

Talk given by Darren Lewis to BHS July 2014.

SPORT IN BENDIGO IN THE EARLY DAYS

Bendigo was settled in the early days primarily from the United Kingdom and many of the sports that Bendigo has nurtured and developed since then had their origins in the UK. In the early days the sports that gained the watchful eye of the Bendigo Advertiser included:

Shooting

Bowls

Rowing

Pedestrianism

Cricket

Tennis

CLASS IN BENDIGO SPORT

Bendigo as a community in its early years very much mirrored the class dominated society of the UK. Most of the sports were regarded as gentlemanly or suitable for ladies. The Bendigo United Cricket Club had been formed in 1861 and its members included most of the key figures in Bendigo society. For years it would challenge teams from all around the State and also host international teams.

There were rowing regattas and tennis clubs and life was very serene.

FOOTBALL IS BORN

With a significant population of fit young men due to the mining there was a genuine need to find something for them to do in the District. We need to remember that in the 1850's and beyond there was little in the way of organised recreational activities as the population of Bendigo exploded. During this time many of the significant monuments in Bendigo were established and it was transitioning from a city of tents to a city with purpose.

Football as a game began to take shape in the 1850's with the first recorded game being the match between Melbourne Grammar and Scotch College in 1858. It is appropriate that the first recorded game occur between these two private schools because the early game of football was clearly a derivative of rugby.

The first set of rules was signed off in 1859 by Tom Wills, W.J. Hammersley, J.B. Thompson, Tom Buttenworth, Alex Bruce, Thomas Smith and J. Sewell. This group of men would have a significant contribution to make in the development of the game in the Bendigo District. Tom Buttenworth's brothers ran a store in Castlemaine and J.B. Thompson was the inaugural secretary of the Sandhurst Football Club.

Mt. Alexander Mail 13 June 1859

A MEETING of gentlemen for the formation of a football club is called for
Wednesday evening next, June 15th, at 7.30 p.m., at the Supreme Court
Hotel
B BUTTERWORTH

The club was duly formed and a match was arranged on June 22nd against a team from Melbourne at the Barkers Creek ground. The match did not eventuate and after another attempt the game was cancelled.

Bendigo Advertiser 3 June 1861

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So, after a well-attended meeting at the Criterion Hotel on this evening, the Sandhurst Football Club was born. J. Hasker was Sandhurst's first president, and Thompson was elected secretary and Bayne treasurer. For the privilege of playing footy for Sandhurst, members had to fork over 5 shillings, not a small amount of money for the time.

Sandhurst's first match was played on a very rough and unmarked Camp Reserve, now Rosalind Park. This was way before boundary lines and rules. A match between Sandhurst in a white strip and the Volunteers from the army was played over a couple of days. Drought, after two hours play scored the first goal in Bendigo. With no rules, there was no set time for a match to be completed and this match went for well over 4 hours, but few goals were scored.

A challenge match was arranged against Kangaroo Flat on 9 August 1862, and it was a rough and willing contest. The match was played on the Back Creek Ground (Harry Trott Oval) after ground owners Bendigo United agreed to its use. At that stage Back Creek was a small round ground built specifically for cricket and privately owned by the cricket club. Sandhurst's team for the match was selected from:-

Thompson, Barwick, Stewart, Hechle, Collier, Glen, McCulloch, Stewart, Fly, Gould, Cahill, Viney, Cox, Drought, Baker, Foley, English, M. Meagher, Lewis. Nicholas, Nicholas, Fly, E. O'Keefe.

Sandhurst continued to use the Back Creek Cricket Ground as its home base in 1863 and a scratch match was played, but there were few opportunities for the club to play challenge matches. Football was not a sport embraced by the general public, with many of the opinion that it was played by louts and encouraged unsociable behaviour from the City's youth.

In 1867 there was good news when the City Council made the decision to expand the playing area in the current Rosalind Park. The Camp Reserve, as it was called was situated between the Bendigo Creek and Pall Mall. Having been turned over by the mining company the

disused area was proposed as a recreation reserve for the people of Bendigo. It created significant debate and took some time to resolve but the Upper Reserve was seen as a better option and it went on to become the Queen Elizabeth Oval as we know it.

The 1870s saw football struggle to make its place in the sporting community and there was a decade of little activity, but there was a dramatic change in the 1880s.

This was very much the story for footballers in Bendigo, until an exciting new development occurred in 1880, the Bendigo Football League was formed. This was also the year when football first moved to get on the Upper Reserve (QEO), but not after some problems with the council.

1881

After the match between Sandhurst and the Coachbuilders club, Sandhurst's team and officials were entertained by their hosts. Local members and the Mayor were invited and a summary of the night revealed the undercurrent of class issues that existed in the city at the time (Bendigo Advertiser Tuesday 5 July 1881, p.3):

Mr. F. Macoboy responded, and remarked that the honor conferred on the Sandhurst Club that evening was wholly unexpected. The action of the coachbuilders would do more to break down the barrier of class against class, a party against party, that has so long existed in the football field, than anything else that had been attempted.

Class continued to be an issue in the early years of Bendigo sport with the community elites congregating in respectable sports and clubs. Football allowed the average man to engage in sport, but at this point the clubs were still very much based around class or workplace

1882

Demonstrating how football was starting to gain popularity amongst the young men of the city a report in the Bendigo Advertiser reported an incident (Bendigo Advertiser 10 May 1882, p.2):

FOOTBALLING IN STREETS. – *The attention of the police is again drawn to the practice of youths playing football in public thoroughfares. On the main road at Ironbark it has become quite a nuisance. Some youths were yesterday kicking a ball in the middle of the road as one of the Eaglehawk cabs with seven passengers was coming down the hill. The*

ball passed immediately in front of the horse, causing it to shy and swerve off the road. The driver with difficulty managed to prevent the horse bolting into the gully, and thus averted what might have been a serious accident. These young footballers should be very careful, for the report of almost any Monday's Police Court shows that youthful peccadilloes are apt to be severely punished.

Coachbuilders, Banks and Law, Charing Cross, Pickwicks, Civil Service, Bendigo, Sandhurst

SANDHURST FOOTBALL ASSOCIATION. – The first meeting of the newly-formed Sandhurst Football Association was held last evening. Delegates from the four principal local clubs were present. The following officer-bearers were elected:- President, Mr. R.S.H.B. Wakley; vice presidents, Messrs. R.J. Moorhead, and F.J. Macoboy; hon. treasurer, Mr. G.M. Pickles; hon. secretary, Mr. P. Mungovan; match committee, Messrs. W. Neill, A.J. Pearce, and M. Sexton. Three matches have already been arranged, viz., Hotham and Carlton at Sandhurst, and with Hotham at Melbourne.

Of course it was still in its infancy and there would continue to be minor hiccups but this is the origin of the Bendigo Football Netball League as we know it.

Club footy as we know it was still a long way off and it was not uncommon for matches to be organized and then abandoned because of a lack of interest by players.

So as the 1880s drew to a close football in Bendigo had totally transformed in that decade. It had gone from an ad-hoc game with a few teams with limited fields of play to a fully established and functional league that now had fixtures and a premiership. It had firmly established itself as the premier winter sport in the community and now had access to a number of quality grounds.

FOOTBALL GROWS AS A GAME

With the sport of Australian Rules Football now more firmly entrenched in Bendigo Society we saw a proliferation of clubs started. You had clubs with colourful names such as Albions, Young Colonials sting and leagues started to be formed. In the 1890's the First Rate Football Association was formed which then became the Bendigo Football Association and then of course Golden City.

Eaglehawk had its own league and with plenty of fit young men footy enjoyed its first real golden age. The expansion of the game was halted by the outbreak of World War One, but a decision was made to conduct a football competition for the men who were required to work in the industry and not enlist. Foggit Jones and Leggos were two companies that entered teams.

Ironically football's greatest expansion occurred in the years between the two great wars and had a burst during the depression. I remember talking to an old guy that had come to the bush in those years and he said it was because there was more hope here than in Melbourne. At least they could work for food and board. There was money around in football in those days, like now, but it was far more subtle than now. I remember talking to Mrs. Ford, widow of the great Reg Ford and she remarked on how she Reg and Bob McCaskill would drive around the countryside recruiting.

Football had expanded into the smaller communities surrounding the district with most towns having a footy club. In the 1930's finals football received a bonus, the advent of the Beaurepaire Cup. Frank Beaurepaire wanted to put something back into sport in our area, and along with football people came up with the idea of a challenge series that would run during the BFL finals series. The format was a very simple one, with the four best teams from the minor leagues surrounding the Bendigo Football League. This did not necessarily mean the premier team, but rather the most dominant. As there were more leagues than positions available, the second requirement was to have the lowest percentage. The competition ran for a decade and was highly regarded by the football world.

FOOTBALL'S GREAT TIMES

The return of servicemen from the Second World War, combined with a significant number of juniors saw football in the district flourish. Sides such as Strathfieldsaye, Huntly, Goornong played in the Association, but it was far more structured and at this time the clubs began to expand. During the 40's and 50's most leagues added a second team competition which placed enormous pressure on small communities.

Football was the big game with most teams having players straight out of the VFL and crowds were huge. It was very much a social outing enjoyed by both men and women.

From the mid-50's we start to see many of those teams either combine or disappear as the pressure to find that many players begins to bite. Despite that the major teams and leagues prosper in a manner not seen before

MONEY FINDS A PLACE

During the 60's the issue of paying coaches and players becomes more of an issue and powerhouse teams such as Rochester bring in high profile players to bolster their local ranks. In those days it was about buying a couple of players that would see you move up the ladder.

That would all change in the 70's when money changed hands freely and sometimes half a team would be bought. It also marked the start of the coaching circuses when a coach would be secured and he would bring his entourage of players. Once finished with the club they would simply go to the next team.

Each decade has seen more and more made of money and I, like most football lovers, despair when I hear some of the budgets clubs have for footballers. It is unsustainable and the list of clubs going to the wall could grow. It is also unfair to say that it is all about buying flags, because for some clubs they are simply buying in numbers. Many Mallee and Wimmera clubs depend on over half of their team driving into the gates from elsewhere.

FOOTBALL IS ABOUT COMMUNITIES

I grew up in Benalla and spent every Saturday of every winter at a football game to watch my father play. My mum worked in the canteen and when I was old enough I helped out and that is what footy means to people who live in the country. It is so much more than having a kick, it is about building friendships and relationships that last for years.

I have had the privilege of compiling a number of club histories and on every occasion I have been moved by the sight of old friends catching up. To me that is what football is really about and why it has remained an important part of the Bendigo Community and its surrounding districts for over 150 years.

SOME CLUBS THAT HAVE DISAPPEARED

Arnold
Axdale
Bamawm
Bamawm Extension
Bears Lagoon
Borung
Campbell's Forest
Corop
Chewton
Costerfield

Derby
Dingdarra
Dingee
Drummartin
Eddington
Epsom
Goornong
Hunter
Huntly
Kamarooka
Knowsley
Korong Vale
Laanecoorie
Leichardt
Llanelly
Lockington
Mincha
Mologa
Mysia
Neilborough
Northern United
Pine Grove
Raywood
Rheola
Sebastian
Serpentine
Shelbourne
Tandarra
Tarnagulla
Tennyson
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Woodstock
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