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Intro Music

Background

Hello and welcome to Grand Final history, in this supplementary episode we review the fourth decade of the VFL, from 1927 to 1936. It's a way of looking at the trends, issues, significant incidents and some quirks or oddities over the last 10 years, before we start on Episode 41, 1937. If you haven't listened to the episodes covering the last decade you can listen now as a way of saving time if you want, or it might provide some context as each episode unfolds. If you are a regular listener you might enjoy this review and analysis of overarching themes, or you can go to the next episode, your choice.

So let's get started.

The fourth decade of the VFL was overshadowed by the crushing impact of the 1930's Great Depression with dramatic increases in unemployment forcing families into poverty and homelessness resulting in political instability and the rise of extremist political ideologies that would in time lead to another World War. It was also a decade where Australians, looking for distractions from hard times, cheered on heroes like Par Lap on the race course or Don Bradman on cricket fields at home or in England.

VFL football provided a cheap, accessible entertainment and focus for a community that was struggling. For many players it was their only source of income, the only way they could provide a food for their family and put a roof over their heads. Unemployment would reach over 30% in the early 1930's and was even higher in the inner Melbourne suburbs like Collingwood, Fitzroy, Richmond. Games were often brutal, violent affairs driven in part by the desperation of players to hold their place in the side so they could continue to receive match payments. Through the decade several clubs were forced to cut match payments, Collingwood players were talking about going on strike in 1928 until Captain Sid Coventry said it would not happen and the players followed his lead. In another example North Melbourne wages were cut in 1935, a decision the players apparently accepted philosophically.

Amongst this economic turmoil it was a decade that saw the VFL establish a framework, a structure that would be followed for decades until the expansion of the 1980's.

1927 to 1936 saw a full decade of the 12 teams that would become the bedrock of the league (Footscray, Hawthorn and North Melbourne having been admitted in 1925) and, the implementation of a new finals system that is the foundation of the current finals fixture, as well as some of the structural battles that would be fought for decades and some examples of the League's emerging political power.

At League Head Office 1927 saw the resignation of the VFL's first Secretary, Edwin Wilson and the appointment of Likely McBrien as the first full time Secretary, effectively the General Manger of the League. We should pay tribute to Edwin Wilson, who was the inaugural VFL secretary, from 1897 to 1927 who managed affairs with such diligence and professionalism that he only missed one League delegates meeting, the handover meeting to Like McBrien. Ed Wilson had literally worked overnight to prepare everything and was so unwell doctors confined him to bed.

Although recognised by the VFL at the time with presentations and the naming of the E. L. Wilson shield that is awarded to each season's premiership team, Edwin Wilson is yet to be inducted into the Australian Football Hall of Fame in the Administrators section, one of many missing names from the early years of the league across many categories.

The League also took the significant step of purchasing a city office building to be their head office, rather than renting rooms from the Victorian Cricket Association. Located on the corner of Spring St and Flinders Lane, Harrison House was a significant financial investment and statement on the emerging economic power of the VFL to control its own destiny. Harrison House was named in honour of the Father of Australian Football, Colden Harrison, a man who did not invent the game but he was instrumental in popularising the code and formalising the laws of the game in its early years. He was also the longest surviving member of that cohort of football pioneers, and so he was honoured with the name Father of Football. He died in 1929 as the VFL was finalising terms for the purchase of the building.

As strong as the League was becoming there were calls in 1929, 1930, 1932 and more for the clubs to handover control to an independent board, given the obvious conflict each club delegate had between what was best for the league overall versus their other commitment to their own clubs. It would take until the 1980s for the clubs to surrender control.

The fourth decade of the VFL saw the battles over grounds that the game was played on intensify. The grounds had originally been allocated to Cricket clubs, well before Football was a thing. So most clubs were effectively tenants of the Cricket Club. The Cricket Clubs had formed a Ground Management Association to address issues of admission price, splits of Gate revenue, catering, bar sales etc. As football clubs generated much bigger crowds and much more revenue anger about the division of gate revenue and related issues became more intense. In 1931 the VFL made arrangements to play games at the Motordrome, a ground located where the AAMI Park for rugby and Soccer now stands, and the Exhibition oval, a ground that used to exist in the Exhibition Gardens, where the Melbourne Museum is now located. Responding to the VFL scheduling games at other grounds, The Ground Management Association threatened to evict football clubs from the grounds they controlled and declared they would start their own football competition.

The Victorian Government Lands Minister arbitrated an agreement that saw the VFL schedule games at their traditional home grounds. But when the Ground Management Association reneged on part of the deal in the week before the opening round of 1931, Like McBrien went to the Victorian Government and declared the VFL would cancel Round One, Recognising the outrage this would cause the government arranged for the Ground Management Association to back down. An early example of the VFL flexing its own political power. Ground control would continue to be a source of tension for decades. Melbourne would eventually play three unhappy losing games on the Motordrome in 1933 but this, at least, was a sign of cooperation, Melbourne football club giving the MCG time to top dress the ground in preparation for an Ashes tour the following summer. Richmond looked to move to the Motordrome in 1936 when it could not come to suitable terms with the Cricket Club but this move was averted and Punt Rd remains the home of the Tiger.

While games are now played in comfortable stadiums with seats for all and many under cover, going to the football in the 1930's required a sterner supporter. With the exception of the grandstand, which was often controlled by the Cricket Club, supporters had to stand on an embanked, sloping mound and endure rain, wind or whatever the weather provided with toilet facilities that were basic at the best of times. Journalists who had been to America called for better conditions and stands with seats for all as seen in the USA, but the Ground Management Association and Cricket clubs were not willing to make those investments. The MCG struggled to fit the crowds wanting to come to finals and in 1936 construction of the Southern Stand commenced which would ensure that the stadium would be able to fit around 100,000 people, even if you had to watch your club in quite ordinary conditions throughout the home and away season.

The VFL's other sparring party besides the Ground Management Association, had traditionally been the VFA. However while the VFL was largely able to weather the storms of the Depression the VFA had a much harder time, and there was some doubt if it was going to survive. So there was a decade focused more on cooperation than fighting, even if the much discussed prospect of amalgamation with two divisions allowing promotion and relegation never happened. As much as it made sense the VFA, no VFL club was going to support a scheme that saw it risk relegation. But the VFL and VFA did renew arrangements managing clearances between their competitions and played four representative games between 1931 and 1936 to raise funds for charity as well as an exhibition night game in 1936. Relations will not remain so friendly in years to come.

This fourth decade of the VFL saw a number of innovations like the night game I just mentioned with the VFA. The first night game between two VFL clubs happened in 1935, it was a practice match between Richmond and South Melbourne. The Grand Final rematch attracted a large crowd at Olympic Park, the re-branded Motordrome, and there were plans for more practice games under lights. But they were blocked by the League Delegates meeting, the resistance coming from those clubs that objected to stronger clubs getting additional revenue and other clubs who opposed the idea of practice matches between VFL clubs. Practice games in this era were usually intra club affairs or against VFA or country teams. If supporters could see how their teams were performing against league clubs they may not turn up when the season started. Night football would have to wait until the 1950's.

Other innovations in this decade were electric time-clocks at the MCG that showed exactly how much time remained in each 25 minute quarter. The clocks were connected to the timekeepers clocks and would stop whenever Time On was signalled. But by 1936 the VFL decided it was not good for players to see how much time remained and the MCG removed them, much to the disappointment of the crowd. There were also a couple of attempts to use sirens rather than bells to signal time. But sirens in this era took a few seconds to build up volume, bells could be rung straight away. Even if umpires did not always here the bell on time. The tradition of tuning in to the Grand Final wherever you are in the world started in 1934 with the first short wave radio broadcast of a grand final which allowed a Richmond Supporter to hear the Tigers win the premiership while he was in Scotland. Rubber balls were trialled in preseason games for a few seasons and received mixed reviews, they were a better option in the wet than a sodden leather ball but too flighty for the league delegates to feel comfortable in making the change from the traditional leather footy.

Another innovation that did not go anywhere was a merged game combining rugby league and Australian rules football. There had been efforts prior to WWI to develop a compromise national code that all states could play. When the 1933 national carnival was held in Sydney there was one final push to see if such a game made sense. A secret trial game was held between some Rugby League players and Representatives from the various state teams but despite the novel event being seen as fast and attractive there was little enthusiasm from the Southern states and firm opposition from many in the rugby league camp. So the split between the Rugby League dominated NSW and Queensland and the rest of Australia continues today.

Some changes to the rules of the game had an impact during the fourth decade of the league and some continue to today. A key difference in this era was that the VFL could not make the rules up for themselves, they had helped set up the National Football Council to have common rules across the country. It was a decision that would cause some frustration but at that time the VFL saw giving power for the rules the NFC was in the overall best interest of the code even if it meant the VFL could not do as it liked. The 19th man as a substitute, no interchange allowed, was implemented in 1930. Much of the opposition to this sensible proposal focused on the potential for Captains and coaches to use the 19th man to replace a player that was playing poorly, not just for injuries as intended. Of course no league club would ever manipulate a system for player substitutes. A rule that had been introduced in 1925 saw a fundamental shift to the style of play this decade. From

1925 if the ball went out of bounds, a free kick was awarded against the team that last touched the ball. Clubs began focusing play on what we would now call the centre corridor rather than the flanks, this meant the ball got to forwards much faster. Scoring increased significantly and there were several full forwards that kicked more than 100 goals in a season. The forward of the era was Collingwood's Gordon Coventry who first topped the ton in 1929 and again in 1930, 33 and 34. Or the extraordinary feats from Bob Pratt who kicked 150 goals in 1934, a record that was only matched by Peter Hudson in 1971. Off the field the Coulter law capping player payments was introduced but how faithfully it was adhered to is another question. In 1934 North Melbourne's president said it was only the poor clubs obeying the Coulter Law because they could not afford to pay more.

The other major innovation was the shift from the modified Argus System of Finals to the McIntyre Final four. The change was driven by Collingwood's 4 premierships in a row from 1927 to 30. Other clubs felt the right of challenge for finishing on top of the ladder was too big an advantage. Also with two semi finals and a final, unless the top of the ladder team was beaten, resulting in a Grand Final, meant you never knew how long the finals series would last. The McIntyre Final four with two semi finals, the preliminary final and Grand Final was seen as a good balance between rewarding the teams that tipped the ladder at the end of the season without giving them too much of an advantage. Although the League now have a Final 8 we can still trace its roots back to 1931, the first year of the new Final 4 system.

Radio itself was an emerging medium in this time, some Country leagues wanted broadcasts banned because they feared supporters would stay home to listen to VFL games rather than attending their local games. Radio Stations had to negotiate broadcast deals with each ground, broadcast revenue going to the Cricket clubs rather than the league or football teams, much to the anger of the VFL. Radio Station 3KZ decided they would just put up scaffolding outside the Lakeside ground to broadcast South Melbourne Games and avoid having to play the Cricket Club but after a few weeks the club erected a large tarpaulin blocking their view. The growth of Radio was significant, at the end of the 1920s about 20% of homes had a radio but by the late 1930's over two thirds of homes were listening and footy in Melbourne was always a popular topic.

Newspapers were allocating more space to football and using current and former players to provide special comments and there was more space allocated to photos of games with much better quality images than previous years. I know from the searches I do on Trove looking at newspapers from each season that there was a 32% increase in articles relating to footy between 1927 and 1936, the public was that hungry for news about their footy

In the modern era the AFL is fiercely protective of its market share, battling with both Rugby League and Soccer for the hearts and minds and dollars of the public, but back in this fourth decade it had a much more live and let live attitude. In 1927 the opening round game on the MCG saw an exhibition Soccer match between a Victorian representative team and members of the visiting British Navy. In 1935 the League hosted a reception for the visiting New Zealand Rugby Union team. Like McBrien even declared that the League was always ready to help the Union game, but not so much today.

The Brownlow medal generated more interest each year through this decade. While live broadcasts of the vote count were some time off, at the end of each home and away season, there were plenty of articles previewing who would win the coveted award. Fitzroy had little success on field and did not make the finals but they did win 5 Brownlows, 3 to Haydn Bunton, two in his first two seasons and one each to Wilfred Chicken Smallhorn and Dennis Dinny Ryan. And just as now there was the annual discussion of whether umpires should be casting votes and why it was always centre men or rovers, what we now call midfielders winning this award. Seems this is never going to change. The voting system did change after a three way tie in 1930 between Richmond's Stan Judkins, Footscray's Allan Hopkins and Collingwood's Harry Collier. Until 1930 umpires only awarded one

vote but from 1931 the 3,2, 1 system we have today was introduced. Judkins was awarded the 1930 Brownlow on the logic he had played the fewest games for his votes, Harry Collier was the catalyst for awarding retrospective Brownlows to players that had missed out when they tied and he and others finally got their medals in 1989. Also worth noting that almost all the press reports referred to the Brownlow as the award for the Best and Fairest player. Will see when the shift to Fairest and Best happens in future episodes

So how did each of the clubs do over the league's fourth decade.

It was clearly Collingwood's decade, six grand finals for six premierships, the Magpie Machine only missed the finals once, They also had three Brownlow medallists, Syd Coventry in 1927, Albert Collier in 1929 and his brother Harry Collier, retrospectively, in 1928. Then there was Gordon Coventry topping the goal kicking 5 times, In an 18 round home and away season they won an average of more than 14 games per season and in 1929 went through the home and away season undefeated, only losing a semi final against Richmond before winning the Grand Final.

Richmond were the next most successful team, unlucky to have one of their best eras at the same time as the Collingwood Machine. The Tigers would play in seven grand finals, one more than the Magpies but for only two premierships. Across 1932, 33 and 34 they played 3 Grand Finals in a row with three different coaches, winning against Carlton in 1932 and South Melbourne in 1934. The Tigers won an average of 13.2 games a season for the 10 years, and missed finals only once in 1936. They had one Brownlow medallist in Stan Judkins in 1930 and while Skinny Jack Titus did not lead the goal kicking in this decade he was one of the outstanding full forwards of the era. It was also the decade that saw the debut of Richmond's immortal, Jack Dyer. An extraordinary performance by the club but in the shadow of one of the leagues most dominate teams of any era.

South Melbourne were also a powerful team. They were coming from a long way back when the club made the decision to appoint grocery store entrepreneur Archie Crofts to the committee and he soon became president. He brought a new energy and professional approach and was pivotal in recruiting the Foreign Legion of players from Western Australia, South Australia and Tasmania. With extraordinary talent such as Laurie Nash, Bob Pratt, Brighton Diggins and more under the powerful leadership of captain coach Jack Bisset the club made it to four grand Finals in a row. Was it the focus on individual brilliance rather than team performance or the Crofts Curse when Archie declared after their 1931 premiership triumph, that more premierships were on their way or the fact they played there Grand Finals against Richmond and Collingwood, two of the best teams of any era. While they only managed the one premiership, 1933 did see South have their Swans Mascot bestowed upon them, it may have been made official in 1934 but the Alex Guerney cartoon from the Herald was the catalyst for the Swans.

Geelong played in two Grand Finals, losing in 1930 to Collingwood but defeating Richmond in 1931. Charlie Clymo retired with the unique 100% success record as coach, one season, one premiership and back to Ballarat. The club made the finals for five out of the ten seasons, so a mixed time for Cats supporters. They also had George Moloney kicking 109 goals in 1932. The Cats appointed Collingwood's Charlie Dibbs as playing coach in 1936, hoping some of the Magpie Magic might find its way to the Corio Oval but Dibbs had been badly concussed in the 1935 Grand Final and retired from Geelong early in 1936. After some thoughts of reappointing Charlie Clymo the committee realised that caretaker Captain Coach Reg Hickey was winning games, the team won the last 6 games of the season, perhaps a sign of things to come.

Carlton were also a successful team in this fourth decade, only missing the finals once but only making it to the Grand final once in 1932, losing the Centenary premiership to Richmond. The club had some great players, Soapy Valence was their top forward and he led the goal kicking in 1931, and the matches against long time rivals Collingwood and Richmond were eagerly anticipated although they could get nasty at times. The 1934 game at Victoria Park was particularly spiteful with

Gordon Coventry knocked out and Blues officials incensed that no Collingwood players were reported. Carlton were one of the leading clubs of the decade but could not add to their last premiership won in 1915

Melbourne were the only other team to make the finals in the league's fourth decade, finishing 3rd in 1928 and fourth in 1936. They did manage to pick up Richmond's premiership coach Frank Checker Hughes for the 1933 season onwards and their second 18 had an amazing run making six Grand Finals in a row and winning five between 1931 to 1935. It may not have been the decade the club wanted for their firsts but they did have the League's first dual Brownlow medallist with Ivor Warne Smith and in 1936 Coach checker Hughes revealed the nick name the Red Demons, which would soon become the Demons mascot, much more inspiring than the Fuchsias. So with a win in the 1936 finals, the success in the second 18, a premiership coach and a decent Mascot perhaps things were also looking good for the Red Demons.

As noted above it had been an unbalanced decade with three clubs dominating and three others competitive enough to make it to the finals. But what of the six remaining clubs, who had raised the issue of pooling gate receipts or capping the number of players clubs could have on their list. The more successful clubs were not very sympathetic. They said it was up to each club to build itself up. Easier said than done when your zone was covered with factories rather than homes in the case of North Melbourne and the constant challenge of poor results leading to fewer memberships being sold that made it harder to recruit players which lead to poor results and so the vicious cycle continued. Hawthorn even threatened to withdraw from the league after round 1 1935 if their local community did not buy more membership tickets.

Lets have a look at the clubs that had a harder time

Essendon had won back to back premierships in 1923 and 24 and played finals in 1925 and 26 but the fourth decade of the VFL was a struggle for the team from Windy Hill. They cycled through coaches and had some occasional bright spots but were not consistent enough. They did however uncover a star recruit by the name of Richard Reynolds, or Dick Reynolds as he was also known. He won a Brownlow in his second season aged just 19. Essendon and Dick Reynolds would go on to have much more success in subsequent seasons than they did in the fourth decade of the VFL

St Kilda did not have a good decade, reform groups took over the committee to be succeeded by subsequent reform groups, different coaches were tried and sacked, seven in 10 years was high even by the standards of the era. There was the memorable game against North in 1933 when the club ended up with 15 men on the field and yet had a famous victory. The players received a special badge featuring the club logo, adopted that same year Fortius Quo Fidelis, Strength through Loyalty, to mark the occasion and the game has grown in St Kilda folklore. North Melbourne club officials had a different view of the game, pointing out many of the injuries, were accidental, or caused clashes between St Kilda players and none of the experienced umpires found any incidents worthy of report. But North players were threatened by the crowd including a St Kilda baseball player with a bat. I guess it depends on which club you support. The Saints supporters could also cheer for Full Forward Bill Mohr, another of the VFL forwards to top the century, he achieved his ton in 1936, 101 goals and he didn't even have to play finals to get his century.

Footscray were one of the newcomers to the VFL, joining in 1925 and finding things harder than the VFA. Though of the three new clubs, they were the most successful through this 10 years, but when we see Hawthorn and North's performance that was not a high bar to clear. The club got their mascot in 1928 when a bulldog led the team out and they did win an average of seven games per season so they provided some regular joy to their spectators. 1931 was their best year when they finished 5th, just percentage them keeping them out of their first finals appearance. The club made several attempts to get Syd Coventry as coach, even announcing his appointment as playing coach in 1930, a bit prematurely as Collingwood did not clear Syd and he would lead the Magpies to a

fourth flag in a row that season. After he retired in 1935 he did take over as coach of the Bulldogs but found success hard to come by. The Doggies would benefit from the efforts of Albert Collier to see Allan Hopkins get a retrospective Brownlow for 1930, but supporters had to wait until 1989 to cheer that result.

Fitzroy had been a powerhouse of the VFL in its first few decades but their last premiership was back in 1922 and in the fourth decade of the league it ranked 3rd last in terms of games won across the ten years. Like other struggling teams it saw reform groups and new coaches come and go, 8 coaches in 10 years does not indicate a stable environment. They did however, win the chase for the wonderful Haydn Bunton, even if he had to sit out a season having breached the rules on how much a player could be paid. It was a bit hypocritical for other clubs to insist on an investigation given most clubs were throwing offers at the young lad from Albury and few abided by the rules. Fitzroy got the player and had to pay the penalty. He won two Brownlows in his first two seasons 1931 and 32 and third in just his fifth season. The Maroons may not have made finals nor won many games but they did well in the Brownlow, Wilfred Chicken Smallhorn making it a hat trick for the club in 1933 and Dennis Dinny Ryan getting another in 1936. As a supporter and a player you would prefer a premiership but at least Fitzroy had something to cheer about.

Hawthorn did not have much to cheer about. They too joined the league in 1925, providing a strategic footprint in the eastern suburbs, but that's about all. They only won 34 games across 10 seasons, Collingwood almost did that in two seasons. There were three wooden spoons and in 1927 they only had one win and none in 28. Two long hard seasons. The club was willing to try new ideas, advertising for players in 1935, given it did not have the funds to send officials up country or interstate for recruiting. There were ongoing rumours about their place in the VFL but they would survive.

North Melbourne was the other cellar dweller for this decade. They would only win 30 games in the ten seasons. There were two seasons without any wins and three with only one victory resulting in five wooden spoons but after all those struggles the club did win 4 games in 1936, including a win over Richmond. So perhaps there was some hope for changing times ahead for the boys from Arden Street

So that's what happened across the leagues fourth decade, a time remembered for the struggles of the Depression and the dominance of the Magpie Machine. An uneven decade in terms of which teams made it into finals but also a decade of innovations some that are still with us today.

Next episode will resume normal programming as we look at season 1937, the start of the fifth decade of VFL football,

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