the minor premiership, which is an achievement in itself – and to play so dominantly in finals and to win this flag having been so long in between flags, it's such a special moment.'¹²

In the aftermath, Goodwin said it had taken him some time to understand the hurt supporters had experienced. Ultimately, what had mattered was a collective decision by the players to say enough was enough. They knew they should be playing big finals games and they had taken responsibility for that.

'To be sitting here today ... is very fulfilling, but the work of so many people is not lost on me,' Goodwin said. 'It started back [with] Peter Jackson, the board, Todd Viney, that had a really clear mission about what they wanted their club to look like. They went about appointing the people they thought could drive that. Hopefully I played a small part in that, but there's so many other people that played a lot bigger part than me.'¹³

Paul Roos had been due to present the winning coach's medal at the Grand Final, which would have made for a very poignant moment with the man he had anointed to follow him. But COVID restrictions prevented him travelling to Perth. During his rebuild of the club, he had coached nine of the premiership team of twenty-three. In the days following the Grand Final, he texted them to congratulate them on their journey, as well as the support staff who went with him, the Demon fans he had come to know, and Nathan Jones, Neville Jetta, Jack Trengove and Jack Grimes, 'who were part of it even if they weren't there'.

'It was a really good sense of closure,' Roos says. 'It was a pretty special time and so pleasing to see the club get to where it wanted to.'

During the 2018 season, Jackie Emmerton, who had been football department secretary during Neale Daniher's time, and was then fundraising for the club, asked me to speak at an event for fifty-year members. My topic was my time moonlighting for *The Demon Magazine* while I was working at *The Age*. Since the other speakers were Angus Brayshaw, Christian Petracca and Hassa Mann, I was clearly at the bottom of the bill, a novelty act padding out the show.

In fact, it was not a matter of making a speech, but of being interviewed by Russell Robertson, so no rehearsal was needed. Growing in confidence as we talked, I became expansive and ran off-topic. That may be why I surprised myself by confidently declaring to the audience that ‘this group of players’ – Melbourne’s young list of 2018 – ‘will change the way the game is played’. Brayshaw and Petracca appeared to exchange a look at this point.

As the 2019 and 2020 seasons sank into the category of false hopes, I sometimes wondered what I had meant during that interview, but 2021 made it real. The team layered a defensive, high-contest game with a varnish of risk-taking and attack.

Often a Grand Final settled by ten goals or more will be declared boring, a disappointment, by neutral observers. That was not the case in 2021. Bulldog fans aside, everybody I spoke to found the Demons’ style of attack, their mix of grit and individual brilliance, their rehearsed discipline and flair exhilarating.

It seemed the group had found a way to meld Paul Roos’ defence-first ethos with John Northey’s insistence that players run out the entire game, as well as the scoring capability of Neil Balme’s 1994 side and the team first culture of the Daniher era.

What a relief – they’d made an honest man of me.

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On 5 December 2021, about 33,000 fans filled the MCC members’ reserve and surrounding sections of the Northern Stand to watch a replay of the Grand Final. The crowd, all of whom had doubtless viewed the match multiple times, and so who always knew what was about to unfold, greeted the highlights with rising cheers of anticipation before the inevitable outburst of celebration. The after-match presentation of medals to the players was re-enacted, and Neale Daniher shared the stage with David Neitz to present the premiership coach’s medal to Simon Goodwin, and the premiership cup to Goodwin and Max Gawn.

The cup itself was passed to the stage in front of a guard of honour of past players from eras successful and unsuccessful. Among those bearing the cup were some who had left during troubled times. In different ways, some obvious, some less so, the club was embracing its past, all of it, and becoming one again.

The ‘D’ word Melbourne supporters were using now was ‘dynasty’. They had a team young enough, and talented enough, that they should

only be satisfied with more success.

That would be fitting. History shows that feast or famine is usually Melbourne's way.



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Appendix: Country Zone Comparison by Club

CLUB	1968-72	1973-77	1978-82	1983-86	Total	Best & Fairests	Team of the Century
Carlton	11 debut	15 debut	7 debut	7 debut	40	6	4
	100+ Games T Keogh G Southby D McKay	100+ Games R Ashman J Buckley K Sheldon	100+ Games P McConville D English	100+ Games P Dean G Williams*		G Southby (2) T Keogh (2) J Buckley G Williams*	T Keogh G Southby R Ashman G Williams*
Collingwood	6 debut	12 debut	8 debut	5 debut	31	3	1
	100+ Games R Wearmouth A Atkinson	100+ Games R Barham K Kink B Picken	100+ Games	100+ Games		B Picken (2) P Carmen	B Picken
Essendon	11 debut	16 debut	6 debut	3 debut	36	6	1
	100+ Games A Wilson	100+ Games M Crow G Hawker M Neagle S Heard T Watson	100+ Games R Merrett	100+ Games D Wallis		T Watson (4) G Hawker A Wilson	T Watson
Fitzroy	5 debut	13 debut	7 debut	13 debut	38	1	0
	100+ Games A Thompson	100+ Games -	100+ Games L Harris R Thornton	100+ Games T Pekin		R Thornton	-
Footscray	20 debut	16 debut	13 debut	8 debut	55	6	2
	100+ Games B Quinlan B Round I Salmon	100+ Games Ian Dunstan Ian Morrison G Jennings K Templeton T Wheeler J Edmond	100+ Games N Cordy B Cordy R Kennedy	100+ Games B Royal S Wallis G Eppelstun		I Dunstan (3) K Templeton (2) B Royal	K Templeton B Royal
Geelong	5 debut	11 debut	12 debut	13 debut	41	4	1
	100+ Games -	100+ Games J Hawkins	100+ Games N Bruns M Bos D Flanigan	100+ Games S Hocking G Hocking B Brownless		G Hocking (4)	G Hocking
Hawthorn	18 debut	11 debut	9 debut	8 debut	46	13***	7
	100+ Games L Matthews P Knights M Tuck K Moore L Rice M Moncreiff A Goad	100+ Games Geoff Ablett	100+ Games G Ayres C Mew P Russo D Brereton**	100+ Games G Dear P Dear R Jencke		L Matthews (8) P Knights (2) K Moore G Ayres D Brereton**	L Matthews P Knights K Moore M Tuck G Ayres C Mew D Brereton**
Melbourne	9 debut	13 debut	16 debut	9 debut	47	2	1
	100+ Games P Keenan	100+ Games -	100+ Games -	100+ Games R Grinter G Lyon		G Lyon (2)	G Lyon

CLUB	1968-72	1973-77	1978-82	1983-86	Total	Best & Fairests	Team of the Century
North Melbourne	16 debut	9 debut	4 debut	13 debut	42	1	1
	100+ Games S Kekovich P Ryan G Cowton R Henshaw	100+ Games M Nolan X Tanner	100+ Games J Law	100+ Games D Steele		S Kekovich	S Kekovich
Richmond	8 debut	6 debut	8 debut	14 debut	36	5	2
	100+ Games M Keane	100+ Games M Lee	100+ Games D Weightman P Egan	100+ Games T Free		M Lee D Weightman (2) T Free (2)	M Keane D Weightman
St Kilda	2 debut	10 debut	14 debut	12 debut	38	7	1
	100+ Games S Theodore	100+ Games G Cunningham J Dunner	100+ Games G Burns	100+ Games T Lockett D Frawley		G Burns (2) T Lockett (2) G Gellie P Kiel D Frawley	T Lockett
South Melbourne	15 debut	7 debut	12 debut	11 debut	45	1	1
	100+ Games S Hoffman D McLeish R Gleeson R Quade	100+ Games C Hounsell	100+ Games I Roberts D Carroll A Daniher	100+ Games D Murphy L Higgins		R Quade	D Carroll

The chart was compiled from information in the *Football Record*, VFL club annual reports, newsletters and *The Encyclopedia of AFL Footballers*.

** This chart represents country zoned players who were recruited directly to their zoned club, with the exception of Greg Williams who was originally rejected by Carlton, however his impact when finally brought 'home' demands his inclusion here.*

*** Dermott Brereton was recruited from Frankston which, as part of the Hawthorn's country zone, was folded into the club's metropolitan zone in the 1973 urban expansion adjustment to coincide with the Melbourne and Metropolitan Board of Works plan. As with Greg Williams, his impact as a player demands his inclusion here as a "country zone legacy".*

****Leigh Matthews and Peter Knights shared Hawthorn's club champion award in 1978.*

The chart includes those who played 100 games for their zoned club. Some who came through the system, like Terry Daniher (South-Ess), Barry Rowlings (Haw-Rich), Michael Malthouse (StK-Rich) and Peter Rohde (Car-Mel), achieved the 100-plus milestone with their second club.

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