



# All In

*The origins of the AFL Players' Association*

*by* **JOHN HARMS**

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FROM THE AUTHOR

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Images have been sourced where possible.



## *It is Monday, December 10 1973...*

ON THE RADIO, Suzi Quatro belts out '48 Crash' but The Rolling Stones' 'Angie' remains top of the music charts. *F Troop* still precedes the *ABC News* and *Number 96* pushes the boundaries.

Gough Whitlam has just celebrated his first anniversary as prime minister. Having been elected on the back of the slogan *It's Time* he continues to push reform. He has the support of those who'd become frustrated by the strictures of Sir Robert Menzies' conservatism.

The troops are home from Vietnam. The protest movement has shown the power in collective activism, if well-led and well-organised.

It's a changing world.

Gough has tapped into the spirit of the moment: the counter-culture and its freedom, its democracy, its egalitarianism, its commitment to possibility and opportunity – for all.

In the early evening a few dozen footballers – from across the clubs – gather in the Union Building at the University of Melbourne. They have responded to the invitation from Geoff Pryor and Gareth Andrews, to come together to discuss the idea of a representative players' collective.

Geoff is a highly-respected senior player at Essendon. Gareth has played over 100 games at Geelong. They have been meeting regularly to discuss their concerns. They believe strongly that players should have a say in how footy is administered; that they should have a platform which allows them to be involved in the decision-making process on matters which affect them directly. They see it as an issue of natural justice; of fairness.

The gathering decides to formally establish a players' association. They agree to meet again early in 1974. It doesn't seem hugely important at the time, but it is one of the most significant moments for players in VFL history.

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## *Early attempts*

**O**VER THE YEARS, VFL footballers have made a number of attempts to develop an organisation to represent them.

Although ostensibly an amateur sport in the early days of the Association and League, footballers were paid from the outset. The under-the-table practice was so prevalent the VFL was forced to legalise match payments in 1911. The decision created much public debate. The gentlemen of respectable Melbourne thought it disgraceful.

According to historians Leonie Sandercock and Ian Turner in *Up Where, Cazaly?* the overwhelming majority of players were from the working class. They not only wanted the money, they needed it. Some were members of a trade union in their employment at a time when owner-worker battlelines were sharply-defined and class warfare could be bitter. They could see that charging fans admission to see the team and players they loved was creating a growing football economy. Football was becoming more and more popular.

Shortly before the start of the 1928 season a group of players, past and present, met to discuss the formation of a players' association. It was reported in *The Argus* under the heading 'Footballers' Council' and sub-heading 'Old Body Re-formed.' It seems that a players' organisation already existed. It had begun in 1913 but had been inactive since 1923. The meeting was chaired by James Smith, who had captained St Kilda before the First World War. Jock McHale, then coach of Collingwood, attended. A number of meetings followed. Its purpose was "to do everything it could to assist the game."

It called for appointment of player representatives to the League and the Association. It sought retiring allowances, assistance to members in the case of accident or sickness, and wanted to secure its own premises "for social and business purposes". It believed the views of players should be sought in relation to the rules of the game.

Two delegates from each club met at another meeting two weeks later. *The Argus* reported:

The meeting in connection with the formation of a players' association is fraught with grave possibilities... Should the management of the association be placed into the hands of extremists there may be disaster ahead.

This was a typical sentiment which was to be repeated whenever players sought to organise themselves. The notion of unionists as trouble-makers remained firmly entrenched in the conservative public mind.

Again, this players' association did not seem to have a significant impact.

In 1944 another attempt was made when Frank Reid, a former secretary of Essendon and a life member of the VFL, led the push for an organisation of past and present players. He called it the Victorian Footballers' Club. But it was no militant union intent on flying the players' flag. It aimed to "promote the social welfare and economic advancement of its members" and "to inculcate in the minds of the members loyalty and obedience to the controllers of football." It demanded players "refrain from political, sectarian or any other improper debate." So, it had serious limitations insofar as organised labour was concerned.

Generally, over the years, players were treated poorly by those controllers of football. They were not

well-paid and the transfer system gave all power to the clubs. Once a player had signed with a club he was at the mercy of the club. Often clubs refused to give players the clearance they wanted. 'Football Flare-up Over Slavery' ran a 1948 headline in *The Sporting Globe*, the article arguing that football clubs were "treating players as bond-slaves".

Its chief writer Hec de Lacy was a consistent advocate of the players. He ran a campaign over many years questioning the whole transfer system as a denial of the basic freedom of an individual. An Appeals Board was mooted. In 1950, *Sporting Globe* columnist Jack Dyer argued for a players' association which would be "a body strong enough to force an issue on many of the abuses players are now forced to suffer without reprieve".

It would just take someone with the energy and know-how to start one.



## 1955 Tom McNeil

**B**ORN IN GLASGOW, Tom McNeil was evacuated to Australia from Scotland in 1940. His parents came out in 1947; the family lived in Melbourne where Tom played footy for the Hampton Scouts. A talented wingman, he was recruited by St Kilda, making his debut in 1951. He loved footy, but his experience was disappointing. After being hit in a game he received poor medical attention. Then, after being involved in another incident, he was suspended. He thought it was an unjust decision. Generally, he felt players were not well-treated. He took the matter up with the club and, after an argument with secretary Sam Ramsay, departed.

After a couple of years of coaching in suburban and country football he returned to Scotland where he visited soccer clubs. He was interested in the coaching methods they used. A newspaper published a story about his visit to Rangers. On reading the article, John Hughes, who was involved in the Scottish Players' Union, contacted Tom and they became friends. Hughes introduced Tom to Jimmy Guthrie, chairman of the English soccer players' union.

Tom decided he would establish a similar organisation when he returned to Melbourne. He thought no VFL player deserved to suffer the poor experience he had. His intentions received coverage in the Melbourne press where he explained that players received a raw deal.

In 1955 he contacted the League and the clubs hoping they would allow him to address their players. Collingwood and St Kilda agreed. Hawthorn refused. The Essendon players weren't interested.

The VFL's then assistant secretary, Eric McCutchan could see no merit in the proposed association. "English players are straight-out professionals," he said. "Our football is only a sideline for the players. There is no need for a footballers' union in Victoria."

Tom was supported by Patrick Cash, a lawyer and Hawthorn player, and Ted Henrys from Preston. They drew up a constitution, based on the rules of the Scottish Players' Union and the Victorian Fire Brigade Employers' Union. The aim was:

... to promote and protect the interests of the members by endeavouring to come to amicable arrangements with the governing Football Authorities with a view to the abolition of all restrictions which affect the social and financial positions of players, and to safeguard their rights at all times.



Other aims included gaining access to workers' compensation, giving legal advice, helping players to change clubs, and regulating relations between professional footballers and their employees.

A meeting was held on May 13, 1955. It was poorly attended. Eighteen VFL players turned up – including Ron Barassi (Melbourne), Jack Clarke (Essendon), Tony Ongarello (Fitzroy), Thorold Merrett (Collingwood), Laurie Icke (North Melbourne) and Stuart Spencer (Melbourne). Eight players from VFA clubs were also there.

The Australian Football Players' Union was formed.

Only twelve players attended the second meeting. They had to postpone the election of office-bearers.

Tom was bitterly disappointed. "All the top men in every league club have told me they want to be in this union but are too lazy to do anything about it," he said to the newspapers.

It was a portent of what was to come: the union struggled to attract members. The players were just not interested.

Eventually Cash was elected president, Tom became secretary, and Henrys treasurer.

If the players' organisation were to have a chance of making genuine progress it needed to be registered as an official 'association of employees' under the *Conciliation and Arbitration Act, 1904-55*, thereby making it a legal entity. If recognised by the Commonwealth Court of Conciliation and Arbitration it could then take grievances to that Court, the decisions of which would be binding. The VFL and VFA would be forced, by law, to adhere to the Court's rulings.

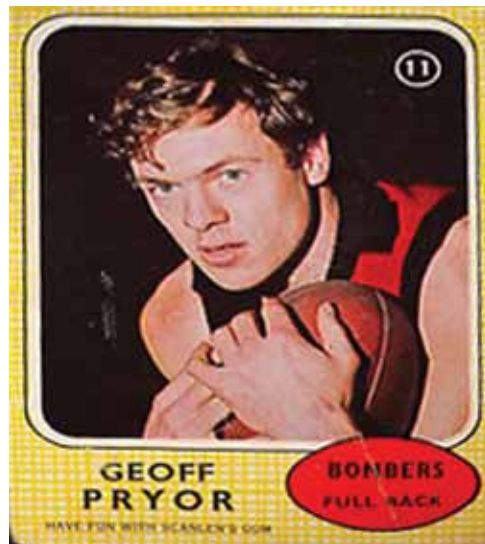
The VFL was genuinely concerned. It fought strongly against the players' union, waging a campaign to dismiss its relevance. Along with the VFA and the Essendon Football Club, they opposed the application. The case was heard by Mr J. L. Taylor whose judgement agreed with the objectors. The VFL's counsel pointed out that because some VFL players remained amateurs (even though it was only a few) they could not be considered employees. Other technicalities caused by loose drafting of the application also affected the decision.

The union was refused registration. They could have appealed but Tom was disheartened further and believed the players were too apathetic to be involved anyway. The organisation was wound up in 1956.

Tom moved to Western Australia to coach and remained there. He was active in public life, serving as a National Party member of the West Australian Parliament from 1977 to 1989.

By 1956, the players had still made little progress as an industrial organisation which could represent its own interests.





## *Geoff Pryor and Essendon; Gareth Andrews and Geelong*

**G**EOFF PRYOR GREW UP IN A COMPASSIONATE FAMILY. He developed tremendous respect and affection for people. His father Gordon studied Medicine at the University of Melbourne. Before becoming a doctor Gordon had been a minister in the Methodist Church. He married Letty, a Melbourne nurse, the daughter of a Bendigo tailor (who once made suits for Squizzy Taylor). They had three boys: Geoff (born in 1945), Ian and Phil.

Gordon and Letty had strong convictions. After working in Alice Springs and Mt Isa, Gordon established a general practice in Essendon and the family settled down to a life of school and community.

The boys were very capable academically.

Geoff was also an outstanding young sportsman. He played football for his school, Wesley College, and also for the South Essendon Methodists in the local league. There was a sense that he would one day play for the Bombers. That's where the best footballers from the area played.

Barry Davis, also from Essendon, remembers that fourteen of the twenty who played in the 1965 Bombers premiership side were locals. He can name the addresses of their childhood homes. A local sensibility prevailed.

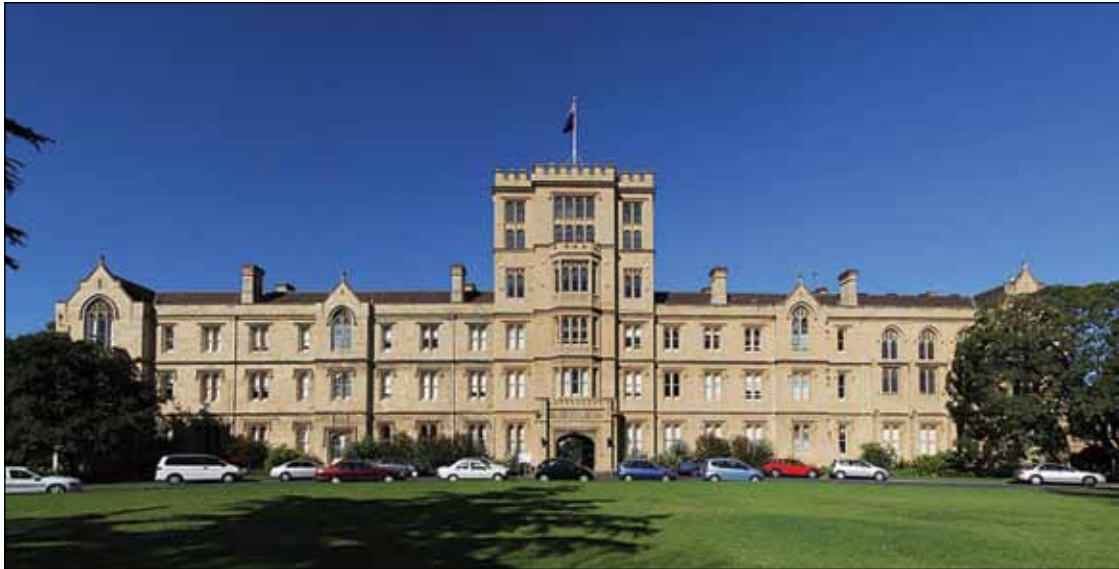
As a teenager, however, Geoff Pryor's world was expanded by his natural curiosity. He was drawn to ideas, drawn to thinking, drawn to making sense of the world. He was drawn to the notion of what was fair and what was right. Where he saw injustice, it concerned him. He felt a powerful obligation to act.

In the 1960s such injustice was evident in elements of the Vietnam conflict, especially conscription; in the treatment of Aboriginal Australians and African-Americans; in the treatment of outspoken students and other radicals; in the treatment of women. He could see the class system in his community – that the socio-economic circumstances into which you were born had a significant impact on the direction of your life. He could see that the powerful would use their power to maintain their position, whether they were nation-states, organisations, businesses, or even football administrators.

Geoff was an independent thinker.

In his matriculation year, he was picked up by the Essendon Football Club and played in their thirds. He made his senior debut the following year, secured his spot, and played in that 1965 Bombers premiership.

Geoff enrolled in Applied Science (studying polymer chemistry with the engineers) at the University of Melbourne, but his education was much broader. He was interested in philosophy and politics, history and economics, literature and theatre. He lived at Queen's College. He hung out with the Carlton crowd of students and lecturers, artists and actors and musos, activists and unionists. They thought he was a footballer ("If you're interested in sport you were automatically a dumb bastard").



*Queen's College, The University of Melbourne*

He was fiercely anti-Menzies. To Geoff, Menzies represented an old world: hierarchical, authoritarian (if not autocratic), imperial, militarist, closed, narrow. Geoff sought a world he believed was fairer, where voices could be heard and respected, where rational argument prevailed, where alternative thinking was not howled down.

Alec Epis, Essendon's half back-flanker, who had grown up in a butcher's shop in Kalgoorlie, called Geoff 'The Socialist'.

To an extent, these were the days when being a schoolteacher at a local footy club still earned you the nickname 'Professor'. Clubs tended to be basic, blokey and anti-intellectual.

But Geoff was not on his own at Essendon. The club had a number of players who were very bright, valued education, and were making their way in their respective professions: Barry Davis in education, Darryl Gerlach in aeronautical engineering, Ray Smith in commerce and later psychology, and there were others.

Some players at other clubs had similar sensibilities.

At the same time, there were those in universities – historians like Professor Ian Turner and Professor Manning Clark, literary critics like Dinny O'Hearn – who recognised the place of footy in culture and in the life of the community, and were trying to make sense of it. They were certain of one thing: footy mattered, especially in Melbourne.

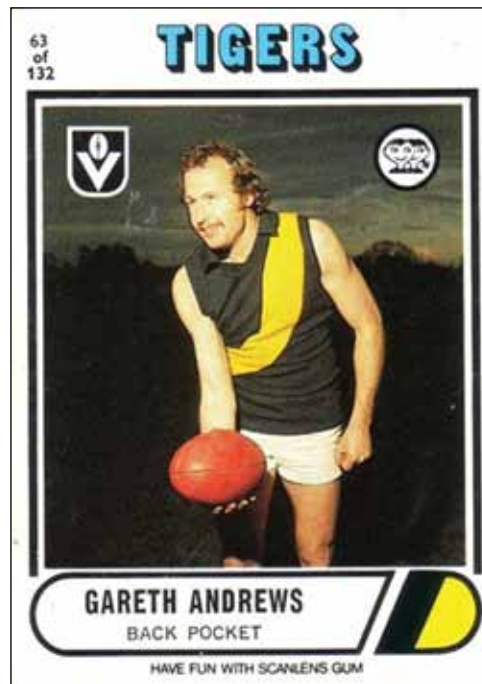
In his capacity for independent thought, Geoff, when contemplating football, a game he loved, asked



questions. What is a footy club? What is the notion of team? What is loyalty? What is camaraderie? Is footy an art, a form of dance?

These were not questions pondered by your average VFL full-back.

Geoff had been thinking about a community of players, something which went beyond the parochialism of club. He set up a room at Essendon where players could meet – just players. There was something about being a player: a bond formed by shared experience. It was a room for all players – visiting sides included.



Gareth Andrews was at Queen's College at the same time as Geoff Pryor. They were friends. Gareth was studying Commerce at the University of Melbourne. He shared Geoff's concerns for the treatment of players, and the rights of players.

Gareth had grown up in Geelong, attended Geelong College, and had been recruited by the Cats. To be at the club he loved was initially a dream come true. To be playing VFL footy was special.

Gareth remembers that most blokes were just glad to be in the VFL:

They didn't think much about it. They were willing to make sacrifices, or turn a blind eye to circumstances which didn't seem quite fair, because they loved the game and they just wanted to play. You also have to remember how different it was then. How differently the game was understood. You can't look back from the perspective of the game now. Almost no-one was able to anticipate this degree of change. At that time, there was still a lot of romance in footy. It was footy. Blokes were gardening in their premiership jumpers. Blokes had real jobs. It didn't dawn on most players to think about footy from an employment perspective.

Gareth went to footy training in Geelong twice a week. That meant a tram to the city, a train to Footscray, a walk to the Geelong Road, from where he would hitch-hike to Kardinia Park, or as close to it as his lift would take him. He would train, head to his parents' place for a hot meal, before they would drop him back to the highway at Corio from where he could hitch-hike back to Melbourne. All in the dead of the miserable Victorian winter!

Eventually the club promised to buy Gareth a car to make things a little easier. When Gareth took delivery of his Morris 1100 ('Floats on Fluid') president Jack Jennings reneged on the deal and asked the Andrews family for half of the cost. Gareth was disappointed to the point of tears – not so much from the

financial perspective, although that was part of it, but because he felt the club was taking most of its players for granted.

“It was so in-grained,” Gareth remembers. “That generation of committeemen like Jack Jennings couldn’t see the need to treat us any better. It just wasn’t in his thinking. We were just the players.”

Gareth also felt the club’s approach was demanding and intrusive. They expected a lot, and the level of expectation was on the rise.

“I felt like footy owned me,” he says.

This was not the bluster of a young hot-head. The clubs did own players. Despite concern and complaint over decades, the traditional transfer system remained in place. Once a player signed on, the club controlled him – for life. The only way the player could go elsewhere was by winning a clearance from that club. That usually came with a price. The club had total power.

There was a further restraint. The League had assigned each club a metropolitan and a country zone. Players living in that zone had no choice: they had to sign with that club.

Remuneration was still dictated by set payments as had been the case since the introduction of the Coulter Law in 1930.

An option for players, particularly of the previous generation, had been to turn their back on the poorly-paying VFL competition and sign healthy contracts with rich country clubs. Bob Rose famously left Collingwood to be captain-coach of Wangaratta Rovers in order to secure his young family’s future. He could not ignore the sums of money being offered in a time of relative rural prosperity. Locals say Brownlow Medalist Peter Box was the highest paid footballer in Australia when he signed on in the sheep-wheat country in the Riverina. He was captain-coach at Grong Grong.

Gareth felt powerless. He spoke about his concerns. But he received little comfort from Reg Hickey. The champion Geelong player and premiership coach said to Gareth, “Just get on with it young fella.”

It was an attitude which prevailed among committeemen and elder statesmen of the game. They traded on the sense that playing VFL footy was a privilege. Such was the reverence for the game in the community.

The anomaly was that clubs could pay their leaders – captain-coach, captain, vice-captain and deputy vice-captain – and interstate recruits more than the standard payment. Some were paid very well.

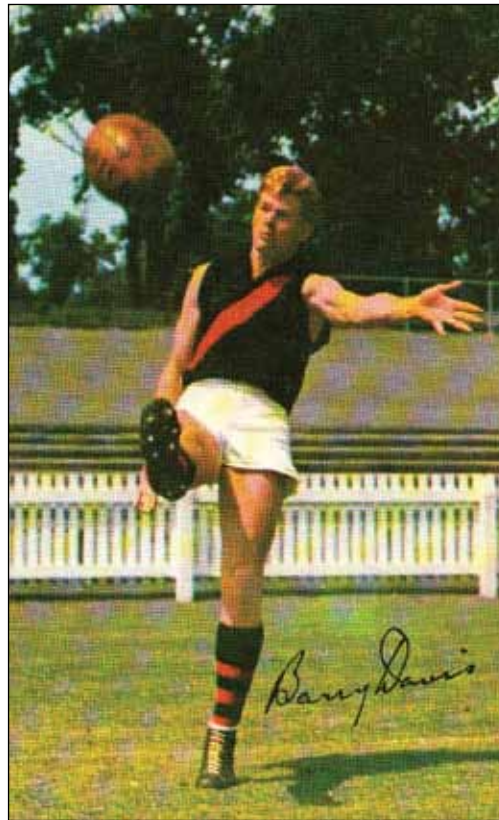
These two elements formed the basis of a two-tier player system. There were the stars – feted, highly paid. And the garden-variety players many of whom, despite being top-line performers, were paid the very modest set fee.

The frustration bubbled away.

Len Thompson and Des Tuddenham, from the powerful Collingwood side, spoke out. Feeling they were paid poorly by comparison to West Australian recruit, Peter Eakins, they approached club officials demanding to negotiate contracts that reflected their comparative worth. “Local Collingwood players were aware of what the interstate blokes were getting,” Ross ‘Twiggy Dunne’ recalls, “and probably weren’t too happy.”

Twiggy had been recruited from West Heidelberg, and was working at the Carlton Brewery in Abbotsford which was highly unionised. “We locals weren’t being looked after.”

There was growing discontent at Essendon where a strong contingent of mature players had served the club well. They realised that some players were treated better than others and that there was an ad hoc system of additional payments. The base payment was just \$35 per week and that hadn’t changed in a long time.



Skipper Don McKenzie and Barry Davis had been instrumental in the success of the Bombers during the 1960s. Geoff Pryor was making his way in the public service.

Having grown up locally, Barry quickly made his way at Windy Hill. He studied Physical Education at the University of Melbourne and then later, while teaching at Niddrie High School where former player Les Griggs was the inspirational principal, enrolled in a Science degree (in geomorphology). He used to visit Geoff at Queen's College. They were good friends.

Barry's parents lived an ordinary suburban life. His father, a Menzies supporter, rode his push-bike to Fitzroy every day to work in the Weeties factory. Barry's politics were very different.

In early 1970, senior Essendon players proposed a scheme of standardised payments, based on the number of years of service, which they felt reflected experience and the level of contribution while being reasonable recompense for the number of hours they were putting in. It included payment for each training session as well. They tried to discuss the matter with management during the pre-season.

"The club didn't want to listen," Geoff Pryor remembers. "They came down pretty heavily all along. Reynolds and Hutchinson represented an old view, an authoritarian view, a World War II view: 'you owe it to the club'. Our questioning was part of a way they did not understand, perhaps could not understand. There were two distinct cultures and they were like tectonic plates: ruction was inevitable."

During the 1970 pre-season, the players formulated a letter to the club outlining their position and explaining their reasons for it. Essendon responded.

"We were called in by the president, Allan Hird [snr]," Barry remembers. "We sat at a huge table and he spoke to us. 'This is the letter,' he said. 'And this is what we think of it.' He put the letter in the bin. He conveyed the sense that we would be punished for our position."

The five players (Geoff Pryor, Don McKenzie, Barry Davis, Darryl Gerlach and Geoff Gosper) explained the situation to the whole squad. The players were furious – and determined. The club's actions

had radicalised the players and they were willing to act.

“There was real solidarity among the players,” Geoff explains. “I told them we had no choice; that we just had to take the issue up and stand strong. They agreed.”

But it was more complicated. There was a feeling of unease; the sort of unease that occurs when elements of an entrenched and accepted culture are challenged. Players felt what Geoff calls “the understandable weight of loyalty”.

Geoff was careful to explain his own feeling. “I am loyal,” he said to the players. “But we have to show that we believe the club can’t treat people the way we’re being treated.”

The players talked about it all week.

They became even angrier when they learnt of threats coming from the club. Allan Hird was a senior figure in the Department of Education. Peter Daniels was a student teacher about to apply for positions in that department. He felt Hird was pressuring him. This was industrial blackmail.

Initially the players told the club they would not be available for the final practice match against South Adelaide. They eventually played that match. However, the five senior players made the decision to go on strike for the Round 1 match against Carlton. Geoff kept coach Jack Clarke informed of the players’ position throughout the dispute.

“We didn’t say much to the press,” Geoff recalls. “That was deliberate. We were not going to play, but we had no intention of bludgeoning the club. We had a legitimate and fierce concern; a belief this needed to be addressed.”

Essendon officials felt the players had defied them in a situation over which the club had no control. They claimed they were unable to increase the payments to the players because of the VFL rules.

Barry Davis thought that position was disingenuous.

“It was disgusting,” he says.

Senior football scribe Alf Brown also thought the club had acted poorly. “The players have been treated like schoolboys,” he wrote in *The Herald*.

The club claimed it didn’t pick the five for disciplinary reasons. But the players knew otherwise: they had made themselves unavailable for selection. They had made their point.

They returned to play in Round 2. “We didn’t agree with the club’s position on the VFL and payments,” Geoff says. “But we chose to play to show our loyalty.”

The whole incident changed things for Geoff Pryor. From that moment, all discussions with the club felt tainted. The club blamed him for stirring. He felt a sense of injustice.

He continued to love the game of football, he just didn’t like how it was being organised. He believed those who were controlling football needed to become more respectful to everyone involved. He had ideas about how that could happen. Notes he made in 1970 show he was interested in finding ways to revolutionise football clubs, to re-distribute the power entrenched in the traditional hierarchies to all people at football clubs. He drew diagrams with structures outlined which gave everyone a say, especially the players. He jotted down suggestions and explanations.

He wrote to Mr Cookson, secretary of Essendon, during 1970, expressing his concerns. The club acknowledged his interest, but had no intention of accommodating his initiatives.

He chose to leave. Some observers were surprised. As Ron Barassi noted, it was not like Geoff to give in and walk away.

Geoff decided to travel overseas. He headed for London where he worked as a teacher, initially at Clapham Common (“the previous teacher had been chased out with a cricket stump”).

While away, Geoff took a keen interest in British politics. He worked as a volunteer on one Labour Party campaign. He was also interested in the English football players’ association and how they represented themselves, and the impact they hoped to have. He observed the level of professionalism in English football and how players understood their place in it. He could see the advances in the professional sports around the world – whether it be American football and baseball or football in the nations of Europe.

Gareth Andrews also needed a break. He chose to spend a year travelling overseas with teammate Geoff Ainsworth. They left after the classic 1970 Grand Final.

Their options were open. They could have come back for the start of the 1971 season. But Gareth decided he would remain overseas. He took a year off football.

While Geoff Pryor and Gareth were overseas, a significant development occurred. It had the potential to have a massive impact on the landscape of professional sport in Australia. When Balmain refused to grant Dennis Tutty a clearance, the star player challenged the NSWRL in the Supreme Court. He won. Rugby League’s transfer system was effectively illegal.

This had enormous implications for the VFL – and elements within the organisation knew it. Lawyer and football historian Mark Branagan explains:

The message was that it was no longer acceptable for a sporting league to just allocate ownership of a player to a club and then allow that club to deal with the player like some enslaved chattel...Slave labour had been abolished more than 100 years earlier and the concept of master-servant belonged to the industrial revolution.

But young footballers were not really aware of the implications of the case, nor of their rights as employees of football. They existed within a system which restrained their trade. The law may have been on the side of the players but they neither realised it, nor did they have a collective which might represent their interests.

The VFL realised. The VFL and the clubs knew they had to make some concessions so the growing upset of the senior players would not translate into militant action.

The situation at Essendon was illustrative – the senior players had not been appeased. If anything, the situation was fuelled when Barry Davis was told by Allan Hird he would not be cleared to Subiaco. Davis had been offered the chance of a life-time: to captain-coach Subiaco while enrolled full-time on a scholarship at the innovative sports science department at the University of Western Australia. Hird again threatened Davis. “I hold a senior position in the Department of Education,” Barry remembers him saying. “You will lose your credits.”

Davis was left shaking his head. It was just plain wrong.

The VFL knew they were on shaky ground. Their legal counsel, Louis Voumard QC and Jack Winneke QC, had advised them of the implications of the Tutty case. Angry players and an unfavourable ruling created an even more flammable situation.

The VFL’s concession came in the form of what became known as the ‘Ten Year Rule’ which allowed players who had served for a decade at one club to negotiate with another club.

Barry Davis moved to North Melbourne.

The VFL sensed the players were getting restless.



# Foundation

INDEPENDENTLY OF EACH OTHER, Geoff Pryor and Gareth Andrews had been thinking about a body to represent the players. Geoff came back to Australia with the specific intention to establish an association. But he did not want to impose it on players; he did not want to become involved in a top-heavy organisation in which the rank-and-file felt just as powerless.

To establish an association Geoff had to become a player again. He also had to win the respect of his fellow-players. He trained very hard. The players welcomed him.

“I had to prove to the club I could play again,” he says. “I had to be a better player than I’d been. Some were waiting for me to make a mistake, looking for any opportunity to criticise me.”

Des Tuddenham, in his second year as Essendon’s captain-coach, had learnt from his players how respected Geoff Pryor was. Des had first-hand experience. Geoff was one of the League’s top backmen. He had a reputation for playing well on Darrel Baldock, which was no mean feat. Tuddenham needed Geoff in the side.

Geoff continued to discuss matters with his teammates, to sound out their interest in being involved in an organisation the precise form of which remained unspecified. Geoff believed that would emerge over discussions with the like-minded.

He just had to find the like-minded. Many players had no interest in what Geoff was on about. They had grown up revering footy. Some weren’t going to be involved in anything which they thought might interfere with their opportunity. Many had little awareness of the inequitable power relationship in which they found themselves, nor of Geoff’s push to improve that position.

Off the field, Geoff was talking to players, researching, looking to players’ organisations overseas. He completed surveys of players. He analysed the ever-increasing hours they were expected to give – at times more than fourteen hours per week. He worked out the rate footballers were effectively paid, and its advancement (or lack thereof) over time.

He was very busy, working in his job in the Department of Overseas Trade in their Melbourne office. It seemed to be a position where there were interesting opportunities.

He was also active in the ALP, having worked for Moss Cass in the seat of Maribyrnong. He had seen first-hand how to run an effective campaign; how to have a political impact; how to persuade. This was to serve him very well in bringing the association to the attention of the public, and winning their understanding and support.

Geoff also sounded out those who were developing an understanding of the situation faced by players as sport was becoming commercialised and professionalised. In Australia this area of study was in its infancy.

Braham Dabscheck, a St Kilda fan, was a young post-graduate student who had persuaded his economics professor to let him pursue research in this area. He completed a thesis: *The Labour Market and Australian Rules Football* in which he argued the transfer system was a major issue. A long essay ‘The Imperfect Market for Footballers’ was published in the *National Bank Monthly Summary*. It was picked up by the popular press; newspapers ran a précis version in May, 1973.

When Geoff Pryor read the article he contacted Braham and the young men met to discuss the ideas it contained. By then Braham had moved to Sydney to lecture in Industrial Relations at the University of New South Wales.

“Geoff wanted to talk things through. He wanted to know whether a VFLPA would be of value. Whether it could be effective?” Braham remembers. “He was interested in what sort of impact it could have.”

Braham told him of the international examples, how they were typified by a core group of disgruntled players who would be active in the organisation, but that it would take a long time to spread to the periphery, and to have all players genuinely interested.

Geoff had found a very handy ally in the young Dabscheck.

Geoff also knew he had a core of disgruntled players.

Ray Smith played at Essendon and was friends with Geoff. Their lockers were close together in the change rooms. Ray had come from Queensland where he played Australian football in the Sherwood-Graceville area, one of the pockets where it is popular in Brisbane. By his own admission, Ray was politically naïve at the time. But he believed in the rights of individuals. He felt the players were poorly represented, and had no advocate. He had great respect for Geoff and supported his initiative. “Geoff is one of the men I [continue to] admire most,” he says. “He was friendly and clearly highly intelligent. He was also very dedicated. He genuinely wanted to do something for players.”

So did Gareth Andrews, by then back playing at Geelong. His concerns had not been allayed.

On June 14, 1973, Geoff and Gareth met for lunch at Casa de Manana, a popular city pub of the day,



on St Kilda Road opposite the Botanic Gardens. They had similar understandings of the players' situation.

They were encouraged enough to meet there again two weeks later.

Then, a week later, they extended the group to include Barry Davis, Ray Smith and Doug Wade. That meeting was serious enough for them to keep and type out notes.

The aims of the meeting were “to document a series of objectives”, that “may be shown to other players in the hope they will see becoming a member...is important” and to establish a “program for the future development of a players' association.”

They knew they had much to find out. They needed to determine “whether we are only contracted parties or legally defined employees” and also “to know if football can be defined as an industry. If not,

then the Conciliation and Arbitration [system] does not apply.”

They also knew they needed to find an issue which was not threatening to the clubs; something “where the players’ association and the clubs could work harmoniously together.”

More club representatives joined in at Geoff’s flat on July 18.

Geoff was talking with other players he knew would be keen. Two in particular – Des Meagher of Hawthorn and David ‘Swan’ McKay of Carlton – were to become heavily involved in the early days.

A series of lunches and meetings followed on September 7 and September 27, October 30. In his diary Gareth refers to each as a ‘Football Union Meeting’. But from November 7 Gareth’s entries refer to the ‘Football Association’.

This was an important differentiation. Geoff was astute enough, and experienced enough, to realise that the idea of a union would create concern. Although Australia had a unionised workforce, significant sections of the community saw unions as subversive and even treacherous. At a time when politics was framed by its Cold War context, conservative Australians feared unions. They had been taught to believe there were reds under their beds. Furthermore they felt unions were becoming increasingly militant, and demanding; their strikes disrupted everyday life. Unions and their officials were constantly in the news, often in situations of conflict with the symbol of traditional authority – the police.

Geoff knew the players’ cause would suffer if they were lumped together with the unions. They needed to call themselves a professional association.

During this time they were doing as much as possible to develop an understanding of what the association might be. Gareth wrote to Derek Dougan, a star at Wolverhampton Wanderers Football Club, an English Division 1 side, and Chairman of the Professional Footballers’ Association. Dougan had a reputation as a passionate protector of footballers’ rights. The return letter included a copy of their constitution. He also received information from the NFL Players’ Association in the USA.



After the 1973 finals the group got hold of copies of some important documents from the VFL. Across the top in handwriting (possibly Des Meagher’s) it says “Private Balance Sheets and Income Statements we came by means unknown?” Signed by administrative director Eric McCutchan, they were the official financial figures from the 1973 VFLfinals series – to the last dollar. They showed how the receipts were to be distributed to the League and the clubs.

The push towards establishing an association was gathering momentum. However, Geoff and Gareth were trying to keep the whole thing quiet until such time as they were organised and ready to make a public statement. They met again on November 14.

VFL: Private Balance Sheets + Income Statements we came by by  
VICTORIAN FOOTBALL LEAGUE means unknown?

FINAL SERIES MATCHES - SEASON 1973



MCG MATCHES

<u>E I P T S</u>						
<u>DATE</u>	<u>MATCH</u>	<u>ATTENDANCE</u>	<u>RESERVED SEAT SALES</u>	<u>MCG CONTRIB.</u>	<u>GROSS RECEIPTS</u>	<u>1972 GROSS RECEIPTS</u>
.9.73	Qualifying	86,386	\$182,088.25	\$ 5,613.90	\$187,702.15	\$146,573.70
.9.73	Semi Final	86,483	181,561.00	6,142.70	187,703.70	146,693.05
.9.73	Prelim Final	98,652	181,521.75	7,637.30	189,159.05	147,571.00
.9.73	Grand Final	116,956	179,276.50	11,210.10	190,486.60	148,757.40
1972	Replay	-	-	-	-	131,106.90
	<u>TOTAL</u>	<u>388,477</u>	<u>724,447.50</u>	<u>30,604.00</u>	<u>755,051.50</u>	<u>720,702.05</u>

Gareth's hand-written notes from one (or more) of these meetings survive. They include issues, actions, a doodle of a possible logo, and a list of footballers who might be approached to be involved.

'Geoff turned up for discussion' Gareth's diary reads on November 20.

His diary records another meeting on November 28. It seems this was the meeting, attended by a representative from most clubs, where Geoff and Gareth outlined the the nature and objectives of an

FOOTBALL UNION.

Wed.

Agree where needed.

① Queen's B'day Monday. - We are made to run out holiday + play on Mond - Finance benefit to V.F.L. - no benefit to players.

② Contracts. All players should be under Contract. esp. beyond 2<sup>nd</sup> Year. Maybe a guarantee. NB: Pre-season training, practice matches etc. Some assembly before final lists.

③ Travelling Expenses - abide by rates estab'd, throw out other industry + as ~~found~~ est'd by RACV or Commercial & General Assn

④ Insurance NB Greening affair, also Workers Compens

⑤ Assistance in personal matters - eg. Taxation claims possible for footballers.

⑥ Reserve players facil's, after Game + also comfort of players Wives + girlfriends + lovers etc

Geoff Pryor.  
G.A.  
Doug Wade.

Point Where Advantages for Unions come in:

- Large of Players Under 21.
- Advantage for Clubs + Administ<sup>r</sup> Roushlers - offers them guidelines + prevents 1 sort of chaos which occurred at beginning of 1973.
- Middleman in any negotiation gives far better results. Saves head-on confrontat<sup>ns</sup> which often lead to ill-feeling
- Backing - eg. Legal - in relationships with Press eg. Standout stunts. Standard rates of pay from T.V. Stat<sup>ns</sup>

association, and the need for a formal constitution. They pointed out that nothing was decided; that the players at the first general meeting on December 10 would determine what was to happen.

Those attending on November 28 were asked to notify all their players of that meeting. The invitation was in the form of an explanatory letter typed on a single page:

Fellow Players,

All VFL players have common interests in such matters as pressure of football, playing conditions and many others. Yet there isn't any organised way where we, as a group, can discuss these interests among ourselves. A VFL Players' Association is a body which can enable this to occur. Through this body, players can talk with players from other clubs about these matters of common interest.

A VFL Players' Association <sup>can</sup> help football generally, providing a focal point for the VFL to obtain players opinions and work together with players in developing our great game even further.

Specifically, a Players' Association will benefit a player by;

- 1 investigating a Tax Averaging scheme
- 2 discussing with the VFL the improvement of facilities for players at all grounds.
- 3 ensuring the availability of a first-rate medical service to all players at all times.
- 4 provide advice to members concerning contracts.
- 5 set up a procedure for grievances to be heard effectively and promptly.
- 5 investigating an injury insurance scheme for members.

Join in and express your opinion.

The first general meeting will be held on Monday December 10th. Be sure you're there!



As Melburnians headed home on the tram on the evening of December 10, they read of the meeting, as it was happening.

"The players will start their quest for a better deal by forming a players' union tonight," wrote Bruce Matthews in *The Herald*. "Players from all VFL clubs will meet at Melbourne University to form what will be known as the VFL Players' Association."

Like any good journalist in the conservative press he immediately teased out the whiff of controversy and confrontation. He'd made a few calls. "League clubs are opposed to the association because they fear the players' demands may lead to strikes and disruption of games," he continued.

But then he represented the best intentions of the players fairly. He quoted Geoff Pryor: "We want to make it clear that our last thought is to strike during the season. But there are certain areas we wish to pursue for the players' benefit, including compensation and insurance."

'VFL players form union' the *Age* announced the following morning with Ken Knox's report of proceedings.

*Age 11/12/73*

# VFL players form union

By KEN KNOX

**It has happened at last . . . Victorian League footballers have their own union.**

The union was born on the second floor of Union House at Melbourne University just after 9.30 o'clock last night.

The birth of the healthy youngster, the Victorian Football League Players' Association, was witnessed by about 60 League footballers.

The birth was also surrounded by a certain amount of secrecy.

Press representatives were not allowed into the meeting and spokesman for

the new body, Geoff Pryor, of Essendon, would not disclose the names of those who signed the attendance book.

Asked if some players feared victimisation by attending the meeting, Pryor said: "Yes, that is possibly so."

It was decided that players would return to their individual clubs and form club associations to elect a steering committee and prepare a constitution.

The next meeting of the

association will be held not later than the second Monday in February and each club will be represented by one delegate.

Eleven clubs were represented last night. Carlton is believed to be the only club without a representative.

Pryor said it was probable that League players down to the thirds and fourths would be eligible to join the association.

Apart from trying to get closer liaison between the players and the League, he said the association would get right down to basics,

such as conditions in dressing rooms at grounds.

Those who were seen at the meeting included Gareth Andrews (Geelong), Frank Gumbleton (Nth. Melb.), Alan Martello, Don Scott, Ian Bremner and Des Meagher (Hawthorn), Graham Moss (Essendon), Greg Wells (Melb.), Denis O'Callaghan, Jeff Clifton, Ross Dunne (Collingwood), Jeff Moran (St. Kilda), Ken Fletcher (Essendon).

Some of the players had gone along out of curiosity, not sure what to expect. At the meeting, the concept of a Players' Association was explained further, as was the philosophy behind it.

Three objectives were outlined. Firstly, that it hoped to assist in the development of the game. Secondly, that players would build better relationships with the VFL. Thirdly, that players enjoyed some sense of self-determination; that they would develop an organisation of players, run by players, to improve the circumstances of players, whether that was payment, conditions, entitlements or even adequate facilities.

A week later Bob White quoted Geoff in *The Australian*:

Players have a lot of ideas about football. We'd like to convey these ideas to the VFL so that a better understanding and a closer relationship can develop.



*Power House on Albert Park Lake*

The players agreed to return to their clubs to hold meetings at which delegates would be elected in preparation for another meeting in the new year.

It was held on February 25, 1974 at Power House on Albert Park Lake, a venue organised by Richmond delegate Stephen Rae. At 21 years of age, Rae had already had a colourful career. Recruited to St Kilda as a talented and versatile forward he'd been twentieth man in the Saints' loss to Hawthorn in the 1971 Grand Final. He'd also suffered a series of debilitating knee injuries. He joined Richmond in 1973 and played in their premiership side. He worked in insurance. During that year Geoff Pryor rang him to talk about workers' compensation.

Stephen was a Whitlam-supporter. He remembers only too well the fear he'd felt when listening to the conscription ballot. There was solid support for the concept of a players' association at Punt Road. More than half of the Richmond players had met in Barry Richardson's physio rooms in Church Street - away from the club. Stephen was elected delegate. Michael Green was also keen to be involved, attending meetings the following year.

Both Stephen and Michael were very impressed with Geoff. Stephen could see Geoff's natural leadership, his ability to express ideas clearly.

Michael Green also had a lot of time for Geoff:

Geoff was the reason all this happened. He was the one who brought the association into being. He was an independent thinker; a man of character who lived on the basis of his values and beliefs. He was man of unimpeachable integrity.

Geoff Pryor was elected president. He was the obvious choice. Swan McKay was elected vice-president.

Des Meagher was elected secretary. A pharmacist, he had many attributes: dedicated, well-organised, thorough, reliable, calm. "He was like that no matter what he was doing," his widow Nan remembers. "He had great energy, great passion. He was always interested in the younger players."

Educated at Xavier, Des remained a devout Catholic and issues of social responsibility and community service were at the heart of his life. "I thought I'd married the Pope," Nan jokes. "His Catholicism meant a lot to him."

They were busy days. Des had been recruited to Hawthorn from the Amateurs – playing with Old Xaverians. He had young daughters, worked at the Box Hill Hospital, and was involved in numerous organisations and causes. "We were just flat out," Nan remembers. "And we didn't have much. There wasn't



any money in football. The best thing we got from footy was a trophy Des brought home: a set of Vacola jars. I used to preserve tomatoes in them.”

Des was the perfect foil for Geoff Pryor. He was the rock-solid supporter in the background. Geoff would visit the Meagher house and the two would talk about what was happening, and what they might do. Des took minutes of the meetings, had them typed and circulated, and collected them in a minute book (which has been instrumental in this research).

He also looked after the correspondence.

Gareth Andrews did not take on a role and, for a while, became less active in the association. He was very keen to play with a different club and had been talking with the Tigers. “At that time, first and foremost, I wanted to play with Richmond,” he explains. “I wasn’t going to do anything that interfered with my chances.”

He was concerned new president Ian Wilson, secretary Alan Schwab, and the influential Graeme Richmond would not be too happy with a group of long-haired radicals agitating for change. Well-connected in Melbourne, the Richmond officials were not suited by the revolution.

Gareth eventually got his transfer to Richmond. He and Rex Hunt swapped clubs in Round 6. He did not attend VFLPA meetings at all through 1974. “I kept my powder dry,” he says.

Before the meeting concluded, Geoff asked the players to return to their clubs and, if they hadn’t already done so, to elect a delegate.

The VFLPA was alive.



# 1974 Beginnings

IT WAS LESS THAN A FORTNIGHT before the first regular meeting of VFLPA delegates took place on March 6, 1974 at Geoff Pryor's North Melbourne home. It was attended by:

Geoff Pryor  
Des Meagher  
R. Gleeson (South Melbourne)  
Ray Smith (Essendon)  
Paul Feltham (North Melbourne)  
R. Robertson (Fitzroy)  
Colin Dell (Footscray)  
Stephen Rae (Richmond)

Ross 'Twiggy' Dunne was an apology.

They set the annual membership subscription at \$5. They needed stationery and a postal address. Treasurer Colin Dell, the Footscray backman, was instructed to open a bank account.

The delegates spent a long time discussing the wording of a letter which was to be sent to VFL administrative director Eric McCutchan to inform the VFL of the existence of the VFLPA, and to request a meeting with VFL directors.

Geoff knew there were a number of battles to be won. For the VFLPA to be successful it needed the support and active involvement of the players. The club delegates were paramount in this. The structure would work, but only if the players joined, and delegates conducted regular, well-attended meetings in their own clubs to canvas their views. All clubs had to be diligent.

Secondly, the VFLPA had to win the public over. They had to convince them that it was doing was fair and reasonable. They needed fans to be able to understand and empathise with their cause.

Thirdly, they needed recognition from the VFL. They needed to give the VFL cause to take them seriously. They needed regular dialogue, likely to be informal in the short-term but formal and binding in the longer term, depending on the legal status afforded the association.

Each battle was going to be difficult.

The constitution was discussed at the first meeting. It was eventually sent to solicitor Michael Green for consideration and further suggestion.

The VFL and the clubs seemed unlikely to make any concessions. Some clubs were heavy-handed from the outset, in particular Richmond, Collingwood (in response to the VFLPA's stand on the John Greening injury situation) and North Melbourne. There are many examples of strong reactions from the clubs at various moments in the years that followed. This worried some players.

The public relations battle was also delicate. Despite the semi-professionalism that had existed in some sports for decades, the notion of the glorious amateur playing for the love of the game was deeply entrenched in the Australian community. The origins of these understandings went back to the nineteenth century. Rising professionalism had led to ongoing debate. Sport was seen as pure. It was supposed to sit outside politics – which is one of the reasons the anti-apartheid protests during the Springbok tour of 1971 had caused such consternation. Sport was not yet considered to be a business pursuit either, although it was often talked about in those terms, but rampant commercialism remained a way off. Many believed money sullied sport. Yet people expected more and more of the players across the codes.

Geoff knew they had to be judicious in choosing their language, and cautious in the intent their

PLAYER'S COPY

*Compulsory R*

## VICTORIAN FOOTBALL LEAGUE

REGISTRATION FORM

74' 19

I, (Surname) McKAY,  
(Christian Names) David  
of (address) 159 Park Drive, PARKVILLE, 3052  
HEREBY APPLY to be registered with the VICTORIAN FOOTBALL LEAGUE

(herein called "the League") as a player of the CARLTON Football Club, and, in the event of the League accepting this application and in consideration thereof, I agree to be bound by the rules and regulations of the League and by the Trust Deed and Rules of the Victorian Football League Players' Provident Fund, I undertake not to play football in any competition or match or series of matches organised or controlled or conducted by any other club, association or body in the Commonwealth of Australia while I am a registered player of the League, or within two years of my ceasing to be a registered player of the League, without first obtaining a clearance from

the said CARLTON Football Club and a permit from the League so to do, and I agree that in relation to meetings or hearings of the League Tribunal I will attend such meetings or hearings thereof whenever required so to do and I consent to the presence of representatives of the press, radio and television at meetings or hearings of the League Tribunal and the subsequent reporting and publication of the proceedings of such meetings or hearings by the press, radio and television or by representatives thereof.

DATED the 2nd day of April 19 74

*D. R. J. McKay*  
(Signature of Player)

The above application is approved by the CARLTON Football Club, and is submitted for the acceptance of the League.

*Alan Hansen*  
Secretary  
CARLTON

Football Club

Accepted by the Victorian Football League this 17 APR 1974 day of 17 APR 1974 19 74

*James*  
Administrative Director, Victorian Football League

OFFICE USE ONLY

Date received.....

Date accepted.....

Letter and copy forwarded to Player 1 MAY 1974 19 74

R.G.-6814

.....Director

Do not detach. Return to League Office for completion.

statements expressed. It was important to create a sense the Players' Association was not militant and, despite some fear-mongering in the press, to consistently affirm that the players were interested in what was best for the game. They did not want to be cast as greedy unionists. It was easy mud for opponents to throw.

On March 27 the VFLPA sent a letter to the VFL requesting a meeting, as soon as was possible, to "introduce ourselves" and to "explain our Association's objectives." It also suggested the meeting could explore ways of having "formal and regular consultations between our two bodies." The letter also stated



that the VFLPA was “no transient group”, that it was “a serious movement of players to think and act responsibly towards the development of Australian Rules football.”

The VFL directors did not meet with the VFLPA. But they were happy for Eric McCuthchan to meet with them on May 9.

Soon after the VFLPA had its executive structure in place, Geoff Pryor was transferred to Canberra in his role in the Department of Overseas Trade. Essendon flew him down to play each weekend – and occasionally he would have to drive. He tried to work it so he could attend VFLPA meetings. It was a disappointment to him that he could not do much from Canberra.

“The others did all the hard work,” he says. “They deserve the credit.”

Swan McKay was elected unanimously to chair the meetings. They were held at his flat in Parkville and then in pubs.

Swan had grown up on a small mixed farm at Newlyn. His parents were Country Party/Liberal voters. He moved to Melbourne to study Economics at Latrobe University and to play footy for Carlton.

“I was going to see how I went at both,” he recalls.

At Carlton he signed the registration form each year and didn’t ask what he was to be paid. He received what other players of his experience received. He says:

There were no negotiations. I’d just go in during the pre-season, sign the form and that was it. There were a lot of inequities in the system and it was the local footballers who were missing out. Although, really, we were all missing out. The VFL was using much of its revenue to pay for VFL Park at Waverley and VFL House. It was the 1960s and 1970s players who financed the VFL’s improved infrastructure.

In 1970, a premiership year, in which he played most of the games, he was paid \$600 in total.

While at university, Swan and his friends discussed politics. He became interested.

“I was attracted to the democratic-socialist viewpoint,” he explains, a philosophical position which “evolved over time” for him.

He had known of Geoff and could see very clearly the importance of a players’ association. Swan was very enthusiastic and motivated. However, he was also disappointed that more players were not getting involved, and that the VFLPA had little money. “Everything had to be done on the cheap, or *pro bono*,” Swan remembers.

They worked on creating an identity for the VFLPA. A logo was designed.



**V.F.L. PLAYERS' ASSOCIATION**



## Lovely shirt, sir

By LOU RICHARDS and TOM PRIOR

RELAX, you Carlton fans.

This isn't David McKay's idea of training for today's big game against Hawthorn.

What happened is that yesterday the VFL took delivery of some of its smart, mono-branded T-shirts.

And, since the T-shirts are designed to suit the people who wear them and to promote their association, it was suggested David should wear one for The Sun.

After all, he is the acting chairman and a vice-president of the VFLPA.

But photographer Bill Tindale wasn't impressed.

"David's the wrong build," Bill said. "He doesn't do anything for the shirt."

Naturally I was shocked that anyone would dare say such a thing about a Carlton ruckman but I kept trying.

"How about Bruce Doull," "The Frying Doormat," I asked. "Or better still, Mick Nolan, of North Melbourne."

### SHAPELY

"If The Chilling Gannet doesn't fill you, that shirt, sir, will."

Just then, shapely, blonde model Erica Goldstein just happened to be walking by.

In a light blue VFLPA T-shirt and matching pantyhose, naturally.

These Sun photographers really know their jobs.

Before you could say "John Nicholson's not to mention Mrs McKay," there was Erica posing prettily on David's shoulder.

And 23 bystanders, including a couple of soccer players and three elderly joggers, had tried to join the VFLPA.

For those interested in football statistics, David is 34 years old, 183cm (6ft. 4in.) tall and weighs 86kg (194st.).

Erica is 22.17cm (8ft. 10in. and 54kg (12st.). And naturally.

VFLPA T-shirts were printed. Players would joke about them, but the T-shirts became something of a symbol of the early days. Players were encouraged to wear their T-shirts to club training on Sunday mornings.

There were many frustrations. Some delegates faced relatively hostile and uncooperative clubs, other clubs were ambivalent and, in the case of Hawthorn, very supportive.

Ray Ball was the South Melbourne delegate. He was struggling to get players to join. One evening, when players were receiving payment in cash in the typical little brown pay envelope from a window not unlike a ticket-seller's, he stood and collected \$5 from each player.

"They handed it over," he recalls. "Most were happy to. But they weren't sure what it was all for."

The VFLPA were also frustrated in their efforts to gain recognition from the VFL. There were positives and negatives in this. When the Players' Association met Eric McCutchan on May 9, not much happened. They talked about matters such as insurance and McCutchan expressed his intention to inform the VFL of the discussions, but there was no hint of the VFL agreeing to a formal relationship.

When the players heard of this they were unimpressed.

The VFLPA executive, young footballers really, and inexperienced in industrial relations and the workings of the world, looked for advice. Geoff and Swan met with Ron Jordan who was on the Victorian Trades Council, to talk about matters such as the constitution of a union. When they walked into the grand old building in Carlton, they walked into the world of the worker, where things were seen, unselfconsciously and without fear, from the workers' perspective.

They invited Ron to a delegates' meeting on July 30 which turned out to rather lively.

It was beneficial for delegates to hear from an official of his experience, to give them a point of comparison with those who lived within the mainstream – predominantly conservative – consciousness.

The son of legendary Trades Hall secretary Mick Jordan, Ron was steeped in Labor history.

"I've been in the Labor Party since I was six weeks old," he told the gathering.

He'd had roles with the Miscellaneous Workers' Union and the Grocers' Union.

Ron loved footy. He had played for Coburg Amateurs. He was a very keen Essendon supporter - and a fan of Geoff Pryor.

"At Swan's place, I could see how keen they were," he remembers. "And they had a pretty good idea of what they wanted to be and where they wanted to go. They just had to develop a strategy to get there. I told them a few simple things; general things really. Firstly, they needed to have every player. All in. Once it's all in you can have an effect. And that was going to be very difficult. Players didn't understand. Most were young blokes. '*What's this about a union?*' they'd say. They had to be made to realise why you *had* to be in it."

The VFLPA was experiencing the age-old problem of organised labour: explaining to workers what a union can do, and why solidarity is so important.

Ron also told them to be patient.

"Don't go out too quick too early," he warned. "You'll blow yourself up. Be careful. Don't use the big stick. Keep that for later."

The old hand Ron Jordan could see how inexperienced the players were. But he was impressed with those driving it, and with the president.

"Geoff Pryor was a good bloke. He was in it for the right reasons," he observed, "which you don't get very often, even in the union movement."

The association needed to get their message to players and to explain issues from their own perspective rather than in the newspapers of the day where stories were compiled by the football media, rather than general news reporters or industrial relations specialists. These were not just football stories.

They began to produce a newsletter which had an immediate impact. More players joined so that financial membership got to 200 and was growing.

When Geoff Pryor wrote to Braham Dabscheck on June 14, he was quietly pleased with the progress, but realistic as well. He understood the VFL's approach to it all. "I believe the League Directors are happy to let us play with our toys, but they'll get upset if we tread on toes. Hope we can do this reasonably soon."

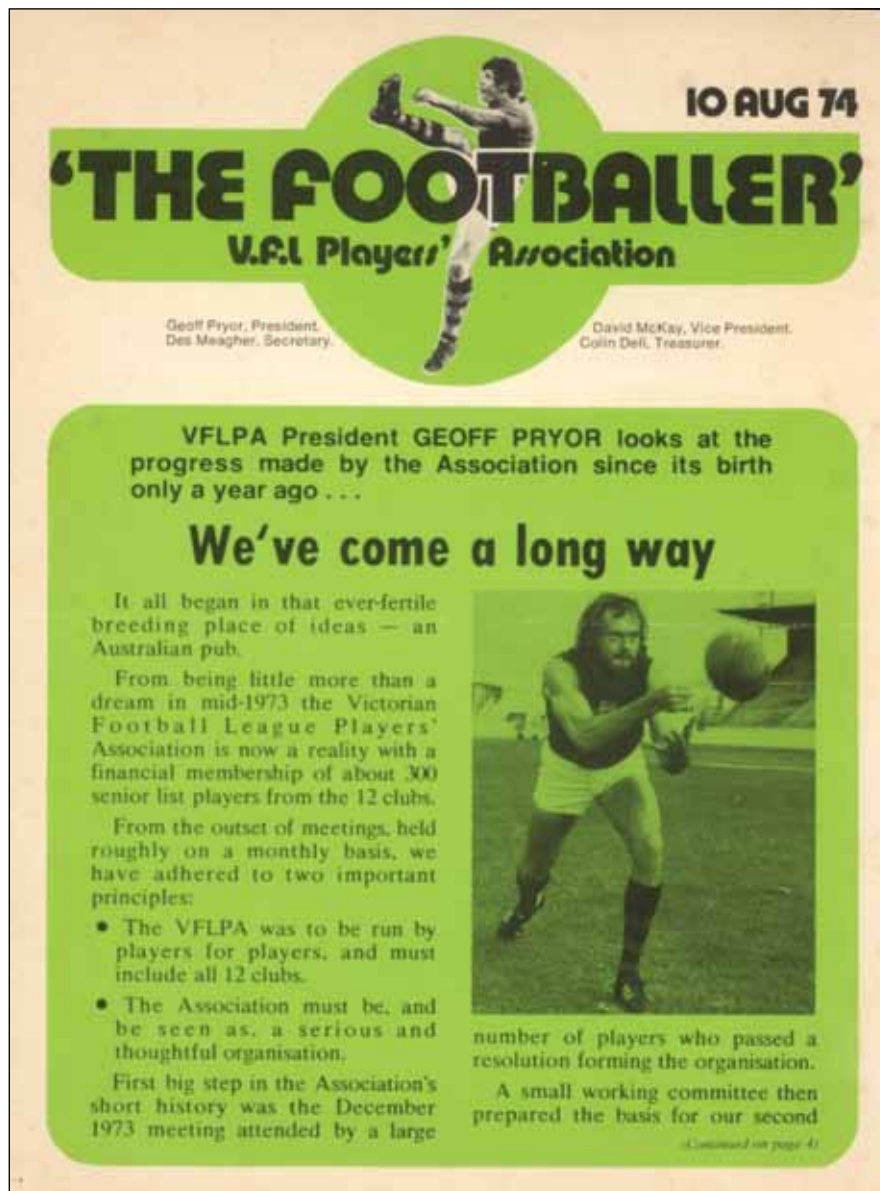
He was pleased with the emergence of young talent – presumably Swan. He just wanted to find a way of swelling player support.

Significantly, they decided a magazine would help the cause. The first edition of *The Footballer* came out in August. Initially, copies were distributed to all players, and to clubs.

Ron Jordan helped to get the magazine off the ground.

Bob Parsonage was a young journalist at *The Age*. For a while he covered Trades Hall Council meetings where he met Ron. Bob was also a passionate Essendon supporter and, by coincidence, they stood not far from each other at Windy Hill.

Bob was invited to produce *The Footballer*, a job he did until the late 1970s by which time it had grown from four to 36 pages. He worked closely with Swan McKay to compile it and wrote some of the stories himself.



The main story of the first edition was entitled 'We've come a long way' by Geoff Pryor who wrote: "It all began in that ever-fertile breeding place of ideas – an Australian pub." And then went on to explain what happened.

The catalyst for this first edition was an imminent meeting with the VFL over their intention to abolish the 'Ten Year Rule'. The VFLPA was vehemently against repealing it, and distributed a press release condemning the proposal. The VFL went ahead. Geoff Pryor had friends in high places. He explained the situation to Deputy Prime Minister, Dr Jim Cairns, and to Minister for Labor and Immigration, Clyde Cameron. Cameron sent a telegram to Geoff condemning the lack of consultation with players and labelling it 'cavalier'. The telegram was tabled at the July 30 meeting.

The Players' Association moved quickly. They sought talks with the VFL. They were to be held on August 19. The catalyst for the first edition of *The Footballer* was the need to inform all players of what had happened and of their representatives' strong stance against it.

It explained the resolution passed at the July 30 meeting which read:

This meeting of the VFL Players' Association, having considered the reports of our officers, express our deepest concern at the undemocratic attitude taken by the VFL Directors in rescinding the 10-year automatic clearance rule... This dictatorial action taken by the clubs without consultation with this Association is a retrograde step and is unacceptable to our members.

The players were invited to attend the meeting which was to be chaired by Justice Robinson. However, it did not go ahead in the format suggested. Instead, the VFLPA representatives – Geoff Pryor, David McKay and Des Meagher – met a sub-committee of the VFL which was made up of Allan Hird (vice-president of the League), Eric McCutchan, Graham Huggins, Albert Mantello and Anthony Capes.

“Hird tried to dismiss us,” Geoff says. “Nothing had changed with him.”

It was a very frosty meeting,” Swan chuckles. “Geoff said, ‘You have to recognise who we are. We have a right to exist and we are not going away.’ He was strong.”

Des Meagher came out of VFL House shaking his head. “Geoff,” he said, “I didn’t know you could talk so much.”

The second edition of *The Footballer* was produced to let the broader playing collective know what had happened. The front page headline read ‘We meet League chiefs’. The central message was that the VFL sub-committee was not willing to reverse its decision, nor had progress been made on just about any issue. However, it was prepared to meet the VFLPA “on any matter it thought worthy of discussion by the VFL.”

The VFL still had the power to decide on an issue’s worthiness.

McCutchan’s return letter was also quoted. The League requested a copy of the VFLPA Constitution,


21 SEPT 74

**‘THE FOOTBALLER’**  
V.F.L. Players’ Association

Geoff Pryor, President.  
Des Meagher, Secretary.

David McKay, Vice President.  
Colin Dell, Treasurer.

**WE MEET LEAGUE CHIEFS**



President Geoff Pryor (left), secretary Des Meagher (centre), and vice-president David McKay look over the first issue of ‘The Footballer’ before meeting with the VFL sub-committee.

Delegates of the Victorian Football League Players’ Association met for the first time with a League sub-committee at VFL House on August 16.

The Association was represented by president Geoff Pryor, vice-president David McKay and secretary Des Meagher.

The VFL sub-committee comprised Mr E. O. McCutchan (administrative director), Mr A. Hird (Essendon), Mr G. Huggins (St. Kilda), Mr A. Mantello (North Melbourne) and Mr A. Capes (Footscray).

A meeting with delegates of the 12 League clubs (announced in the newsletter, Aug. 10) to have been held on August 19 was called off following Mr McCutchan’s request for talks with the Association.

Several issues concerning the Association, including the abolition of the 10-year rule, were discussed with the sub-committee.

Full report on page 2.



the number of financial members, and the number of players the VFLPA "purports to represent."

It was not outright recognition but, according to Braham Dabscheck it had some impact. The events of 1974 sent a message to the players, the clubs, the VFL, and the fans, that footy really was on the path to professionalism.

## 1975 Gareth Andrews

Geoff Pryor could not continue playing for Essendon from Canberra. It was too difficult. With the end of his footy career came the end of his direct involvement in the VFLPA.

Shortly before relinquishing the presidency, he wrote to Braham Dabcheck again expressing his concern for the direction of football in Victoria, and about the reactionary nature of the VFL generally.

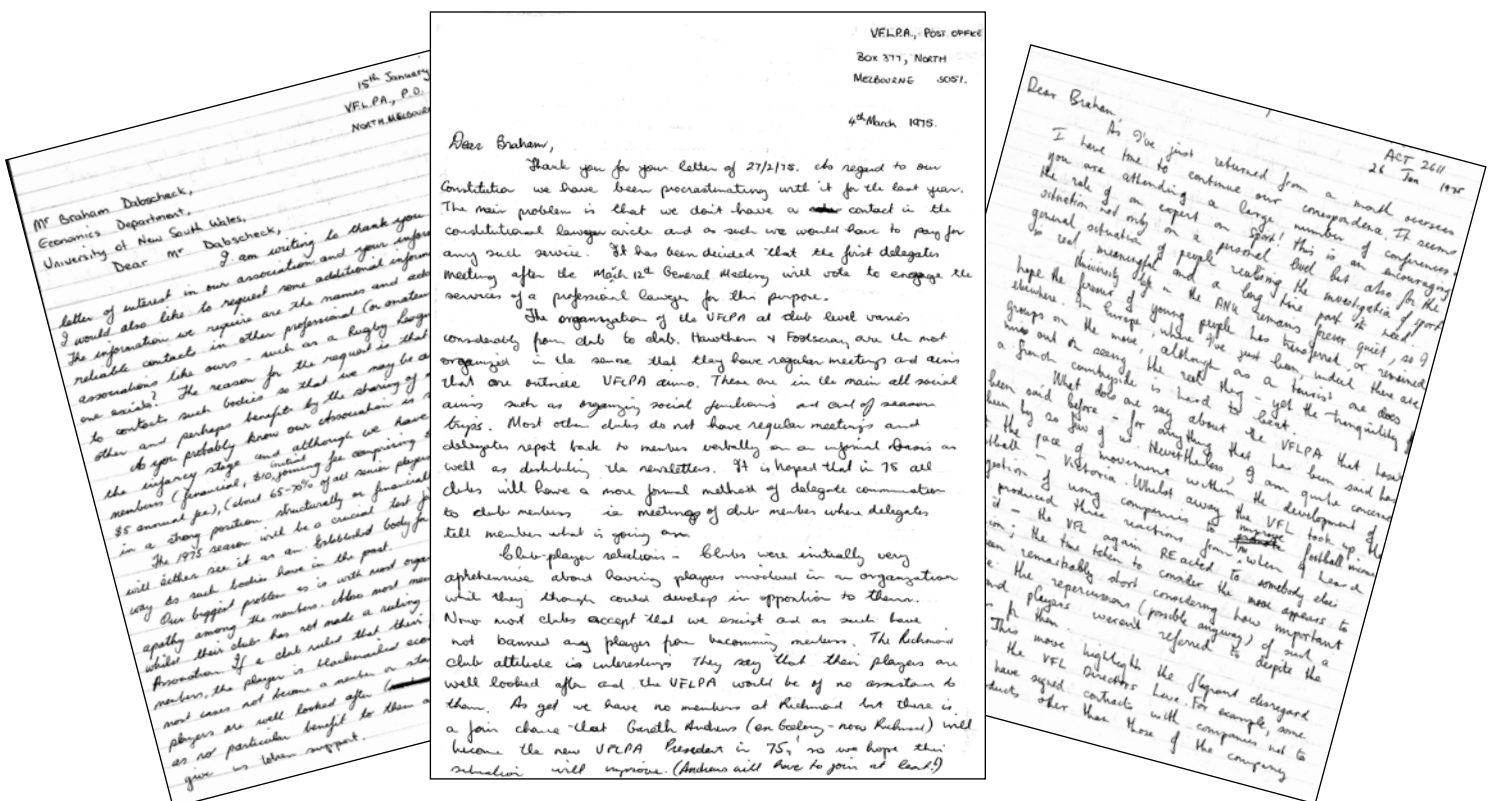
He was also concerned with the prospect of sponsorship from businesses. The VFLPA had already opposed the proposed use of sponsor logos on footy jumpers. Channel 7 and the ABC held a similar view that if logos were on jumpers they would refuse to broadcast footy. It was a position which showed how little they understood about the commercial possibilities of professional sport. Geoff wrote:

If this present move to take money directly from the Companies goes ahead, then it seems to me the professional [era] will come quickly, and with it the placement of 'playing' into a working environment, so that players will be much more serious in their attitudes towards conditions.

They were wise words and a prophetic reading of what was to transpire, it just took a long time to achieve. Players were slow to realise their position.

David McKay also corresponded with Braham:

[The VFLPA's] biggest problem is apathy among the members. Also, most members are only members whilst their club has not made a ruling about membership of our Association.





He admitted that, if faced with the threat of “economic blackmail” from their club, most players would not remain members of the Association.

But Geoff was hopeful. In his final report he acknowledged the progress the VFLPA had made through 1974:

Our first year has been successful. We have 300 financial members. Therefore the VFLPA is representative of players and deals with the matters which concern players... Finally [however] one year of development means nothing unless it is used as a step to further growth.

The responsibility fell to Gareth Andrews who, after a year behind the scenes, returned to the VFLPA and was elected president. He had played in the 1974 premiership with Richmond, satisfying an important personal ambition.

During 1975 the VFLPA continued to develop in its main initiatives: to get as many players involved as they could; to continue to educate the players; to continue to develop their own understanding of how they could have an impact; to build funds so they could afford to pay for administrative support; to show the football public the purpose and nature of the Association.

“What we were after was simply ‘Respect,’” Gareth explains. “Clubs did not respect players and we were going to do all we could to make sure that they did.”

Gareth was an effective spokesman. He had access to the newspapers. He was often sought out for comment and his articles in *The Footballer* were reproduced in the press, sometimes word for word. His response to Sir Maurice Nathan’s VFL Annual Dinner speech was published in *Inside Football* under the heading ‘Andrews blasts VFL’.

# Andrews blasts VFL

**Further to the Annual Report, which I only briefly summarised, I mentioned that I had read the Full Text of Sir Maurice Nathan's VFL Annual Dinner Speech, which had been printed in INSIDE FOOTBALL.**

I quoted Sir Maurice:—  
“The folk heroes of yesterday are now rapidly losing their image.

“Players no longer play for love of club. Club loyalty is at a discount.

“Clubs are being exploited by players who have an insatiable appetite for money.”

To me, this is another example of the VFL living in the past.

It is unrealistic to compare the type of loyalty associated with football two and three decades earlier to the loyalty in today's professional era of football.

It is a whole new ball game. There is a new professionalism in sport throughout the world and in business throughout the world.

What was good for yesterday's football need not be good for today's.

The club is still bigger than the individual — this is the point we must never forget.

It is up to the clubs to become more professional in their approach to team-building.

Players can be bought and sold through aggressive and professional negotiation.

**VFL Players Association immediate past president, Gareth Andrews, slams Sir Maurice Nathan's comments on the VFL players and their club loyalty.**

Weak clubs can become strong if they make the effort. This is good for football.

A footballer can then become just as loyal to his new club as he was with his old.

It is in every players' interest to play well in a successful club.

If he is not loyal to his club, then this will show in his perfor-

mance and this, in turn, will quickly show in his pay packet.

Also with this new age of professionalism, there is a new responsibility being shown by players.

Sir Maurice did not mention this in his speech.

He did not mention the establishment of the VFL Players Association which was formed to represent the players as a body and has, as one of its aims, the promotion and advancement of Australian Rules Football. Surely this is worth mentioning.

I think that it is therefore worth putting Sir Maurice's speech in perspective.

It was completely negative and showed a complete lack of responsibility towards a cause which he should be promoting — the cause of Australian Rules.

Surely an Annual Dinner, with the promise of a wonderful season of football ahead of us, is not time to be providing a public slap in the face to the lifeblood of the game — its players.

We refute his remarks in their entirety.



“Clubs are being exploited by players who have an insatiable appetite for money,” Nathan had said.

Gareth responded: “We refute his remarks in their entirety. With this new age of professionalism there is a new responsibility being shown by players.”

During the season the VFLPA Constitution was finalised (with the help of law firm Morris Komesaroff Aarons & Co) and signed by the delegates.

We, the undersigned agree to become members of the Association  
and approve and accept and agree to be bound by the foregoing  
rules:

Gareth Anderson 14/5/75

Dermot Doyle 14/5/75

R. Smith 14/5/75

Col. O'Connell 14/5/75

R. Montgomery 14/5/75

M. O'Connell 14/5/75

Greg Diller 14/5/75

Paul O'Connell 15 May 1975

Paul O'Connell 14/5/75

Kevin M. Higgins 18/6/75

Clark 14/5/75

G. R. O'Connell 18/6/75

Ross O'Connell 14/5/75

P. O'Connell

Stan O'Connell 14/5/75

P. B. O'Connell

Mike O'Connell 14/5/75

Pat O'Connell

Mike O'Connell 14/5/75

P. B. O'Connell 14/5/75

P. O'Connell

David McKay 14/5/75

The Association was continuing to develop an understanding of its function and its approach. John O'Brien, a Melbourne solicitor, briefed the May meeting which was also attended by Braham Dabscheck. According to the minutes, much of the discussion centred on:

- Restraint of trade and the Restrictive Trade Practices Act;
- Validity of VFL rules in the legal sense – e.g., clearances;
- Who is a worker? Buckley v Tutty; Taxation Department case; and
- Workers' compensation and partial or total disabilities.

Clearly the VFLPA were becoming increasingly aware of their situation in terms of industrial relations. But they were only just building an understanding of their own. How could they convey that to a reticent playing group?

Some players could not be engaged. "The high profile players weren't really interested," Swan remembers. "They had no reason to be. They were doing very well."

It would have been helpful to have them support the VFLPA openly and publicly.

The VFLPA received good publicity through its Most Valuable Player Award decided by the vote of the players themselves. In the first year, 1975, it was won by Alex Jesaulenko.

There was a relatively successful meeting with six representatives of the VFL in July. "We got a much better hearing than I thought we were going to," Gareth remembers. "We went through a number of issues and they responded to each one."

That was something.

Gareth's presidency ended on his retirement as a player.

He felt he had followed through on what he and Geoff had begun.

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## 1976-77 Don Scott

**D**ON SCOTT BECAME PRESIDENT of the VFLPA in early 1976. "When Gareth Andrews and Ray Smith asked me, I was honoured," he says. "Honoured to serve my fellow-players."

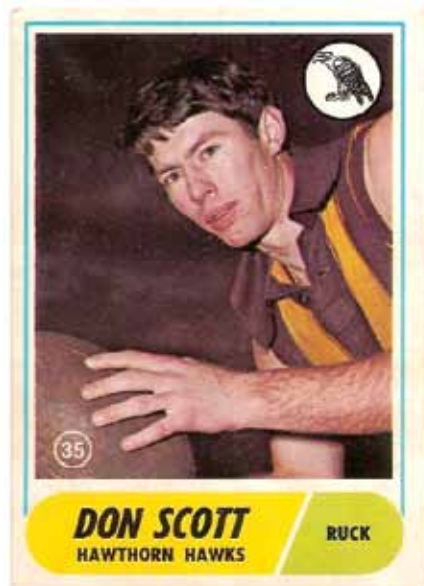
As a tough, confrontational ruckman, Don gave everything. Blokes followed him. It was a style he brought to aspects of his leadership of the VFLPA. Michael Moncrieff, who became president himself in the early 1980s, remembers Don thumping the table at VFL headquarters so hard "that Jack Hamilton's papers were propelled into the air."

Don was colourful, flamboyant, and sometimes divisive. He had the best interests of the players at heart.

Bob Parsonage had never met Don before he went to visit him in his Camberwell Junction menswear store to talk about *The Footballer*. When Bob knocked on the door, Don was sitting in a swivel chair facing away. He swung around and slapped the newspaper he was holding.

"Jesus Christ, have a fuckin' look at this," he exclaimed. His divorce was all over the front page of *The Sun*.

But there were elements of his character and style which defied the stereotypical image of him. He had become involved in the players' association as a delegate because he was concerned for the blokes on



the bottom half of the list. The demands on their time were increasing, they were copping a fair physical belting, and they weren't being paid much.

He had grown up in a home where Labor values prevailed. His father, Doug, a secondary teacher, was active in the teachers' union.

"Dad was often on the phone, talking things through with officials and colleagues," Don remembers.

His paternal grandfather was a plumber. "He loved talking politics with Dad," Don says. "He was no fan of B.A. Santamaria I can tell you."

So when Bob Hawke accepted the invitation to be guest speaker at the AGM of the VFLPA in March 1976 Don understood the significance of his ACTU role.

**MR BOB HAWKE addresses the VFL Players' Association meeting last night.**

The Sun, Friday, March 26, 1976—Page 83

## Players get top backing

By BOB CRIMEEN

**THE VFL Players' Association has the pledged support of Australia's No. 1 union man — ACTU president Bob Hawke.**

Mr. Hawke told last night's meeting of the two-year-old association that he and his colleagues would help "in any way".

But he stressed that he was not advocating the association's involvement with the trade union movement.

"If at any time a point arises in respect of which my experience, or the experience of my colleagues, could assist, you only have to ask and it would be forthcoming," Mr. Hawke said.

"I emphasise that we would do this without any commitment or involvement by you in the trade union movement."

Later, answering a question from North Melbourne ruck-rover Brent Crosswell, Mr. Hawke said:

"I don't want to suggest that you become a bunch of wild firebrands or radicals."

"But, I would like my affiliated associations to have the power you fellows have."

"You have an enormous amount of power... it's incredible."

Earlier, both Mr. Hawke and retiring association president Gareth Andrews, lashed VFL president Sir Maurice Nisbett, for his comments on player allegiance and money demands at last Friday night's VFL annual dinner.

On a statement by Sir Maurice that players "had an insatiable appetite for money," Mr. Hawke said:

"I thought that was surprising coming from a man, who is a millionaire."

Mr. Andrews said the VFL didn't seem to realise that football in 1976 wasn't "the football of the 1940's."

"It's professional football," he said.

### BOLTA'S GIFT A REAL BOLTER

**ADELAIDE. — Victorian stayer Bolta's Gift stormed to a seven-length victory in the \$10,500 national greyhound distance championship at Angle Park last night.**

Sunderland Mink, from NSW, ran on gamely to beat Queensland champion Rabbits Glen by a length for second.

Bolta's Gift, 6-4 favorite, ran the 731 metres in 44.46 which was only 6.10 sec. outside the track record established by Corcoran two years ago.

Dugby Court, which started 1-4 second favorite, lost his position after going 100 metres, but ran on gamely for fourth.

Durand's Scholar failed to flatten at any stage.

Bolta's Gift has now landed three major events in the past three months. She was second in the \$10,000 Roy Moulden Memorial at Sandown Park and the \$3000 Spring Cup at Angle Park.

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The difficulty was to develop the expertise to have a significant impact. A key part of that understanding was to learn to utilise the power of the collective.

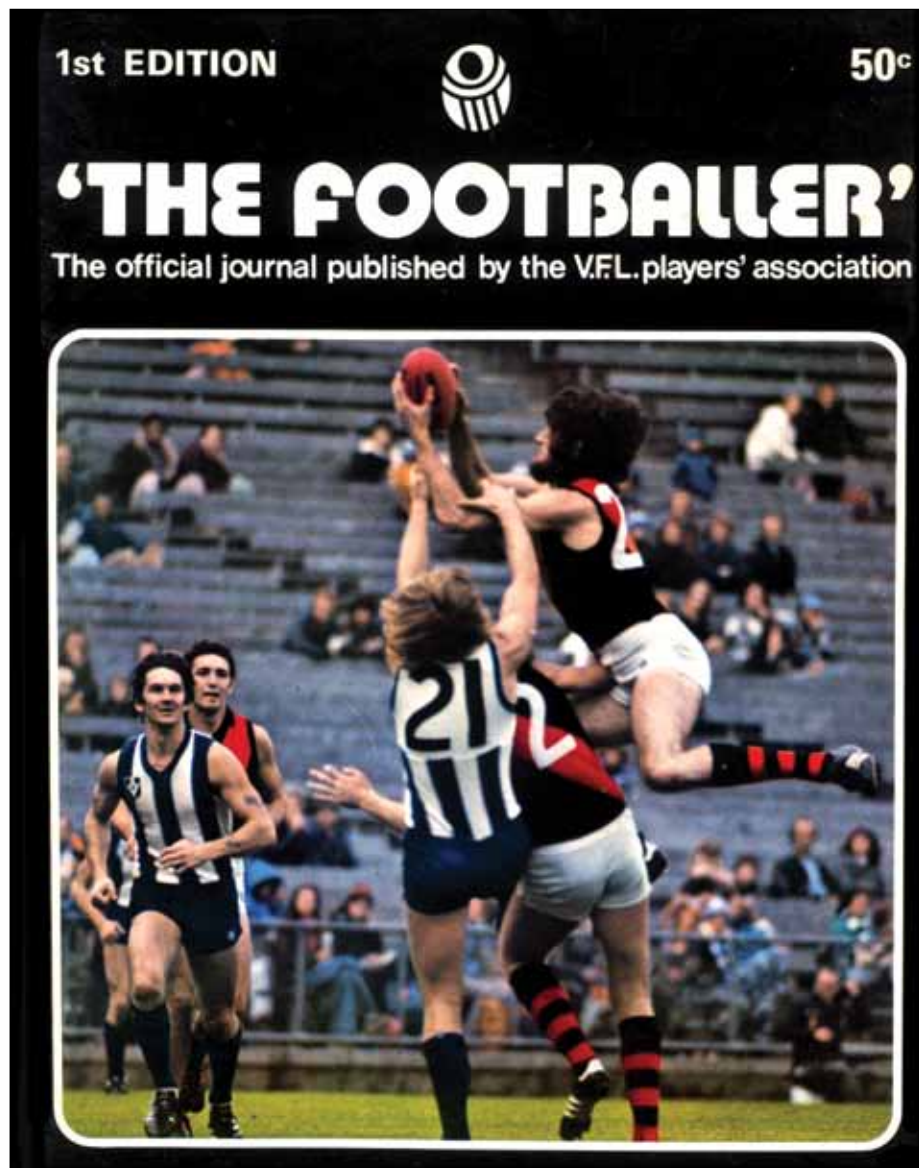
Braham Dabscheck continued to communicate with the executive; and continued to push the idea that they faced issues not of football but of industrial relations. He encouraged them to look at how labour was organised in other industries, and how professional sportspeople were organised in other parts of the world.

Braham wrote an important paper which presented the story of the formation of the VFLPA and the issues it faced. Titled 'Industrial Relations and Professional Team Sports in Australia' it was published in the March 1976 edition of *The Journal of Industrial Relations*. He sent copies to the VFLPA, no doubt hoping they might benefit from reading it. He barracked for St Kilda, but he also barracked for the players, and more broadly, for justice in the workplace. A long paper, it concluded with encouraging words:

At this stage it is not clear what will be the nature of the collective bargaining relationship established between the VFL and the VFLPA...What is clear, however, is that a relationship will be established, and in all likelihood that the VFLPA will start to press for substantive concessions from the VFL.

He was very confident. He was sure the players had the law on their side.

Don Scott also took heart when, after being part of Harry Beitzel's international touring team in 1978, he visited Manchester to talk with local players and their association. "They couldn't believe how Australian



footballers were treated,” Don says, referring to the transfer system, and the absence of contracts.

Equally, Don couldn’t believe what the English footballers had managed to achieve.

They were so well-organised... they were treated as professional players and they treated each other as professional players. They had an award outlining payment and conditions. They were paid injury costs. They had an apprenticeship scheme.

Don was encouraged. “It gave me confidence,” he says. “I knew we just had to keep working.”

The VFLPA had a long way to go. There were improvements in minor matters: car parking, access to tickets, the establishing of crèche facilities. Which was at least something.

However, a little progress was being made in the crucial areas as well, even if decisions took a long time. Qualification for the provident fund went from a minimum of five years service and fifty games to five years or fifty games. There were numerous proposals to the League regarding match payments and for insurance coverage, but these were often tentative agreements which were stalled at the level of discussion. The deal was not done.

“The VFL were treading very carefully,” says Braham Dabscheck, “They were playing the players on a long rope.”

The VFLPA still needed funds. It needed more members to pay more fees so it could pay people to work more time to advance the cause.

The VFLPA had one part-time administrator, John Webb. They needed alternative revenue streams. *The Footballer* was made into a 36-page magazine which had a wider circulation to newsagents and attracted advertisers. It remained a way for players to convey their position while offering fans a glance into their lives.

The VFLPA also suggested a state of origin match between Western Australian born and Victorian-born players to raise funds for the association. The idea was eventually taken up by the League.

There was some support from the media. HSV7 offered the VFLPA time on its sports shows. Print journalists like Geoff Poulter, Bill Cannon and Trevor Grant appeared sympathetic to their cause.

But still there was an enormous amount to be done.

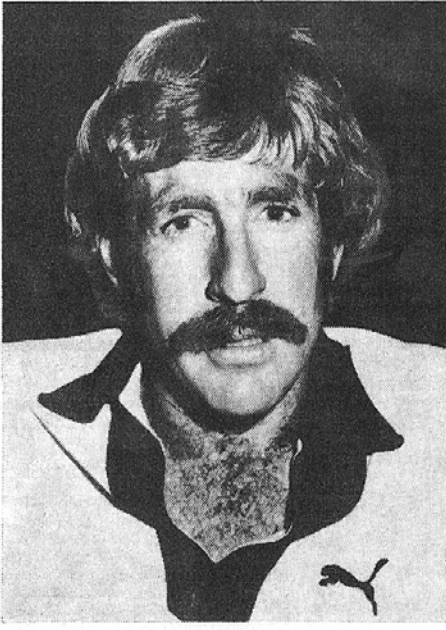
Des Meagher was one who had put in the hard work. But he was retiring. Don thanked him publicly for his contribution.

“We needed more Des Meaghers,” Don says, on reflection. “Des Meagher was a radical thinker. He was an elder statesman and was highly respected. He had so many qualities. He was radical because he could think beyond himself. In football most fellows don’t think about the bigger picture. They haven’t learnt how to think about the bigger picture. That hasn’t changed.”

The VFLPA needed expertise, and something which gave the players the fire in the belly.







## Arbitration scheme is Ron's next target

By JIM MAIN

**The Victorian Football League Players Association is six years old and well over its growing pains.**

The association held its sixth annual meeting on Monday night and president, Fitzroy ruckman Ron Alexander, said he felt the association was moving at a tremendous pace.

He said: "We seem to have achieved so much yet there seems so much more work to do."

"But the signs are good. We now are an accepted part of football and the VFL recognises us and works with us."

"In fact, Dr. Allen Aylett (VFL president) said he looked forward to discussions with us."

"He feels the meetings are constructive for the players and for football."

Alexander said he was proud of the association's achievements and listed them to emphasise their importance.

"We have had players pay-ments increased and that itself is of basic importance."

"We have had an insurance scheme for players running successfully for a season."

"We have a players' magazine and we generally seem to be bettering the benefits and image of players."

Although Alexander feels the association can be proud of its achievements there will be no resting on laurels.

The association has definite aims for the next few seasons and intends to push hard for their ambitions.

### SECURITY

For example, its insurance scheme will operate for the next two seasons at least and Alexander feels this is vitally important.

"The players know that if injuries prevent them from doing their normal jobs they are covered."

"That means a lot in terms of security."

The association also plans to affiliate with an arbitration scheme so that a third party can settle possible disputes.

"Problems might arise and it would be good to know that an independent arbitrator can settle the matter," Alexander said.

The association also wants players to be aware of taxation problems, and is making every effort to inform its members.

"We had a taxation consultant address the members at the annual meeting and I am sure it was of tremendous benefit to those present."

The association now is looking for a sponsor and believes it can offer a good deal.

"We can wear the sponsors name on T-shirts and bags and that gives the sponsor some benefit."

"And it would help us financially. We are growing all the time and we even are planning a players association in Western Australia."

"I went to Perth with administrative manager John Webb last weekend and we look like getting started there."

"We certainly are on the move."

AUSTRALIAN 28 MARCH 79

RON Alexander... "We have achieved so much."

AUSTRALIAN 28 MARCH 79

## 1978-79 Ron Alexander

**W**HEN DON SCOTT STOOD DOWN from the presidency at the beginning of the 1978 season there was no shortage of nominations for the role:

- R. Galt
- S. Gull
- R. Alexander
- W. Schimmelbusch
- G. Southby
- D. McKay

After delegates took the nominations to their members and the votes were tallied by the administrator, Fitzroy delegate Ron Alexander was elected.

Ron came from a family with strong sense of social responsibility. His grandfather, Alphonses Maurice O'Connor, an Irish immigrant, became Inspector of Police in Western Australia. His mother Ilene was a brilliant student who left school at fifteen to become a nursing sister. She was totally dedicated. Her two brothers Brian and Ray played senior football for East Perth. Ray went on to be premier of Western Australia.

An outstanding ruckman at East Perth, Ron was recruited to Fitzroy in 1976. He immediately felt the demands of the increasingly professional approach.

At a time when only the stars were well-paid, there were more training sessions, more games – including night games and the prospect of Sunday games- more meetings and more media commitments. Ron was married and had two young daughters, with a third child on the way. He was also trying to complete a Bachelor of Education as a full-time student. At times the club would ask him to do extra promotions such as flying to Sydney with Bernie Quinlan to promote a game against Richmond.

Injuries also had an impact. They had an impact on players' work which in turn put financial pressure on them. "The demands placed on footballers were affecting family life," Ron says.

Players felt the VFL was generating more and more revenue and that players were entitled to what was reasonable for the hours and the effort.

“This was never about greed, or an appeal for money,” Ron says. “It was about what was fair.”

Ron Alexander met with VFL president Allen Aylett and administrator Jack Hamilton.

“They were capable people. Good people,” he says. “But they were a little affronted. They thought they wanted what was best for the players, and they thought they knew what was best for the players, but they didn’t really understand the pressures on players at that time. They wondered why the players would need representation at all.”

That was certainly reflected in North Melbourne’s position. Aylett and Ron Joseph did not want North players to be part of the Association. They made that clear. “The Committee of this club,” wrote administrator Ron Joseph in a strongly worded letter to the VFLPA, “devote their almost undivided attention to the welfare of our Players. We do not intend to either encourage or discourage our Players from joining your organisation. This Club has no axe to grind with the Association, but I suggest that you organise your own talks and the collection of your own membership fees.”

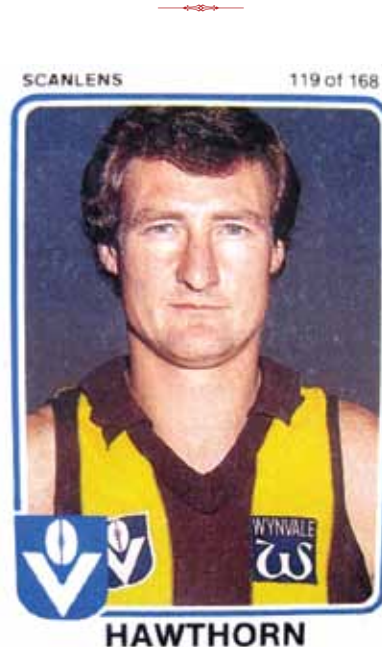


Mordy Bromberg, a fringe player at St Kilda, was a law student at Monash University. He knew players were getting a poor deal. He calculated that, with four days training, plus a game, he was making about \$2 per hour. Interested in industrial relations law, he became the St Kilda delegate. In one meeting he held with the players, coach Alex Jesaulenko came in, uninvited, and stared him down. He also felt pressure from president Lindsay Fox. “I shouldn’t have been a delegate,” he recalls. “I was so young. But, at the same time, it was obvious to me that it was only through collective representation that players could improve their circumstances.”

Interestingly, it was this pressure which helped Mordy fashion his views on the right of people to freely associate. Mordy went on to have a significant career as an industrial relations barrister who was to influence the impact of the AFL Players’ Association in the early 1990s. He is now a Supreme Court judge.

But like all those involved in the late 1970s, he could see how difficult it was going to be. The top players were employing managers and looking after themselves; the bottom half of the list weren't thinking beyond the next game. "We were united," Mordy says, of those battlers, "but we were also competing for the same spots in the side."

Still the players needed to find a way of genuinely pulling together.



## *1980 and beyond – Michael Moncrieff and the major turning point*

**M**ICHAEL MONCRIEFF had kicked a lot of goals for the successful Hawthorn club. He also had an Accounting degree from Swinburne University and was a financial advisor. He became involved in the VFLPA in the tradition of Hawthorn players and was elected president in 1980.

He sensed immediately that the association needed a (near) full-time administrator. They appointed Peter Allen of Image Sports, a Melbourne Sports Marketing Consultancy. Allen would serve as the administrator for almost two decades.

After reading an article in the press about the tenuous position of the players, barrister Bryan Roberts, who had represented various employee bodies in disputes, became interested in the VFLPA. He chatted with former Hawks player, Ray Wilson, a friend of Don Scott, indicating his willingness to help where he could.

Len Coysh, who had a Master of Economics in Industrial Relations, was manager of the Australian Federation of Air Pilots. He had successfully carried out negotiations on behalf of the pilots and had, at times, asked Bryan to act on their behalf.

Having worked effectively together before, they formulated a proposal to represent the VFLPA's interests. They offered to prepare submissions and applications, and legal and industrial relations advice.

They knew what they were doing.

Their appointment raised a few eyebrows at VFL House. "Senior football officials fear increased confrontation between clubs and players following recent changes in the VFL Players' Association administration," wrote Mike Sheahan in *The Herald*.

Jack Hamilton noted the change: "I think we have entered into a different sort of relationship."

Bryan and Len proved invaluable from the outset. Roberts knew the law, and he knew the players were in a strong position.

Player wages had increased during the late 1970s. The wage bill was having an impact on the clubs, in what became known as a period of 'football inflation'.

The clubs were crying poor, campaigning for cuts.

Throughout the 1980 season the players pushed for an independent wages board. The VFL did not want that. They wanted control. The Department of Labor and Industry in the Coalition Government ruled against the idea of a board.

The VFL got involved further.

They proposed significant wage cuts with a new system of payment to players under Rule 11. The players were not consulted. They weren't happy.

Jack Hamilton told Michael Moncrieff he would hear the players' position at a meeting, eventually scheduled for December 10.

When they arrived, Moncrieff, Roberts and Croysh were kept waiting outside until Ralph Lane came out. He referred to notes jotted on a napkin or toilet paper.

"We were hanging around for over an hour," Bryan remembers, "Until Lane appeared. Then he basically said, 'We don't recognise you, we'll never recognise you. We won't meet you, we'll never meet you.'"

Moncrieff was livid. He defended the rights of the players very strongly. He told *The Age*:

[The VFL] has emerged as a highly centralised dictatorial wage-fixing body which completely disregards the right of the individual to deal with his employer... This arrogant attitude cannot be allowed to continue... the time has come to sort out this matter once and for all – and that we will do.

The VFL were not going to budge.

"The directors and presidents voted unanimously not to receive the deputation from the Players' Association," Jack Hamilton told *The Age*.

Reporter Trevor Grant concluded: "The League has decided to take a stand against what it believe to be a growing militancy."



As the three men walked into the street Bryan said, "Accept this and we might as well shut the Association up and go home."

They went straight to his office and typed out a notice of meeting for the VFLPA on December 14. At that meeting, the delegates resolved to implement:

- A ban on the playing of all Sunday football in Season 1981.
- A complete ban on all inter-club games played interstate.
- A refusal to participate in the Escort Cup Championship matches.
- A thorough examination of all aspects of the current VFL Rules be undertaken.

The VFL's attacking move back-fired completely. Finally the players were united in their opposition to VFL House. They didn't like the VFL's wages proposal and they would not be treated with such disdain.

Bryan knew it was the moment to shore up player support. Over the next weeks he organised meetings with the clubs – players, administrators, board members.

Fitzroy and Essendon were the two key clubs. They were to play the opening match of the Escort Cup on March 7.

The Essendon players were strong. Young coach Kevin Sheedy admired the VFLPA and was very supportive.

When Ron Alexander called the players together in Fitzroy's gym, officials reacted. They tried to stop the meeting. "Hold that door," Ron said to Chris Smith. They weren't going to budge the centre half-back.

The sense of solidarity spread. It was all in. Bryan got to South Melbourne on a Sunday night. The boys had made every effort to quench their thirst that evening. He explained the situation and the reason the players should join in.

"Yeah, mate," said Colin Hounsell, "but what are you gunna do for the country boys?"

At cash-strapped Footscray, a club official yelled at Bryan: "You are trying to destroy clubs like us."

St Kilda players were unable to meet at their club. Delegate Phil Stevens, a teacher, gathered the boys at his local school. They committed.

A further meeting was held with Essendon and Fitzroy players. They had not changed their position.

By mid-February, with the players resolute, the VFL knew that unless it met with their representatives, the ban would go ahead. With two days to go the VFL were forced to change their position. They met with the Players' Association and reached an agreement. They would negotiate further over the various issues of concern to the players including Rule 11. The Escort Cup match went ahead.

The VFLPA was recognised.

"It was the turning point," Bryan Roberts says.

\* Page 72—The Sun, Thursday, March 5, 1981

# BAN IS OFF

By MICHAEL DAVIS

## VFL agrees to meet players

**THE** threat of a ban on Saturday night's Escort Championship match by players was averted last night when VFL directors agreed to meet representatives of the Players' Association.

Last night's move is a complete about face by directors since they turned away a VFL players' Association delegation from their meeting on December 19 last year.

At that time the VFL directors refused to recognise the association as a negotiating body because the delegates retained professional representation.

A fortnight ago directors agreed to authorise Dr Aylett and Mr Hamilton to meet association members in discussion matters of player welfare but only if they were registered VFL footballers.

Association president Michael Moncrieff reacted sharply to that move and said the association had a right to retain professional representation.

Mr Hamilton said last night: "There are no doubts to the number of representatives but, no date has been fixed."

After the meeting he contacted Moncrieff at a private dinner party to advise him of the VFL board's decision.

Moncrieff will be talking with Mr Hamilton again this morning and a suitable date for a meeting will be arranged.

"We've met their demands that discussions take place. The question of a ban on Saturday's game should not be applicable now because we have agreed to meet them," Mr Hamilton said.

"Certainly by the decision tonight, we have now met the players' wishes on this matter."

The closed association delegation agreed to meet directors on December 19 to put its case on the VFL's rule 11 relating to payments to players.

Mr Hamilton said a meeting would probably be arranged for next week.

When the delegation was turned away from the VFL boardroom a subsequent meeting of Players' Association delegates voted to impose bans on all but Saturday games and away matches in 1981.





*Justin Madden addresses the media after a meeting of players in 1993*

## POSTSCRIPT

### *Strength to strength*

**M**UCH HAS HAPPENED in the thirty years since. Simon Madden and his team made further advances in the late 1980s. Simon, highly respected, was able to secure the AFL as a signatory to a players' contract which further changed the landscape.

And then the real crunch came during Justin Madden's presidency when, again, the League, by then the AFL, tried to freeze the AFL Players' Association out. Justin called a crisis meeting at the Radisson Hotel in January 1993. Many of the star players were there. The whole playing fraternity, rivals on the footy field, agreed to stand together, and to take up the fight, in the hope that they could win an industrial award which set out terms and conditions of employment. If the AFL refused to negotiate, a strike was a real possibility.

A legal strategy was put in place by Mordy Bromberg and Graham Smith (industrial relations lawyer and lecturer at the University of Melbourne). In order for the AFL Players' Association to take their concerns to the Federal Industrial Relations Commission, they had to demonstrate that they were negotiating on behalf of all players, that the AFL Players' Association was a federal body, and that there was 'a dispute'. That was possible, and likely.

The AFL was forced to respond. The idea of an independent arbiter setting conditions caused much concern and they agreed to negotiate. It was an enormous victory for the players. They had claimed the position they'd been fighting to secure.

The collective bargaining agreement was the culmination of two decades of struggle. Many had played their part over that time.

From there the AFL Players' Association has gone from strength to strength.

After forty years it represents the players extremely effectively and does what Geoff Pryor, Gareth Andrews and their colleagues had always hoped – that the players would always further our great game.