

# A History of the AFL Membership

by Dr Alf Andrews, PhD

"Football: The People's Game?" is the title of Dr Alf Andrews' PhD thesis. The following are two extracts from Chapter 7 of the thesis, which we are publishing as it relates to the AFL Membership. The AFLMA is grateful to Dr Andrews for his permission to publish these extracts on the AFLMA website. (Please note that the opinions expressed in these extracts are those of Dr Andrews and do not necessarily represent the views of the AFLMA.)

Anyone wishing to read Dr Andrews' complete thesis can access it at <http://alf.magpies.net>.

Post-World War 2 demographic changes in metropolitan Melbourne and a long history of dispute between the League and the M.C.G. Trustees persuaded the V.F.L., in 1959, to plan its own stadium in the sprawling eastern suburbs. Free of the greed and tyranny of cricket-oriented ground managers, the League would enjoy the fruits of its own labours, presenting its product to comfortably seated crowds of a magnitude never seen in Australian sport before. In 1962 the League purchased 200 acres of land in the City of Waverley.<sup>1</sup> Two years later the League obtained vacant possession of all houses and land at the site which, by now, was being referred to as 'V.F.L. Park'.<sup>2</sup> The development of the new ground became an obsession for the V.F.L. during the 1960s, a deduction from gate takings at all V.F.L. matches being allocated directly to the project. In August 1967 the League's publication, Football Life, predicted 'the start of something big'. The stadium, the article said, would eventually hold 166,000 spectators, with parking for 25,000 cars.<sup>3</sup> An 'artist's impression' of the proposed stadium, which looks futuristic even from a 2000 perspective, accompanied the photograph.

Unlike the M.C.G., the new stadium would not be required to devote its prime seating, or indeed any of its seating, to members of the M.C.C. Instead the League developed a membership package for football fans wanting to reserve their rights and privileges at the new stadium. Membership numbers were strictly limited but the ceiling on numbers grew as the stadium grew. The League had no difficulty in obtaining subscribers as its commitment to the new project left little room for doubt that it saw V.F.L. Park as the future of football. In 1981 the League felt that the future had almost arrived. The board of directors voted to move the Grand Final from the M.C.G. to V.F.L. Park from 1984. The ground had been used for matches since 1970 and its capacity had reached 75,000. The new plan involved building works to extend the stadium's capacity to 104,000,<sup>4</sup> not quite the figure imagined 14 years earlier, but one which compared more than favourably to what remained of the M.C.G. after the Members had been accommodated. All that was needed was State Government approval for the extension works to go ahead. This did not prove to be as simple as anticipated.

The removal of the Grand Final from what was perceived by many as its traditional home to a distant outer suburb poorly serviced by transport infrastructure brought the V.F.L.

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<sup>1</sup> V.F.L. Annual Report, Season 1987, p.41, official chronology.

<sup>2</sup> V.F.L. Annual Report, Season 1964, p.8.

<sup>3</sup> Football Life, August 1967, p.20.

<sup>4</sup> V.F.L. Annual Report, Season 1981, p.6.

into direct confrontation with a State Labor Government keen to champion what it interpreted as a popular cause. Although V.F.L. Park was closer to the demographic centre of metropolitan Melbourne than the M.C.G., its lack of train or tram facilities placed great strain on the road system in its vicinity. The central business district was still the hub of Melbourne's public transport network and the M.C.G. was well served by trams, trains and buses. The League's original decision to build its stadium at Waverley had been guided by assurances from the State Government of the time that the area would be provided with transport facilities to match its status as a fast-growing residential area.<sup>5</sup> That and subsequent administrations had failed to deliver such facilities.

Early in 1982 the League's bid to move the Grand Final to Waverley was in jeopardy when the Cain Government refused to approve the extensions to spectator facilities at the Waverley ground.<sup>6</sup> Throughout 1983 the League was involved in heated negotiations with the Government, the M.C.G. Trustees and the M.C.C. to try to resolve the dispute. The League's Annual Report at the end of 1983 expressed concern at proposed legislation that would give the State Government the ultimate say in where the Grand Final was played.<sup>7</sup> The threatened legislation would have declared the Grand Final a 'major sporting event' and given the Government the right to intervene, through court injunction, in any move to have it played at what the Government regarded as an inappropriate venue.<sup>8</sup>

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

When it became obvious that the Government was willing, if necessary, to coerce the League into keeping the Grand Final at the M.C.G., much of the fine tuning of the compromise agreement centred on the respective rights of M.C.C. and V.F.L. Park members to special seating areas on the day of the match. The League proposed a scheme under which it would lease the M.C.G. for the day of the match. V.F.L. Park members would have exclusive use of the area normally set aside for M.C.C. members. The latter would be given priority access to the purchase of tickets to reserved seating in the Olympic Stand. In November 1983 the M.C.C. submitted the League's proposal to a vote of its members. Not surprisingly, the M.C.C. members were not willing to relinquish what they regarded as an inalienable entitlement of M.C.C. membership. The eventual compromise, accepted by the League in February 1984, provided for a greatly enlarged members' enclosure, to be shared by M.C.C. and V.F.L. Park members.<sup>9</sup>

The new arrangement was sufficiently acceptable to the League for it to agree to the 1984 Grand Final being played at the M.C.G. It included a provision under which the M.C.C. would have to compensate the League for shortfalls in revenue resulting from the

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<sup>5</sup> V.F.L. Annual Report, 1983, p.3.

<sup>6</sup> V.F.L. Annual Report, 1983, p.3.

<sup>7</sup> V.F.L. Annual Report, 1983, p.3.

<sup>8</sup> *Age*, 9 February 1984, p.28.

<sup>9</sup> V.F.L. Annual Report, Season 1984, p.9.

allocation of what had previously been public seating to M.C.C. members. Although the League regarded this as adequate compensation for any financial disadvantage incurred on Grand Final day itself, it felt that there were larger issues at stake. In particular it was concerned that the continuation of the tradition of playing the Grand Final at the M.C.G. would impact unfavourably on its ability to retain subscribers to V.F.L. Park.<sup>10</sup> In November 1983, V.F.L. president, Dr. Allen Aylett, had sent a letter to all V.F.L. Park subscribers advising them that, regardless of the outcome of negotiations over the venue for the 1984 Grand Final, the League still hoped to play the Grand Final at Waverley from 1985 onwards. The letter was sent as part of a mail-out that included V.F.L. Park membership renewal notices.<sup>11</sup> A cynical cartoon in the Age showed Aylett standing next to two large piles of letters, one labelled 'Letter to V.F.L. Park members' and the other labelled 'V.F.L. Park renewal notices'. Aylett was shown instructing his mailing clerk to send the letters to members before sending the renewal notices.<sup>12</sup> Because of its ongoing desire to keep faith with its own subscribers, the V.F.L. was still not willing, in February 1984, to commit itself on the matter of the Grand Final venue beyond 1984.<sup>13</sup>

The new arrangements for members' access meant that 18,000 fewer Grand Final seats would be available to persons without M.C.C. or V.F.L. Park medallions. The holders of finals series tickets to the Northern Stand would be entitled to a seat only at the lead-up finals. On Grand Final day they would be forced into standing room accommodation.<sup>14</sup>

While the decision to allow M.C.C. and V.F.L. Park members to share an enlarged members' enclosure safeguarded the entitlements of the members of both organisations, it effectively excluded non-members of those bodies from over 40% of the available seating. It also had the effect of making the size of Grand Final crowds less predictable than they had previously been because the enlarged reserve meant that a much larger area of the ground was given over to patrons who were free to attend at their own discretion on the day. When the crowd figure for the 1984 Grand Final reached only 92,685 it was the first time since 1962 that it had fallen below 100,000. A glaring 'bald spot'<sup>15</sup> on the top deck of the Northern Stand was a source of embarrassment for all parties to the agreement. Though the shame belonged to all, the blame was negotiable. Premier Cain was the most obvious target for League president, Dr. Aylett. His insistence on the match being played at the M.C.G. had led to the 'catastrophe' of 10,000 empty seats.<sup>16</sup> Opposition leader, Jeff Kennett, was similarly inclined to target his political adversary. Cain had interfered in what was essentially the League's business using the threat of legislation, thereby denying '8,000 to 10,000 Victorians' the chance to see the match.<sup>17</sup> Cain preferred to blame the V.F.L. for overestimating the requirements of V.F.L. Park members. He said that the area set aside for members had been based on a predicted attendance of 23,000 V.F.L. Park members and 16,000 M.C.C. members and had been determined on the basis of negotiations between the two bodies.<sup>18</sup> Although he chose to target the League, his vitriol could as easily have been directed at the M.C.C., whose secretary, John Lill, took the more diplomatic approach of blaming the weather.<sup>19</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> V.F.L. Annual Report, Season 1984, pp9-10.

<sup>11</sup> Age, 17 November 1983, p.34.

<sup>12</sup> Age, 17 November 1983, p.34.

<sup>13</sup> Age, 9 February 1984, p.28.

<sup>14</sup> V.F.L. Annual Report, Season 1984, p.10.

<sup>15</sup> M.C.C. News, No.71, February 1985. (pages not numbered)

<sup>16</sup> Age, 1 October 1984, p.1.

<sup>17</sup> Age, 1 October 1984, p.1.

<sup>18</sup> Age, 1 October 1984, p.1.

<sup>19</sup> M.C.C. News, No.71, February 1985. (pages not numbered)

The embarrassing spectacle of unoccupied seating in the Members' enclosure was not new, but the significant enlargement of the 'discretionary attendance sector'<sup>20</sup> since 1984 exacerbated the problem. The concentration of empty seats on the upper deck of the Northern Stand suggested that more 'traditional' members' areas were filled to capacity. John Lill felt that many M.C.C. members had been deterred from attending in 1984 by the prospect of a 'crowded and uncomfortable day, particularly in their traditional Pavilion areas'.<sup>21</sup>

In an article for the Age, Garrie Hutchinson observed that the crowd in the Members' reserve at the 1984 Grand Final was made up of two distinct categories of members, 'Real' and 'Other'. The Real members 'had been forced to share the privileges of the Smokers' Pavilion with the hordes from V.F.L. Park'.<sup>22</sup> As Hutchinson saw it, the Other members were, by and large, oblivious to the traditions of the hallowed ground which they had been permitted to occupy for the day.

To most of the Other Members social niceties such as paying obeisance to an older culture, visiting something like the Long Room where you had to wear a 'visible tie or cravat' were beside the point. The point was to watch the Bombers tear the feathers off those sportsmen, the Hawks.<sup>23</sup>

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

A point to ponder: If reserved seats were allocated by lot, as would appear the only fair means, would you accept the luck of the draw if your seat was in the top deck of the Northern Stand.<sup>24</sup>

By the end of the season, however, an arena-level section of the Northern Stand, comprising 3,400 seats equally divided between the V.F.L. and the M.C.C., had been set aside for reservation by members.<sup>25</sup>



At the beginning of the twenty-first century, football entered a new era with the demise of the Waverley ground and the opening of the Colonial Stadium in Melbourne's Docklands precinct. Many of the Game's most enthusiastic and dedicated supporters became pessimistic about the possibility of being able to continue to support their clubs in the manner to which they had become accustomed. Although the general admission

<sup>20</sup> M.C.C. News, No.77, November 1987. (pages not numbered)

<sup>21</sup> M.C.C. News, No.71, February 1985. (pages not numbered)

<sup>22</sup> Age, 1 October 1984, special liftout, p.7.

<sup>23</sup> Age, 1 October 1984, special liftout, p.7.

<sup>24</sup> M.C.C. News, No.75, March 1987. (pages not numbered)

<sup>25</sup> M.C.C. News No.77, November 1987. (pages not numbered)

price at home-and-away matches still compared favourably to most other alternative forms of popular entertainment, the trend towards smaller 'boutique' stadia was tending to make the pre-booking of reserved seats essential at many games. It made sound business sense for the A.F.L. to schedule matches at grounds with only barely enough capacity to hold the expected crowd. The closure of the Waverley, a venue rarely filled to capacity, would appear to have been a ploy by the A.F.L. to phase the general admission cash spectator out of physical presence at matches.

General admission spectators were excluded from the Grand Final after 1957. After 1977 they were appeased by the provision of 'live' television coverage of the event. The increasing availability of this armchair option did much to induce a state of acceptance among fans who no longer found actual attendance at matches viable. It was clear from the A.F.L.'s embrace of the Colonial Stadium concept that it was willing to forego the direct patronage of this section of the market altogether, preferring to allow this group to make its contribution to football indirectly, through its willingness to be exposed to television advertising.

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

A more secure alternative to Social Club or Gold membership was A.F.L. or M.C.C. membership. Subscription rates to these organisations were considerably less than the financial commitment required for corporate sponsorship of a club or membership of most coterie groups. Joining the M.C.C. or the A.F.L., however, normally involved a long waiting period. In April 1990 the M.C.C. encouraged its members to nominate their children or grandchildren for club membership at birth for a fee of \$10. There were over 73,000 people on the waiting list at the time and it was estimated that new nominees would have to wait 27 years to become full members.<sup>26</sup> No waiting period applied, of course, on 15 November 1838, when five men paid one guinea each to subscribe to the club which they had just formed.<sup>27</sup> Tradition born of longevity and the privileges which go with membership of a club which enjoyed a pre-eminent position in Melbourne's sporting culture, made M.C.C. membership what the M.C.C. News, in no idle boast, described as 'the sporting world's most prized possession.'<sup>28</sup>

A.F.L. membership had almost 130 years less to generate a waiting list, beginning, as it did, in 1966 with the V.F.L.'s subscription plan to help finance the building of V.F.L. Park. It wasted no time in catching up, however. In 1998 the A.F.L. had 34,505 full members. A further 17,442 enjoyed restricted membership status, with another 15,000 on the waiting list. A report in the Herald Sun in May 1999 estimated that new applicants

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<sup>26</sup> M.C.C. News, No.84, April 1990. (pages not numbered)

<sup>27</sup> M.C.C. News, No.77, November 1987. (pages not numbered)

<sup>28</sup> M.C.C. News, No.89, November 1991. (pages not numbered)

would need to wait between 15 and 20 years to become full members.<sup>29</sup> On those figures, A.F.L. membership, like M.C.C. membership, would not appear to be an option for an individual wishing to guarantee access to Grand Final ticket sales in the short term. Estimation of waiting periods is naturally fraught with uncertainties. For example, if the M.C.G. suddenly ceased to be the Grand Final venue it is quite likely that membership of the M.C.C. would fall away to a figure more befitting that of the district cricket club which Melbourne essentially is. The thought of a waiting list for membership of any district cricket club other than Melbourne would be laughable. It was only the club's occupancy of Melbourne's largest and most popular sporting venue that made membership a 'prized possession'.

In May 1999, the A.F.L. decided to allow 5,000 Colonial Stadium subscribers effectively to jump the queue into full A.F.L. membership, effective from Season 2000. No longer would the mere passage of time guarantee the option of A.F.L. membership to any person with either the patience to endure the long waiting period, or forebears with the foresight to have previously nominated them. The 'Medallion Club', as this initiative of the A.F.L. and Channel 7 was known, provided subscribers with prime seating at Colonial Stadium as well as access to matches at the M.C.G., including the Grand Final. Each member had to commit to an initial \$5,000, plus annual fees of up to \$5,000 for five years, a 'bargain' clearly beyond the reach of most football supporters. In announcing the decision, Wayne Jackson stressed that the 5,000 Grand Final seats would come out of the A.F.L. members' allocation rather than that of the A.F.L. clubs.<sup>30</sup> It seemed, however, that some club members did not hear his assurance. A group of Kangaroo supporters, members of the priority membership category, 'Pagan's Patrons', interviewed by the Herald Sun on the day of the announcement, feared that the League's decision had seriously reduced their chances of being able to buy tickets if their club were to make the Grand Final.<sup>31</sup> Their fears, groundless though they were, were based on past experience of the A.F.L.'s elitism and a perception that such elitism would inevitably continue and get worse. As 'Pagan's Patrons' member, Colin Dickson, put it:

It's another example of the A.F.L. not looking after the ordinary supporter ... They're pushing for clubs to get more members but they're leaving us less and less tickets.<sup>32</sup>

While Dickson's concerns were based on incorrect detail, they would certainly have struck a chord with the A.F.L.'s restricted members and people on the waiting list, who were the real victims of the decision. In any case, as stated earlier, perception was a stronger influence than fact in determining the attitude of a club member denied a Grand Final ticket. For a supporter such as Colin Dickson it was as if experience of past injustices had created the expectation that injustice would continue.

The fanzine, Hot Pies, an unofficial monthly publication for Collingwood supporters which, by its own admission, was not 'burdened by truth or fact in the compilation of any article',<sup>33</sup> was also free of the burden of both A.F.L. censorship and the bourgeois sensibilities of the Herald Sun or the Age. As such it provided the perfect vehicle for this perception-based outburst by one of its writers incensed by the A.F.L.'s Medallion Club

<sup>29</sup> Herald Sun, 21 May 1999, p.118.

<sup>30</sup> Herald Sun, 21 May 1999, p.118.

<sup>31</sup> Herald Sun, 21 May 1999, p.15.

<sup>32</sup> Herald Sun, 21 May 1999, p.15.

<sup>33</sup> Hot Pies, Issue 3, July 1999, p.3.

decision.

I wouldn't want to be the ticket girl at Lulie Street who tells me there aren't any tickets left after I've been sleeping outside the ground for three months. The thought of five thousand sushi-eating, hatchback-driving, apartment-living, homeware-buying yuppies and their chunky arsed girlfriends seeing Collingwood win next year's Flag instead of me is perverse. Docklands memberships are destined to become yet another wanky outer-directed status symbol carried by people who cheapen everything they touch. The prohibitive and restrictive realities of Docklands are about to slap real footy fans in the face.<sup>34</sup>

For die-hard supporters without the financial resources to commit thousands of dollars a year either to their particular club or to the League, basic club membership provided little or no chance of being able to attend the Grand Final. While priority membership still served as an insurance policy against Grand Final ticket disappointment, the premiums were high, and claims were, of course, only payable when the particular club defied the seven-to-one odds against making the Grand Final in a 16-team competition. Considering these odds, buying a ticket from a moderately greedy scalper when one's club qualified for the Grand Final could have been regarded as a more astute act of bargaining than paying for Social Club membership year after year. In any case, the viability of the priority membership option as a guarantee of Grand Final ticket access appeared certain to be eroded as memberships of these categories continued to grow. With corporate coteries and elites such as the Medallion Club gradually taking a larger portion of the available seating, the future of the Social Club as a Grand Final ticket guarantee seemed limited.

Essentially the League's attitude at the turn of the millennium was the same as it had been during its battle, on behalf of club members, against the M.C.G. Trustees in the 1950s and 1960s. The League still considered grand finals to be primarily for 'insiders', not the general public. In 1968, 'insider' status could be bought for the price of a season ticket. In 2000 the cost was much higher and rising. A new schedule of membership categories and fees drawn up by the Collingwood Football Club for Season 2000 failed to provide Social Club members with any guarantee of access to a Grand Final ticket in the event of the club making the Grand Final. Only members prepared to commit to a reserved seating package covering 16 home-and-away matches in Melbourne for \$495, compared to the basic Social Club membership fee of \$255 for 11 matches or \$310 for 16 matches, were guaranteed access.<sup>35</sup>

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<sup>34</sup> *Hot Pies*, Issue 3, July 1999, p.3.

<sup>35</sup> 'Membership: loyalty, commitment, tradition, passion, strength forever', membership brochure, Collingwood Football Club, Season 2000.