

# FortySouth

TASMANIA

TASMANIAN VOICES

## Treated with contempt

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*Saul Eslake*

The game we now know as “Australian rules” football has been part of life on this island for as least as long as it has been called Tasmania. *The Hobart Town Daily Courier* of Friday, August 5, 1853, informed its readers that, on the following Wednesday, the Cessation of Transportation to Van Diemen’s Land would be celebrated at Richmond by, among other things, “Games ... of Foot-ball”.

“Victorian Football Rules” were formally adopted by Tasmanian clubs in 1866. The Tasmanian Football League was established in 1879, and the Northern Tasmanian Football Association in 1886 (both of them before the Victorian Football League, the precursor to the present-day AFL, which wasn’t established until 1896), when six clubs broke away from the Victorian Football Association, which had been founded in 1877. The North-West Football Union began in 1910.

Tasmania played its first interstate game against Victoria at the MCG on May 21, 1887, in front of a crowd of between 15,000 and 20,000. A report in *The Mercury* the following Wednesday records that “despite the exertions of the Islanders”, with “seldom a fairer and better game of football been contested on a Victorian ground”, they were soundly beaten, 7.15 (57) to 4.6 (30).

But the tables were turned six years later, on June 10, 1893, when a team from the Southern Tasmanian Football Association beat a VFA “seconds” team 5.7 (37) to 5.5 (35) at Cornelian Bay in front of about 5,000 spectators. The game was officially recorded as having been drawn because behinds weren’t counted towards the final score until 1897. The Melbourne *Argus* reported that a Victorian player kicked the ball into a nearby paddock late in the game “to waste time”, sparking a melee which involved players, spectators and the police.

Tasmania participated in the first interstate carnival held in Melbourne in 1908, where we beat Queensland (by 20 goals), New Zealand (by 11 goals) and New South Wales (by 27 points), but lost to South Australia by more than 11 goals (we didn’t get to play against Victoria or Western Australia). Three years later, Tasmania beat Western Australia by five points in Adelaide. In 1923, a Tasmanian side defeated a South Australian Second XVIII by 32 points in front of a 25,000-strong crowd at the Adelaide Oval (the SA First XVIII was playing Western Australia in Perth on the same day).

The interstate carnival was held in Hobart for the first time in August 1924, where Tasmania defeated New South Wales and Queensland (the latter by 198 points) but lost to the big three of South Australia, Western Australia and Victoria.

Tasmania didn't win many more interstate games after that until the late 1950s when Tasmania beat South Australia at the 1956 carnival, and both South and Western Australia in Melbourne two years later.

Most famously of all, Tasmania (missing Darrel Baldock who had been selected as captain) defeated Victoria by seven points at York Park on the Queen's Birthday holiday in 1960.

Almost exactly three years later, Tasmania beat Western Australia, 9.10 (64) to 6.13 (49) at Perth's Subiaco Oval. Seven years later (after some repeated drubbings at interstate carnivals) a Tasmanian side again beat the Sandgropers, this time by only two points, thanks to a goal from John Bingley 30 seconds before the final siren, at North Hobart Oval. The day before, WA's captain Graham "Polly" Farmer had told journalists that "if we can't beat Tasmania, we ought to give the game away".



I remember that game vividly. At that time, many Tasmanians – Royce Hart, Darrel Baldock, Verdun Howell, Ian Stewart, "Percy" Jones, John Devine and Peter Hudson, among others, were making names for themselves in the VFL (which we could of course only watch on delayed replay).

But the local competitions were also thriving. The Launceston Bank for Savings and the Hobart Savings Bank used to publish at the beginning of the season little foldable calendars, with your chosen team's colours diagonally across the top right-hand corner of the front page, containing the roster of home-and-away games and a place for you to record the scores each week – which you could catch up on by watching Tim Lane, "Nunky" Ayers and Ray Walker on the ABC's "Who Won Why" on Saturday evenings.

I never played football, but as a teenager I would walk from my parents' home in Howrah to Bellerive Oval to watch Clarence (under John Bingley) take on whoever was making the trip over the river. As a 12-year old I saw their first Premiership in 1970.

Everyone had their favourite VFL team – mine was (and still is) Essendon, because when I was first asked (at Smithton Primary School) who I barracked for, Essendon was the only place in Melbourne I'd ever heard of (apart from Melbourne itself) because that's where the airport was, and we'd passed through it en route to visit my grandparents in Sydney. But people also cared about the outcome of local games.

That enthusiasm probably started to fade when direct telecasts of VFL games into Tasmania started in the mid-1970s, and when promising young Tasmanian players began to be drafted directly by VFL clubs without needing to prove themselves in the TFL, NTFA or NWFU. Inevitably, the quality of the local competitions started to wane, and with it, the interest of spectators.

Tasmania has been poorly served by the AFL ever since its creation in 1990. As the self-proclaimed custodian of Australia's "national game", the AFL ought to be concerned with nurturing its grass roots, ahead of proselytizing the code in "foreign fields".

Instead, the AFL has treated Tasmania with contempt, almost from day one of its existence. Tasmania's functions, in the eyes of its hierarchy, is to send our best players to play for mainland-based clubs; and to use taxpayers' money to subsidise games between what were, initially, financially-strapped Melbourne-based clubs and teams from other mainland states with few followers in Melbourne, which would lose money if staged at the MCG or Docklands Stadium.

The AFL's long-standing attitude to Tasmania was perhaps best encapsulated by its then CEO Andrew Demetriou's comment about a round 19 game between St Kilda and Hawthorn at York Park in August 2009. The scheduling decision would have been made the previous November, when no-one would have known the game would have an important bearing on whether St Kilda would finish on top of the ladder (it won, and it did) and on whether Hawthorn would make the finals at all (it lost, and it didn't). Demetriou's comment about such an important game being played in Tasmania was, "We will not make that mistake again."

In Demetriou's eyes, scheduling a game that mattered to the outcome of the competition in Tasmania was a "mistake". And it was certainly one he didn't make again.

And that same contempt has been evident whenever Tasmania has advanced its case to participate in the national competition, on an equal footing with clubs from, now, every other state.

It was on show in 2010 when Demetriou told Tasmanian Premier David Bartlett that Tasmanian would not get its own team, "not now, not ever", even though he had to acknowledge that the business case for a Tasmanian team which Bartlett had presented to the AFL Commission "ticked all the boxes".

It initially seemed that Gillon McLachlan, when he succeeded Demetriou as AFL boss in 2014, might have a more enlightened attitude towards the AFL becoming the "truly national" competition that it has long, but falsely, claimed to be. But those hopes have turned to dust.

Tasmania needs to keep pressing its case – which Peter Gutwein has, to his credit, done with gusto since becoming Premier of Tasmania in January 2020. The articles to follow in this series will look at different aspects of that case.

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Saul Eslake came to Tasmania with his parents as an eight-year old. He went to primary school in Smithton, and high school and university in Hobart (graduating with a First Class Honours degree in Economics from UTas). Like so many in that era, he went to the mainland for work, initially at the Treasury in Canberra, before spending almost 32 years in Melbourne, working as (among other things) chief economist of the ANZ Bank for 14 years and chief economist (Australia & New Zealand) for Bank of America Merrill Lynch for 3½ years. In 2015 he came home to establish his own business, [Corinna Economic Advisory](#). Saul Eslake is a Vice-Chancellor's Fellow at UTas, and a non-executive director of the [Macquarie Point Development Corporation](#).