

Victorian Amateur Football Association/Victoria University Essay Prize 2004:

Category of Submission - Tertiary

Essay Title:

The Amateurs March On:

The Victorian Amateur Football Association at the Olympic Games

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Word Count: 2707

As part of the 1956 Melbourne Olympic Games, there became a need to stage a demonstration sport that reflected our national pastimes. Undoubtedly the only sport that could have been considered was Australian Rules, played by amateurs under the strict amateurism laws of the Olympic Movement. The Victorian Amateur Football Association (VAFA), the premier amateur association for Australian Rules football, were chosen and invited by the Australian Olympic Organizing Committee to stage the demonstration game on the final day of the Games. They would be opposing a mix of amateurs from the combined, mostly professional Victorian Football Association (VFA) and Victorian Football League (VFL). This game would serve to be a proving ground for the VAFA, in terms of the rivalry and resentment felt towards these two teams due to poaching issues. Additionally, the opportunity for increased public exposure on an international stage was invaluable to the VAFA in further establishment of the association. Through a series of events leading up to and during the match, this would be achieved with desirable results.

As the premier amateur football association of the state, and therefore the perfect choice for a competition encompassing strict amateurism, the Games were a considerable opportunity to boost the Association's public profile¹. Not only this, it was an opportunity to prove their superiority against their opposition- the Victorian Football Association combined with the Victorian Football League. This proving ground was deemed to be vital in terms of pride, as the relationships of the VAFA with these two football bodies were somewhat resentful. Officially, the relationships were the example of civility, with

¹ Joseph Johnson, *For the Love of the Game: The Centenary History of the Victorian Amateur Football Association 1892-1992* (Hyland House Publishing Pty. Ltd: South Yarra, 1992), p. 127.

VAFAs officials attending annual VFA dinners and those of other football associations. These respective associations would send representatives to VAFAs events, and for purposes of media representation and perceptions of goodwill cordiality reigned supreme. For the clubs and coaches of the VAFAs, this feeling of goodwill was not reciprocated. Given that payments to players were forbidden in amateur competition, the VAFAs clubs were growing frustratingly accustomed to the poaching of their best players by VFL clubs. The 'arrogance' of the VFL in assuming that cash payment was a lucrative enough inducement for abandoning amateur status and a tight-knit club community rarely failed, and this caused resentment amongst VAFAs players and clubs. This resentment led to episodes of bitter outrage in some cases².

However, the officials of both leagues persisted in establishing goodwill between them, if only for appearance's sake. It was reasoned that as the leading leagues in their respective national councils within the state, civility should be most achievable. In 1952, the executive committee of the VAFAs began holding their meetings in the enemy camp, the VFL headquarters of Harrison House. It was a widespread conclusion that this very act would undoubtedly have caused ex VAFAs official L. A. Adamson to 'turn in his grave', with ex association president Harold Stewart likely to follow suit. Adamson was renowned for his intense dislike of the VFL - so much so that he was loath to permit his Wesley College boys to attend VFL matches for fear of corruption³. While somewhat obsessive, this type of attitude demonstrates the undercurrents that ran at club level between the VAFAs and the VFL.

² Johnson, *For the Love of the Game*, p. 121.

³ Johnson, *For the Love of the Game*, p. 118.

With the Olympic Games celebrating amateurism at its finest, the VAFA were able to use this opportunity to promote themselves as the superior league. A prestigious moment occurred when the VAFA executive was requested to select three runners for the torch relay. Indecisiveness and a desire for fairness prompted them to take nominations from each Association club, and holding a ballot for the final three. The three chosen (Gordon Robert – Powerhouse; Peter Mahardy – Brunswick; and Leo Kennedy - Teachers College) carried the torch for a mile each as representatives of the VAFA at the opening of the Games⁴. With this milestone over, the real spectacle was yet to come.

The match between the Victorian Amateur Football Association and the combined team of the Victorian Football Association and Victorian Football League took place on Friday 7th December 1956, at 4.10pm. Given that it was the event that took place before the closing ceremony, it was consequently the last event of the Games and attracted novel attention. In keeping with the amateur status of the Games, the VFL/VFA players that competed were required to sign declarations of their amateur status, as decided by the Victorian Football Match arrangement committee⁵.

The VAFA team was as follows:

**Figure 1.0- Victorian Amateur Football Association Team -Exhibition
Match, 1956 Melbourne Olympic Games**

⁴ Johnson, *For the Love of the Game*, p. 128.

⁵ Minutes of Victorian Football Match Arrangement Committee, Wednesday, 22 August 1956.

G.W Hibbins (Capt.)	Follower	Collegians
W.M Mitchell (V. Capt.)	Half Forward	Old Melburnians
J.D Anderson	Full Forward	Old Melburnians
R.C Fenton-Smith	Follower	Ormond
A.G Capes	Half Back	University Blacks
R. Collins	Back Pocket	MHSOB
C.W Empey	Centre-Wing	Commonwealth Bank
G.J Gill	Half-Forward	University Blacks
L. Grant	Follower	Power House
J.N Hannan	Half Forward	Old Melburnians
P.K Harkness	Follower	Old Scotch Collegians
M. Keogh	Rover	University Blacks
J.R Hayes	Follower	University Blues
L. Merrick	Centre Wing	Coburg
R.F Pettigrove	Rover	Coburg
P. Rochow	Half Back	Commonwealth Bank
W.B Thomas	Centre Wing	Old Melburnians
R.W Tindale	Centre	Old Scotch Collegians
L.J Wakeling	Full Back	Old Paradians
L.E Williams	Half Back	Ivanhoe

Emergencies were P. D. Craw, D. Douglas, J. Byrne, B. J. Hill and S. P. Hawthorn⁶. All these names had been, in most cases, participants in various association grand finals (L. A. Adamson Cup) and, in the case of Murray Mitchell, he had captained/coached Old Melburnians to success the previous year.⁷ Geoff Hibbins, another resplendent name in football at this time, had won the Australian Amateur Football Association medal that year⁸. Therefore it was by no means an inferior team that went into the Friday afternoon match against the favored VFA/VFL team. The team was extremely similar to the one that had represented the Victorian amateurs in the last two interstate series, and so had better team cohesion than the combined opposition.⁹

In reality, the VAFA were the favored team to win the exhibition match. The *Argus* reported that this possible ‘upset result’, if it occurred, would be due to the work of ‘brilliant Old Melburnian full forward Duncan Anderson- combined with the VFL/VFA side’s lack of a reliable goalkicker.’ Anderson was reportedly the target of a number of League sides due to his reliability, and would line up against Richmond’s Vic Naismith on the day. However, it was noted that his perceived ‘edge in both height and speed’ would give him an advantage on the celebrated VFL player.¹⁰ The only likely threat to the amateur team was VFL/VFA forward, Dave Plunkett, renowned for his suitability on dry grounds such as the Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG) on this occasion. This prediction of a VAFA victory was not unfounded - a practice game staged the previous Sunday between the two sides had seen the VAFA triumph. Anderson had been a key

⁶ Johnson, *For the Love of the Game*, p. 126.

⁷ Johnson, *For the Love of the Game*, p. 230.

⁸ Johnson, *For the Love of the Game*, p. 246.

⁹ Percy Taylor, ‘Yes, they saw OUR football’, *Argus*, 8 December 1956, p. 13.

¹⁰ ‘Be Ready for A Shock In Olympic Footy’, *Argus*, 7 December 1956, p. 14.

figure in the win, hence the *Argus*' confidence in attributing possible victory to his skill, as well as the 'general steadiness' of the VAFA side¹¹. Given the media confidence and their recent triumph still fresh in their minds, it was a confident VAFA team that marched out onto the MCG on the afternoon of 7 December 1956. The team appeared resplendent, wearing white knickers and white socks with green tops. Their jerseys, disdainfully described as 'pretty pretty' by a reporter,¹² were white with the five colored Olympic circles on the chest, emerald green cuffs, collars and numbers.¹³ The playing field was an area of concern for the VAFA team, as it was by no means of the quality they were used to- due to the cinder track situated around the inside of the MCG, the oval was considerably smaller than normal. Parts of it were unsteady due to the jumping pits having only just been filled over for the match¹⁴. The overall dryness of the turf, as outlined by the *Argus*, would be more of an advantage to the opposition.¹⁵ As well as this, the forward pocket had been reduced to a mere fraction of its normal self, due to the Olympic flagpole having to remain there until the closing ceremony the next day¹⁶. Nevertheless, confidence was still high among the VAFA officials' camp.

By no means did the match come unnoticed by authority figures and royalty- the Duke of Edinburgh extended his scheduled visit to the MCG in order to attend the exhibition match, and as a result 600 international pressmen were also in attendance¹⁷. VAFA

¹¹ 'Be Ready for A Shock In Olympic Footy', *Argus*, 7 December 1956, p. 14.

¹² A Staff Reporter, 'Visitors Were Rude About Our Football', *Age*, 8 December 1956, p. 3.

¹³ Johnson, *For the Love of the Game*, p. 127.

¹⁴ Johnson, *For the Love of the Game*, p. 128.

¹⁵ 'Be Ready for A Shock In Olympic Footy', *Argus*, 7 December 1956, p. 14.

¹⁶ A Staff Reporter, 'Visitors Were Rude About Our Football', *Age*, 8 December 1956, p. 3.

¹⁷ 'Duke Stays To See Our Football', *Sun*, Saturday, 8 December 1956.

secretary Jack Fullerton took pride of place next to HRH the Duke of Edinburgh, in order to explain to him the goings on and intricacies of the match¹⁸.

According to the official Olympic Report, ‘the game was played in the true amateur spirit, with abundance of vigour and speed, plenty of good kicking and high marking, system and other characteristics of Australian football’¹⁹. In short, the supremacy of the VAFA was never threatened. Leading the match in all four quarters, the VAFA team triumphed by 26 points over a lacklustre VFA/VFL. The progressive scores can be seen below:

Figure 1.1: Progressive Scores

	VAFA	VFA/VFL
First Quarter	6.1.37	1.0.6
Second Quarter	9.4.58	6.0.36
Third Quarter	11.8.74	6.2.38
Final Score	12.9.81	8.7.55

Pettigrove and Fenton-Smith both had blistering games, kicking 4 goals apiece in a relatively low scoring match. Anderson fulfilled all predictions of his ability with 3 goals,

¹⁸ Johnson, *For the Love of the Game*, p. 128.

¹⁹ The Organizing Committee of the XVI Olympiad, Melbourne, 1956, *The Official Report of the Organising Committee for the Games of the XVI Olympiad, Melbourne, 1956* (Melbourne: WM Houston, Government Printing, 1958), p. 714.

and Rochow with one. Best players for the VAFA were named as Hibbins, Fenton-Smith, Anderson, Thomas and Pettigrove²⁰.

It was interesting to note that the headline in the *Age* the following day read 'VFL-VFA Team Beaten', indicating that the VAFA were almost certainly rated as the underdogs, despite the *Argus*' confidence in a VAFA victory. However, there may have been a personal element to the win- the above article reads '... with star League follower Denis Corder subdued by the marking ability and persistency of Fenton-Smith and Harkness ...'²¹. Corder had captained the University Blacks to a premiership in 1948 before defecting to the VFL. Given the proportionate number of University Blacks players on the VAFA representative side, resentment may have played an instrumental part in the win.²² Yet the VAFA captain, Collegians' Hibbins, had also had a taste of league football. The strong marking ruckman had played out a two-year stint at St Kilda between 1952-1954. Upon leaving St. Kilda, he had returned to the amateurs and his old team to finish his career - a gesture of loyalty to the Collegians. His devotion to his team would no doubt be a positive attribute in leading his team to victory²³.

The *Age* article above dictates that the VAFA team was 'faster, more talented' and 'had control almost from the first bounce'²⁴. The *Argus*, proud backers of the VAFA team, were more lavish in their praise:

²⁰ Percy Taylor, 'Yes, they saw OUR football', *Argus*, 8 December 1956, p. 13.

²¹ 'VFL-VFA Team Beaten', *Age*, 8 December 1956, p. 1.

²² Johnson, *For the Love of the Game*, p. 230.

²³ Jim Main and Russell Holmesby, *The Encyclopaedia of League Footballers*. Second Edition (Wilkinson Books: Melbourne, 1994), p. 201.

²⁴ 'VFL-VFA Team Beaten', *Age*, 8 December 1956, p. 1.

The Victorian amateur team won, won well, and deserved the victory. It was a better combination, it shone in the air, it stumbled rarely, and it seemed the faster. And weren't those amateurs pleased with the result!²⁵

As predicted, the success of the VAFA team was attributed to better teamwork due to the combined experience as a team gained in the previous interstate series. Where the VFL/VFA side had some good individual players, there was a lack of cohesion, or as the *Argus* phrased it, 'an absence of punch'²⁶

The win over the more lauded VFA/VFL side had some excellent outcomes for the VAFA. Recognition of their on-field efforts came in form of a congratulatory letter from W.S Kent-Hughes, chairman of the games organizing committee. This approval from the higher bodies led to a momentous event in 1957, when the VAFA were able to gain usage of the Olympic Park No. 2 Oval as their headquarters. This facility, due to its excellent location and splendour, enabled the VAFA to charge admission to their games and to turn a small profit. This profit was secondary to the recognition the Association received from being based at this venue. The Olympic Park games also received television coverage for a brief time, however the lack of guarantee of a consistent audience led to its cessation.²⁷ Player exposure was also increased as a result of the exhibition match, though in some cases this left players wide open to the demands of VFL clubs who were able to offer players sizeable sums. Ormond's Fenton-Smith, after his performance in the exhibition match, was offered a ruck position at Melbourne which he promptly took. He was

²⁵ Percy Taylor 'Yes, they saw OUR football', *Argus*, 8 December 1956, p. 13.

²⁶ Percy Taylor 'Yes, they saw OUR football', *Argus*, 8 December 1956, p. 13.

²⁷ Johnson, *For the Love of the Game*, pp. 128-9.

reasonably successful over his two years at Melbourne, where he played 50 games and kicked 22 goals. In 1959 he left for a South Australian amateur side²⁸.

Collectively, the exhibition match did more for the VAFA than to simply prove its superiority over the VFL and VFA combined side, their traditional foes in player poaching. It strengthened their ties to other sporting committees in Melbourne, endeared themselves to some of the leading figures in sport at that time and gave them an opportunity for expansion. More importantly, it showcased the fine skills present in their players and their ability to bond as members of the same association. By doing this, they established themselves as the premier association of football in Australia to the 15,000 spectators and diplomats who watched them triumph. Where this player profiling had a detrimental effect in the respect that their footballers became more in demand in league circles, the majority of association players remained to enjoy this reputation. In a year where amateurism was so celebrated and respected in Australian and international society, the Victorian Amateur Football Association established themselves as the most 'professional' amateurs there were. This only served to evolve into the excellent reputation the VAFA holds today as an association of skill, integrity and team cohesion. It is a reputation money could never, nor will ever buy.

²⁸ Main and Holmesby, *The Encyclopaedia of League Footballers*, p. 133.