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Intro Music

Hello and welcome to Grand Final history, in this episode we go back to 1929 the 33rd season of VFL

1929 was a pivotal year in the 20th century. Forever known for the Black Thursday Stock Market crash on Wall Street on the 24th of October. Within three years the Dow Jones index lost 90% of its high set in September of 1929. The crash set off a global economic depression¹ that would hit Australia hard, especially in the early 1930's. It was unlucky timing for new Prime Minister James Scullin and the Labor party who won an election and took office a week before the crash. The Crash happened after the footy season had ended so we will see more of its impact in coming episodes.

But economic disruptions do not come completely as a surprise. Players and supporters had been experiencing changing economic times as the 1920s came to a close. The 1928 budget had new taxes and budget cuts to address a growing deficit. The Government, led by Prime Minister Stanley Bruce, blamed high production costs, so they tried to abolish the arbitration courts. In a time of heavily unionised work force this led to significant unrest and strikes with unemployment already a concern.

Times were getting tougher but people did not realise how bad things were going to be in the 1930's.

A small example of growing unemployment touching football was the decision by Footscray council in March re employment of casual labour for manning the gates at the VFL and VFA games. The council gave preference to local, unemployed, married men.⁷ And the Herald reported that many clubs were having trouble finding jobs for their players. Local councils were usually the first option. It was seen as win win because a good football team lifted the pride of the city, it was even claimed that Richmond grew its population when the Tigers won premierships in 1920 & 21. In some country newspapers jobs were advertised thus, "Wanted a hairdresser, must be a good footballer".¹⁵

In other 1929 news there was a cricketer from New South Wales who made his first test century at the MCG in January. He might have a future that young Don Bradman.

In December the game of Bingo was invented by an American toy salesman Edwin Lowe, although lotteries with players ticking off numbers from some type of random draw have been around for centuries. Many football clubs across the country have relied on Bingo games as a key fund raising activity, using a format similar to that developed by Mr Lowe in 1929.

Also new in 1929 were inexpensive, mass produced sunglasses first brought to market by Sam Foster in the US and now a mass market item with some fashion brands some not so inexpensive. But don't wear them in the Grand Final Parade.⁸⁴

In America the Birdseye company launched a range of frozen foods including meat, fish and fruit with an advertising campaign to convince consumers⁴. And so a new convenient option for meals was established and now we can defrost something to eat while we watch footy on the TV.

Another milestone event in September 29 was a horse winning their first race after 5 attempts. It may not sound significant but the horse was a big red, known as Phar Lap who would become a hero in the early years of the depression.

In early March the VFL delegates met and there was much to discuss, with most of the action taking place behind closed doors away from the press. First up was a push for an executive committee to pay closer attention to the management of the league and address any waste of money. Some interesting parallels here with the eventual move to an independent commission in the 1980s but that is still decades away. At issue was how many delegates should be on the executive. A full delegates meeting meant two representatives from each club chaired by the independent president of the VFL. Obviously this many people could be a bit unwieldy in terms of day to day management.

The first proposal was five delegates to manage affairs, another suggestion was for seven delegates and the third option was each club being represented with an executive group of 12. None of the options achieved the 75% majority for any change and the motion was lost. The need for an executive was agreed by all, but the details were blocking progress. If you have ever worked on a committee you will know the feeling.

A previous meeting had blocked increasing price of membership tickets, they were supposed to go up by sixpence. Well the price rise was now back on, the additional money to help fund a full time secretary and the VFL's own premises, rather than the renting rooms from the Victorian Cricket Association. Also addressing financials was a push to reduce the number of free tickets that were being given out. The number of people who thought they were worthy of free admittance had got out of control and action was required.

The final item for this significant meeting was the ongoing challenge of the relationship between the VFL and the Melbourne Cricket Club regarding use of the MCG for finals. The League believed the finals were a significant attraction and the MCC should pay the league for the right to host these games. A working group was established to negotiate with the MCC⁶ but you can be sure there will be an ongoing difficult relationship between these two organisations, eventually resulting in the league setting up its own ground.

In April it was announced the MCC would pay the league £300 a year for "a period of time" when the agreement would be reviewed. However the VCA was paid about £1,000 per year for the test matches and Sheffield Shield games that attracted large crowds. It was noted that Cricket provided 22 days a season while finals and interstate games only added up to about 6 days per year. So at this point Cricket was seen as the bigger revenue driver for the MCC but football will eventually take the lead.¹³

There was an interesting post script to this issue of Rights in June when the Argus reported that the VFL was discussing radio broadcast rights. In 1929 the cricket clubs at grounds hosting a game received payment for radio broadcasts and the league was of the opinion that it should receive a share. Broadcasting rights will absolutely become an ongoing issue for the league.

There was also a change in the direction of the administration of the VFL in March. The delegates decided that the position of secretary which was more like the General Manager should be full time. Edwin Wilson had been the VFL's Secretary since the League was established in 1897, managing affairs for more than 30 years as it grew into the most powerful football league in the country. But he was also the president of the Federal Institute of Accountants, a precursor to the Certified Practising Accountant or CPA organisation and he was also auditor of the Melbourne City Council and several other councils. He did not want the full time position now required by the league.

His successor was Likely McBrien, a former South Melbourne secretary who would be VFL Secretary from 1929 to 1956. Edwin Wilson's devotion to his duty was such that he worked until 3am on the last day in the office to make sure everything was in order for the transition and he was so unwell his doctors banned him from attending the League delegates meeting the next evening to have his official, formal farewell. It was only the second time in 32 years that Edwin Wilson had missed a league meeting^{9,38}.

We don't hear much of people like Edwin Wilson in discussions about the history of football, but without effective administration football clubs and leagues tend to fall apart. So we should appreciate his efforts over 30 plus years at the VFL and his role in founding the Collingwood football club. He would live until 90, and at the time of his death, was the oldest practising member of the Federal Institute of Accountants¹⁰ For reasons I don't understand, Edwin Wilson is not yet in the Australian Football Hall of Fame Administrators section.

The other major development in league administration was the decision in May to purchase a building on the corner of Spring Street and Flinders lane to be the League's head quarters for £21,500 to be funded in part by sixpence tax on each membership ticket, revenue from the football record and a levy of £500 to be paid by each club to be paid over 10 years.

In May 1929 as the purchase was finalised and it was already common knowledge the building would be called Harrison House in honour of the Henry Harrison.²²

In September 1929 this decision was formalised after the death of the Henry Colden Antil Harrison. He was 92 years old and had been pivotal in the establishment of the game of Australian Football. At the time he was publicly acknowledged as the Father of Football and given much more prominence than Tom Wills. That may be due both to his longevity and the fact he was a respectable, establishment figure. Tom Wills had ended his own life after a long struggle with alcohol and more. As discussed in previous episodes Henry Harrison had helped define the rules of the game in 1866, establish the VFA and then the VFL and much more. He had seen the game played in the paddocks on the edge of a young Melbourne become a sport that attracted two million spectators in a single season and more than 60,000 at finals. I will do a separate supplementary episode to mark his life so we don't get too distracted from the 1929 season.

The football previews were again confident of a bigger, more popular season than anything that had gone before and large crowds attending practice matches was a strong indication of a keenly anticipated season.¹⁴ As before every season, recruiting was in full swing and clubs had travelled all over the state, in motor cars, to recruit country champions. The Football Record even forecast that aeroplanes would soon be used to reach players and sign them up before a competing club could arrive. It would happen.

While on aviation matters there was a prediction in July 1929 that, within 50 years, travellers would fly, in safety and comfort, from England to Australia in under 24 hours¹⁸. At this time the fastest flight between the two countries had taken 15 and half days¹⁹! It was a pretty good prediction because in 1974, just five years ahead of the forecast, Qantas had Jumbo Jets flying from Heathrow to Perth in about 20 hours²⁰.

There were a smaller number of coaching appointments in 1929 than the previous season. Jimmy Freake took over at Fitzroy, he had won premierships with the club in 1913 and 22 and was an amazing forward, holding the club goal kicking record when he retired as a player. Down at Geelong Arthur Coghlan took over as captain coach from Tom FitzMaurice who had gone to Mortlake. Dan Minogue became non playing coach at Carlton, the team he had defeated in the 1921 Grand Final as captain coach of Richmond, but now he would be looking to lead the Blues to success. Albert Chadwick had led Melbourne to a premiership in 1926 but now he would have a much bigger challenge as captain coach of cellar dwellers Hawthorn. Jim Caldwell returned to South Melbourne as their non playing coach. In 1918 he had captained the club to their last premiership and now he was looking to achieve the same result as coach. Footscray appointed Alec Eason as their new coach. He had been one of the casualties of the Bulldogs move from the VFA to the VFL as he had earlier moved from Geelong to Footscray without a clearance. Despite the League welcoming Footscray as a club Eason could not play, being suspended from the VFL for transferring without a clearance. But now his playing days were over and he would take charge as coach.

And if you want to see what a VFL training session looked like in 1929, there is a wonderful short, silent, promotional film made that year looking at St Kilda, South Melbourne, Footscray and Melbourne. You get to see some of the players, their grounds and their training drills. And from the close ups you will notice training jumpers were a bit less sophisticated than those worn by the modern player and the number of missing teeth is clear evidence that mouth guards were still a long way off. I will put a link on the Grandfinalhistory.au website for this episode or go to Youtube and search for Australian Rules Football: Personalities of the 1920s posted by the National Film and Sound Archive.

The opening round was on Saturday April 27, a cold, wet and windy day that seemed designed to remind everyone that football is a winter sport. Collingwood hosted Richmond and unfurled their premiership flag in front of the new Jack Ryder grandstand, named for the Collingwood and Australian Cricketer. Built by unemployed men and partly funded by a government unemployment relief fund, it provided 3,000 seats for the Collingwood supporters and they had a wonderful time in their new seats and in the outer.

Some clubs are said to suffer from a premiership hangover when they under-perform in the new season, the glory of the previous year perhaps undermining the desire to work as hard or harder again. There was no evidence of a premiership hangover as Collingwood kicked 13 goals straight in the first three quarters to remind Richmond of the challenge ahead (13 goals straight set a record that stood until 1979 when Geelong kicked 15 straight against St Kilda at Moorabin). The Tigers performed well under such an onslaught eventually going down by just 17 points but the accuracy and method of the Magpies was a sight to behold.

Around the grounds, Carlton rewarded their new coach with an easy win over Essendon, Fitzroy had bought in a new committee, a new coach and many new players but they finished a goal behind the Bulldogs. A result that could be seen as either a failure or a step on the way to improvement, the weeks ahead would tell where the Maroons were at.

When North joined the league in 1925 they played their first game at Geelong and won, in a shock for everybody, but they hadn't beaten the Cats since and after opening round, they still had only one win in Geelong. Hawthorn took a three goal lead in their first quarter of the season at the Junction oval against the Saints but despite raising Maybloom supporters hopes it was St Kilda with the win at the end of four quarters. And Melbourne were too good for South

The season was underway, Membership tickets were selling out despite the sixpence increase¹⁷ and if your team won then all was well and for those with a loss, there was hope for next week.

Collingwood were not hiding their ambitions. In the review of the game Syd Coventry said "That's our first step towards our hat trick in premierships I hope". No taking it week by week for the Magpies, they had a target in mind and were letting everybody know.¹⁸

A disturbing incident was noted in the Round 2 game where St Kilda's captain Bill Cubbins was hit by three stones thrown from the crowd. The game was held up for a minute while he recovered.²¹

After six rounds or the first third of the season the Collingwood Machine was staking its claim at the top of the ladder, six wins from six games and a percentage of 184 showing how comfortable those wins were. Carlton followed with five wins, Melbourne third with four wins and a draw with Richmond fourth and Essendon fifth on four wins. Footscray, St Kilda and Geelong were in touch with the top four but Hawthorn and North Melbourne were both in sadly familiar territory, without a win at the bottom of the ladder.

North Melbourne decided changes were required and Charlie Tyson resigned as coach. The club must have been frustrated when their captain coach had injured himself playing in the Wednesday League for the fire brigade, although many league players played in the mid week competition, but perhaps not captain coaches. It was reported that he would stay on as a player but that was only for one game and by late June he was given a clearance to play at Yarraville in the VFA. The former Collingwood grand final captain and the victim of unfair rumours after the 1926 Grand Final loss to Melbourne had played his last VFL game.^{23,24,25}

At the end of June, Fitzroy with just one win were also making coaching changes. Jim Freake, who curiously had been appointed at the start of the season as “Supervisor of Training” was out and Doug Ringrose was appointed playing coach. Because the players would not allow injured captain Charlie Chapman to resign the captaincy, their champion forward, Jack Moriarty, resigned as vice captain, giving Ringrose the position and seniority on the ground along with his coaching role²⁶. After all the off field changes with committees and new players the Maroons would continue to struggle this season only winning two games, a long way off their glory years in the league’s early days.

Also losing their coach in June was South Melbourne after six rounds with a win over Richmond and also St Kilda. But the committee was not happy with training methods and Jim Caldwell was asked to resign²⁷. In the modern era coaches tend to go quietly with speaking points such as “jointly agreed this was the best decision” or similar words that smooth over the very difficult situation of sacking a coach mid season. But in 1929 Caldwell wrote to the Herald with a vigorous defence of his record and results in the short time he had at his old club, while also wishing the team well for their future.²⁸ Sadly in Mid August he died after being ill for several weeks with “Internal Troubles”²⁹

On more positive note June saw Hawthorn have a win, defeating South the week after Caldwell was sacked. Not great for South Melbourne but cause for celebration for the Mayblossoms, it was their first win since August 1927!

The following week Collingwood's run through the season hit a small hurdle at St Kilda. On a cold windy afternoon the Saints kept pace with Collingwood, the first team to push them in the season so far. But Gordon Coventry kicked a goal to retake the lead just before the end of the game.

At the start of July the Victorian team travelled by train to Perth for a festival of football to celebrate Western Australia’s centenary. There would be two games against WA , one on Saturday and the second on Wednesday. Also a game against SA in Adelaide on the return journey. It would be a two week trek for the 23 players and officials. It was meant to be 24 players, two from each team but Leo Dwyer from North Melbourne was a late scratching and no replacement player could be found the day before departure.³¹

During this podcast series, I have noted several aviation milestones as part of the background to help describe the changing world inhabited by players, officials and supporters. But its no surprise that in 1929 travel to Perth was still on trains. What might surprise you is the time required to cross the country. The group left at 5.00pm on Monday evening, arrived in Adelaide the following morning in time for a quick change of trains which would arrive in Terrowie at 8.15pm for another change of train then on to Port Augusta for yet another change of trains. By 2.30pm on Thursday the team was scheduled to arrive in Kalgoorlie with time for some practice on the Kalgoorlie footy ground before a 5.30 pm departure. But the train was late so no lunch or training in Kalgoorlie, just switching trains and a nod to the town that had dropped everything to host the Victorians for a few hours. They arrived in Perth 10.00am Friday morning.

In summary leaving Melbourne Monday afternoon and getting to Perth Friday Morning with four changes of train³². In a country the size of Australia the modern national competition can only happen with air travel on jets.

And if you are wondering what the players did with their time on the train The Age reported that singing in solo and chorus was a popular pastime as well as story telling and playing cards. With the comfort of first class sleepers, it was only some who chose to stay up all night, unlike previous VFL trips taken in cramped second class seats.³³

Despite some criticism in the Perth press of the way the Victorian team was selected, two from each team rather than the best players available, the VFL had their first ever win in Perth over a WA team 15.19 to 13.8 in the first game then lost the second match by 3 points in a thriller.

Earlier I spoke about the increasingly difficult economic situation in 1929 even before the Great Depression began. A story from the Victorians return trip to Adelaide is a good example and a credit to the players involved.

While the train was stopped at Cook, an isolated outpost in the middle of the Nullarbor Plain, a stowaway was found. He had improvised a canvas bed roped between the wheels of a carriage. When discovered the railway officials were going to dump him on the side of the track. Melbourne wingman Ray Usher organised a whip around with all players tossing coins into a hat and paid his fare to Port Augusta with a pound or two left over to send him on his way. He had not eaten for three days and it is likely he would have died of thirst or accident before arriving in Adelaide where he had been promised work.³⁴

In Adelaide, the South Australians had a win by two goals with the Victorians hampered by playing injured players³⁵. The result meant the VFL team had one win and two losses on their epic interstate journey, arriving back in Melbourne on the Tuesday.

Despite the interstate games creating an absence of 23 players, normal rounds were scheduled for June. It was felt with each club providing two players each, the burden was evenly shared, and games could proceed

After twelve rounds of the season had been completed Collingwood was still undefeated and still with a terrific percentage. Carlton were second and Richmond had taken third spot with Melbourne sitting fourth. Geelong had moved up to fifth just half a game behind Melbourne and Footscray were generating excitement out west, the Bulldogs were just one game behind Melbourne, looking to play their first ever VFL finals series, if they could manage things in the last third of the season. St Kilda were also keeping their supporters interested even though they were a game and a half behind Melbourne their percentage was quite good. And Essendon, fourth after the first six games had dropped to seventh, on the same number of wins as the Saints but handicapping themselves with a poor percentage, which made a finals run just that much harder.

Round 13 saw everybody talking about Gordon Coventry, again. Against Hawthorn, who had managed three wins in the season, which was progress for the Mayblossoms, Gordon had a day out, kicking 16 goals in front of a delirious Victoria Park home crowd. Setting a new record for the VFL. At half time, Colourful Racing Identity, John Wren promised £50 to Coventry if he could break South Melbourne Harold Robinson's 1919 record of 14 goals. Coventry, with the support of his teammates, set the new record and John Wren handed over the £50, close to about \$4,500 in modern terms.^{36,37}

His team mate, Percy Bowyer, recalled later that the other players thought they would get £1 each leaving Gordon (or Nuts as he was known) with £33, but he kept the lot. For a while he got a new nick name, Hungry, but it didn't stick and Nuts would keep kicking goals which is what he, the coach and the team wanted.³⁷

And it was in Round 16 on the 17th of August at Fitzroy's Brunswick St home that Gordon "Nuts" Coventry became the first VFL player to kick 100 goals in a season. While he was cheered from all parts of the ground, the crowd did not invade the oval.⁴⁰ Nor did the club make much fuss about the century effort. Jock McHale's focus was on the team and working towards success in the finals.⁴¹

In the same round, at the supposedly civilised MCG, a spiteful game between Melbourne and Footscray was made worse by the reaction of the crowd. After a number of clashes in the first half there were several "incidents" as Footscray players tried to enter their change rooms via a roped off passage through the MCC Members Stand. A woman attempted to hit a player with her umbrella, another man tried to kick the same player and, as reported by the Herald, a comrade of that player promptly knocked the kicker down. During the game a beer glass was thrown from the grandstand and struck George Stanley, playing his first game, on the leg. Fortunately he was not hurt.⁴² Poor crowd behaviour, even from the MCC members, has a long history.

By Round 17 the finals fight was coming to a head. Collingwood were still undefeated, if they did this for two more rounds and they would achieve something no other club had managed. South Melbourne went close in 1918 and might have achieved the record first except for a drunken weekend away before a Monday game. Check out Episode 22 to see what happened to South in their amazing 1918 season.

Carlton were safe on second and Richmond and Melbourne both sat on 16 wins, the Tigers having the better percentage with St Kilda the only team with a chance, six points behind. Round 17 saw Richmond have an easy win against South to hold on to third spot but 35,000 people squeezed into the Junction oval to see if St Kilda could continue their late season run against Melbourne. The Saints had won five games in a row to drag themselves from 8th on the ladder to knocking on the door for finals. And in a superior display on their home ground they had a three goal win to get within half a game of fourth spot. And of course Collingwood had an easy win against North.

It would come down to the last round. Melbourne hosting Collingwood at the MCG. If Melbourne won they would stay in the four. If Collingwood won the back to back premiers would be the first team to go through the home and away season undefeated. And then Melbourne would have to hope St Kilda lost.

For the other two finalists Carlton and Richmond, their last games of the season delivered a couple of odd games. Carlton were playing North, second versus last, North had only one win all season. Perhaps Carlton decided to take it easy and at three quarter time they were three goals down, but North did not score in the last quarter and the Blues won by seven points, avoiding an embarrassing loss in the final round. The Tigers travelled to Geelong for a game that would not change their position on the ladder either and perhaps they too were thinking of finals rather than the game at hand. The Cats gave them a 40 point thumping.

In a game that did matter the Saints were visiting Footscray, who had looked like possible finalists before falling away in the latter part of the season. The scores were close at half time before the Saints took over in the second half, for their seventh win in a row. They knew, by watching the scoreboard, that Collingwood had been untroubled in disposing of Melbourne.

The Saints barnstorming second half of the season had got them into the finals for the first time since 1918, 11 years ago.

Collingwood had become the first team to go through the season undefeated, they were top of the ladder on 18 wins, with the right of challenge and red hot favourites for the premiership.

And Melbourne were out of the finals, despite having been in the four for the previous eight weeks, achieving a Silver AlmostUs award for just missing the finals after having been in the four with a week to go.

At the other end of the ladder Hawthorn supporters could celebrate a season that brought four wins, which equalled the result of their past three seasons put together, so that's progress. North Melbourne would be glad the season was over after only one win and Fitzroy's hope of a new start with new committee and new players was yet to bear fruit with only 3 wins. The powerhouse of the early years of the VFL were in the doldrums, their fifth season in a row without finals. In September it was announced that a new reform group would challenge the incumbent reform group to restore the Fitzroy club to its former high prestige⁴⁵. Should work this time, right?

On the Wednesday after the end of the home and away season the Umpire and Permits committee met to count the votes for the Brownlow medal. One vote awarded each game by the field umpire. There were some anomalies this season. No votes were awarded for the rounds when the state team was in action in Adelaide and Perth and, in a game between Geelong and Collingwood, Albert Collier of Collingwood was bracketed with George Todd of Geelong. But half votes were not allowed and this vote was declared informal.

This did not stop Albert "Leeter" Collier from winning the Brownlow with six best on ground performances.⁴³ He had been a leader since Collingwood primary school days and Leeter became his nickname. He was a 20 year old centre half back who had played at Ivanhoe before joining his older brother Harry at Collingwood⁵⁹. Carji Greeves who had dominated Brownlow voting over previous seasons faded from the umpires view in 1929, for the first time in the medal's history he did not get a vote.

Carlton took on St Kilda in the first Semi Final on the 7th of September. Carlton had finished the season three games clear of the Saints and beaten the Saints easily in their only meeting in Round 8. Yet the Saints had finished the season in a mighty rush, winning their last seven games in a row., The expert panel of current and past players assembled by the Herald was evenly split between the two clubs.

The Saints would be without half backman Ed Sannerman who suffered the fate all footballers fear, aggravating an injury at training on the eve of the finals. He had been out since Round 14 and in front of a large crowd of Saints supporters he broke down while testing his leg and was ruled out of the team. The Saints had quite an injury toll to deal with when selecting their team, along with Sannerman they were also missing centreman Barney Carr, and ruckman Arthur Ludlow, who had played for Victoria earlier in the season, was out with an illness.

Over at Carlton Coach Dan Minogue had the forwards working against the defenders and then circle work before bringing the team in for a meeting. ⁴⁶ The Blues had virtually a full list to draw on, only missing Harry "Soapy" Valance, who had been knocked out the week before and not fully recovered. He was running second in the goal kicking to Gordon Coventry on 64 goals for the season but the Blues were full of players with finals experience, none of the Saints had ever played a VFL final.

58,500 were at the MCG including some French sailors from the French cruiser Tourville which was visiting Melbourne⁴⁸. No doubt they would return to France eager to take up the Australian game. After a dry week, the MCG had been watered on Friday evening, this was unfortunate timing because rain fell heavily overnight creating a soft and muddy ground in parts with the centre of the ground being very sticky.

The Sea Siders were the sentimental favourites given their lack of previous finals success and the great way they had finished the season. They received a warm welcome as they came onto the ground. All players and officials wore back arm bands as a mark of respect for Henry Harrison who had died on the preceding Monday. Carlton's captain Ray Brew won the toss and kicked with the wind to the Punt Rd end. An advantage given more rain was expected and getting a lead with the better conditions and a lighter ball would help. Only one ball used in these games so they could get heavy by the end of the match.

The first half was a tight game with both clubs scoring well when they had the wind. Carlton led by a goal at half time and when they came out for the third quarter they knew they had to take advantage of the scoring end. But the inexperienced, undermanned St Kilda players had not read the same script. They played the attacking football and scored three goals in the first 18 minutes, gaining the lead and threatening to take the game away from the Blues. But Carlton were a classy team, had been well coached all season and had a strong captain in Brew and a target up forward with Horrie Clover, even if some of his marks were observed to involve a bit of "illegal pushing out of the defenders". Not the first forward to get away with that tactic nor the last. At three quarter time the Blues were back in front by a goal.

Now the Saints had the wind and the scoring end. But the wind turned violent in the last quarter, newspapers flew around and others described it like a dust storm obscuring the players. It seemed to distract the inexperienced Saints more than the Carlton players and, after the wind storm peaked it just died away, there was no wind advantage for either team. The Saints made a valiant effort in the last quarter but were hampered by injured players who could not be replaced as no substitutes were allowed in this era. Carlton won the Semi Final, they would play the winner of the Richmond Collingwood game. The Saints had lost the game but still won plenty of admirers for the efforts. ⁴⁷

Richmond would take on Collingwood in the second Semi Final. The Magpies had won 20 games in a row, the 18 rounds of this season plus two finals from last year. They had regularly doubled the opposition score and had not been troubled by the Tigers in their two games this season. Not surprisingly they were the favourites for everyone in Melbourne except the suburb of Richmond. And even the most loyal of Tiger supporters must have been worried.

The Collingwood selectors had an easy evening, choosing a team that had 15 players that had won the Grand Final in 1928, against Richmond. Of which 14 had also played in the premiership game the year before, also against the Tigers.

At Punt Rd the selectors spent a long evening considering their options and looking for the best match ups against the likes of Syd and Gordon Coventry, Brownlow medallist Albert Collier and others. Unlike Collingwood only 10 of this team had played in the last Grand Final and while most of the football world had already written the result down the Tigers were not going to be there just to make up numbers.⁴⁹

51,000 were at the game, 7,000 less than the week before, perhaps some did not want to see a foregone conclusion. Those who had made the effort to get to the ground saw something they would long remember.

As reported by Old Boy in the Argus “from the very first bounce Richmond was the faster, the more convincing, the more systematic, the more purposeful, the better in the air, the cleverer on the ground, in fact, in every thing that goes to make up a football team the Tigers were the Masters. The further the game went the more the superiority of Richmond impressed.”

Seldom has a game confounded expectations as the Second Semi final. How was this upset achieved? A combination of tactics and system with a dash of force.

Every Richmond player was to stand in front of his opponent and match him for speed and movement. The match up of players onto the Collingwood stars was planned and Richmond’s coach Checker Hughs told his team “Give them all you’ve got and they will crack”. And they gave it to Collingwood in every sense of the word, within minutes of the start Syd Coventry and George Clayden were flattened. Collingwood supporters were outraged and Jack Worrall described the blows on both players as “displaying a reprehensible spirit that marred the play all day”.

At half time Hughs told his players it was the first time in three years that he had been able to smile at half time in a game against Collingwood but that Collingwood would come at them like lions in the next quarter. But the game did not change.

The game ended with Richmond 62 points in front, the Herald said it was “the most extraordinary upset in the history of football eighteen spanners were thrown into the works and the machine was smashed to smithereens”^{50,51,52}

The run of 20 wins in a row was over for the Magpies, a record not broken until 1952 by Geelong.

Richmond would take on Carlton in the Preliminary Final and Collingwood, using their right of challenge, awaited the winner in the Grand Final.

There would be a price to pay for Richmond's strenuous victory, Richmond's defender Basil McCormack was suspended for eight weeks for striking George Clayden, meaning he would be unavailable for the remainder of the finals.

The Preliminary Final was set for Saturday 21st of September. Richmond had beaten Carlton twice during the season even though the Blues finished the season two and half games ahead on the ladder. At selection the suspension of McCormack meant Maurie Sheahan moved to the wing and Don Harris who had played 8 games from Round 7 to 14 was back in the team after good performances in the Second 18. Carlton had lost Alex Duncan to an ankle injury and replaced him with Charlie McSwain and First year player Jim Crowe was the unlucky man making way for Soapy Vallence's return.⁵⁴

Kickero of the Herald tipped the Tigers and the Friday night panel of experts in the same paper generally favoured Richmond although there was a solid cohort for the Blues.⁵⁵

60,750 were at the MCG, the biggest crowd of the three finals so far, the weather was initially fine but soon clouds rolled in and then the storm opened up. A crowd in the outer that seemed packed to capacity somehow found room in the stands, not by paying the extra fee of 1/ 9p but simply by pushing their way in to an already crowded space. Those who could not get into the stands were left soaking and many left the ground at half time, looking for a radio broadcast in a dry home or pub. The crush in the outer in the first half had reduced the chances of a brawl as there was no room to swing a punch.

In the second Semi Final Richmond had been fast and accurate with their play but also somewhat vigorous with their opponents. Old Boy in the Argus said the game "provided an extraordinary mingling of good, bad and indifferent" in what became a spiteful unpleasant match. He also wrote that the Carlton players had adopted the old saying "Thrice armed is he who has his quarrel just, but six times is he who gets his blow in first" (Doubt that we will hear that line used in any modern TV commentary).

From the start elbows rattled on unprotected ribs, fists flew, kicking was rife and it became what old players called Rafferty's rules. Umpire Bob Scott allowed the action to continue without "undue interference". An uppercut to the jaw of a Richmond player in the first quarter spurred the players on and in the third quarter, after a goal was scored and the ball returned to the centre, shouts of "Look at that" burst out from the crowd. 100 yards away from the ball two players, one from each team were staggering and falling to the ground. Trainers from both clubs were attending their player when Richmond's Don Harris tore himself free and rushed back towards Tommy Downs before he could be restrained by trainers and other players.

It was a game that exceeded all normal constraints and the amongst all the brutality there was a close game being played to see who would take on Collingwood. It was a game where the lead changed multiple times, where the biggest gap between the teams barely exceeded two goals, with displays of magnificent ball use, passing and running and accurate kicking at goal.

Nineteen minutes into the last quarter, Carlton had a 13 point lead, Richmond barrackers were leaving the ground and Blues supporters were beginning to plan their Grand Final preparations. Jack Baggot went to the centre to stop Carlton's Colin Martyn who had been dominating the play in that quarter. All of a sudden, against the flow of play, Harry Weidner and Maurie Hunter goaled for Richmond and they were only one point down. People rushed back from the exits, Carlton's Grand Final plans were on hold.

Richmond's first year player Tommy Dunn, showing calmness beyond his years, passed the ball to Jack "Skinny" Titus. As he would so many times in his career, it was mark and goal. Three goals by three different players in three electrifying minutes and the Tigers were 5 points up. Another behind to Harry Weidner and some frantic defending saw Richmond win the game by 6 points. It had been so close but sadly the focus for many, on both sides of the fence, had been on the fight and not the game.

Only two players were cited by the umpires after the game, Tommy Downs of Carlton was reported for striking Richmond's Don Harris in the first quarter and also elbowing Harris in the third quarter. Harris was also reported by the Goal umpire for striking Tommy Downs and unseemly conduct, a charge that might have applied to many more players on both teams. There were calls from a number in the press for the league to investigate further given the violent display.^{56,57,58, 62}

There would be no further action by the league. Tommy Downs however would add to his unenviable record in games against Richmond. Tommy was the cousin of Lyle Downs, the Carlton player who collapsed and died of a heart attack after training one night in 1921. Tommy was also a frequent offender against Richmond, after the 1928 Semi Final he was suspended for 12 games for striking Richmond's Jack Fincher. The evidence at the tribunal for this game, was that Downs had been repeatedly struck by Richmond players and captain Ray Brew said he was not in full possession of his faculties. Downs admitted to striking Don Harris but said it was an accident, he was aiming for the ball. He was suspended for 19 games, missing all of the 1930 season. Looking ahead to 1931, in his next game against the Tigers he would be reported for kicking and be suspended for the remainder of 1931 and all of 1932. We will look at that incident in more detail in a couple of episodes but three games against the Tigers netted Tommy Downs 60 weeks suspension, which might be a record for one player versus one club in so few games.

Harris was found not guilty of hitting Downs and guilty of "Unseemly Conduct but only given a severe reprimand, leaving him free to play in the Grand Final.⁶¹

The Grand Final

Syd Coventry was in his third year as Collingwood captain and looking to be the first captain to lead his team to three VFL premierships in a row. In an interview earlier in the season with the Argus Syd shared some of his thoughts on the game and how to get the best out of yourself. "This is no game for weaklings, if you are to do your best on a Saturday you must remember that there are six other days in the week in which you can prepare. ... don't think if you are out late on a Wednesday you can make it up by sleeping 12 hours on a Thursday night. It is the regular life that makes an athlete keep their form." Coventry also shared some of his thoughts on the game such as reducing the number of players from 18 to 16 to reduce crowding. He was also supportive of the umpires and said the players see things differently to the barrackers.⁶⁷

In the three grand finals between Collingwood and Richmond the Tigers had three different captains. 1927 Alan Geddes led the team, in 28 it was Donald Don and in 1929 it would be Cyril "Dooley" Lilburne. Originally from Birchip he came to Melbourne as a 15 year old and attended Wesley college, immediately slotting into their football team. An around sportsman he also excelled at rowing, cricket and tennis. In tennis he competed three times for the Victorian schoolboy championships. His early senior football was at Brighton in the VFA for three seasons before joining the Tigers. He played three seasons for Richmond, being appointed captain in 1929⁶⁸ He returned to Brighton in 1930, like many VFL players, receiving an offer too good to refuse, even if it meant leaving the club without a clearance. In his later years he continued to display his sporting expertise by as Australian Lawn Bowls fours champion and also as a state selector for Queensland.^{69,70,71}

Jock McHale was, of course, coaching Collingwood, in his 18th of 38 seasons. As well as taking his team into their fifth successive Grand Final with a chance to achieve the first premiership hat trick since Carlton's 1906, 07 & 08 victories Jock had also taken on coaching Old Xaverians in 1928 and 1929. Obviously it had to fit around his Collingwood duties which meant he was at Old Xaverians Wednesday nights along with two nights and Saturday's at Collingwood. As well as Sunday mornings after attending church at St Ambrose's in Brunswick. At the same time holding down a full time job at the Carlton Brewery. It would be decades before coaching became a full time job. He took the unpaid additional role at Old Xaverians on as a favour for "Colourful Racing Identity" John Wren, who had a son playing for the team. They made the finals in 1928 but during the 1929 season the extra workload became too much and Jock handed the reins for Old Xav's over to Bert Laxton.⁶³

Richmond's coach Checker Hughes was in his third year at the Tigers and had his team in their third successive Grand Final, each time against the Magpies. At this stage of his coaching career Hughes had a record that was both impressive and unwelcome at the same time. As a coach he had already been in six grand Finals but runners up on six different occasions. Three times with Ulverstone in Tasmania, once with the Richmond Second 18 and twice with the senior team⁵³ Surely 1929 would bring a different result.

Bob Scott had umpired all the finals in 1929, including the spiteful preliminary and this was this would be his first Grand Final. He had started as a VFL umpire in 1921 but struggled to get a regular spot in league games, instead spending many hours travelling on trains officiating at various country games. Things changed in July 1929 after he took charge of a Collingwood Richmond game at Punt Road and his name was front and centre from then on. He would umpire seven grand finals in a row between 1929 and 1935, so this won't be the last we hear of Bob Scott. He was inducted into the Australia Football Hall of fame in 1996

In the week of the Grand Final McHale gave the players an easy time, Sid Coventry recalled that Jock would not let us handle a ball. McHale also had a message in one of his rare comments "We will be holding a meeting with our players on Thursday night and my instructions will be for our men to play the ball at all times, Collingwood wants to win the premiership by fair means only" But while the players had an easy time on the training track the selectors had a difficult job to name a team to take on Richmond after the shock loss in the semi final. Some hard decisions were made.

George Gibbs has played every game in the season but was dropped for not defending Syd Coventry when he was hit in the semi final. He was replaced by Charlie Ahern, playing just his third game. Also missing out were John Harris and Norm McLeod, both having played all year as well. Harris was understandably upset at being dropped and would transfer to Hawthorn the following year. McLeod would stick with the Pies. Coming into the team were Percy Bowyer and Leo Murphy. There were also a number of positional changes as McHale and the selection committee looked for better match up on the Tigers. They had a heavier, stronger team and some specific plans in place as they reached for this unprecedented success for the club.

Richmond would take an unchanged team into the Grand Final. They too had a lighter week on the track with a focus on pace, passing running and marking. They were buoyed by the premiership win of the Richmond reserves team or Second 18 in their Grand Final win against Geelong held on Show Day.^{64,66}

The past and present players and officials surveyed by the Herald for their expert's panel were evenly split between the two clubs, even though the Magpies had only lost one game in the entire season.

On Saturday 2th of September the lines to get into the ground stretched over 300 yards as 63,000 people made their way into the MCG for the Grand Final, the biggest crowd of the Finals and just under the record set in the 1925 Geelong Collingwood Grand Final.

An unusual and disturbing aspect of this game was revealed after the match. Eleven anonymous letters were sent to Collingwood players, death threats unless the players allowed Richmond to win. Club officials intercepted the letters and kept them secret, the players were not disturbed, but the sender was never identified. A difficult decision for the club at a very tense time.

The tone for the game was set by Collingwood from the very first quarter. After some scrambly play in the opening moments Collingwood got their system going, but the machine was operating in a different manner today. Gordon Coventry was making his usual fast attacking leads, closely guarded by multiple Richmond players but the Magpies were passing the ball to young Horrie Edmunds, playing just his ninth game.

In the ruck Charlie Ahern was doing all he could to protect Syd Coventry, giving Syd the opportunity to display his skills, unlike the semi final.

By the end of the quarter, Edmunds had three goals and Collingwood had a 27 point lead. Both teams added a goal in the second quarter but the Magpies, having had the week off, were beginning to look faster and fresher than the Tigers, who had played two big finals to make to this game.

The second half was more of the same, Ahern putting his body on the line for his captain, Gordon Coventry, in his sixth Grand final and the first man to score over a 100 goals in the VFL, acting as a decoy while first season player Edmunds picked up five goals and Collingwood supporters enjoying every minute of the fitting triumph to their most dominating season.

The Collingwood dressing rooms were the usual chaotic celebrations. George Conner, the club secretary could finally take of his jacket to show a placard on his back, Hat trick 19271928 1929". He said he had put it on at home because he knew they would win.

McHale said he had never been prouder and that the present team was equal, he would not say better, than any Collingwood team. But he did say that Syd Coventry was the greatest captain Collingwood had ever produced.

Syd Coventry declared that "It was a great win for Jock" and Coventry also gave special recognition to Charlie Ahern saying he played one of the most selfless roles in a great day for the club. When asked which of the three premierships teams was the best Coventry declared it was too difficult to compare sides but that the younger players had improved all the time. And in this grand achievement it was two first year players that helped the club to a mighty achievement. Edmunds, from Diamond Valley like Syd and Gordon, with his five goals and Ahern, who played the game of his life with a fractured bone in his arm. Sadly it would be his last game, he would die in 1931 from bowel cancer. He only had a short career but his team mates would never forget his contribution^{72,73,74,75}

Season Review & Conclusion

Collingwood left on a well deserved trip to Tasmania and Richmond would have to lick their wounds until the 1930 season but the business of managing football continued.

The first issue to raise its head in early October was the shock headline in the Argus "Project by League, Killing the Association". Old Boy declared there were well advanced plans to expand the league to 16 clubs by admitting four amalgamated teams from the VFA. The amalgamated entities would be Preston with Northcote, Coburg with Brunswick, Williamstown and Yarraville and the fourth would be a combine of Brighton and Prahran. Port Melbourne would be admitted by merging with South Melbourne. Possibly building on work done in 1928's failed discussions on VFA affiliation with the VFL.

However, by that afternoon there were denials from the VFL's new secretary Like McBrien and several VFL and VFA clubs were unanimous in disowning the story. No one knew anything about such a proposal, nobody wanted to kill the VFA and nothing of the sort was being considered.

Despite all these denials a proposal to admit another four or six clubs was debated at the November League meeting. So perhaps there was something going on in the background. In a foreshadowing of the league's eventual expansion in the 1980's where licence fees paid by the Brisbane Bears and West Coast Eagles were essential to paying league and club debts, Melbourne delegate Gordon Coulter suggested any new clubs might be asked to contribute to league funds to meet the liability on Harrison House. When the issue went back to the clubs for consideration there was no support. I suspect any possible opportunity for this to happen was derailed by the collapsing economic conditions that would engulf Australia and the League in the coming years.^{76,77,82,83}

Melbourne Cup week saw the Australian Football Council meeting in Melbourne with much discussion on rules of the game. First up was a proposal by the VFL to reintroduce the option of a flick pass for handball. This would allow an open palm to be used rather than a clenched fist as agreed in 1927. But WA and Tasmania were opposed, saying the flick pass created too many disputes about throws, making the umpires job harder and causing confusion in the game. The Holding the Ball/Holding the Man rule also came up for discussion, unsurprisingly as it has been a point of contention for the entire history of the game. Canberra tried to change the rule such that a player had to be absolutely stopped before a free kick could be awarded but this came to nothing. The VFL also tried to reintroduce the old out of bounds rule, with a throw in if the ball went over the line, but could not get a sufficient majority for the change. To cap of an unsuccessful Council meeting, at least from a VFL perspective, there was no consensus on a substitute rule for injured players. The VFL was also unhappy with the allocation of costs to continue to support the Council, the League with liabilities for Harrison House was running short of funds^{78, 79}

However further discussion on the issue of substitutes finally saw a breakthrough where the option for a 19th man to be bought onto the ground to replace a player at any time at the captains discretion, without any option of a player returning to the ground after being replaced, was finally agreed by delegates after the Council meeting had ended. The proposal would have to be agreed by each league before the start of the 1930 season. It was some progress but the mechanics of the Australian Football Council were causing the VFL some frustration.^{80, 81}

Before we finish this episode and season it is worth noting the extraordinary achievements of the Collingwood club in 1929

- First team to be minor premiers three times in a row
- First team to win every game of home and away season (Essendon had an undefeated season in 1893 in the VFA but that included two draws which were more common in an era where behinds did not count in the score. ⁴⁴)
- First team to win 20 games in a row (18 in 1929 and last two of 1928)
- First VFL team to have a century goal kicker and Gordon Coventry's 118 goals in the season beat Dave McNamara's 107 goals for Essendon Association in the VFA in 1910
- Syd Coventry the first man to captain a side to three successive minor premierships and a hat trick of Grand Final victories.
- Brownlow medal winner Leeter Collier.
- Second 18 Best and Fairest Winner Bob Ross
- Scored more than 2,3
- 6.
- 000 points in the season, a new VFL record
- 8 VFL premierships to lead the league, overtaking Fitzroy
- Played fewer men in a season than any other team to date in the VFL, at one time playing the same 18 players for six weeks in a row⁴⁵

We will return next episode for season 1930. As economic conditions deteriorate football became an important comfort. Will the Saints continue on with success in 1930, can Richmond recover from the disappointment of three Grand Final losses in a row or will the Collingwood Machine continue to roll on.

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