

Johannesburg Sportsman's Club

27 July 2018

DHOM speech on Australian rules football

It's a great pleasure to join you today to talk about one of my great passions, Australian rules football, Australia's indigenous game and our most popular winter sport.

Most Australians follow football of one variety or another, but, just to confuse visitors, 'footy' has different meanings for different people, with no fewer than four codes played across Australia.

Australian rules football has its strongholds in the Northern Territory, South Australia, Tasmania, Victoria and Western Australia. Rugby league is the most popular winter sport in New South Wales and Queensland. Soccer has a growing following across the country. And, in possibly heartbreakening news for a South African audience, rugby union enjoys only a niche and sadly shrinking audience.

Coming from Western Australia, I grew up, like most boys of my generation, playing cricket in summer and Australian rules football in winter.

Around 1.4 million Australians play Australian rules football today, ranging from kids who play in their local suburban club, to professionals who play in the Australian Football League, or AFL, which is the premier competition in the country.

In the men's league of the AFL, eighteen teams from across Australia compete in the 23 rounds of the home and away season, before the top eight teams battle it out in the four week finals series. The season culminates in the grand final, played at the iconic Melbourne Cricket Ground on the last Saturday in September, which for many Australians is akin to nothing short of a religious commemoration.

In the women's league, known as AFLW, eight teams from across Australia compete in the seven rounds of the premiership season, after which the top two teams play off in the grand final. AFLW is only two years old, and will expand to 14 teams by 2020.

While the birth of AFLW is perhaps the most exciting recent development in Australian rules football, I will focus on the men's league, if only because there is more to say about it at this stage.

The AFL is riding a wave of popularity. Last year, 6,734,062 people attended games during the home and away season, setting a new record for annual attendance. 553,818 were lucky enough to attend a final, with 100,021 holding a coveted ticket to the grand final on that magical last Saturday in September.

Membership of AFL clubs is also at record levels. 907,561 people were members of one or another of the 18 clubs last year. That number is approaching one million, or around one in every 25 Australians, this year.

The Collingwood Magpies had the most members last year with 75,879. Collingwood holds a special place in the competition as the team that everyone else loves to hate. As an indication of the derision that non-Collingwood supporters hold for the club, allow me to draw on my own family history.

My uncle never had any interest in Australian rules football, putting him sharply at odds with his immediate family, all of whom support the Essendon Bombers for whom my grandfather played; and his extended family, including me, who support the West Coast Eagles. That was until he had the revelation that he could annoy his family even more by joining Collingwood. So, for around a decade now, my uncle has unfortunately been one of those 75,000-odd people who carry a Collingwood membership card. I guess that every family has its disreputable elements.

2018 is said to be the 122nd season of the AFL, although the Australian Football League only became known by that name relatively recently.

The Victorian Football League, or VFL, was previously the premier Australian rules football competition in the country, although there were also successful leagues in other states and territories. The VFL was established in 1896 with eight clubs, the oldest of which, the Melbourne Football Club, now known as the Melbourne Demons, was founded in 1858.

The VFL provided the foundations of the current AFL. It first expanded beyond Victoria into New South Wales, when South Melbourne moved to Sydney in 1982, becoming the Sydney Swans. In a bolder step, the VFL then expanded into Western Australia and Queensland in 1987, becoming a 14 team competition by adding my beloved West Coast Eagles and what is now the Brisbane Lions.

With teams from four states, the fiction that the league was solely Victorian was abandoned in 1990, with the name changing from the VFL to the AFL.

Reflecting its roots in the VFL, today the AFL consists of ten teams from Victoria; and two from each of New South Wales, Queensland, South Australia and Western Australia. Debate continues to rage about adding a team from Tasmania, another traditional stronghold of the game.

Putting aside the origins of the AFL as a competition, the origins of Australian rules football as a game trace back to at least 1858, the same year that the Melbourne Football Club was founded. The first recorded game was played between Scotch College and Melbourne Grammar School, two secondary schools in Melbourne, on 7 August that year.

Tom Wills is credited with devising the game, but what influenced him to do so is contested among historians. Wills was born in New South Wales in 1835 to wealthy parents descended from the British convicts who were the first European settlers of Australia.

Wills' family soon moved to the Grampians, a rural district of western Victoria, where they were pastoralists. Wills was said to be the only white child in the district. In a particularly enlightened attitude shared by too few at the time, Wills' father allowed the Djabwurrung people to continue their traditional practices on his land, and encouraged his son to play with the local Aboriginal kids. Wills did just that, becoming fluent in their language, and attending traditional corroborees, or ceremonies.

Wills left Australia at the age of 14 to attend Rugby School, which was the most prestigious school in England at the time. He was a gifted sportsman, excelling at cricket, but also playing rugby. Wills returned to Australia in 1856 at the age of 21 and, two years later, wrote the first set of rules for what we now call Australian rules football, aided by three other members of the newly formed Melbourne Football Club.

The controversy about the origins of Australian rules football stems from whether Wills simply set out to create a modified version of rugby that avoided scrumming on the often hard Australian turf, or whether he instead took inspiration from the Australian Aboriginal game known as 'marnbrook', mindful of his relationship with the Djabwurrung people as a child.

Wills himself never made any mention of being influenced by marnbrook, but that could just as easily have been a sign of the times, given the persecution of Aboriginals by European settlers, and the scepticism with which many of his white peers may have greeted any mention of the Aboriginal game.

The parallels between Australian rules football and marnbrook are immediately obvious. Marnbrook, which has all but died out today, was played with an ovular ball, often made from possum skins filled with charcoal and tied together with sinew from kangaroo tails. The game involved kicking the ball into the air, then running after the ball and leaping, often in packs and with players climbing on each other's backs, in an effort to catch it. A catch was called a 'mumarkee', which immediately invokes the term 'mark' that we use today. The aim was to keep the ball off the ground. The player with the ball could be tackled. There was no equivalent of what we would call an offside rule in rugby or soccer, with all players able to compete for the ball.

Marnbrook did differ from Australian rules football in some ways, being played in teams of up to 50 players each, with a game often spanning several days. There was no scoring as such, with the winner being determined by who kicked the ball most often, the highest, and the furthest distance.

Some historians have ruled out Wills being influenced by marnbrook, arguing that the game was simply not played by the Djabwurrung people with whom Wills grew up, however romantic the notion that Australian rules football had its roots in an Aboriginal game. But other historians have found evidence that marnbrook was, in fact, played by the Djabwurrung people, and argue that the similarities between marnbrook and the game that Wills devised are simply too great to ignore.

The true influence of marnbrook upon the game of Australian rules football is destined to remain a mystery. I, for one, am certainly drawn to the romance of our Australian game having its roots among the first Australians.

Whatever the truth, it is indisputable that Indigenous Australians have a rare feel for Australian rules football, and are among the most exciting and instinctive players of the game today. Their cultures and contribution to Australian rules football are celebrated in the AFL's indigenous round each year.

Unsurprisingly, the laws of the game have evolved considerably since Wills first set them out in 1858. Today, the game is played on an oval field, making it particularly compatible with cricket. Indeed, our most famous cricket stadiums in summer are transformed into Australian rules football stadiums in winter, relatively seamlessly in more recent times thanks to the technology behind drop-in cricket pitches.

There are no exact stipulations for the size of the field, although it must be long enough to fit a 50 metre arc from the goals at either end of the ground, and a 50 metre long centre square. At the Sydney Cricket Ground, the shortest AFL ground, the 50 metre arc almost touches the centre square, requiring teams accustomed to larger grounds to modify their style of play for the more cramped quarters.

The goals at either end of the ground consist of four posts, two taller posts on the inside, accompanied by two shorter posts on the outside.

If a player kicks the ball through the two tall posts without it being touched, he scores a goal, which is worth six points. If a player kicks the ball through a tall post and a small post, he scores a behind, which is worth one point. Australian rules football is perhaps the only game that rewards a player with a point for missing.

A team also scores a behind if the ball is touched before going through any of the posts, is carried through the posts in what is known as a ‘rushed behind’, or hits one of the tall posts. If the ball hits one of the small posts, then it is out of bounds and no score is recorded.

The game is played in quarters of 20 minutes playing time each, plus ‘time on’, which is essentially stoppage time. Including time on, a quarter lasts around 30 minutes, give or take. Add in the breaks for quarter, half and three quarter time, and a full game of Australian rules football takes close to three hours.

Each team has 22 players, 18 of whom may be on the field at any one time, with four on the interchange bench. Unlike in rugby or soccer, players can be interchanged on and off the bench multiple times, although the total number of interchanges that a team can undertake during a match is capped at 90.

Teams have finely tuned strategies for rotating players on and off the bench, particularly those who play in positions that follow the ball and hence involve kilometres of running. As of April this year, the greatest distance that a player ran during a game this season was an astounding 17.2 kilometres. You’ll appreciate that the body type and athleticism required for an Australian rules football player is rather different to rugby or even soccer.

The 18 players on the field for each team are notionally divided into forward, half forward, centre, half back and back lines, each of which consists of three players; plus a ruckman who contests the centre bounce, and two rovers who follow the ball around the field. But, just as in marnbrook, there is no offside rule to prevent any player from contesting the ball, and there is no rule to prevent a player from the back line running to the other end of the ground and contesting the ball in the forward line.

In the last ten years or so, the game has evolved into more of a running game, with players who can ‘break the lines’ and play out of position being highly valued. As a result, there are routinely more players around the ball than the notional structure of a team would suggest.

While my example of a player in the back line running all the way to the forward line is extreme and doesn’t happen every day, a player in the half back line will routinely roam up the field into the centre and half forward lines. Turn to the sports pages of any Australian newspaper today and you’ll see that the AFL is currently debating controversial possible rule changes to lessen the resulting congestion around the ball.

Each game is adjudicated by three field umpires, who control the game; four boundary umpires, two on either side of the ground, who determine when the ball has gone out of bounds; and two goal umpires, one at either end, who determine whether a score was a goal or a behind. While female goal umpires have been around for several seasons, the first female field umpire in the men’s competition debuted last season.

The game starts by one of the field umpires bouncing the ball high into the air in the centre circle, which, as the name suggests, is a circle ten metres in diameter in the centre of the field. The two ruckmen from the opposing teams will leap to contest the ball, aiming to tap it into the hands of a team mate, generally one of the rovers who follows the ball.

Once underway, the game is in near constant motion, with the player in possession of the ball able to be tackled. The free-flowing nature of Australian rules football is one of its hallmarks. Play only stops if a player takes a mark, a player is awarded a free kick, a pack forms over the ball and a field umpire determines there is a stalemate, or the ball goes out of bounds.

In the case of a mark, when a player catches the ball after it has been kicked more than 15 metres and has not been touched, the player has ten seconds within which to dispose of the ball from the position where he took the mark before he can be tackled, or 30 seconds if he is within range of goal and chooses to have a shot. In the case of a free kick, the same rules apply.

In the case of a field umpire deciding that there is a stalemate, he or she will immediately throw the ball in the air, and the two ruckmen from the opposing teams will leap to contest the ball, just as at the opening bounce.

If the ball goes out of bounds, a boundary umpire will throw it back into play over his or her head, and the two ruckmen from the opposing teams will again leap to contest the ball, with one exception. If a boundary umpire determines that the ball went out of bounds having been kicked out on the full without being touched, a field umpire will award a free kick to the other team.

A player in possession of the ball must dispose of the ball legally, by kicking it, or by handpassing it. Consistent with there being no offside rule, a player can dispose of the ball in any direction.

There are no rules around how a player must kick the ball, but the two most common kicks are the drop punt, where a player kicks the ball just around from its point, with the aim of making it spin end-over-end through the air; and the torpedo, where a player aims to kick the ball on its side, with the aim of making it spin on a vertical axis through the air like a spinning top.

The drop punt offers considerably more control over the ball and accounts for virtually all kicks today. The torpedo is harder to control, but can travel a longer distance, and so is only used when a player needs to ‘go long’. Most players can comfortably kick the ball 50 metres, with the longest kicks in the game able to clear 60-65 metres, even using the humble drop punt.

The handball is a unique aspect of Australian rules football. To dispose of the ball legally by hand, a player must punch the ball with a closed fist out of his other hand. If the player slaps the ball with an open hand, or if the ball leaves the hand with which he is holding it before he punches it, his attempted handball is a throw, and a field umpire will award a free kick to the other team. While that’s a fine theory, plenty of balls are technically ‘thrown’ out of packs when a field umpire is blindsided, often earning the ire of the crowd if replayed on a big screen at the ground.

There are many reasons why a field umpire may award a free kick, a couple of which I have already mentioned. Conscious that I may have already bamboozled you with my description of the game, I will mention only two more of the most common, and often most contentious, types of free kicks.

Arguably the most contentious free kick is for holding the ball. A field umpire will award the free kick if a player in possession of the ball runs more than 15 metres without bouncing the ball, or, coming to the more contentious aspect, if a player is tackled and does not dispose of the ball legally.

The free kick for holding the ball when a player is tackled has become increasingly technical over the years. Today, if a player had prior opportunity to dispose of the ball before being tackled, a field umpire will award a free kick if he fails to dispose of the ball legally. If the player did not have prior opportunity, a field umpire will only award a free kick if the player fails to make a genuine attempt to dispose of the ball legally.

Whether a player has had prior opportunity to dispose of the ball before being tackled, and, if he didn't, whether he made a genuine attempt to dispose of the ball legally, can be highly subjective judgements. These judgements, perhaps more than any others, explain why field umpires are often booed off the ground at the end of a game.

Almost as contentious as the free kick for holding the ball is the free kick for an illegal tackle, which is defined as a tackle above the shoulders, below the knees, or involving a push in the back.

Like the free kick for holding the ball, the free kick for an illegal tackle has also become increasingly technical over the years. As one example, several shorter players developed a technique of bending at the knees or lifting their arms when tackled, causing the tackle to slip above the shoulders and thereby seeking to earn a free kick. After a rule change last season, intentional efforts to ‘shrug’ a tackle this way no longer earn a free kick. Again, judgements about a player’s intent are highly subjective and put field umpires in an unenviable position.

However complicated the laws of the game may have become, I’m pleased to say that not only Australians have managed to understand them. Indeed, Australian rules football has drawn interest beyond Australia’s shores from its earliest days.

The game first spread to New Zealand in 1878, and then expanded to here in South Africa from the 1880s onwards, courtesy of Australian gold miners here in the Witwatersrand, and then Australian troops fighting in the Boer War. The AFL has had a formal presence in South Africa since 1997.

The AFL has hosted an International Cup in Melbourne every three years since 2002. The most recent Cup was held last year, with 18 teams competing in both men's and women's competition. Papua New Guinea, our closest neighbour, took home the silverware for both the men and the women.

The South African Lions have competed in the men's competition at all International Cups. The Lions' best finish was third in 2008. Last year they finished a credible ninth. But I'm sure that South Africa has the potential to do much better.

I suspect you will be surprised to hear that no fewer than 32,000 kids and young adults currently play Australian rules football in South Africa, the youngest of whom are seven years old. Over 40 per cent of those players are girls and women.

Australian rules football, or 'footy wild' as it is sometimes called locally here, is currently played at 23 centres across the six provinces of Gauteng, KZN, Limpopo, Mpumalanga, North West and the Western Cape. Footy wild is active in 92 primary schools and 46 high schools, mostly in townships. Aside from being fun, the game is making a significant contribution to health and social cohesion in these communities.

There are now some successful African players in the AFL, mostly drawn from the Sudanese and South Sudanese diasporas in Australia. It is only a matter of time before the growth of the game in South Africa sees one of these kids from the townships make it in the AFL. It will be a great day that I look forward to.

Financially, the AFL runs on not much more than the smell of an oily rag in South Africa. I have no intention of turning this lunch into a fundraising event, but it would be remiss of me not to mention that the AFL is always interested in hearing from potential sponsors. I would gladly put any interested party in touch with the General Manager of the AFL in South Africa, July Machethe.

While I have tried to describe Australian rules football to you, there's nothing like actually watching the game. High-flying marks and goals kicked from seemingly impossible angles, both defying the laws of physics, are undoubtedly two of the most exciting aspects of Australian rules football. Allow me to conclude with a brief, three minute video showing the three finalists from 2017 for each of mark and goal of the year.

Hopefully they will whet your appetite to watch some more Australian rules football. Thank you again for the opportunity today to introduce you to our wonderful game.