

BEHIND THE GOALS

The history of the
Victorian Country Football League

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About the author

Paul Daffey is a Melbourne journalist and author. He has written two books on country football, *Local Rites* and *Beyond the Big Sticks*, and he has contributed towards several other books on a range of football topics. He has written about country football in newspapers and spoken about it on radio for many years. He now runs his own publishing company, PD Footy, which produces podcasts on country football.

[Following pages](#): Action from a game at Mansfield, 2009 [Adam McNicol]





TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction	6
1 Town and country	9
2 A united voice	23
3 Rules and wrangles	41
4 A new era	55
5 Boom time in the bush	73
6 The arrival of zoning	91
7 A jolt to the old order	107
8 The fruits of expansion	123
9 The problem of distance	139
10 The money game	159
11 Investigations aplenty	179
12 Radical action required	197
13 Sacrifice for a greater need	213
14 Financial independence	229
15 Health and harmony	253
16 Stepping up to the state league	273
17 A new independent age	291
18 Professional development	307
19 Change for the greater good	327
Appendix	348
Bibliography and references	350
Acknowledgements	354
Index	355

INTRODUCTION

Bob Templeton served as an official with the Victorian Country Football League for 31 seasons, from 1975 to 2005. Throughout this period, he did his book work in his room out the back of Strachan's dairy in Hamilton in between going to matches in Casterton and Coleraine and meetings in Melbourne. When deciding on a VCFL matter, Bob had a basic question: Is it good for country football? This book is about officials who worked for the good of country football.

The book puts the game in country Victoria in the context of developments in the game at large, especially at head office in Melbourne. The Victorian Football League formed the VCFL as a sub-committee. The relationship between the two bodies underpinned many decisions made in the name of Victorian country football.

Some distinctions need to be made. Throughout the 20th century, the Victorian Football League was often called simply "the League" and the Victorian Football Association was called "the Association". The VFL and VFA are occasionally referred to as the League and the Association here.

The word "junior" originally had a different meaning to that which we use now. Until the Second World War, junior football was any football that was played below League and Association level — that is, junior football was the game in the country and the suburbs. It had nothing to do with the age of the players. That changed after the Second World War when many suburban and country clubs formed teams for teenagers. The meaning of "junior football" then changed to mean football for juniors.

The people from the Australian Bureau of Statistics who put together the Census define a provincial town as a town with a population of more than 1000. That distinction is used in these pages. Less



well defined is the term of "village". For the purpose of these pages, a village is a town of less than 500, but the word is used only to make a distinction when comparing towns in smaller competitions.

The VCFL always distinguished between major and minor leagues, but in 1976 its rules committee recommended a change in nomenclature. The term "minor league" was replaced by "district league".

This is not a book about the grand sweep of country football. It is a book specifically about the Victorian Country Football League, the body that ran country football in the game's home state from 1927 until 2016. It is a book about decisions — the reasons behind those decisions and the effect of those decisions on the national game in its heartland in country Victoria.

This is a book about pride of place and sense of connection. It is a book about decisions made for the good of country football.

Gate attendant at the Skipton football ground, 2016 [Jaime Murcia]



CHAPTER 1.

Town and country

It was 1859, and the city of Melbourne was humming with energy as money from the Gold Rush coursed through the banks and trading houses and hotels. A Melbourne sportsman with a blazing talent, Tom Wills, wrote to a newspaper to suggest that the men of Melbourne should form “a game of our own”. Members of the Melbourne Cricket Club formed an offshoot called the Melbourne Football Club. Four of these members — Tom Wills, Tom Smith, William Hammersley and James Thompson — agreed on a set of rules for the new game. Then, in an administrative flourish, they wrote down the rules, and in doing so, they established what is believed to be the first set of written rules for any code of football in the world. The game was first known as Melbourne rules football, but later it became known as Victorian rules then Australian rules, as it came to be played around the nation.

The earliest clubs in the new code of football were Melbourne and Geelong, which were both formed in 1859. One was formed in the capital, the other in the town around the bay. The smaller town fought to prove itself against its larger neighbour. Tension between town and country was evident from the earliest days of the game.

New clubs were soon formed in the Goldfields region, which had been the beating heart of the colony of Victoria since the discovery of gold a decade earlier. The Ballarat Football Club was formed in 1860. The Sandhurst Football Club was formed in Bendigo in 1861.

James Thompson, the sports writer who was one of the four signatories on the original set of rules for the new code, was the first secretary of the Sandhurst Football Club. Fellow Goldfields towns such as Maryborough, Castlemaine and Kyneton formed clubs. The coastal town of Warrnambool formed a club. The members of each club formed teams and played matches against each other until rival clubs were established.

As in the case of James Thompson, members of Melbourne's professional classes who moved to the country were vital in the establishment of the code around the colony. These men included bankers, land commissioners and law clerks. They put the game on a solid footing through their book-keeping and administrative skills. Local businessmen saw the advantage of having a football team in their town, so they too became involved. Shire councillors went on to club committees, having recognised a chance to serve the people — and a chance to stoke their prospects of re-election. The men from Melbourne's professional classes took the game into the country, then local men took over the running of their own affairs.

In the 1870s, football clubs were established in the gold towns of Beechworth, Inglewood, Ararat and Stawell. Clubs were also formed in the pastoral towns of Peshurst and Winchelsea. In 1874, the men of Rochester formed a club for the express purpose of "playing and beating Echuca".

In 1877, officials from the clubs that had formed a loose affiliation during the game's early years came together to form the Victorian Football Association. Through the new body, they made decisions on the laws of the game, player eligibility and matters of dispute. The VFA began with five senior clubs in Melbourne: Melbourne, St Kilda, Albert Park, Carlton and Hotham (later renamed North Melbourne). It then formed a provincial division, which was comprised by Ballarat, Ballarat Albion, Sandhurst, Kyneton, Geelong and Barwon, a club formed in the industrial area of South Geelong. Barwon won the first provincial premiership.

Small clubs around the colony affiliated with the VFA because the Melbourne body offered formal governance and the chance to play challenge matches against city clubs. Inglewood hosted Melbourne in



1877 and Carlton in 1879. The practice of city teams travelling to the country to play challenge matches was another factor in spreading the popularity of the game.

Football match in Geelong, 1864 [Bob Gartland collection]

Provincial towns and country districts formed their own structured competitions in the 1890s. Three Ballarat clubs — Ballarat, South Ballarat and Ballarat Imperial — had played through a few ill-starred seasons in the senior division of the VFA before forming the Ballarat Football Association in 1893. Beechworth, Chiltern and Rutherglen were among the clubs that formed the Ovens and Murray Football Association in 1893. Shepparton, Kyabram, Mooroopna and Tatura were foundation clubs in the Goulburn Valley District Football Association in 1894. In Gippsland, competitions were formed in the Snowy Valley, Omeo, Heyfield, Avon, Walhalla and Morwell districts, among others, usually with three or four clubs. By now, the game was known as Victorian rules.

The formation of structured competitions was a sign that country football was settling into a form of stability, but in Melbourne there was dissension about the best format for the main competition, the Victorian Football Association. To that stage, Geelong and