

**Victorian Amateur Football Association/Victoria University
Football History Essay 2005**

Undergraduate - Category B

Football in the Jewish Community: The Ajax Football Club



Word count: 2,430 (including footnotes, excluding bibliography)
Submitted by: Loren Dawes –
Undergraduate student at Victoria University

Football in the Jewish Community: The Ajax Football Club

The Victorian Amateur Football Association

The Victorian Amateur Football Association (VAFA) is the premier amateur football competition in Victoria, if not Australia. The competition features the scholastic teams of Collegians, University, Xaverians, Scotch and Haileybury, as well as a mix of suburban teams from the north, east, south and western suburbs of Melbourne and surrounding Geelong.¹

The VAFA has proved to be a resilient and innovative sporting association, surviving the depression in the early 1930's², as well as two world wars. It has also managed to introduce a series of initiatives, such as club relegation, the 19th man, and an order-off rule for players committing undisciplined acts during the course of play.³

The Jewish Community in Victoria

Jewish presence in Australia dates back to 1788, with the arrival of Jewish convicts during the penal era. Organised Jewish community life was established

¹ Joseph Johnson, *For the Love of the Game: The Centenary History of the Victorian Amateur Football Association, 1892-1992*, Hyland House Publishing: South Yarra, 1992, p. 248.

² Johnson, *For the Love of the Game*, p. 83.

³ Johnson, *For the Love of the Game*, p. 80.

in Australia after the free Jewish immigration in the late 1820s and with the arrival of the Anglo-Jewish population during the gold rush.⁴

Melbourne's Jewish community embraced Australian Rules football as part of a desire to fit in with the 'football mad' community. Football was a way for the Jewish community to be integrated into Australian society and share a common activity. Because football was such a vital part of the social and cultural fabric of Victoria, it was something that could not be avoided by the new arrivals.⁵

Most of Melbourne's Jewish community initially lived in the inner suburbs of Carlton and Fitzroy. When a suburban shift occurred in the mid 1930s after the depression, the Jewish community also spread to St Kilda and Caulfield. This led to an emerging rivalry between the communities on the north and south sides of the Yarra, who would compete in an annual 'north versus south' football match, billed as one of the biggest events on the Jewish social calendar.⁶

The Formation of the Ajax Football Club

By the 1950s, the Jewish community had well and truly embraced Australian Rules football and saw fit to establish their own club. In 1955, Daryl Cohen, an

⁴ Anthony Hughes, 'The Jewish Community', in Richard Cashman, Philip Mosely, John O'Hara and Hilary Weatherburn (eds), *Sporting Immigrants*, Walla Walla Press, Crows Nest, 1997, p. 103.

⁵ Bob Stewart, Rob Hess and Chris Dixon, 'Australian Rules Football', in Richard Cashman, Philip Mosely, John O'Hara and Hilary Weatherburn (eds), *Sporting Immigrants*, Walla Walla Press: Crows Nest, 1997, p. 190.

⁶ Barry Markoff, *The Road to A Grade: A History of the Ajax Football Club*, Brownhall Printing: Clayton South, 1980, p. 8.

Australian Rules enthusiast playing for Old Collegians, proposed that a new team be formed from Jewish members of the community to compete in the VAFA. During practices for the north versus south matches, a meeting was held for those interested in forming the club.⁷

Associated Judaeon Athletic Clubs (Ajax), was admitted into the VAFA in 1957. Calling the St Kilda area home, Ajax adopted the red, white and black colours also worn by St Kilda in the Victorian Football League. A set of guernseys for the Ajax players was provided by the St Kilda president, Reuben Sackville.⁸ The only modification to the jersey was a Star of David replacing the Christian cross of the St Kilda emblem.⁹

The modest beginnings of the Ajax club included its home ground Blessington Street oval, known as the 'Peanut Farm' as peanuts were originally grown at the ground. The facilities were described as deplorable, with cold showers and the oval too far away from public transport, inconveniencing the majority of the team members who did not have cars.¹⁰

These inadequate facilities contributed to the difficulties of attracting players to the club. There was no nucleus from which Ajax could get its footballers, unlike

⁷ Markoff, *The Road to A Grade*, p. 10.

⁸ Markoff, *The Road to A Grade*, p. 11.

⁹ Stewart, Hess and Dixon, 'Australian Rules Football', p. 193.

¹⁰ Markoff, *The Road to A Grade*, p. 15.

the large pool of potential players available for the scholastic teams. As a result, the club had to settle for finding players who were willing to play, rather than those that could play with an advanced display of skill.¹¹

These problems were soon overcome and the Jewish community embraced their own team. Most of the money to run the club came through fundraising events, such as barbeques, open to the entire Jewish community, who responded by turning up in droves.

Ajax won their first home and away match in the VAFA, and quickly established itself as a strong club and a valuable addition to the ranks, especially when it came to entertaining interstate visitors during carnivals and interstate matches.¹² Additionally the club provided a point of social contact for Jewish immigrants coming to Australia after World War II and the existence of the Ajax club no doubt contributed to a greater acceptance of Jewish people within Australian society.

Religion and Football

Sport in Australia, especially, is sometimes seen as a form of religion as there are undeniably close links between sport and religion. As Tim Chandler and Tara Magdalinski point out, both institutions share a similar structure, ritualistic

¹¹ Markoff, *The Road to A Grade*, p. 14.

¹² Johnson, *For the Love of the Game*, p. 125.

traditions and a dedicated time and space for worship.¹³ Sport has frequent religious connotations added to the spectacle. Athletes are referred to as 'gods', their playing fields 'sacred', while the quest for the winner's trophy' is often referred to as the road to the 'holy grail'.

Religion in sport can also have negative overtones, and the Ajax football club was to feel the effects of this. Several instances of racial vilification were directed at Ajax players, which reflected a level of anti-Semitism present in Australian society at the time.¹⁴

Port Melbourne and Ajax had several spectacular brawls as a result of racist remarks on the football field. Port Captain Joe Harrison took a personal stance against racism in 1959 and told his charges if anyone in his team uttered anti-Semitic remarks, they would have to deal with him. Ajax players appreciated the absence of racism and in a mark of respect, several Ajax players and officials attended the funeral of Joe Jackson after his death in a car accident the following year.¹⁵

The VAFA, following the lead from the Australian Football League (AFL), have

¹³ Timothy Chandler and Tara Magdalinski (eds), *With God on Their Side: Sport in the Service of Religion*, Routledge: London, 2002, p. 1.

¹⁴ Dixon, Hess and Stewart, 'Australian Rules Football', p. 193.

¹⁵ Paul Daffey, *Local Rites*, Black Duck Publications: Flemington, 2001, p. 110.

since developed legislation to stamp out racism. The legislation can result in a player being suspended if he is found guilty of vilifying an opponent based on confirmed or supposed religious beliefs.¹⁶

Ajax Football Club: The 1972 Season

In 1972, religion prevailed over football. The Ajax football club reserves side, playing in E grade, were having a successful season and were on track for a 9 September grand final. Controversially, this date coincided with the Jewish New Year celebration, Rosh Hashanah. The Jewish religion does not permit the playing of sport on that day, as it is one of the three most sacred days of the Jewish faith.¹⁷

Attempts by Ajax club secretary, John Brustman, to re-schedule the grand final were made as early as May, via means of a letter to VAFA secretary, Jack Fullerton. As intimated in the correspondence, should Ajax be fortunate enough to make the grand final, it was their request to play the final on Sunday, 10 September, the second day of Rosh Hashanah celebrations.¹⁸ The Jewish New Year is celebrated every September and occasionally is on a Sabbath, which is from dusk Friday to dusk on Sunday.¹⁹

¹⁶ Daffey, *Local Rites*, p. 112.

¹⁷ Markoff, *The Road to A Grade*, p. 92.

¹⁸ Markoff, *The Road to A Grade*, p. 92.

¹⁹ Daffey, *Local Rites*, p. 112.

The VAFA responded with a letter stating that such matters were given consideration by the VAFA prior to Ajax joining the league and the founding members of the Ajax club were made aware that no special concessions would be given to the club with respect to the Association's program being altered because of the fact that Saturdays are a sacred day for the Jewish religion.²⁰ Additional letters were sent to all E grade clubs in July.²¹ The letters were sent in vain, as the VAFA and all but one team in the competition (Marcellin), refused to alter the date of the 9 September grand final. According to Jack Fullerton, the whole interests of the VAFA had to be served and altering the date of the grand final could not be permitted.²²

This issue contributed to a tumultuous 1972 season for Ajax reserves, as they overcame player shortages during the season. At one stage, club secretary John Brustman was called on to make up the numbers on the field. They finished the season strongly and won their second semi-final by more than 10 goals, before honouring their faith and forfeiting the grand final.²³

No team would like to claim a premiership with a forfeit, such as Old Ivanhoe Grammarians did in 1972, but it is still recorded in the record books as a premiership victory and for Ajax, a premiership defeat. Many considered Ajax

²⁰ Markoff, *The Road to A Grade*, p. 93.

²¹ Markoff, *The Road to A Grade*, p. 94.

²² Markoff, *The Road to A Grade*, p. 93.

²³ Markoff, *The Road to A Grade*, p. 95.

'moral' premiers that year, but the team's premiership winning potential remains only speculation. In the rematch between the clubs the following year, the seniors and reserves matches developed into spiteful encounters as the two clubs continued their hostilities for several seasons.²⁴

In 1975, the VAFA realised its cultural insensitivity and moved the grand final away from the Jewish New Year. However future finals series were still in jeopardy of falling on Rosh Hashanah. Such was the case in 1999, as the grand final had been scheduled on the same day as Rosh Hashanah. Ajax notified the VAFA of the impending clash before the first round. When it became clear Ajax would be involved in the finals that season, they were able to reach other potential finalists and ask them to nominate alternative grand final dates.²⁵

After the preliminary final Ajax's eventual opponents Monash Blues, nominated the Saturday after Rosh Hashanah. This delay meant Ajax had three weeks off after winning their second semi-final and a self inflicted lack of match fitness affected their performance early on in the grand final. However, Ajax went on to win the grand final and clinch their second VAFA premiership.²⁶

²⁴ Daffey, *Local Rites*, p. 111.

²⁵ Daffey, *Local Rites*, p. 111.

²⁶ Daffey, *Local Rites*, p. 112.

These incidents were not the first the VFA experienced in regard to concerns of religious groups for scheduling of weekend games. The Australian National Football Council (ANFC) held interstate carnivals between different states of Australia to enhance the exposure of Australian Rules football, particularly in Queensland and New South Wales, which were predominately rugby-playing states.²⁷ In 1950, before the inclusion of Ajax to the VFA, the Canberra Football League approached the VFA to stage a match on a Sunday. As the official historian of the VFA, Joseph Johnson notes, this was at a time when community objections to organised competitive sport played on Sundays was still strongly held in the VFA for family and religious reasons.²⁸

Gradually, as community values changed and after permission was obtained from the chief secretary's department, Sunday football was introduced, as the VFA hosted an interstate match featuring Tasmania and South Australia.²⁹ The VFA introduced Sunday football in 1978 when the grand finals were held on Sunday for the first time. The following year, a record crowd watched Ajax defeat Marcellin in the B grade grand final, played on a Sunday at Elsternwick Park. Interestingly, it was Ajax that participated in the first VFA home and away game played on a Sunday, in April 1980 against Ormond.³⁰

²⁷ Johnson, *For the Love of the Game*, p. 106.

²⁸ Johnson, *For the Love of the Game*, p. 116.

²⁹ Johnson, *For the Love of the Game*, p. 159.

³⁰ Johnson, *For the Love of the Game*, p. 160.

Conclusion

The decision made by the VAFA in 1972 regarding the Ajax football club's grand final appearance, was a fair decision based more on the interest of the Association and the problem of re-scheduling the game, rather than being powered by anti-Semitic prejudices stemming from Australia's growing multi-cultural, yet sometimes xenophobic society.

The decision was backed with the testimony from Jack Fullerton, VAFA secretary, that prior to Ajax joining the league, the VAFA had mentioned in their initial discussions that Ajax were to be given no special concessions as VAFA matches had previously always been conducted on Saturdays.³¹ Adding to Ajax's plight in requesting a Sunday game, were the strong family and religious reasons held by members of the VAFA that, at the time, prevented football being played on a Sunday.

Despite these obstacles, the Ajax football club continued to prove its worth in the VAFA. A record crowd watched Ajax defeat Marcellin in the B grade grand final in 1979, fittingly played on a Sunday. Ajax's first VAFA premiership accordingly led to the promotion of the team to the elusive A grade. More recently Ajax

³¹ Markoff, *The Road to A Grade*, p. 93.

overcame a three week delay in between the finals because of Rosh Hashanah, to win their second premiership in the clubs history.³²

It was a brave and admirable decision for the Ajax football club to honour their faith and forfeit the grand final in 1972. The club deserves praise for standing by its decisions. Now it can enjoy the long awaited and well deserved success earned in their first half century of club history. As Ajax Captain Michael Ritterman stated after the 1979 premiership win, 'It's great to see the Jewish community supporting Ajax and even more fantastic to see a Jewish club reaching the highest level in an Australian sport.'³³

³² Daffey, *Local Rites*, p. 112.

³³ Markoff, *The Road to A Grade*, p. 156.

Bibliography

Chandler, Timothy and Magdalinski, Tara (eds), *With God on Their Side: Sport in the Service of Religion*, Routledge: London, 2002.

Daffey, Paul, *Local Rites*, Black Duck Publications: Flemington, 2001

Stewart, Bob, Hess, Rob and Dixon, Chris, 'Australian Rules Football', in Richard Cashman, Philip Mosely, John O'Hara and Hilary Weatherburn (eds), *Sporting Immigrants*, Walla Walla Press: Crows Nest, 1997.

Hughes, Anthony, 'The Jewish Community', in Richard Cashman, Philip Mosely, John O'Hara and Hilary Weatherburn (eds), *Sporting Immigrants*, Walla Walla Press: Crows Nest, 1997.

Johnson, Joseph, *For the Love of the Game: The Centenary History of the Victorian Amateur Football Association, 1892-1992*, Hyland House Publishing: South Yarra, 1992.

Markoff, Barry, *The Road to A Grade: A History of the Ajax Football Club*, Brownhall Printing: Clayton South, 1980.