

AUSTRALIAN FOOTBALL IN SYDNEY BEFORE 1914

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I

In the early 1880s it was unclear whether rugby or Australian football would become the dominant code in Sydney or whether the two might even manage to co-exist. At that time Australian football was played in Melbourne, Adelaide and Sydney and rugby was played in Sydney. By 1890 Australian football was dominant in Victoria, South Australia, Tasmania and Western Australia and rugby held sway in New South Wales, New Zealand and Queensland. The aim of this paper is to suggest why Australian football did not become the dominant code in Sydney.

Rugby was a product of the English public schools, its rules being formalised in 1871 with the formation of the English Rugby Football Union. Sydney's first club was formed by the University in 1864 and over the next decade four more clubs and three school teams were formed. In July 1874 the leading clubs formed the Southern Rugby Football Union (SRFU), to organise the game under the rules of the English Union. A regular club competition was arranged and in its first annual report the SRFU noted that rugby was established in all the chief schools and that the number of clubs had increased to twelve'.¹ The origins of Australian football have been described often enough; suffice here to say that it was invented in 1858 by Melbourne cricketers who wanted to keep fit during the winter but did not want to risk injury playing the more physical rugby game.² Australian football became extraordinarily popular in Melbourne, spreading to Adelaide and Tasmania, but a controlling body, the Victorian Football Association (VFA), was not formed until 1877.

It is not intended here to enter the debate on the relative merits of both codes, nevertheless, it is perhaps worth mentioning that an English journalist, Richard Twopeny, played both codes and found the Australian game more 'stylish':

A good football match in Melbourne is one of the sights of the world... The quality of the play...is much superior to anything the best English clubs can produce...there is much more 'style' about the play.

A point to remember is that, at least until the 1890s, football in Melbourne was on a much bigger scale than in Sydney. In 1881 Melbourne's population was 282,000 and Sydney's was 225,000, but the disparity in the popularity of football was much greater. According to Twopeny, Melbourne had eight times as many clubs as Sydney, the biggest crowds were three times the size of Sydney's best, and about ten times as many people watched football in Melbourne as in Sydney on any given Saturday. Moreover, the sixpence charged at Melbourne grounds had helped to create a chain of well-appointed suburban grounds while in Sydney, with one exception, matches were played on unenclosed grounds such as Moore Park and the Domain, and disruptions to play were common as spectators spilled on to playing areas.

II

Australian football was first played in Sydney in 1877 when a local club, Waratah, invited the Melbourne club Carlton to play two matches, one each under rugby and Australian rules. Apparently, rugby had become rather slow and unattractive and the Waratah club hoped to make the point in a direct comparison with Australian football. On Saturday 23 June nearly 3,000 spectators paid one shilling each to see Waratah beat Carlton under rugby rules at the Albert Cricket Ground in Redfern, and the following Monday a smaller crowd saw Carlton win the match under Australian rules. The following season, Waratah visited Melbourne, being held to a draw by Carlton under rugby rules and beaten but not disgraced under Australian rules.⁴

There are probably three reasons why the Australian game took nearly twenty years to reach Sydney. First, it evolved in Melbourne because cricketers did not want to be injured playing rugby on hard grounds. In Sydney, conditions were more like England than Melbourne - Sydney's annual rainfall was twice that of Melbourne and Sydney averaged twenty more wet days each year than did Melbourne.⁵ Sydney's grounds were therefore much softer than Melbourne's and this reason for changing the style of football was not so pressing.

Second, although the Australian game was popular in Melbourne it was not well-known in Sydney and there was little mention of Melbourne football in the Sydney press of the 1860s and 1870s. Third, it mattered little to the SRFU's leading men whether others found their game attractive. John Calvert, president of the SRFU from 1874 to 1915, was the son of Thomas Calvert, warden and dean of Manchester Cathedral and professor of divinity at Cambridge. The young Calvert was educated at Shrewsbury School and Oxford, and arrived in Australia in 1853, becoming clerk of the New South Wales parliament in 1871. Thomas Arnold, senior vice-president of the SRFU, was educated at Rugby School (though no relation of its famous headmaster), and like Calvert, joined the New South Wales parliamentary staff, becoming clerk of the Legislative Assembly in 1904. Both men saw rugby as more than just a game; it was a symbol and reminder of their Englishness. Even the SRFU's name reflected the allegiance to England - it was simply the southern offshoot of the English body, the 'Southern' rather than the New South Wales Rugby Football Union.

Encouraged by the success of the Waratah and Carlton matches, the VFA suggested to the SRFU that regular intercolonial matches be inaugurated, starting in 1879. The SRFU refused, pleading that there was no ground in Sydney suitable 'for matches of so great interest'. However, this was simply not the case. The New South Wales Cricket Association offered the use of its own ground (later the Sydney Cricket Ground), the venue for intercolonial cricket matches, but this was not 'convenient' for the SRFU and the VFA's proposal was abandoned.⁶ Arnold gave the real reason for not playing the match when he addressed the SRFU's annual meeting in 1880. He thought it 'almost frivolous' to play intercolonial matches as the rules were so different and to alternate the rules would simply mean that each colony would win under its own rules. Arnold had received letters from New Zealand and thought that intercolonial matches could be arranged with that colony. He noted that rugby had become very popular in New Zealand, despite attempts to introduce the Australian game there.⁷

The second series of matches between Waratah and Carlton, when Carlton forced a draw under rugby rules and the Australian rules match was closely contested, showed that the problem of

different rules was not insurmountable. However, the SRFU would not compromise. Rather than play intercolonial matches against Victoria, it wanted to play rugby intercolonials against New Zealand.

The SRFU's decision not to play intercolonial matches with Victoria prompted the supporters of the Australian game in Sydney to action. A meeting of the game's supporters at Woollahra in June 1880 was well-attended and, according to the *Sydney Mail's* football writer, 'Leather-stocking', a clear indication of the dissatisfaction with rugby among Sydney footballers:

It is pretty well understood...that there are scores of footballers ...who play the Rugby game under protest as it were, and who would gladly welcome a radical change in the present method of playing football.⁸

A week later over 100 footballers formed the New South Wales Football Association (NSWFA), to play under the VFA's rules. The president of the new body was Philip Sheridan, the Irish born manager of the Association Cricket Ground.

The following month another group of footballers met to form an association to play under English Association rules, and, although soccer would not threaten either rugby or the Australian game, the meeting is of interest here in that it reflects the antipathy of rugby supporters toward the Australian game. Senior rugby officials warmly welcomed the introduction of soccer which they believed would improve the skills of rugby players. Indeed, there was only one dissenter at the meeting, a committeeman with the NSWFA, F. Lyons Weiss. In a speech that 'nearly drove the Rugbyites to the refreshment bar', Weiss declared that:

as the colonies in many matters, political and social, had struck out a path for themselves, he did not see why the same line of conduct should not be adopted in the game of football.

While averring that he had as much respect for British institutions as anyone else, Weiss claimed that people in New South Wales were 'quite as capable of judging the merits of the game as they were in England'.⁹

Within a fortnight of the NSWFA's formation, the SRFU met to discuss the challenge of the new code and, realising that rugby's popularity had been prejudiced by a pertinacity...in adhering to

the tight scrimmages', members agreed to open the game up and penal clauses were introduced to that end.¹⁰ However, the relative openness and speed with which football was played was not the only factor likely to determine the long-term success of one code over the other. Also important were the number of clubs (and therefore players) with each code, and the establishment of regular inter-colonial contests. Despite an initial hesitancy to play intercolonial matches, the SRFU soon held an advantage in both areas.

At the start of the 1881 season there were only two Australian football clubs in Sydney (Sydney and East Sydney), though a third team, from Maitland, about 100 miles north of Sydney, competed against them regularly. Late in 1881 a club was also formed at Petersham and in May 1882 Waratah formally switched its allegiance from rugby to Australian football. By comparison, there were thirty rugby clubs affiliated with the SRFU, fifteen in Sydney and fifteen in country areas.

In 1881 the trustees of the Association Cricket Ground announced that the ground would be available for intercolonial football matches. When the NSWFA arranged two matches with the VFA, and perhaps partly through the patronage of Sheridan, it was given use of the ground for both intercolonial and club matches. The first match was played in Melbourne and, partly because of Victoria's greater skills, but also because the SRFU had banned Sydney's players from taking part, the home side won easily. Later in the year 5,000 Sydneysiders paid to see New South Wales soundly thrashed in the return match. The Melbourne Football Club also sent a team to play three matches against Sydney clubs during the season but these and local club games were poorly attended by comparison with rugby matches, most of which were played on the adjacent Moore park. Part of the reason for this was the unwillingness of Sydneysiders to pay regularly to see football matches, but some of the blame must go to the NSWFA because, according to 'Leatherstocking', the Australian football matches were poorly advertised and managed.¹¹

The following season the SRFU inaugurated intercolonial rugby matches, bringing a Queensland team to Sydney and sending a New South Wales team to New Zealand. Queenslanders had played the Australian game in the 1870s but the SRFU was keen to claim that colony for rugby and apparently did so by bearing the expense of the

first Queensland team to Sydney.¹² The SRFU used the Association Ground for these matches but the crowds were smaller than for the inaugural Australian football intercolonial match in 1881. However, the important difference was that while the Australian football match was a one-off event, the rugby match was the first of what became regular annual and later biannual matches between New South Wales and Queensland. For the rest of the decade crowds at important NSWFA matches involving a variety of Melbourne clubs, a South Australian club, Queensland teams and even a Maori team, gradually declined. By comparison, crowds at representative rugby matches against Queensland, New Zealand and, in 1888, an English team, increased (see Table 1). Ironically, the establishment of Australian football in Sydney was just the impetus rugby needed to emerge as a major spectacle in Sydney. Again, according to 'Leatherstocking', if it had not been for the formation of the NSWFA, rugby 'might have gone on for years in the same humdrum style':

it has opened the eyes of the union to the danger of permitting an active rivalry, and the result has been that Rugby adherents, finding their pet game menaced, have shown more vigour lately than was ever anticipated.¹³

Another problem for the Australian game was that the best footballers played rugby and, as a result, New South Wales teams were never able to compete effectively against Victorian and South Australian sides. Besides a solitary success against a Queensland team, New South Wales never came close to winning an intercolonial match under Australian rules. This was partly due to the SRFU's ban which stopped rugby players playing Australian football, but also resulted from the NSWFA's failure to develop a junior competition. In 1886 'Censor', who had replaced 'Leatherstocking' as the *Sydney Mail's* football writer, noted that 'The pick of our young men - those who would make grand players at the Australian game - fight under the Rugby banner'.¹⁴ The only schools playing Australian football were the Catholic private schools St Joseph's and St Ignatius. In 1886 the St Ignatius annual reported that the Australian game was played in accordance with the wishes of the Rector.¹⁵ Presumably the priests of St Ignatius and the brothers of St Joseph's were more itinerant than their counterparts in protestant schools and many, having come from Melbourne or Adelaide, preferred the colonial game to rugby. And presumably the priests who came

TABLE 1: ATTENDANCES AT MAJOR AUSTRALIAN RULES AND RUGBY MATCHES
IN SYDNEY. 1882-89

Australian Rules				Rugby		
Year	Date	Match	Crowd	Date	Match	Crowd
1882	15 Jul	NSW v Geelong	2-3000	15 Aug	University v Queensland	3-4000
				19 Aug	Walleroo v Queensland	1500
				22 Aug	NSW v Queensland	500
1883	14 Jul	NSW v South Melbourne	5000	(NSW went to Brisbane)		
1884	26 Jun	NSW v South Adelaide	2000	31 May	NSW v New Zealand	4000
				7 Jun	NSW v New Zealand	4-5000
				14 Jun	NSW v New Zealand	3500
				12 Jul	NSW v Queensland	?
				19 Jul	NSW v Queensland	2000
				(NSW went to Brisbane)		
1885				24 Jul	NSW v Queensland	4000
1886	19 Jun	NSW v Queensland	2000	13 Jul	NSW v Queensland	5000
	26 Jun	NSW v Queensland	1000	(NSW went to Queensland)		
1887				2 Jun	NSW v England	?
1888	23 Jun	NSW v Melbourne	a few hundred	9 Jun	NSW v England	7000
				14 Jul	NSW v Queensland	2500
				21 Jul	NSW v Queensland	?
				4 Aug	NSW v England	?
				15 Jun	NSW v Maoris	7-8000
1889	29 Jun	NSW v Maoris	v. fair	22 Jun	NSW v Maoris	7-8000
	6 Jul	NSW v Port Melbourne	800	13 Jul	NSW v Victoria	3500
				20 Jul	NSW v Victoria	?

Dates: All matches were played on Saturday afternoon except the rugby matches between University and Queensland and NSW and Queensland in 1992 which were played on Tuesday afternoons.

Venue: All matches were played on the SCG except the rugby match between NSW and New Zealand in May 1884 which was played on the RAS Ground.

Source: Sydney Mail, 1882-89; Referee, 1887-89.

straight from Ireland preferred Australian football because of its affinity with Gaelic football. A competition for junior Australian football teams began in 1892 and St Joseph's entered. At the same time, though, and perhaps as a result of pressure from the Rugby Union, but more likely because the boys had tired of playing against men in the senior competition, St Ignatius turned to rugby. The college's annual reported simply that 'After some deliberation the Superiors consented that the boys should change from Australian rules to rugby'.¹⁶

Without a strong junior competition the NSWFA could not develop a lasting senior competition and, without regular matches against more skilled opponents, the senior sides were unable to improve their play. Irregular visits by strong intercolonial teams simply saw the humiliation of successive New South Wales teams. By comparison, rugby had a flourishing junior competition - all the major state schools and protestant private schools played rugby and by 1890 there were two junior competitions as well as the senior competition. Regular visits by New Zealand and Queensland teams provided strong opposition and although New South Wales was often too weak to challenge powerful New Zealand fifteens, it maintained an ascendancy over Queensland. More important, the tour in 1888 of an English team provided what sporting journalist J.C. Davis later termed encounters 'matchless in athletic sport' - matches between England and Australia.¹⁷ In the late nineteenth century Sydney looked to England to provide its ultimate football contests.

The 1888 English team played both codes and despite the SRFU's earlier intransigence one is struck by their apparent interchangeability. In 1881 a proposal to send an Australian team comprising nine players from New South Wales, eight from Victoria and three from New Zealand was only abandoned when the Victorians withdrew. A proposal that an English team visit Australia in 1886 was also abandoned.¹⁸ It is not clear whether, with eight Victorians, the 1881 Australian team was to have played rugby, Australian rules or a composite of both codes. Certainly in 1886 'Censor' expected that the proposed English team would play both codes, suggesting that:

The meeting of an English and an Australian team at the Australian game in Melbourne would draw one of the largest crowds ever seen... in the sports-loving metropolis.¹⁹

Though the 1886 tour did not eventuate, the 1888 English team fulfilled 'Censor's' prediction. After winning its two opening games against New South Wales under rugby rules, the second before a crowd of 7,000, the English footballers travelled to Melbourne. 25,000 saw Carlton beat the tourists under Australian rules at the Melbourne Cricket Ground and a week later 10,000 saw South Melbourne also beat them.²⁰ Of the twenty-eight games the English footballers played sixteen were under Australian rules against Victorian and South Australian teams. Although soundly beaten by the Melbourne clubs the Englishmen won five matches under Australian rules against Port Melbourne, Horsham, Ballarat, Sandhurst and Kyneton.²¹

Shortly after their arrival in Sydney the English team agreed to play against New South Wales under Australian rules but upon its return from Melbourne and Adelaide the match had been cancelled.²² Presumably the team management bowed to pressure from the SRFU which, after the success of the southern part of the Englishmen's tour, was not keen to encourage the rival code in Sydney.

In 1889, Andy Flanagan, a Carlton supporter who had moved to Sydney and become a vice-president of the NSWFA, donated a cup to be competed for by the senior Australian football clubs in Sydney.²³ Like other challenge cups before in cricket and rugby, the Flanagan Cup generated considerable public interest. In July 1891 a match between Sydney and West Sydney attracted 5,000 spectators and a month later 6,000 saw the final match between West Sydney and Waratah.²⁴ According to the *Sydney Morning Herald* these matches 'created a vast amount of interest among the general public'.²⁹ Unfortunately the matches were played on Moore Park so the NSWFA could not charge the spectators, though possibly this was at least part of the reason for the large crowds in the first place. By the early 1890s most important club rugby matches were played on the Association Ground or the new Royal Agricultural Society (RAS) Ground, next door. Philip Sheridan had stood down as president of the NSWFA in 1890 and, whether this was as a result of disagreement with members of the NSWFA or not, after 1890 the SRFU had a virtual monopoly on the Association Ground during winter. On the rare

occasions that the Flanagan Cup matches were played on the RAS Ground attendances were disappointing.

In the early 1890s public interest in rugby grew rapidly and Australian rules disappeared. In April 1894 a racy sporting and political gossip weekly, the *Bird O'Freedom*, asked 'What has become of the Australian game of football in Sydney' and at the end of 1895 the only Australian football clubs in New South Wales were in Riverina, Albury and Wagga, regions which were economically and culturally bound to Melbourne rather than Sydney.²⁶ Bad luck, poor management, squabbling between clubs, the loss of the Association Ground, the poor showing of New South teams, and a failure to develop a strong junior competition all contributed to the disappearance of the game from Sydney.

In a concerted effort to increase interest in Australian football, the NSWFA brought Carlton, South Melbourne and a Tasmanian team to Sydney in 1890. Unfortunately the matches between New South Wales and Carlton, and between South Melbourne and Carlton were abandoned because of heavy rain. The loss of these potential gate receipts, together with the loss of the Association Ground at the end of the season, ended any chance of raising enough money to organise competitive football.

The Flanagan Cup was popular with non-paying spectators but it was also a source of ill-feeling between clubs. The Cup was the first formal competition for Sydney Australian football clubs and some responded poorly to the competitive spirit. In the 1891 final West Sydney, aided by some-players from the East Sydney club, beat Waratah who were understandably upset by the ploy but were happy enough the following year when a similar tactic cost West Sydney the final.²⁷ In a match against Sydney, West Sydney played an ineligible man and was disqualified. Rather than win the cup by default Sydney chose to play a final but the West Sydney team did not appear, still believing that they had won the earlier match fairly, and so Sydney was awarded the premiership.²⁸ In 1893 the NSWFA's annual report declared 1892 to have been the most disastrous year in its history; the 'petty jealousies' of 1891 had been replaced by 'a keener and more bitter form of antagonism'. The report concluded that:

Although the year 1891 was painfully disastrous to the progress of the game, yet it remained for the close of 1892 to almost crush it out of existence,

Apathy, bitterness and poor management combined to bring about a decline in membership: in 1893 there were not enough clubs to continue the competition 'in a satisfactory manner' and 'owing to the disorganised state of the association' and the disbanding of a number of clubs 'circumstances did not warrant the arranging of intercolonial matches'.³⁰

III

Australian football was revived in February 1903 when a meeting at the Sydney headquarters of the YMCA formed the New South Wales Football League (NSWFL). Within a fortnight the *Herald* reported that there was a lot of interest in Australian football in Sydney and the paper expected it to become well-established.³¹ By then three clubs had been formed, at Sydney, Paddington and the North Shore, and by the beginning of April there were eight more - Alexandria, Ashfield, Balmain, East Sydney, Newtown, Redfern, West Sydney and YMCA.

The involvement of the YMCA is intriguing. Like the priests and brothers of St Ignatius and St Joseph's in the 1880s, members of the YMCA were taken all round Australia on their religious duties and, having seen Australian football played in Melbourne and Adelaide, they may well have been keen to see it re-established in Sydney. Six weeks before the inaugural meeting of the NSWFL John Virgo took up the position of General Secretary of the YMCA in Sydney, having transferred from the equivalent post in Adelaide. Elected a vice-president of the NSWFL, Virgo was one of a number of former Melbournians or Adelaidians who wanted to see the game played in their new home. Other vice-presidents of the NSWFL were Alfred Meeks, a Melbourne educated merchant who lived in Adelaide before moving to Sydney in 1888 and Alfred Nash who had been president of the earlier NSWFA.

The federal spirit also played a part in the revival of Australian football and, as in the 1880s, its presence was linked with the debate between Australian nationalists and imperial patriots. When Fitzroy and Collingwood visited Sydney for an

exhibition match in May 1903 the New South Wales Minister for Lands, Edward O'Sullivan, was there to meet them. Also a vice-president of the NSWFL, Tasmanian born O'Sullivan had worked as a journalist in Melbourne before moving to Sydney in 1882. He observed that while the game was originally called Victorian rules it was now taking on a national flavour and had become known as Australian rules. O'Sullivan said he liked the name because Australia was a new country and the game belonged to that country. He contended that while the people of New South Wales should respect rugby they should also 'support a game that was invented by Australians for Australia'.³² The supporters of Australian football stressed that its revival was not intended as a threat to rugby; for example, the *Herald* declared that there were hundreds of young men around Sydney anxious to play football but who did not care for rugby, and it saw no reason why the two games should not flourish side by side.³³ Monty Arnold, brother of Richard and also a long-serving rugby official, disagreed declaring the Australian game to be 'foreign' to New South Wales. So did J.C. Davis:

An Empire game for football appears to me to be far more desirable than an Australian game. One is universal; the other parochial....Give us an International or Universal game. Let us have England or Great Britain against Australia. It has a relish that eclipses anything of a purely local character. If the do not want it in Victoria, we want it in New South Wales.³⁴

Perhaps recalling the failure of the NSWFA to create a strong junior competition, the NSWFL began a conversion campaign in Sydney schools. It established the Australian Football School League which was open to all public schools in Sydney, and the Catholic Primary Schools Football Association, which in May 1904 included twelve schools, was affiliated to the NSWFL.³⁵ In a pamphlet which had emblazoned on its inside cover the pronouncement, 'Australian football: the game for Australian schoolboys', the NSWFL praised the safety of its code, at the same time warning parents and teachers of the dangers of injury in rugby. More tangible incentives to convert included three gold medals in a competition for the best essay on Australian football, trophies for the schools competition and a promise that the NSWFL would bear the expense of sending the champion school to play the best school in Melbourne each year.³⁶ In May 1904 the *Herald* reported that the NSWFL and the Rugby Union were having 'a great

struggle' for the allegiance of schoolboys.³⁷

The NSWFL's efforts met with some success in the schools, and although the private schools remained staunch bastions of rugby, many state schools took up the Australian game. That they did so successfully is shown by the fact that Petersham Public School, winners of the first schools premiership, travelled to Melbourne in September 1904 and beat Albert Park State School in the preliminary match to the 1904 VFL grand final.³⁸

The first season of senior Australian football was equally successful. Eleven clubs competed in the senior competition, and in May 1903 over 20,000 watched Fitzroy and Collingwood play at the Sydney Cricket Ground (formerly the Association Ground). Later in the season Carlton and Geelong, attracted 5,000 to the same ground, and the final of the Sydney competition was played on the RAS Ground in front of 4,000 people (see table 2).

Between 1903 and 1910 the VFL spent over £10,000 sending Melbourne clubs to play in Sydney.³⁹ These matches sometimes counted towards the Melbourne premiership and others were against New South Wales teams. Not only did the VFL pay all expenses, they also left the gate receipts to the NSWFL, and many of the teams continued on to Brisbane where the VFL was also keen to establish the game. Indeed, the revival of Australian football in Sydney can be viewed as a missionary expedition by the VFL. In 1906 an Australian Football Council was formed by delegates from each state. The Council, which could not have survived without the support of the VFL and the South Australian Football League, established a 'propaganda fund' for the development of Australian football in the 'weaker' states, of which New South Wales was one.⁴⁰

However, despite this encouraging start, the attempt to revive Australian football in Sydney was unsuccessful. In 1905 there were only eight teams in the senior club competition, and after the initial novelty of the game between Fitzroy and Collingwood, major games failed to attract more than 6,000, 2,000 to 3,000 being typical. By 1912, despite the VFL's best efforts, Australian football in Sydney had at most between 5,000 and 6,000 regular supporters.

One of the reasons Australian football did not develop in Sydney was its inability to secure good enclosed grounds. The first

TABLE 2: ATTENDANCES AT SELECTED AUSTRALIAN RULES MATCHES
IN SYDNEY, 1903-12

	Match	Day	Ground	Attendance
1903	Fitzroy v Collingwood	Sat	SCG	20000
	NSW v Fitzroy	Wed	SCG	2000
	Geelong v Carlton	Mon	SCG	5000
	NSW v Carlton	Wed	SCG	small
	*East Sydney v North Shore	Sat	RAS Ground	4000
1904	*Balmain v Ashfield	Sat	Redfern Oval	1000
1905	South Melbourne v Fitzroy	Sat	SCG	6000
	{ Sydney v Fitzroy	Wed	SCG	meagre
	{ Sydney(A) v South Melbourne			
*Newton v YMCA	Sat	Wentworth Pk	3000	
1906	NSW v Carlton	Sat	RAS Ground	3000
	NSW v North Adelaide	Sat	SCG	4000
	NSW v Queensland	Sat	SCG	4000
	NSW v St Kilda	Sat	SCG	4000
	*Balmain v YMCA	Sat	Wentworth Pk	3000
	*Newtown v Redfern	Sat	RAS Ground	2000
1907	NSW v Port Adelaide	Sat	RAS Ground	4000
	NSW v South Melbourne	Sat	RAS Ground	5000
1908	NSW v Norwood ^a	Sat	SCG	1000
1909	NSW v South Melbourne	Sat	Erskineville	3000
	{ NSW v Queensland	Sat	Erskineville	5000
	{ Geelong v Collingwood			
	*Newtown v YMCA	Sat	Moore Park	2000
	*North Shore v YMCA	Sat	North Shore	3000
	*Newtown v Redfern	Sat	Moore Park	2000
	*Newtown v YMCA	Sat	Moore Park	4000
1911	Sydney v Kalgoolie	Sat	Erskineville	3000
	Paddington v Sydney	Sat	Moore Park	3000
	East Sydney v Sydney	Sat	Erskineville	3000

Notes: ^(a) The match was played as a prelude to a rugby union match between university and South Sydney which drew 10000.

* Denotes a Sydney club match. Only such matches drawing 1000 or more are included and not all of those are documented here, it being intended simply to indicate the level of support for Australian rules rather than to provide detailed crowd figures.

Source: Referee, 1904-12; Sunday Times, 1904-12; SMH, 1904-12.

president of the NSWFL was Sir John See, premier of New South Wales, trustee of the Sydney Cricket Ground and president of the RAS. While See was president, the NSWFL had access to both the Sydney Cricket Ground and the RAS Ground and in 1903 the Sydney Cricket Ground trustees granted free access for two important matches.⁴¹ However, See's retirement from the NSWFL had the same impact as the resignation of Sheridan as president of the NSWFA in 1890, and Australian football again found itself without a regular home. Unhappily for the NSWFL, See's retirement coincided with the establishment of rugby league in Sydney, and there was thus even more competition for the limited number of good grounds.

Reporting the loss of the RAS ground for Australian football, the *Referee* noted that the relatively small unenclosed grounds with which the NSWFL was left were 'of little use in showing off the spectatorial strength of the game'.⁴² In 1909 the NSWFL did manage to rent Erskineville Oval, but, although the ground was well served by both bus and tram, it was further from the centres of population than the Sydney Cricket Ground and RAS ground. And in 1911 Albert Nash still had to complain that the greatest drawback to the development of his game in New South Wales was the lack of suitable grounds.⁴³ The problem was partly solved in 1912 when the NSWFL purchased Erskineville Oval, renaming it the Australian Football Ground. According to Nash, purchase of the ground had been made possible by the newspaper tycoon, Hugh Denison, who, as patron of the NSWFL, also donated one hundred pounds for the erection of a grandstand.⁴⁴ Like many supporters of the game, Denison had been educated in Melbourne and Adelaide before moving to Sydney in 1905.

Possession of an enclosed ground was not enough to make Australian football a serious competitor to rugby union or league. Because Sydney's best footballers already played rugby, Australian football had little talent with which to work, a problem made even worse with the emergence of rugby league. It is easy enough to understand why this last group, largely dissatisfied with the Rugby Union, did not turn to Australian football. Australian football in Sydney was amateur so the main grievance of disgruntled rugby players, the lack of compensation for time off work through injury and representative rugby commitments, would not be helped by changing codes. However, it is worth noting that at least one man, the international

cricketer Victor Trumper, who was the inaugural treasurer for the New South Wales Rugby Football League, had also been involved with the Paddington Australian Football Club in 1903.

The curious question is what happened to all the school boys who were encouraged to convert to Australian rules - in 1908 fifty-eight state schools and thirteen Catholic schools played the game.⁴⁵ Undoubtedly many went on to play senior club football but the problem there was that, as in the 1880s, the standard of play in that competition never improved. Because Sydney Australian football was amateur there was no incentive for professional Victorian players to take up coaching positions and because Victorian and South Australian teams visited only occasionally there was no opportunity for the New South Wales teams to regularly develop their skills against superior sides. The big matches they did play were invariably one-sided and this adversely affected spectator attendance as well as the confidence of players. Indeed, the public's lack of interest, or rather lack of confidence, in the New South Wales team was evident from the outset. When Carlton played Geelong at the Sydney Cricket Ground in August 1903, 5,000 paid to watch the match, but when New South Wales played Carlton two days later the attendance was very small because, according to the *Herald*, a Carlton win was a foregone conclusion.⁴⁶

Even before Australian football was revived in 1903 the *Herald* suggested that:

the reluctance of New South Wales to change its game, or even to introduce another form which would be followed side by side with Rugby, is due largely to the fact that our athletes excel rather in cricket than in football.⁴⁷

When rugby league began in 1908 Sydney spectators finally had a brand of football in which their team was successful. Between 1908 and 1912 the New South Wales rugby league team won all eleven of its matches against Queensland, scoring 426 points to 83, nine out of eleven matches against New Zealand, and two out of three games played against England. The majority of spectators and the best players soon flocked to the new professional game, rugby union went into decline, and Australian football was left to a small band of devotees, most of whom were expatriate Victorians and South Australians.

In the late 1870s Australian football had had a real chance to establish itself in Sydney. Certainly rugby was already established, but only at club level, and football was a much smaller concern there than in Melbourne. A popular view is that intercolonial rivalry was the main reason for Australian football's failure to take-off in Sydney, but to suggest that Sydneysiders rejected the game simply because it was a Melbourne invention appears to over-simplify the matter. After all, what better way to show Victorians who the better side was than to beat them at their own game. Looking elsewhere for explanations, the poor standard of play by New South Wales teams and the failure to institute regular intercolonial matches are compelling. These, though, were simply the consequence of a more basic problem. Sydney Australian football officials did not promote or manage their game we well as their counterparts in the Rugby Union managed and promoted rugby. When Australian football first appeared in Sydney rugby officials immediately took steps to make their game more appealing and throughout the rest of the century, whenever their game was challenged rugby officials invariably took up that challenge, or more often, took the initiative away from Australian football. Indeed, Sydney Australian football officials, most of whom were initially from Melbourne or Adelaide, were, after initial enthusiasm, content to exist as a small coterie maintaining their cherished pastime in a (in footballing terms) hostile environment. Unlike the VFL, their missionary zeal soon gave way to a beleaguered garrison mentality and, like most beleaguered garrisons, they eventually wilted. The other factor was that Australian football was a colonial invention and unlike the more nationalistically self-sufficient Melbourne, Sydney before 1914 looked to England for its ultimate sporting contests.

Indeed, it is only now in the 1980s, with a highly successful Sydney-based Australian football team, enthusiastic officials and a diminution of interest in rugby matches against England that Australian football can be confident of a future in Sydney.

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42. *Referee*, 22 April 1908.
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44. *SMH*, 5 February 1912.
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