

**Shirtfront: a short and amazing history of Aussie Rules  
by Paula Hunt*****black dog books*****Teacher Notes prepared by Peter Tunbridge****Rationale:** To be used as a reading guide for the book**Readership:** Lower secondary**Genre:** Factual, including a timeline and statistical information.**About Shirtfront**

Australian football — Aussie Rules — was born in Melbourne in 1858, when Scotch College played Melbourne Grammar on the paddocks we now know as Yarra Park. Melbourne was still a very young town, only about 20 years old, grown on the back of a gold rush.

The new game was conceived by a flamboyant young cricketer, Tom Wills. When Tom and his friends put the rules to paper, not even a year after that 'first' game, Australian football could lay claim to being the oldest codified form of football in the world. Tom's personal story ended in tragedy, but the game he helped create

continues to dominate his home town.

Australian football has the unique position of being truly home-grown. It was successfully exported to South Australia, Western Australia and Tasmania but the ongoing feud between the colonies of Victoria and New South Wales ensured it would always be a game that held half the nation spellbound, and was completely dismissed by the rest.

Over the years Australian football has reflected the society in which it was played. Early Melbourne was a relatively egalitarian society; the eight hour working day ensured that football was a game played by both the working classes and the privileged. And this equality was not just seen on the field; around the boundary all were welcome, rich, poor, men and women. This was extremely important to football's ongoing success. The crowds that came to watch the footy were always, from that first bounce, substantial.

Football rode out the depressions of 1890s and 1920s, providing one of the only social outlets for much of the suffering working class. But in the First World War football was derided, seen as a distraction at a time when focus should have been on fighting the Hun. Professional footballers were seen as mercenaries, while their mates were dying in the trenches of Europe. But by the time the Second World War was fought attitudes had changed. Football was seen as a way to keep the home fires burning, footballs were sent to the troops in Egypt and it was played in the prison camps of Changi.

Throughout the 1950s and 1960s, football, like much of Australia remained unchanged and conservative. Twelve teams, six games on a Saturday. TV had arrived but football was limited to one replay on Saturday night. That was until 1964 when Ron Barassi left Melbourne for Carlton. His defection signalled the start of what would become an epic change. Football had been professional since 1911 but as a local competition playing fees had remained relatively small. Over the next thirty years South Melbourne was sent to Sydney, the VFL went national and became the AFL, twelve teams became sixteen, and football became the fully professional sport we have today.

Sometimes football is the conduit of history rather than



the mirror. When in 1993 Nicky Winmar responded to the racists taunts of the crowd by lifting his guernsey and pointing to his black skin he helped set in motion a change in attitude that has seen the formation of the racial vilification rules and a substantial increase in the number of indigenous players in the game.

But for the fans the history of football is all about those last minute goals, the fighting comebacks and the legendary footballers.

## About the author

Paula Hunt broke her father's Swan heart when she announced, at the age of four, she was a Blue. It was the start of a life long passion for the game of Australian Rules. At the end of the last millennium Paula finished a lengthy stint as a manager in corporate Australia when she decided there just wasn't enough football in her career. Now, as Jezza Bella, she writes a weekly column about the Blues in the Melbourne Times and also writes a column for the City Weekly. She works on Health and Safety at the Mecca of football, the MCG and waits expectantly for next season.

## Teaching Applications

### KEY LEARNING AREAS

#### SOSE (Studies of Society and the Environment)

This would be a very useful resource that could be used to provide awareness of issues covered in Year 9 SOSE. Issues relating to:

- **Immigration**  
The White Australia policy and the impact Immigration has had on our society. (p105-107)
- **Aboriginal Culture**  
The stolen generation (p81) and assimilation

problems faced by the two cultures. (159-161)

- **Australians at War**

The impact of war on the Australian community, WW1&2, POW's in Changi Prison (p88).

- **Study of Australian Culture**

How our way of life has changed and developed, the British influences, Australians developing their own identities and the influence of migrants.

## AUSTRALIAN HISTORY

Very useful for looking into our history and looking at the topic through football and sport is a good way to gain the interest of those who might be sporting inclined but not interested in historical issues.

## PHYSICAL EDUCATION

Theory at year10&11. The sociology of sport and the role sport, such as football has had in shaping our society. Or used as a case study looking at how football has developed and changed to meet the demands and changes of society, the spectators and the playing of the game itself.

### THE FIRST BOUNCE — pages 1-27

- Where was the first official game of Australian Rules played and between which teams?
- What was the final score in that first encounter and how long did the game last?
- Tom Wills was the inspiration behind the formation of Australian Rules football. Present a pen sketch of Tom Wills the person.
- Why did he see the need to develop the game of Aussie Rules?



- What was the possible link between the origins of Australian Rules and Australia's indigenous people?
- Who was regarded as the first superstar of the game? And what was he renowned for?
- The game was keenly watched by thousands of barrackers from all over Melbourne. Where does the word barracker originate from?
- Prepare a time line showing the beginnings of Aussie Rules as it started up around Australia.

**AUSTRALIAN RULES — pages 28-31**

- There have been numerous changes made to the rules of the game as it has developed. Prepare a time line showing the main rules of the game and when they were introduced?
- Which rule change do you think has had the biggest influence on the game and why?

**BOOTMAKERS, STOCKBROKERS & LARRIKINS — pages 35-47**

- Draw up a chart with two columns. One column headed similarities, the other headed differences. List the similarities and differences of Aussie Rules that you can identify between the 1880s and today?
- What impact did the depression in 1890 have on the game and the city of Melbourne?
- Who was 'Albert the Great' and why was he rated so highly as a player?

**CLASS WARS — pages 54-65**

- What impact did World War 1 have on the VFL competition?
- Provide a pen sketch describing Roy Cazaly the

person and the footballer?

**CHAMPIONS, SUPERSTARS AND BRAWLERS — pages 72-91**

- Over the years the VFL has seen many players who have been given the tag of a champion, a superstar or a brawler. This chapter covers seven players who have gained such a reputation. Write a short personal profile on each player. At the end of each profile try and match the player with a modern day AFL player who you think has a similar profile.

**YES COACH — pages 99-116**

- What impact did John Coleman and Ted Whitten have on football?
- Describe what it was like living in Melbourne in the 1950s?
- How did the arrival of European migrants change the way of life in Australia?
- One of the greatest coaches was Melbourne's Norm Smith. Describe his style of coaching that made him so successful?
- What was the scandal surrounding Ron Barassi and Norm Smith? How did it change the nature of football teams?
- Why was the 1970 grand final so significant in the game is played today?

**THE TIMES, THEY ARE A CHANGING — pages 122-140**

- 1970 – 1980 This decade of football witnessed some major changes to the game. What were these changes and impact did they have on the game?



- There have been many significant changes made to Aussie Rules but 1982 saw one of its most significant. Describe this change and how it paved the way we follow football today?
- Ablett and Matthews are possibly the greatest players to have played the game. Do a comparison or an analysis of the two players and decide for yourself who was the greater and why?

**THE CLUBS — pages 141-145**

- Produce a bar graph showing the number of premierships won by each club?

**NATIONALISATION OR BUST — pages 149-163**

- What significant changes took place in the 80's? Describe the impact each change has had on the competition and the game?
- How is football different today to what it was 20 years ago? Have the changes improved the sport? Explain how?

**GOING FORWARD — pages 169-184**

- If Tom Wills (the founder of Aussie Rules) could be asked for his opinion of what he thinks of football today, what do you think he would say?
- Bring out your crystal ball and describe how you see football being played in 2030? Will it be very much different to today? How?



**black dog books**

15 Gertrude Street Fitzroy Victoria 3065  
03 9419 9406 [dog@bdb.com.au](mailto:dog@bdb.com.au)

**Teacher Notes**