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Intro Music

Background

Hello and welcome to Grand Final history, in this episode we go back to 1938 the 42nd season of VFL

Before we get into the footy let's look at what was going on in the world, the news that supporters and players might have skipped over as they got to the sports section of the newspapers. 1938 was the 150th anniversary of the arrival of the First Fleet into Sydney Harbour, the start of white settlement in Australia. January 26 was a time of celebration for many, while the Australian Aboriginal League held a Day of Mourning with a conference at Sydney Town Hall.¹ Doug Nicholls, who had played his last game for Fitzroy in early in the 1937 season, before returning to Northcote in the VFA, was one of the delegates from Victoria.²

Sydney was the sporting focus in February, hosting the 3rd British Empire Games, which would, in time, become known as the Commonwealth Games. Australia led the medal tally with 25 gold medals. Along with sporting festivities, Sydney was also struck by tragic events in the same month. On Sunday the 6th of February, a sunny Bondi beach was crowded with families, friends and tourists enjoying the iconic beach, when three freak waves swept hundreds away from the shore. Bondi Lifesavers leapt into action and 30 minutes later after assisting 250 people there were 150 unharmed, 60 suffering from immersion, 35 rescued unconscious and revived on the beach and 5 people drowned. It is known as Black Sunday. Less than a week later, a Ferry celebrating the departure of the US Navy ship Louisville, capsized, with 19 people dying, celebrations turning to catastrophe in moments.

In September the IOC declared that the 1940 Olympics would be moved from Tokyo to Helsinki in Finland because of the Japan's war against China. The world would have other issues to deal with by the time 1940 arrived.

September also saw British Prime Minister Neville Chamberlain make his famous "peace for our time" declaration after meeting Hitler in Munich. Germany had already absorbed Austria earlier in the year and the Munich agreement led to Germany occupying parts of Czechoslovakia. There was no European war in 1938 but many feared it was coming.

October 1938 saw some people in America flee their homes, panicking about a war with the Martians, when they mistook a radio play by Orson Wells as a real invasion from Mars rather than a radio drama based on the science fiction novel by HG Wells. Fortunately Americans are now much better informed and unlikely to believe ridiculous media broadcasts.

There was a potential threat worse than alien invasion in Victoria in October 1938, at least according to some. For the second time the state would vote on prohibition of liquor licences. For Prohibition to succeed the legislation demanded a 60% yes vote, a convincing win required for such a dramatic change, but drinkers could smile, the threat had passed with 660,000 votes rejecting prohibition and only 340,000 supporting, a two thirds majority for the status quo. In the previous poll, in 1930, the vote was much closer with 43% supporting prohibition.²⁸

1938 saw the discovery of LSD which has never been used by any footballers and there was also the discovery of Nuclear fission by Otto Hahn, which was nothing to worry about. On the domestic front Nescafe instant coffee was launched in Switzerland, eventually being served in many footy club canteens for years.

The first appearance of Superman in DC Comics in 1938 would, in time, lead to many VFL and AFL players also being called Superman for their flying marks or game winning performances

Let's look at the footy in 1938.

January saw Haydn Bunton depart for Western Australia, he spoke candidly at a farewell function, *"while playing for money you should get all you can out of the game. If you can improve your position through your ability as a footballer do so, because when you can't give your best any longer you will soon be forgotten and you won't have anything to show."*³ Many then and now want to recall a time of loyalty to the club, but the brutal reality is clubs will drop players when they don't need them anymore so players need to be getting the most out of their limited playing time.

Essendon had to make sure they did their best to hold on to dual Brownlow medallist Dick Reynolds who had been unemployed for two months. He visited Adelaide to discuss coaching Norwood who also offered to find him a job. Essendon's Secretary declared suitable employment had been found for Reynolds and he would stay with the Dons⁴. The Essendon Football club might have had a very different history if Reynolds had taken up the offer from Norwood.

February saw Carlton elect a new President, Kenneth Luke. A successful self made businessman running his own metal spinning and engraving factory in Carlton by the time he was 29. His business grew and he would become a wealthy man, a philanthropist and eventually president of the VFL as it made pivotal decisions such as the development of VFL park in Waverley and, perhaps not surprising given his career, the introduction of the premiership cup⁵ All of that is in the future, 1938 is when Kenneth made his debut on the stage of VFL administration, we will be hearing more about him in future episodes. For the moment let's just say he will be one of the archetype successful entrepreneurs that takes a pivotal leadership role at a League club. South Melbourne had seen the likes of Henry Skinner in the first decade of the century and Archie Crofts in recent years and there will be plenty more that follow at Carlton and other clubs.

One of Luke's first achievements was to secure the transfer of Brighton Diggins from South Melbourne to Carlton where he would become Captain Coach. South had forced Diggins to stand down for a season, refusing to clear him in 1937 but they relented in 1938. Kenneth Luke was full of praise for South and said that Carlton would always be willing to help if South needed any assistance²⁵, not sure that offer if was fulfilled given the way Carlton has treated the Swans at times over the decades but let's not go there.⁸

February also saw the VFA confirm its intentions, flagged at the end of 1937 to break away from the league and play by its own set of rules, no longer bound by the Australian Football Council, the peak body for rule making made up of leagues from each state. The aim was to create a faster more attractive game which would draw more spectators and improve the financial position of the Association.

New rules included a return to the throw in when the ball went out of bounds rather than a free kick against the team that last touched the ball. Allowing a free kick to be transferred to the nearest player if the intended recipient was injured, up to 1938, if the recipient of a free kick was unable to take the kick it resulted in a ball up. There was the introduction of a free down field if the kicker was unfairly tackled. All now established in the modern game, even if the more radical innovation of throwing the ball with two hands, under the shoulder only, was eventually eliminated.

The changes were applauded in the press and, despite the risk that VFA players could now be poached by the League, the VFA was applauded for its brave innovations to brighten the game.⁶

The League considered offering the Association financial assistance if it would maintain the agreement and play under Australian Football Council Rules⁷ but the offer came to nothing. The VFA's last proposal in the negotiations was for a promotion relegation scheme where the top two Association teams would replace the bottom two League clubs each season. Given this concept had been rejected many times before I am not sure how serious the Association was but they probably felt they were going to march their own way so why not try this one last time. As expected the League refused the offer and the split between the two organisations was confirmed.¹⁴

VFA secretary Russell Keon-Cohen gave the league a serve when speaking at a Coburg Businessman's lunch in March. He criticised the League for not spending any money from its huge gate takings on research, could anyone imagine a business with turnover of £70,000-100,000 not devoting some of that income to research. He pointed out that only one text book had been published on the game. Mr Keon-Cohen spoke about several issues impacting the Australian game, the need to introduce a formal diploma for coaches. His experience was too many coaches just pulled faces at half time and used bad language. He also attacked the trainers employed by League and Association clubs and proposed a centralised service with qualified staff for treating injuries. It would be many years before these sensible points were addressed by the League, clearly a man ahead of his time.¹³

The 1930's method of deciding the playing list for the season was different to our modern game. Preseason involved crowded ovals full of hopeful candidates that were whittled down by the start of the season. Richmond decided to simplify matters in 1938 by declaring their senior and reserves training list appearing on the training track, would not exceed 100 at any point during preseason.⁹ Who knows what possible star was missed by applying such a harsh limit?

March also saw the arrival of another shipment American footballs as part of the international kicking competition that had commenced in 1937. It was a drawn out affair in 1938 with the VFL seeming the drag the chain. The Australian shipment of balls to the US went missing and there were problems getting the place kick component of the competition completed. But the LA Times reported in December that the USA had won the team and individual honours. There are now several Australians punting in College and professional football in the USA and they can trace a legacy back to the kicking competitions of 1937 and 1938.

With the split between the League and Association confirmed late March the League was placing hope in the registration agreement each player had signed to ward off raids by VFA clubs. League footballers had all signed registration forms that had a term that players agreed not to play in any other football league or association without a clearance within two years of ceasing to be a registered player.¹⁵ This was about to be tested by one of the biggest names in the game and in a preview of clearance challenges in court cases decades later, the informed opinion of one lawyer was this registration contract was as watertight as a sieve. No man can legally contract himself out of his right to free movement where the whole or part of his livelihood is involved and it could not be a binding contract because the League made no consideration, no payment of any kind for a two year commitment.¹⁶

Camberwell made a compelling offer to South Melbourne great Laurie Nash, you knew he was a great player because you just had to ask him and he would tell you himself. He became Captain Coach at Camberwell and also received a salary to play sub district cricket with Camberwell in the summer and an indoor job with Camberwell Council.¹⁷ There was talk of a legal challenge given the risk of losing the case the league did not follow through with the threatened action. The departure of Nash meant the Swans had lost 13 players from their 1936 Grand Final team, hollowing out what had once been the leading team in the competition, 1938 would be tough season for South.

Camberwell were thrilled to have landed Nash and 3,000 supporters were at the practice match against Kew, this was going to be a different kind of season.²⁰ The sporting Globe then went through a list of players said to be in discussion with league clubs, names mentioned included Jack Dyer (who was missing from a practice match), Brownlow medallist Chicken Smallhorn, Carlton's Harry Soapy Valence and Collingwood's Ronn Todd amongst others. All would remain with their League clubs this season but if you were a supporter, club official or player in early 1938 you were in for a nervous time of rumour, conjecture and anxiety. And the traffic might not be one way. Brunswick reported they had not heard from three of their players who were believed to be training at League clubs.²⁰ It was a return to the environment of 1930, the last year before the League and Association entered into an agreement to stop the poaching wars.

Keeping up the fire before the season started the Association Secretary Russell Keon-Cohen said the VFL was the "rebellious child" of the Association that had brought only profit and litigation into the game. There were even some Collingwood supporters so frustrated with the way they believed the League had treated their club they suggested Collingwood should leave the VFL and join the Association. It may not have been a big group but they had submitted a proposal to the club committee and it would be reviewed.²⁴ Another "What If" moment to consider how football history would have unfolded if that unlikely event had occurred.

In the previews of the season there was enthusiasm from Geelong aiming for another premiership for the city's Centenary, while Carlton was seen as a formidable opponent by the Herald, Collingwood had lost Gordon Coventry but seemed to have held off the threat of Ron Todd going to Williamstown and they had the players and experience to challenge for another flag, Melbourne had been promising in 1937 but faded away, perhaps they would come to the fore this year. Richmond and the enigma St Kilda were classified as promising clubs, and the other teams were all optimistic at this point, before the ball had been bounced for the first time.^{21,22}

There were only three new coaches in 1938, much less than had been normal for the last decade or more but the League was moving to a more stable period as far as coaching changes were concerned. We have already mentioned Brighton Diggins taking over from Percy Rowe at Carlton. North Melbourne had appointed Keith Forbes, a 10 year veteran at Essendon as their playing coach to replace Paddy Scanlon who had retired after two and a half seasons. Coaching North was a tough gig in this era, St Kilda had moved up the ladder with veteran coach Dan Minogue but wanted an on field leader, appointing Ansell Clarke and Carlton did not stop the clearance of their former captain, recognising his 9 years of service and the opportunity to improve his position in life. Minogue would remain at the club as seconds coach, ready to identify and develop talent, responsible for all new recruits before they moved to the seniors, an innovative approach for the time.²⁶

The season opened on Saturday 23rd of April, just before the Anzac day but this was long before games were played on Anzac day. Five out of the six games were close going into the last quarter. Geelong unfurled their premiership flag when they hosted Melbourne but this battle between these two oldest clubs in the league did not go as expected, Melbourne kicking four goals with the wind in the fourth quarter to win by 17 points. Hawthorn had declared 1938 a new era with no financial barriers, a new grandstand under construction and a plan for success, they were at home to Carlton and only 2 goals behind at three quarter time but the Blues kicked away in the last quarter. Fitzroy matched Collingwood for much of the day but went down by three goals, Essendon got their season off to a win at home against St Kilda and despite the loss of Nash South were too strong for Footscray. Richmond went to the top of the ladder with a percentage boosting win against North Melbourne. The season was off and running.

The Football Record had a sly dig at the VFA when they reviewed the kicking competition between Stanford University and Carlton and noted the Americans could throw the ball almost as far as they kick it. It went on to say they hoped they great Australian Game would never become a "Throw ball" game as some "ill advised" people are attempting to do. The VFA however would have been delighted that their gate takings on the opening day of league football had increased from £174 in 1937 to £306 in the new look 1938 season.

Round two of the league season saw a milestone set when all three of the most recent clubs to join the competition won on the same day for the first time. Footscray were too strong for the Maroons, Hawthorn surprised everybody, perhaps even themselves when they went to the MCG and knocked off Melbourne for their first ever win at the MCG. Completing the hat trick was North Melbourne where celebrations at Arden Street marked a win over South Melbourne who had trailed the shin boners all day. Only Carlton and Collingwood remained undefeated after two games, the Blues somehow sneaking home by one solitary point against Richmond despite their inaccurate kicking. Carlton 12.23 to the Tigers 14. 10. Geelong, reigning premiers were second last on the ladder without a win.

Round 3 saw Collingwood lose inspirational player Albert Collier with a broken bone in his ankle to keep him out of the game for at least 8 weeks.³⁰

Innovations at football games in 1938 were not just restricted to on field activity. The Tea Market Expansion Bureau had taken up an idea used in England and now supporters could buy hot tea in cartons at football grounds.³¹ Not sure if that meant less beer was drunk?

An ugly incident occurred in Round 5 at Victoria Park where Carlton had been 39 points down at half time and four goals behind at three quarter time but an incredible nine goal last quarter gave them a 16 point win and kept their place, undefeated, on top of the ladder, despite Ron Todd kicking 11 goals for the Magpies in front of a record 38,000 crowd.

After the game Jack Carney, Carlton's smallest player, rushed up to shake his captain Brighton Diggins' hand, celebrating the stunning win. Diggins was talking to Harry Collier, they had played against each other many times and were work workmates at the CUB Brewery. In 1990 Collier told the Sun that Carney had made a remark, a remark that could not be printed in the newspaper and so I wasn't happy, so I turned around, I didn't punch him, I sort of pushed him and said don't argue. Whether he was pushed, slapped or punched, Carney ended up on the ground with a lacerated face, he was carried off the oval and had not recovered by 9pm when he was taken to Royal Melbourne Hospital, getting two stitches in his upper lip.³⁶ At the time Collier thought nobody had seen the incident but Carlton lodged an official complaint. At the Investigations Committee Collier was asked if he had anything to say, in response he admitted he struck Carney, provoked by a remark, a remark he would not repeat. Carney denied making any comment and Diggins gave evidence that he heard no comment but did not see the blow either³⁸. Prior to sentencing Harry Collier said that he had played 231 games and never been rubbed out.

The verdict came, the head of the committee said they had taken into consideration his long career and the frankness of his guilty plea but Harry Collier was suspended for the rest of the season. For the third year in a row a key Collingwood player had been suspended and prevented from playing Finals. Gordon Coventry in 1936, Albert Collier in 1937 and now his brother Harry. Magpie supporters were convinced the other clubs were combining to inflict unjustified suspensions on Collingwood because they had been too successful. A petition of 2,500 signatures was presented to the League delegates meeting to review the suspension. It was rejected 11 votes to 10.³⁴

Adding to Collingwood's pain was the injury to veteran full back Jack Regan, a dislocated elbow³⁵ would keep him out from Round 5 until his return against Richmond in Round 14. The Magpies depth was being tested this season.

With Harry Collier suspended and his brother Albert out with an injured ankle the Magpies elected defender Fred Froud as captain with Phonse Kyne as his deputy.⁴⁰

Round 6 saw the completion of the first third of the season. Carlton lost their first game of the season by 5 points to Melbourne despite the Blues getting the best of the field umpire Eric Hawkins with 59 Free Kicks to The Red Legs 21 frees³⁷ Carlton still sat on top of the ladder, followed by Collingwood, Footscray, Melbourne and St Kilda all on 4 wins, with Richmond, Geelong Essendon all on 3 wins and still with reasonable expectations of a top 4 finish. After a number of lop sided seasons, 1938 had started out as one of the most level in memory. North were in their sadly familiar spot at the bottom of the ladder with Fitzroy and South above them on just one win and clearly out of finals consideration. There were 12 more games to go and it seemed only Carlton could be really sure of making the finals. Just a week earlier St Kilda had been second on the ladder but a 66 point loss to Footscray saw their percentage drop and they slid to fifth.

Round 8 was a split round with games played on the Saturday and Monday but St Kilda and Essendon players had it harder than most. They played Collingwood and Geelong respectively on the Saturday and then fronted up again on the Kings Birthday holiday Monday at 10.30 am to play their Round 12 fixture, less than 48 hours after their Saturday games. The rare Morning game, the first since 1920 was to allow St Kilda to travel to Western Australia and Essendon to visit Tasmania after Round 11 at the start of July. I am not sure if we will ever see morning games in the modern era but you never know. Essendon beat the Saints in that unusual time slot in a game that was described as slow motion football, well below League standards with players obviously not recovered from their Saturday match.⁴²

A bizarre incident occurred during the game, Essendon's Ted Bryce raced around the boundary towards the goals, in his haste he went over the boundary line but continued on, kicked the ball to Ray Watts who goaled, the field umpire signalled All Clear, the flags were waived and the ball taken back to the centre. But in an era well before video reviews there was still time for the boundary umpire to run up to the field umpire and say that Bryce had gone out of bounds and that the Field umpire had not noticed the boundary umpire's signal. Worth noting at this point, boundary umpires did not have whistles, they might have caused confusion with the field umpire whistles, boundary umps instead waved a white handkerchief, presumably clean, to signal out of bounds. A little like Soccer assistant referees with their off side flags. Boundary umps would not get whistles until 1955.

So how was the issue resolved? First the ball was taken to where it went out of bounds, but rather than give a free kick to St Kilda, given Essendon had last touched the ball before it went out of bounds, the boundary umpire threw it in, but then the Goal umpire intervened and the three officials had a conference, the worried field umpire took the ball back to the centre, the goal stood, and the ball was bounced to start play again. A confusing moment and thankfully not critical in deciding the game.⁴⁴ Under today's rules the ball would be declared out of bounds and the goal disallowed.

South Melbourne were having another tough season and again there was push to entice coach Roy Cazaly back into the team but the selection committee held firm on the eve of South Melbourne's Round 8 game against Richmond, declaring that selecting a 46 year old man was not the path to success. Possibly a fairly obvious point but maybe it needed to be said.

Other less savoury elements also wanted South to win against Richmond. A man representing some betting card promoters approached Richmond's Jack Titus at his hotel the day before the game offering £50 if he were to play dead. An unnamed Carlton player was also said to have been offered a bribe. The man stated his associates would lose significant sums if Richmond and Carlton won. Titus showed him the door, told him a Richmond victory was a foregone conclusion, suggested he might try his luck with Carlton and reported the incident to Richmond Officials⁴¹.

For the record both Richmond and Carlton won that week, Jack Titus scored four goals. In addition, as reported in Smiths weekly in Sydney, Richmond notified the police, the call was traced and the Card Racketeer was out of business, with further developments pending and the VFL was deluged with complaints from card punters who tipped correctly but were not paid⁴⁴. Fortunately gambling is no longer a problem as far as the modern game is concerned.

The tension between the VFA and VFL had not subsided, despite several League club officials using the Saturday off to watch VFA games, some to look at the new rules in action, others to scout for potential recruits. Dr Hartnett, Camberwell's President, had some harsh words for the League. In an article headlined "Who Cares What the League Thinks", he said "Anyone would think the fate of the football universe hung on the words of one or two league men and their vested interests. It might interest them to know that if it were possible to copyright the Throw Rule we would do so tomorrow. We don't want the league to adopt it. We have a winner and sooner or latter we are going to come out trumps."⁴⁵ The Throw Rule was being well received in reviews of games and the VFA was attracting more crowds, so they did have cause for some optimism.

Round 9 saw Richmond pull off a terrific win from behind against Essendon who had led all day and were 27 points up with just 10 minutes to go. Something woke the Tiger spirit and they rattled on 5 goals to win by 5 points, a great escape for the Tigers but heartbreak for the Dons.⁴⁶

Round 10 was Collingwood's turn for a stirring, unexpected win when they were 18 points behind at three quarter time, kicking against the wind at Geelong's home ground Corio oval. But Jock McHale had a trick up his sleeve, making 11 positional changes to revitalise his players, confound the Cats and sneak home with a 5 point win just as the final bell rang.

It was also the day Hawthorn celebrated the opening of their new £16,000 Grand Stand, dedicated to the football club alone, the most modern stand in the state but sadly the Saints spoil the party, winning by 4 points.⁴⁷

While Round 11 was underway the Victorian team was in Adelaide winning their interstate game. While in Adelaide there was talk by the South Australian League of sending a combined Australian team to California to promote the Australian game, it was a perennial topic, plans had been well advanced 20 years earlier before the start of the first World War intervened. The practical aspect of the small grounds in American stadiums also presented challenges that were unlikely to be overcome.⁴⁹

After Round 12 the season was two thirds done. Carlton were still on top of the ladder with only one loss, second were Footscray having their best League season ever on 8 wins, they had hopes of securing the double chance in the Final Four, Collingwood were third, a game behind and then Geelong, Richmond and Melbourne all on 7 wins but Geelong's percentage had them fourth. The Herald's analysis of the team positions and remaining games suggested Geelong was the most likely to make the finals. Geelong's two hardest games were to be at the Corio oval and Richmond and Melbourne both had to play three of the top four teams in the remaining six rounds. A hard ask indeed. St Kilda and Essendon were a game behind these three teams and it was hard to see them making up the gap. North had dragged themselves off the bottom of the ladder with three wins so far, once again beating Richmond in R12, a team they seemed to have developed a habit of beating but South were looking in trouble with only one win, way back in the opening round of the season.

In recent years the Western Bulldogs have played some home games in Ballarat, giving regional Victorians a chance to watch league games live, in 1938, during a bye week for the interstate game against the visiting Western Australians, Geelong played Richmond in an exhibition game on the Ballarat oval with the Tigers winning by 9 points in front of the largest football crowd in the city for 10 years.⁵⁰ Other clubs also used the week to travel to promote the game and perhaps test out some new players or tactics, although the option of testing the throwing the ball rule was not allowed.

Melbourne defeated a Bendigo representative team and Fitzroy beat Essendon by one point in an exhibition game in Hobart, the Dons earlier having played a Launceston team. Hawthorn were too good for a combined Western District team in Hamilton and the Saints were defeated in Perth by a second Western Australian team

On a heavy, muddy MCG the Victorians were too strong for a gallant Western Australian side, used to lighter drier playing surfaces, the Victorians winning by 22 points.⁵¹

There was a recognition of the changing transport trends when one of the Western Australian officials made the brave prediction that air travel would replace tiresome train trips. A three day train journey from Perth to Melbourne was not the best preparation for a football team, air travel would reduce this to one day⁵². Even as this prediction was being made, some of the Essendon players and officials, who could not get leave from their jobs, had flown across Bass Straight to join their team mates in Tasmania for the exhibition games, the world was changing⁵³. Yet even in our modern game travel by air is still seen as a hurdle for teams travelling to interstate games.

The visit of the Western Australians and a South Australian official to Melbourne allowed time for an unofficial meeting of the three big leagues of Australian Football, not an official Australian Football council meeting but the power brokers of the game had gathered. There was push back against the dreaded throw pass adopted by the Association, despite enthusiastic support from some commentators and spectators. However there was an effort to address the also dreaded holding the ball holding the man issue, which had been contentious from the earliest days of the code. The Western Australian proposal was to outlaw the option of dropping the ball when tackled, which had been allowed since the early days and require players to kick or handball the ball with a two second limit. This mirrored the interpretation of the VFA, albeit the players in the Association could throw the ball to dispose of it when tackled.⁵⁴

Round 13 kept most supporters on the edge of their seats, or on their toes for those standing in the outer. Four of the six games were decided by a single point. Geelong defeated St Kilda, Melbourne beat Hawthorn, Essendon surprised Collingwood and North, after so many near misses, had a one point win instead of a loss against South for their third win in a row. Essendon's hopes for a top four finish were alive and Richmond with a comfortable win over Carlton were back in the four.

Relations between the League and Association were becoming more strained as the season went on. The Association had hoped to play a Semi Final and Grand Final on the MCG, their season finishing earlier than the League's and Melbourne would be playing away on those two days. But the League, who had a contract with the MCC, refused permission, saying the Melbourne Reserves would be using the ground.

Adding more heat to an already tense situation was a proposal by the owners of Olympic Park to set up a new VFA club to play at Olympic park. There was talk of raiding VFL clubs for players and the prospects of this centrally located ground, just opposite the MCG, hosting Association games every second week, with the attractive new form of the game that was gaining so many new spectators must have caused some frustration.⁵⁵ We know this didn't happen but for League and club administrators in that tense 1938 season it must have seemed like anything was possible.

The season was approaching its end in Round 17, with two games to go the Final Four was far from settled. Carlton was on top of the ladder a game clear of Footscray and both of those teams were sure to be in the finals. The match of the Day was between third placed Geelong and Fourth placed Richmond at the Corio oval.

The Tigers avoided "Train Weariness" by travelling down to Geelong on the Friday evening, they spent a quiet Saturday morning before travelling to Corio oval. It all counted for nought, Champion forward Jack Titus broke down during the game and Geelong dominated all day⁵⁶. The Tigers were out of the finals and clubs were still wondering how to cope with the perils of the long distance travel to Geelong, however, the Cats seemed to manage to do it every second week and for every final they played.

Another shock result was St Kilda beating Footscray, which meant Geelong went to second, on percentage, above Footscray, setting themselves up for the double chance given their final game was against lowly South Melbourne.

The final surprise of this dramatic round was sixth placed Melbourne defeating top of the ladder Carlton, The Blues were a game clear on top of the ladder but had a worse percentage than Geelong and Footscray, so if they lost their final game, against the unpredictable St Kilda, they could drop to third, after being on top of the ladder since round 3. While the Saints were well out of the four, they had just beaten second place Footscray.

The end result of all this turmoil was Richmond out of the finals race, Collingwood back in the four level on points with Melbourne, who they were playing in the final round.

In Round 18 Geelong and Footscray won their games as expected and there was no dramatic change in percentage, so their positions did not move. Carlton were only 3 points up at half time in their must win game against St Kilda, but they were stronger in the second half, winning by 3 goals to stay on top of the ladder. However their Rover Ron Cooper who had played every game of the season picking up a very handy 30 goals was reported for striking and suspended for four weeks, he would not be helping Carlton in their finals campaign.⁵⁷

All eyes were on Victoria park, 30,000 people packed the ground for a close fought match with the Magpies holding off the Demons by 9 points. Collingwood were in yet another finals series and Melbourne, after making finals for the last two seasons would have to content themselves with the 1938 AlmostUs Award for finishing just out of the finals.

Footscray had become the first of the 1924 expansion clubs to make League finals and both North and Hawthorn had done better than usual this season with 6 and 4 wins respectively. South Melbourne's fall from grace was complete. They had finished the season first in 1936, runners up in the Grand Final that year, two years later they were last with the wooden spoon.

Footscray would play their first ever League final against Collingwood and then Carlton and Geelong would compete in the second semi final. One man who would be watching the finals with special interest was Ted Baker, a veteran of 142 games played with all four teams competing in the finals. His one and only game with Carlton was his debut match in 1920, he then dropped out of the league for two years before playing two seasons at Collingwood before finding his real spot at Geelong in 1927, going on to captain their 1931 premiership team with a return to Collingwood in 1932 before ending his playing days with three games at Footscray in 1934. Perhaps he would favour Geelong given he'd captained them to a premiership but whoever took out the flag for 1938, Ted was able to claim a connection.⁵⁸

The Brownlow Medal vote took place on the Wednesday after the home and away season had finished. For the second year in a row and the third time in his career Dick Reynolds from Essendon won the coveted award with 18 votes, just one ahead of Hawthorn's centremen Stan Spinks. It could have been even closer when an umpire gave a One Vote to Reynolds but used the initial D for Dick rather than R for Richard. Given he was called Dick as well as Richard the vote stood and the tied result averted.⁶⁰

Things might have been different if Reynolds had found the right job when he visited Adelaide before the season, but he had stayed with the Dons and could now celebrate matching the record of three Brownlows with Haydn Bunton. Interviewed by the Herald the following day Reynolds recognised the bias to mid field players and his luck in being a rover that gave him more chances to be seen by the umpire. In a 2002 interview he could not have been more clear on how he compared his third Brownlow to Essendon's 1942 premiership victory. "They were both great but there is no way you can compare them. Everyone gets to share in a flag. The Brownlow is an individual celebration compared to a team celebration- there's no comparison. Premierships are why you play the game"⁵⁹

The focus quickly moved to the Semi Final and the opportunity to see the Bulldogs speed and strong defence against the experienced Collingwood machine. While Footscray had the third best defence in terms of points against, they were only ranked seventh for points scored across the season, would this weakness in the forward line hurt the team in their first league final? Collingwood would still be without Albert Collier, who had injured his knee in the Round 16 game against Carlton. The Herald noted that opinions of experts and the public were evenly divided. Displaying true sporting character the Fitzroy football club sent a letter of congratulations to Footscray on making the finals, a gesture that was truly appreciated.^{61,62}

67,000 spectators were at the game, a record crowd for a first semi final, and the Bulldogs were sentimental favourites in their first league final. The suburb was deserted, shops and businesses had closed early, streets were empty with the western suburb citizens either at the MCG or home by the radio hoping for success on their biggest day yet in the VFL⁶⁴. But the Collingwood Machine had no time for sentiment. Jack Regan was captaining the Pies and won the toss kicking with the wind to the Jolimont end. The experience of Collingwood was soon on show with efficient low passes avoiding any risks from the swirling wind resulting in five straight goals, while Footscray were straining for every score. By half time the Magpies had an incredibly accurate 9.1 67 to the Bulldogs wasteful 7.11 47. Footscray were not out of the game but their poor kicking at goal was not helping their cause. Six behinds in a row during the second quarter. From 20 shots at goal all they achieved was 2 goals eight behinds.

The Bulldogs started the third quarter with more energy and focus and two goals by Cliff McRae suddenly had them three points in front. But sometimes experience counts in these situations and Collingwood's Captain and full back Jack Regan and backman Marcus Boyal were calm in the storm and that moment in front was the high point for the Bulldogs. Soon the game began to turn Collingwood's way. Pannam goalled and the rout began, six goals in six minutes and when the bell rang to end the quarter, a shell shocked Footscray, who had led for a few minutes now were six goals down, Collingwood 16.5 to Footscray 9.14. To rub salt in the wounds the wind changed direction giving the Magpies the advantage as the rain began to fall in the last quarter but the damage had already been done. Collingwood finished the game 41 points up⁶³. The Magpies were in the preliminary final.

It had been a best ever season for the Bulldogs but they had fallen in their first final to a team that had made a habit of winning games in September. Footscray were left to make plans for 1939. At least the better season for the Bulldogs had left them in a stronger financial position so they could start to repay players that had match payments cut from to £3 to £2 in 1936. The promise was made at the time to repay the shortfall when the club was in a financially stronger position. The club's ability to fulfil promises made during tougher times is a testament to their integrity and financial prudence. This act of good faith likely bolstered the trust between the players and the club, setting a positive tone for the next season.⁶⁹

The Age had Geelong favourites in the second semi final, expected to have the better of the aerial duels and go into the game with greater confidence but the Blues were firm in their convictions they were the team to win.

The Herald thought Carlton would have trouble covering the loss of rover Ron Cooper following his suspension and the fact Geelong had won their last seven games in a row, peaking at the right time of the year. The Sun and the Argus also picked Geelong to win. Carlton had won their Round 11 game against Geelong at home in the only clash between the two sides this year, but would they do the same in a final?

Another huge crowd of 65,000 were at the game, even the expensive reserved seats in the Grand Stand had been popular with Geelong supporters, wanting to make sure they had a seat when they got to the end of their long trip to Melbourne. There were even reports of tourists from America, just arrived on a cruise ship, who were going to the game.⁶⁶ It might just be the thing to start the international spread of the Australian code.

The game started evenly with the Blues ahead by two points at quarter time, but the Carlton players were having all sorts of trouble keeping their feet, many players with stops falling out of their boots because of the firm ground. At quarter time most of the players rushed to the boundary line to replace boots and the start of the second quarter was delayed by three and a half minutes, even then several players were trying to lace up their boots after the game started. The second quarter saw Carlton playing better football but it was not an impressive game overall.

Just as the second quarter had been delayed with boot trouble, Carlton players were again late out after half time, half backman Frank Anderson didn't appear until the game had been underway for two or more minutes.⁶⁷

The third quarter is when the game was decided, perhaps the loss of Bernie Hore to injury unbalanced the Cats or perhaps the Blues who had been playing better all day began to assert their dominance on the scoreboard or maybe it was the poor kicking by Geelong but the end result was Carlton taking control of the game. When the bell went to end the quarter it was Carlton leading 11.9 to 6. 18. The last quarter was more of the same, Carlton performing better for most of the time with Geelong showing glimpses of what they had done during the season to get to second on the ladder, but not enough to trouble the Blues. Carlton were through to the Grand Final while Geelong had to play Collingwood in the preliminary. The final scores Carlton 16.17 113 to Geelong 10.21 81⁶⁸

The previews for the preliminary final had Collingwood as slight favourites in the Herald. It was expected that Geelong would bounce back, unlikely to have two bad games in a row yet Collingwood was a formidable opponent, well used to success at this time of year. The Cats were sending out a team that were on average, older, heavier and taller than Collingwood.⁷⁰ The Magpies had included Albert Collier in their team, despite concerns on his knee and they might feel they had the advantage having won in a come from behind game at Corio in the only game between the two sides this year.

The preliminary final was yet another record breaking crowd of 61,000 people, many who had travelled from Geelong to see their team attempt to make it to a second Grand Final in a row, yet they were to be sorely disappointed. It was a one sided game from the start, a five goal to one first quarter set the scene. Ron Todd was in superb form, leaving Geelong's captain coach Reg Hickey floundering in his wake, 11 goals in a preliminary final a record performance equalling the effort of Carlton's Soapy Valence in a semi final in 1931 and the 1932 preliminary final, both against Collingwood.

Collingwood kicked the first five goals of the game and never looked back. Geelong were playing better football than they did against Carlton but it was still no match for the Magpies. If there was any hope for the Cats it was snuffed out in the stunning final quarter when Collingwood, already well in front kicked six goals to demonstrate their dominance. The final scores Collingwood 21.9 135 to Geelong 14.14 98. It had been a strong season for the reigning premiers until the finals when they lost both games in decisive fashion.

The week leading into the Grand Final was, from a global political and military perspective, incredibly strained as the crises in Europe, where Germany was demanding the return of Czechoslovakian territory, was unfolding with tense diplomatic communications between Britain, Germany, France, Italy, Czechoslovakia and more looking to avoid European war. A crises closely followed in Australia given the implications it might have to join the UK if war was declared. A football grand final provided a welcome distraction to these challenging issues.⁷⁶

Collingwood's captain for the 1938 Grand Final was Albert Collier, it was a role normally occupied by his older brother Harry but he had been suspended earlier in the season. Albert was a tough rugged player who played as a follower but also was known as a "protector", a player who would make sure his teammates were left alone. His career had started way back in 1925, making his debut when he was just 15 years and nine months old, he won a Brownlow in 1927, had already played in eight grand finals for six premierships and this would be his 9th attempt to win the flag for Collingwood.

Carlton would be led by their new captain coach Brighton Diggins. He had played in four Grand Finals for one premiership at South but now he was in a new role. Diggins had to earn the respect of the Carlton player and, as Micky Crisp, who had been with the Blues for 9 years said of Diggins, "He was determined, he was forceful if needed. He was never a bully he drove us, he led us but he always went with us. He never once asked us to go in where he would not go himself. I might have sad in shorter fashion, he won our confidence."

Diggins introduced techniques that McHale had pioneered and Geelong's Reg Hickey had also adopted. Setting up simulations of match situations, introducing more running for speed and endurance. Diggins also employed an expert in Physical Education Herbert Trueman to apply a scientific method to the players fitness, training and development.^{71,72}

Finally Diggins had extra incentive to win the premiership, Carlton President Kenneth Luke had promised him £150 from his own pocket if Carlton won the flag, big money at that time and sure to keep Diggins focused.⁷¹

Over the years a myth has developed that Diggins, who worked at the CUB Brewery, was forced to work on the Saturday morning before the Grand Final by Jock McHale, a foreman at the same brewery, But this has been dismissed on multiple occasions. Firstly McHale worked in a separate part of the brewery to Diggins and there is a photo of Diggins on the morning of the Grand Final inspecting the MCG surface, dressed in a suit, but wearing footy boots. I will put a copy up in the episode notes at Grandfinalhistory.au if you want to check it out.⁷¹

Collingwood's Coach was the enduring Jock McHale. He had been coaching the Magpies since 1912, he had won 8 premierships and been runner up seven times, he had coached the club to the unprecedented 4 premierships in a row between 1927 and 30 and was now leading the club to a third grand final in a row after wining twice in 1935 and 36 and looking to go one better than the defeat against Geelong the previous season.

The umpire was William Blackburn for the second of his three grand finals. He had been in charge of the 1936 Grand Final and the 1938 Interstate game against Western Australia and was known as a stern umpire, allowing little dissent from the players and noted for an uncanny instinct of catching breaches of the rules behind play when a man had disposed of the ball. He had joined the VFL umpiring ranks in 1929 after time in the VFA. He had made an in depth study of the laws of the game and after he retired he would become Umpires Coach and an unofficial ambassador of umpiring, travelling near and far to educate those interested in the art and science of umpiring. Away from umpiring he was employed as an ambulance officer in the railways department.^{73, 75}

The last time Carlton had won a premiership was back in 1915, during the first World War when they beat Collingwood, coached by Jock McHale, in his playing coach years. Since that time Collingwood had gone on to win 8 premierships and been runners up 5 times while the Blues had only been able to be runner up 3 times. But records would not count when the teams met in 1938. The Herald had tipped Collingwood and the Sun had them as slight favourites. Horrie Clover favoured the Blues in his column while Ivor Warne Smith tipped the Magpies. But all considered it would be a close affair. As are most predictions before a Grand Final.

Carlton took an unchanged team even though Ruckman Jack Hale's face was a mask of black and blue bruising from a heavy collision in the final against Geelong, yet the Carlton Doctor assured selectors Hale was right to play, even though he had been off work for two weeks.

Team selection at Collingwood was a tense affair and continues to be a subject of dispute decades after the event. Albert Collier had not recovered from his knee injury. He played in the preliminary final but the Argus reported that he seemed to falter early in the game and it was evident his knee was worrying him. Collingwood had been able to dominate the game overall so the impact of Collier not being fully fit had not been an issue. Collier could barely train in the week before the Grand Final and many assumed he would be dropped but when the teams were selected his name was there, despite Jock McHale's long standing opposition to playing injured players in finals. Harry Collier said in 1993 that his brother hadn't wanted to play but a desperate McHale had persuaded him. In an alternative view Jock McHale's son said in 1999 that it was the selection committee that overrode Jock's objection. The aim was to have the leadership that Albert could provide on the field.

Brighton Diggins knew Albert was injured and told his team to leave him alone, it was better to have an injured player on the field than risk having him replaced by a fit 19th man,

it had been an unprecedented finals series in terms of crowd numbers and the grand Final broke all records yet again with 96,834 people packed into the MCG. Carlton's backman Don McIntyre said it was so crowded that even getting through the crush to the dressing rooms felt like playing one or two quarters of footy.

There were so many spectators the gates were shut well before the game started leaving thousands disappointed they could not get in. The crush was so bad that halfway through the curtain raiser spectators started spilling onto the ground, filling the space between the boundary line and fence. One of the police officers controlling the situation was none other than Richmond premiership player and former president Bernie Herbert, he managed the crowd, keeping them in their place even as the players thundered past.

The Curtain raiser was the Seconds preliminary final, Collingwood grabbed the lead in the lead late in the final quarter but Footscray steadied regained the lead and won by 5 points giving them the right to play Geelong in the seconds Grand Final, to be played on the Thursday Show-day holiday. If you're wondering, Geelong won their second reserves premiership in a row, in front of 5,500 people at the MCG, beating Footscray by 11 points.^{77,78}

Carlton and Collingwood players entered the playing field, most in the crowd cheering the sentimental favourites Carlton, rather than the perennial grand finalist Collingwood.

The Grand Final started in a bruising forceful fashion as both teams tried to impose themselves on the game. The ball travelled from one end of the ground to the other as players bumped and charged each other in a strong physical display but without any scores being registered. At either end of the ground defenders were dominating forwards. Collingwood seemed to take some control of affairs but Carlton's defenders Frank Gill, Jim Park, Don McIntyre and Frank Anderson just kept intercepting the ball and repelling the attacks. Some reports claim there were 15 reportable incidents in the first ten minutes but Umpire Blackburn kept the game going and players soon settled down.

Eventually, about halfway through the quarter Ron Todd received a free kick and scored the first goal of the game for Collingwood. Carlton responded with a goal to forward pocket Mick Price then ruckman Rod McClean kicked another for the Blues before Ron Todd got his second for the game. When the bell rang for quarter time the crowd hushed for a moment, the Blues were up by one point. Players had a rest, grabbed oranges and listened to instructions, spectators debated which way the game would go. After the usual time elapsed, the umpire was ready to start the second quarter, players were in position, 97,000 people looked on, but everyone had to wait just a little longer as Carlton's wingman Jack Carney just needed a bit more work on his boots.

The Magpies quickly took the lead kicking the first goal of the quarter, their supporters moving to even louder cheers. Carlton started to take more marks with Brighton Diggins, Jack Wrought and Jack Hale all flying high. The game was willing at times with umpire Blackburn warning several players, the Argus noting that it was hectic but not vicious. The Blues got onto a run, getting the ball out into the open with accurate kicking and strong marking resulting in 4 goals in 5 minutes. The half time score was Carlton 7.6 (48) to Collingwood 4.4 (28). The Blues were looking better and Collingwood were effectively playing a man down with Collier unable to run nor impose himself on the game, but there were still two quarters to go and Collingwood had plenty of Grand Final experience to draw on.

It had been a warm day and many of the Carlton players started the third quarter in short sleeves. Cottonwood threw Bervin Woods into the Ruck, having kept him in the back line for the first half, hoping he would have more energy in the last two quarters. They had no time to lose, the game could be taken away if they were not careful. It was a good start for the Magpies, quick passing, their trademark style, between Doherty, Kyne and Todd allowed Jack Knight to run into score the opening goal, the difference was just over two goals now. Some more forward play with some inaccurate shots got them within inn 9 points but the experienced Brighton Diggins took a series of brilliant marks and the Blues defence prevented any more Collingwood scores as their forwards stretched the lead to 17 points at the final change.

Things had to change if the Magpies were to turn the game around, young Ron Todd moved int the centre and the veteran Albert Collier limped down to the forward pocket. Des Fothergil got the first goal for Collingwood, closing the gap to that two goal mark yet again but quickly Carlton's half forward Paul Schmidt managed to get his foot to the ball as he fell over and the goal stretched the lead again. Umpire Blackburn bounced the ball to restart play and a dashing moment of play from the ruck to Phonse Kyne through to Alby Pannam gave Collingwood their second goal to bring that elastic band a little closer and keeping the crowd on their toes.

It was a tough scrambling quarter, with the ball being sent deep into the forward line for both teams but again and again the back-men would stem the tide in the mouth of the goals, just to see it come back and be repelled again. Players began to follow the ball in desperation, moving away from their positions, aiming to get that decisive score. The noise form the crowd was deafening, spectators were strewn around the boundary but fortunately not interfering with the desperate play. With time on ticking down Jack Wrout, Carlton's centre half forward was given a free kick. He stopped, drew his breath, lined the goals up and kicked, this time the ball went through the middle and Carlton's lead was 10 points.

A handy break but not enough to relax. Once more the ball was deep in Collingwood's forward line, then Carlton's Jim Francis grabbed the footy, running and bouncing to clear the ball, his kick to Jack Wrout who burst through the pack and passed to full forward Ken Baxter. His shot at goal straight and true, the definitive sealer bringing Carlton fans to their feet, screaming. In one last desperate attempt Collingwood took the ball forward and Ruckman Des Fothergill scored another behind, it was the last score of the game, too little and too late for Collingwood. Carlton had won their first premiership since 1915, the 23 year drought was broken.

One man who had a closer view of both of these premierships was Reginald Treloar, boundary umpire in 1915 and, for the 5th time, a Grand Final Goal Umpire in 1938, perhaps a lucky omen for Carlton.

Hale may have been black and blue with bruising to his face but he was nominated as best on ground by most observers. Sometimes picking a player with an injury pays off, other times, like Albert Collier it doesn't. When it works the selection panel and the club have taken an inspired risk, when it doesn't the team has broken the fundamental rule, never pick an injured player. Just got to know when to break the rule I guess.

And then there was the doping that might have given Carlton an edge, they had started using Glucose supplements to provide more energy, all part of the scientific approach inspired by Herbert Trueman⁸⁹. Did they really work, was their a true physical benefit or did they just give a mental advantage, we will never know but we do know who won the flag.

In the post game celebrations in the change rooms Collingwood's President Harry Curtis, Secretary Frank Wraith and Captain Albert Collier all went to congratulate Carlton and their new President Kenneth Luke made it clear they saw the Magpies as having set the standard and he hoped, by following Collingwood's example, more premierships would follow to the Blues.

Players went to a city hotel for dinner, they were all seated, ready to start but Brighton Diggins, their successful captain coach was nowhere to be seen. Until he appeared through the door holding up both hands full of cash. He had been collecting on his bets, placed at double figure odds before the season started on a Carlton premiership. Along with the £150 bonus from Kenneth Luke, Diggins was having a profitable day. Other players would all get a £10 bonus from donations from happy supporters. Dinner was followed by a tour of the Northern suburbs and Sunday celebrations at Princess Park. Brighton's future wife recalled she did not see him for a week after the game, it seems at some point he had jumped into a car with a bunch of teammates and they took off to Adelaide!^{79,80,81,82}

It might have happened, but Carlton did travel to Adelaide a couple of weeks later for the so called Championship of Australia, the first such game since 1927, taking on South Australian Premiers South Adelaide with the Blues proving too strong in a game that was noted more for speed than vigour. Carlton won by one goal, 10.22 to 10.16 South Adelaide's George Jobson could have tied the result with a kick after the bell but his shot went out of bounds.⁸³

The week after the Grand final was full of tension as war looked imminent but by Saturday it seemed the negotiations at Munich had delivered the gift of peace, we know from history that it won't last, but at that time, the deal that allowed Germany to partition Czechoslovakia seemed to allow the European states to step back from the brink of war.

Once the season was over clubs moved to their Annual General Meetings which were often a time for reform groups to promise they could achieve success if only they could replace the current administration. St Kilda supporters would have felt a familiar sense of deja vu when the club president published an appeal for unity, prior to their elections due at the end of October.⁸⁴

The other major post season event was the biennial meeting of the Australian Football Council, the first to meet since the Association, who actually had never been allowed to be a member, had broken away with their own rules, splitting the Australian code. The Throw was discussed and dismissed. The Western Australian delegate said, any mug could throw a ball but a handball required skill. However, in addressing an ongoing challenge to the game, the Holding the Man rule was changed, along the lines used by the rebel VFA. Now a player when firmly held had to kick or punch the ball away immediately otherwise he would be penalised. And ever since then there has not been a problem with the holding the ball rule.⁸⁵

The other major change was the reversion to the old out of bounds rule where the ball would be thrown in by the boundary umpire except if a player wilfully kicked or forced the ball out of bounds. It had been 13 seasons since the rule was changed and many attempts had been made but 1939 would see the traditional out of bounds rule back in force. One other rule that was rejected was the downfield free kick if a player was dumped after kicking the ball, It seemed to have worked well in the VFA but delegates were not convinced of the need for the change ⁸⁶

The decisions were made but there was strong opposition from respected and experienced commentators and former players like Barney Herbert and journalist Hec de Lacy who thought the holding the ball change penalised the player who went in for the ball and the lack of a penalty for the attack on the kicker was due to prejudice against the VFA rather than an understanding of the needs of the game. ^{87,88} Sure to be more debate on these rules in coming seasons.

We will leave 1938 there and return next episode for the 43rd season of the VFL in 1939 which would be a significant year for many reasons.

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