The Debut of Mentone Footballers in the Victorian Football League: 1960-1970

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Introduction

Due to the metropolitan zoning agreements employed by the Victorian Football

League (VFL) in the early twentieth century, certain suburban football clubs have

traditionally been aligned with respective VFL clubs. The St Kilda football club

history acknowledges this, stating that local football clubs such as East Brighton have

proved a 'fertile recruiting ground for St Kilda'.[1] The Mentone Football Club can be

considered another of these successful feeder clubs. Historically, a number of

Mentone footballers have progressed from the club to play higher-level football, at a

number of different clubs. However, between 1960 and 1970, a total of eight Mentone

footballers made their VFL debut. Two of these footballers, Brian Sierakowski and

Barry Breen, went on to make a significant contribution to St Kilda's history. Both

players played in the first St Kilda premiership in 1966, with Breen kicking the

winning point. In addition, both players have gone on to make a lasting contribution

to VFL, and later AFL, administration.

This paper will look at newspaper coverage of the debut matches of both Brian

Sierakowski and Barry Breen. In looking at this coverage, it can be determined

whether the player's regional affiliation is referred to, if their debut match was

acknowledged in the media and whether these players performed well or badly.

Coverage of the 1966 grand final match will also be studied to examine whether

Sierakowski and Breen had a positive impact on the game as a whole. Prior to their

premiership success, both these players were junior footballers at Mentone Football Club, and it was here where they developed a love and aptitude for the game.

The Breeding Ground: Mentone Football Club and the Federal League

Mentone Football Club was formed in 1904, and in 1909 became a founding member of the newly formed Federal Football League.[2] The Federal League was a 'rogue' bayside competition, widely acknowledged as the third strongest league in suburban Melbourne.[3] While the amateur football competitions were usually considered of a better standard than the Federal league games, the Federal games tended to draw larger crowds. There were a number of reasons for this- the games held under the auspices of the Federal league were perceived to be rougher and more colourful, and the footballers were usually well known to spectators. Given that the Federal League were unaffiliated with the Victorian Football League (VFL) and any of its umbrella organisations, they were free to recruit VFL players without the concern of clearance agreements.[4] Player mobility within the VFL was severely limited, due to the metropolitan zoning system that had been in place since 1915.[5] Each VFL club was allocated a suburban zone, and had a monopoly over all player recruitment within this zone. Therefore, no player could initially play with another club, and in effect players were bound to clubs in 'perpetuity'. Only with the permission of the club committee could a player be transferred to another VFL club.[6]

The financial status of the Federal League also contributed to the great number of VFL players switching allegiances to the Federal competition. Clinton Walker states that money was the reason for the success of the Federal League, as the league's proximity to the 'bayside racing fraternity' ensured a constant cash flow in the 1950s

and 1960s.[7] This level of financing ensured that Federal club recruiters were able to pay out large sums for ex-VFL players.[8] Given that player payments in the VFL were capped by means of the Coulter Law, which imposed an upper limit on player payments, this financial inducement would appear impossible to resist. The Coulter Law was intended to reduce professionalism and prevent wealthier clubs from dominating the league through lucrative country and interstate recruiting.[9] Up until the late 1960s, zoning for country and interstate players was non-existent.[10] However, the more financially viable clubs were able to offer these players 'under the table' match payments, and lure them to their clubs by means of superior facilities and services.[11] These sorts of inducements were not necessary for metropolitan footballers, as they were zoned to a particular club, and so their match payments were considerably less.

Within the Federal League, Mentone won their first senior premiership in 1928, with additional premierships following in 1935, 1956, 1967-68 and 1976.[12] The club enjoyed a boom period between 1950-70, with their back-to-back premierships occurring in this year. A large number of Mentone footballers were recruited to VFL football in this era, which is largely attributed to the club's dedication to its junior teams and the subsequent success of these sides. The Mentone thirds side won seven premierships in thirteen seasons between 1950-62, and it was within this environment that the talents of Sierakowski and Breen were developed.[13] In 1982, due to administrative problems and an inability to keep up with the more affluent opposition clubs, Mentone made the shift from the Federal League to the Southeast Suburban League. Despite the success Mentone experienced in this league, it was decided that the long-term financial viability of the club needed to be ensured. In line with this,

Mentone merged with St Bede's Old Collegians in 1992, and the amalgamated club commenced the 1993 season in D Grade of the Victorian Amateur Football Association competition.[14]

Brian Sierakowski (St Kilda, 1964)

Brian Sierakowski was the first of the two players to be examined within this paper to make his debut. Sierakowski played for Mentone Football Club from 1962 to 1964,[15] was a member of Mentone's 1962 Thirds premiership and played in the 1963 senior grand final team.[16] An avid footballer, he also played for his school, Xavier College, and for South Belgrave in the Mountain District League, His Saturdays were solely reserved for the Mentone club, where both his friends and his football idols played.[17] He is remembered in football circles as a 'safe and occasionally spectacular mark whose kicking style was awkward'.[18]

Alan Schwab recruited Sierakowski to St. Kilda in 1964.[19] Sierakowski played 75 games for St. Kilda, and played in the 1966 St. Kilda premiership side. Upon his relocation to Western Australia, he played over 100 games for Subiaco. While at Subiaco, he was the senior best and fairest winner in 1972, a premiership player in 1973, Vice President in 1983-1984 and was awarded life membership in 1985. He twice represented Western Australia in the Australian championships, and has had a continued involvement with Western Australian football as an administrator. Sierakowski was the director of the West Coast Eagles from 1993-1999, a member of the Western Australian Tribunal, and since 1988 has been their arbitrator. In 2000, he was the recipient of an Australian Sports Medal for his contribution to Australian Rules football.[20]

Sierakowski commenced his playing career with St Kilda in the 1964 season.

Newspaper coverage indicates that he spent the first few games of this season playing

in the St Kilda reserves, and was consistently named in their best players.[21] On the

day of his debut, Saturday 6 June 1964, he was named as a reserve for the St

Kilda/North Melbourne match. This received little media attention, as he had

previously been named as a reserve, but in this instance he replaced injured St Kilda

player Jim Read on the wing after half time. The Saints won by fourteen points, and

Sierakowski kicked one behind. However, as represented in the *Sporting Globe*, it

was a less than auspicious debut match:

> Brian Sierakowski, who replaced injured Jim Read after half-time on the wing
> for the Saints, wasted a golden scoring opportunity, through inexperience or
> over-confidence, when Darrel Baldock shot a pass to him unattended on the
> flank. Brian touched the ball to the ground as he sprinted around the boundary
> goalwards, but made a touch too many and had to make a hurried kick, which
> went out of bounds, as a North defender closed on him. In the meantime,
> several of Brian's teammates, in a much better position to score, had called in
> vain for a pass.[22]

A reporter denounced this as an 'expensive, wasted opportunity for St Kilda'[23].

However, Sierakowski was named as a reserve once more for the next week, playing

the last quarter, but after this he was dropped back to the reserves for a number of

weeks.[24] He was not named as a fully-fledged member of the St. Kilda senior team

until August 1964, where he was named in the back line.[25] Sierakowski's debut match

was less than memorable, but his premiership teammate Barry Breen's experience

was much more positive.

Barry Breen (St Kilda, 1965)

Barry Breen enjoyed an illustrious career at Mentone, and also at the St Kilda football
club upon his recruitment in 1965. Breen played junior football at Mentone and for
his school, De La Salle, and was vice captain of the Mentone Thirds in 1964. He was
runner up in the best and fairest that year. After 28 games and three seasons at
Mentone, St. Kilda recruited him in 1965.[26] Breen hailed from a football background,
with his grandfather captaining Kerry to the All-Ireland Gaelic Football championship
in 1901.[27] Upon making his debut, Breen voluntarily went back to play for the
Mentone under 18 side after playing in the Saint seniors a week earlier.[28] Once
established as a firm fixture at St Kilda, Breen played 300 games between 1965-1982,
kicking 308 goals. He captained the Saints in 1979 and represented Victoria three
times. After his playing career had finished, he went on to become the Sydney Swans
general manager.[29] Breen was considered an 'exceptionally talented centre half-
forward' and 'a matchwinner on his day'. In line with this, he is best remembered as
the player who kicked the winning behind in the 1966 grand final.[30] Breen has duly
been acknowledged as Mentone's most successful VFL footballer.[31]

Like Sierakowski, Breen was consistently named in the best players for the St Kilda
reserves.[32] Unlike Sierakowski, however, his debut match was not as a reserve. Breen
made his debut in the St Kilda/North Melbourne match at Coburg on May 22, 1965 on
the half-forward line, with his former Mentone teammate Sierakowski named on the
back line.[33] Breen was one of three St Kilda first gamers on this day- Kevin Neale and
Julian White also made their debut, with White also hailing from Mentone. The three
debutantes were among five players brought in by selectors after the Saints' loss the
previous week.[34] The media were somewhat dubious to the potential contribution of

the trio, given their youth and the fact St Kilda has lost their game the previous week.

Lou Richards declared in the Saturday *Sun* that:

> … There wouldn't be more panic than hit the Saints selectors this week. So help me, they win four matches, and when one goes the other way they make five changes. It's just not football sense… And to add to the panic, three of them- Julian White, Bobby's kid brother Barry Breen, and Kevin Neale-are first uppers. It wouldn't surprise me if they came out wearing nappies instead of knicks'.[35]

However, Breen's debut was not the disaster Richards predicted. St Kilda won the game by a leisurely 38 points, and the *Sporting Globe* reported that 'Breen, showing a lot of promise in his first game for St Kilda, kicked their thirteenth goal in great style'.[36] Additionally, a half-column was devoted to Breen in the *Sporting Globe* the following week, celebrating his Irish heritage:

> Begorrah, shure, it was a great day for the Irish at Coburg on Saturday when De La Salle schoolboy Barry Breen played his first VFL game for the Saints… Barry, who was born in Australia, showed plenty of potential as a forward, and it wouldn't surprise me if he finished up at full-forward for St Kilda. With a football background like his, he should be a beauty, and, who knows, the Saints may change their theme song to 'It's a Long Way to Tipperary'.[37]

A Joint Effort: The 1966 St Kilda/Collingwood Grand Final

With regular season appearances under their belts, Sierakowski and Breen were both named among the best players in the finals matches leading up to the grand final, and both were named in the St Kilda side to take on Collingwood.[38] In what was a close match, St Kilda pipped Collingwood by just one point, kicked by Breen in the dying seconds of the match. Interestingly, until the finals Breen had played largely in defence, but the Saints' coach, Allan Jeans, feared the pressure would be too much for an eighteen year old, and placed him in the forward line.[39] It was from this position that he won them the match:

> After two minutes of time-on had ticked away, St Kilda forward flanker Breen grabbed the ball from a ball-up and sent a long bouncing kick through for a behind to grab the lead for the Saints…the bell sounded and the pro-St Kilda crowd wildly acclaimed the first St Kilda premiership, a premiership the club had been seeking for ninety-three years'.[40]

As stated by Feldman and Holmesby, 'the wobbly punt would immortalise Breen', but given its importance, it was conveniently forgotten that it was his fifth behind for the day.[41] In fact, Breen in later years stated that he didn't immediately realise the significance of what he had done.[42] Naturally Breen, as the game-saver, was applauded in the press for his role. Alan Fitcher of the *Sporting Globe* declared that 'Barry Breen, only 18, was another of the Saints' best and when he kicked that behind two minutes into the time-on period he was a hero. He will never forget his first grand final, for that matter; neither will any of the Saints or their supporters'.[43] The *Sun* announced that 'Breen gave an early hint that he was going to prove a matchwinner', making some valuable plays early in the match.[44]

However, it was Brian Sierakowski who was revered in the press for his less acknowledged contribution. It was proclaimed that 'Brian "The Rock" Sierakowski stood out like Gibraltar with his timely marks in defence'.[45] He performed brilliantly in the second and third terms before sustaining an injury, but overcame his injury in the final quarter.[46] It was in this final quarter he proved himself as a footballer:

> Typical of the spirit that wins Grand Finals was the dedication of Brian Sierakowski during the last quarter … came the last quarter and Sierakowski was injured at a most critical time. Trainers began to help him from the ground, when suddenly the ball came his way. He threw off the helping hands to mark the ball and ease the pressure on the Saints defence. After that great effort there was no further thought of him leaving the field.[47]

Such was his spirit and expertise that Polly Farmer, in his column in the *Sun*, declared

Sierakowski his 'best man on the ground'.[48]

Conclusion:

Based on the newspaper coverage examined of the debut matches and grand final

performances of both Brian Sierakowski and Barry Breen, it can be said that school

affiliation was more widely acknowledged than regional club affiliation. Other

aspects of a player's background, such as nationality and family football affiliations,

as seen in Breen's case, determined whether the debut was reported on. In

Sierakowski's case, it is uncertain whether his debut match would have received

significant coverage had his performance been less controversial. However, based on

the contributions of these two players to the 1966 grand final match alone, it can be

said that Mentone players made some contribution to the VFL between 1960 and

1970. Two Mentone players were represented in a grand final match, and in one 1965

match three Mentone players took the field. As part of a greater study, it will be

ascertained whether this was a regular occurrence in VFL teams. While Brian

Sierakowski and Barry Breen are two of the great Mentone success stories in terms of

VFL performance, their debut matches were clearly not indicative of the success they

would later enjoy. Given their contribution, it is yet to be determined whether the

other six players that debuted in this decade will have nearly as much impact on the

competition.

Notes:

[1] Jules Feldmann and Russell Holmesby, *The Point Of It All: The Story of St Kilda Football Club*, Playwright Publishing, New South Wales, 1992, p. 182.
[2] Rob Hess, 'The Tiger Spirit: A Brief History of the Mentone Football Club', unpublished paper, 2004, p. 1.

[3] Clinton Walker, *A Football Life*, Pan Macmillan, Sydney, 1998, p. 75.

[4] Walker, *A Football Life*, p. 76.

[5] Booth, cited in Bob Stewart, 'Boom-time Football', in Rob Hess and Bob Stewart (eds), *More Than A Game: The Real Story of Australian Rules Football*, Melbourne University Press, Carlton, 1998, pp. 169-170.

[6] Sandercock and Turner, cited in Stewart, 'Boom-time Football', pp. 169-170.

[7] Walker, *A Football Life*, p. 75.

[8] Walker, *A Football Life*, p. 76.

[9] Booth, cited in Stewart, 'Boom-time Football', p. 169.

[10] Stremski, cited in Stewart, 'Boom-time Football', p. 187.

[11] Stewart, 'Boom-time Football', p. 187.

[12] Hess, 'The Tiger Spirit: A Brief History of the Mentone Football Club', p. 2.

[13] Hess, 'The Tiger Spirit: A Brief History of the Mentone Football Club', p. 1.

[14] Hess, 'The Tiger Spirit: A Brief History of the Mentone Football Club', p. 2.

[15] Hess, 'The Tiger Spirit: A Brief History of the Mentone Football Club', p. 4.

[16] Mark Beasley, Rob Hess, Drew Johnson and Brett Marchant, *Mentone and St Bedes Old Collegians Inaugural Hall of Fame*, publisher unknown, 2004, p. 25.

[17] Robert Pascoe, *Sierakowski: Five Generations*, B.C Sierakowski, Perth, 2002, p. 131.

[18] Russell Holmesby and Jim Main, *The Encyclopedia of AFL Footballers* (Sixth Edition), Bas Publishing, Melbourne, 2005, pp. 668-669.

[19] Pascoe, *Sierakowski: Five Generations*, p. 132.

[20] Beasley, Hess, Johnson and Marchant, *Mentone and St Bedes Old Collegians Inaugural Hall of Fame*, p. 25.

[21] Mal McCandlish, 'Saints Coast', *Sporting Globe*, 18 April 1964, p. 16, and Dave Andersen, 'Tigers In Charge', *Sporting Globe*, 27 May 1964, p. 4.

[22] 'In The League Limelight', *Sporting Globe*, 10 June 1964, p. 2.

[23] Frank Morley, 'Saints Down North', *Sporting Globe*, 6 June 1964, p. 11.

[24] Dave Andersen, 'Saints Won At A Walk', *Sporting Globe*, 13 June 1964, p. 11.

[25] Alan Fitcher, 'Melbourne Still Top Team', *Sporting Globe*, 1 August 1964, p. 12.

[26] Beasley, Hess, Johnson and Marchant, *Mentone and St Bedes Old Collegians Inaugural Hall of Fame*, p. 6.

[27] Russell Holmesby, *Heroes With Haloes: St Kilda's One Hundred Greatest*, Playwright Publishing, New South Wales, 1995, p. 34.

[28] Holmesby and Main, *The Encyclopedia of AFL Footballers*, p. 78.

[29] Beasley, Hess, Johnson and Marchant, *Mentone and St Bedes Old Collegians Inaugural Hall of Fame*, p. 6.

[30] Holmesby and Main, *The Encyclopedia of AFL Footballers*, p. 78.

[31] Beasley, Hess, Johnson and Marchant, *Mentone and St Bedes Old Collegians Inaugural Hall of Fame*, p. 6.

[32] Ted Marshall, 'Saints v Dons', *Sporting Globe*, 15 May 1965, p. 13.

[33] Bill Twomey, 'Saints In Run-Away', *Sporting Globe*, 22 May 1965, p. 10.

[34] Kevin Hogan, 'Clubs Use Long Knives' *Sun*, 21 May 1965, p. 52.

[35] Lou Richards, 'Panic's Hit The Saints', *Sun*, 22 May 1965, p. 58.

[36] Bill Twomey, 'Saints In Run-Away', *Sporting Globe*, 22 May 1965, p. 10.

[37] Bill Twomey, 'Barry, Broth of Boy', *Sporting Globe*, 26 May 1965, p. 2.

[38] Graeme Atkinson, *The Complete Book of AFL Finals* (2002 Edition), Five Mile Press, Noble Park, 2002, p. 278.

[39] Holmesby, *Heroes With Haloes*, p. 33.

[40] Atkinson, *The Complete Book of AFL Finals,* pp. 275-276.

[41] Feldmann and Holmesby, *The Point Of It All,* p. 192.

[42] Holmesby, *Heroes With Haloes*, p. 33.

[43] Alan Fitcher, 'In The League Limelight', Sporting Globe, 28 September 1966, p. 3.

[44] 'Barry Got The Point', *Sun*, 26 September 1966, p. 43.

[45] 'Aylett's Angle', *Sporting Globe*, 24 September 1966, p. 13.

[46] John Rice, 'Grand Final in Figures', *Sporting Globe*, 28 September 1966, p. 2

[47] Alan Fitcher, 'In The League Limelight', *Sporting Globe*, 28 September 1966, p. 3.

[48] Polly Farmer, 'Saints Worthy Of Flag', *Sun*, 26 September 1966, p. 42.

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