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Intro Music

Background

Hello and welcome to this special supplemental episode for the 1928 season focusing on the VFA's proposal to affiliate with the VFL.

If you want the regular episode about the 1928 season and who will win the premiership etc. then go to Episode 32, 1928 "A lot depends on you today", But if you want to learn more about the fractious relationship between the oldest football competition in Victoria and its more successful break away league and what might have been in 1928 then listen on,

As you may know the VFA first formed in May 1877 by a number of Melbourne clubs to help coordinate games as the years went by it became more structured but not everyone was happy. The more successful clubs resisted attempts to pool admission revenue, there was some unhappiness about the level of violence associated with some clubs and a push to update the rules of the game.

In 1897 8 teams established the VFL and it would quickly become the more successful competition in attracting spectators, hence money and hence better players. The VFL also saw itself as the senior competition helping to organise the Australian National Football Council to ensure uniform rules across the country and investing time, effort and money in promoting the national game, especially in NSW and Queensland.

The VFA managed to continue and recruit additional clubs and attract a reasonable level of support and coverage in the newspapers.

In the press there were frequent calls for one organisation to control football in Victoria but the VFA and VFL did not have a good relationship and cooperation was not common.

At times there was an agreement that players needed a clearance to transfer from one competition to the other. One of the reasons the VFL had agreed to this was to stop VFA clubs cherry picking established VFL players and paying them large amounts of money which had an inflationary effect on the wages of other players. For example Footscray, still in the VFA, recruited Collingwood's captain Con McCarthy as their captain coach in 1922 on £10 per week compared to the £2/10 he was getting at the Magpies.

The Agreement on clearances between the completion succeeded in reducing the number of player switching competitions and reduced the wages spiral but, the agreement fell apart in the lead up to the 1925 season when the VFA claimed Coburg from the VFL's second 18 competition and the league poached three teams from the VFA,

Footscray, North Melbourne and Hawthorn.

The VFA threatened to take the VFL to court regarding this switch of three clubs but did not follow through. Instead along with Coburg in 1925 they recruited Camberwell in 1926 and Yarraville in 1928.

In March of 1928 The relationship with the VFA was raised at a VFL delegates meeting with suggestions the VFA associate itself with the VFL. One delegate proposed the league hold out the olive branch.³ But listening to some of the delegates illustrates why many in the VFA thought the league was an arrogant organisation with a dismissive attitude to the VFA.

Collingwood's delegate Bob Rush said "Many blessings have been bestowed on the league and we ought to be generous in our treatment of the poor. The Association represents poverty in Football. We are in power and those in power should be merciful to the powerless. We should not let any paltry thoughts of players we might secure interfere with out voting on this question and I appeal to delegates to vote in the interests of football."³

I believe Bob Rush was genuine in his thinking about what was best for football and his analysis on the strength and weaknesses of the respective organisations was probably accurate but I also am sure the words used and the impression created would not help get the VFA on side. They were a proud organisation, proud of their heritage as the original football organisation in the state and not likely to appreciate talk of poverty.¹

During March and April there were many discussions and the Association approached the a conference with the VFL as a matter of significance with the potential for affiliation but not amalgamation. Affiliation was seen as a starting point to a more constructive relationship with the league, especially addressing the stopping of transfer of players without clearances as well as working together in the best interests of the game generally.²

The potential for soccer and rugby union clubs to take over existing football grounds was also identified by VFA delegates as a real threat if VFA clubs were forced out of existence. The position of Brunswick Football club was used as an example, of 36 players on their list from last season 16 were training with VFL clubs.⁴ As well as Affiliation the VFA proposed several options to take to the meeting with the VFL including discussions of a two tier competition with the VFL as Tier 1 and the VFA as Tier 2 with promotion and relegation or two conferences with the top two teams to play off for the premiership amongst other options⁵ These were reviewed by Forward in The Age noting that VFL clubs were not keen on a relegation scheme because of the fear that once a club fell into Division 2 it would have difficulty in regaining its spot in the top tier competition. Also the potential problem if Melbourne was relegated which could lead to the MCG being unavailable for finals.⁶ (I don't find that argument convincing, the MCG was managed by the MCC and even the VFA had been able to use the ground on occasion, generally much to the VFL's displeasure.)

Despite the willingness of the VFA to move forward on Affiliation and the various options they brought to the table, the most important meeting between the two bodies, as described in the newspapers of the time, ended up in an anti climax. The VFL rejected Affiliation because the VFA had no district scheme or zoning of suburbs to restrict players to a specific club based on where they lived. The League also refused to commit to the hold on player clearances between the two competitions that had been in place in the lead up to the conference. The only result of this most important conference was an agreement to form a new committee with five members of each body with an independent chair.⁷

By mid May there had been little progress and Old Boy in the Argus wrote of the League's attitude

"If one asked the league delegates collectively or individually what is the controlling body in football the answer would be "The League." If one went further and said what does the league control? The answer would be "Everything but the Association". If another question were to be asked "How is that body to be disposed of? "a League delegate that knew his history would reply "We have been endeavouring to do that since 1897, without avail. We took Richmond, then North Melbourne, Footscray and Hawthorn. But then new clubs joined the Association. We have taken their players but the clubs keep going."⁸

Some might say a pretty fair summary of the VFL's attitude then and until the demise of the VFA. The end result of the consultations was a meeting in June where the VFL proposed aligning individual VFA clubs to VFL teams with each league club allowed two clearances per year from their allocated club.⁹

For example Carlton would be aligned with Brunswick, Collingwood with Northcote, South Melbourne to Port Melbourne and St Kilda with Brighton. Melbourne would have the choice of two players from across the VFA and Geelong would not be given any access, given they had the entire Geelong Region at their doorstep.

It was not an acceptable position for the VFA, who felt they were being forced into a subordinate position, although it was a preview of the eventual alignment of VFA and AFL clubs in Victoria when the AFL clubs dispensed with reserve teams at the end of the 1990's

In a preview of future trends there was an extraordinary puff piece or public relations article written by League President Dr William McClelland in the Herald shortly after the unproductive June meeting with the VFA. It sung the praises of the VFL, rewrote the history of the split between the VFA and the clubs that established the VFL. According to this article it was not the threat to equalise gate revenue between all clubs that drove the formation of the VFL, rather the unruly behaviour where visiting teams were stoned by spectators after defeating the home club. (A look at some of the crowd behaviour in recent VFL seasons would undermine this argument). While there was truth in the support that the VFL provided to country leagues, sending out umpires each week far and wide, there were many who felt the league had treated the Association poorly.¹⁰

When the proposition was reviewed at the Association delegates meeting in July it did not get an enthusiastic reception There was the concern that if a VFL club wanted two players those men would be forced to move to the league club. Also the Association had been an innovator in Australian football and affiliation with the VFL would mean following Australian Football Council rules, no room for the Associations individuality. Despite these concerns no final decision was made and the Sub committee would work with the league sub committee before any recommendations were made ¹¹

At the end of July the League and Association sub committees met again. The Association said the leagues proposal was not acceptable, The Association was prepared to discuss affiliation on similar terms to Ballarat and Bendigo leagues, discuss the agreement on player clearances or consider other options proposed by the league.

The League pointed out that Ballarat and Bendigo leagues were in a different situation, as very few of their players came down to Melbourne.

After further discussion including the option of a truce for a year in the matter of clearances while the VFA assessed the option of district scheme it was agreed that the parties would review options and reconvene at a date to be confirmed. ¹²

In August the Association delegates confirmed their rejection of the League proposal for affiliation. They had submitted six proposals to the league which had been rejected. The only suggestion from the league were to legalise the pirating of Association players.

Delegates stated that the only way the Association could hold its own was for clubs to be loyal. While a few years ago every club was trying to get into the VFL they should look at the consequences for Hawthorn, who were no better off than if they were in the Association, their attendances were down and their costs were up. (However true this might have been in 1928, if you look at the long term this example of Hawthorn doesn't quite work.)

While the Proposition for the League had been rejected the option was still open if the Association wanted o put something else to the league. ¹³ But in September the League reviewed the correspondence from the Association and disbanded their subcommittee.

And it would all end for the VFA in 1996 when the VFA was re-branded as the VFL in 1996 and most remaining clubs aligned to a Melbourne based AFL club as previewed in 1928. A year when the VFA and VFL seriously looked at Affiliation and Cooperation. The VFL would not give much in the way of compromise and the VFA wanted to retain their independence and dignity. And they would continue for many decades with a loyal following.

Season Review & Conclusion

I hope you enjoyed that little detour from our regular episodes and we can only imagine the alternate history of football in Victoria and nationally if the VFL and VFA had worked out a way of cooperating. Maybe the end result would not have been all that different given the strong resistance to any proposal that included relegation and promotion between the two competitions. And now it is time to get back to preparing the 1929 episode.

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