

FOREWORD BY  
SUSAN ALBERTI AC

Since the inception of Australian Rules football in the 1850s, women have been eager to be involved. More than 100 years ago, they began taking to the field. However, their stories have largely been invisible – sidelined, ignored or forgotten.

## Play On!

is the first comprehensive history of women's Australian Rules football and showcases the athleticism, hard work and resilience that has kept the women's game alive. Discover how competitive women's football began with shop assistants at Perth department stores, how female footballers supported soldiers in both world wars, and how a few passionate women created state and territory leagues across Australia.

With schoolgirls' competitions flourishing, state leagues growing, and a national league imminent, the women's game has never been stronger. Talented, dedicated and proud women over the past century have made Australian Rules football a truly national and inclusive game.

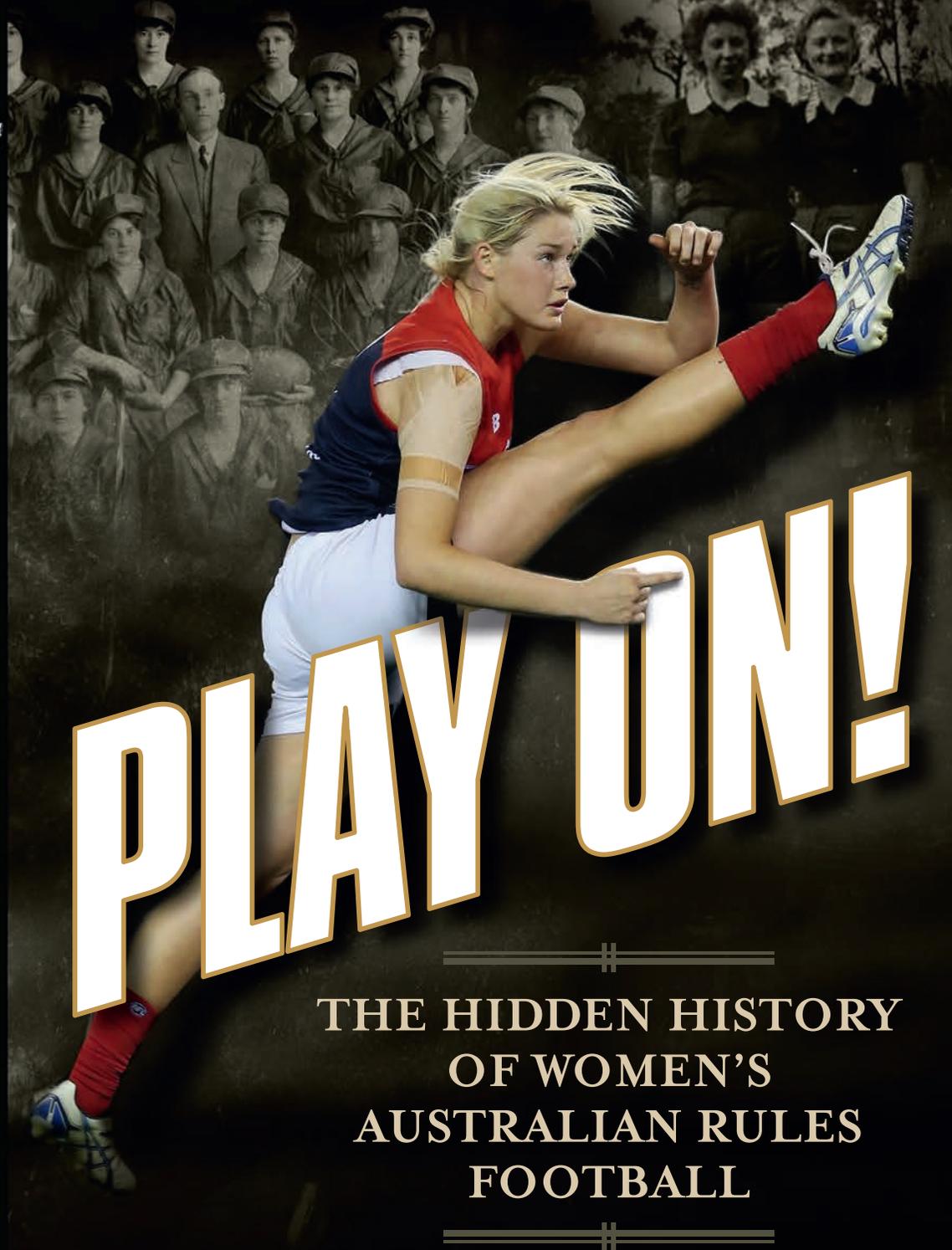


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PLAY ON!

BRUNETTE LENKIĆ & ROB HESS



THE HIDDEN HISTORY  
OF WOMEN'S  
AUSTRALIAN RULES  
FOOTBALL

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**echo**



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Echo Publishing

A division of Bonnier Publishing Australia

534 Church Street, Richmond

Victoria Australia 3121

www.echopublishing.com.au

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First published 2016

Printed in Australia at Griffin Press.

Only wood grown from sustainable regrowth forests is used in the manufacture of paper found in this book.

Cover design by Luke Causby, Blue Cork

Page design and typesetting by Shaun Jury

Front cover photograph: Tayla Harris displays her distinctive kicking style while representing Melbourne against the Western Bulldogs during a women's exhibition match at Docklands Stadium, Victoria, on 16 August 2015 (Photograph by Michael Dodge/Getty Images).

*Top left:* The pioneers of women's football in Australia, the Foy and Gibson team in playing uniform, Perth, 1917 (Courtesy of State Library of Western Australia, 004998D). See p. xii.

*Top right:* Irene Malone (left) and Dorothy Briggs were teammates in several matches that took place during the late 1940s in Daylesford, Victoria (Courtesy of Irene Malone). See plates.

Back cover photograph: Reverse view of Tayla Harris at the women's exhibition match at Docklands Stadium on 16 August 2015 (Photograph by Justine Walker/AFL Media).

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Typeset in Dante and Trade Gothic

National Library of Australia Cataloguing-in-Publication entry: (paperback)

Creator: Lenkić, Brunette, author.

Title: Play On!: The Hidden History of Women's Australian Rules Football / Brunette Lenkić; Rob Hess.

ISBN: 9781760063160 (paperback)

ISBN: 9781760404468 (ebook)

ISBN: 9781760404475 (mobi)

Subjects: Women football players—Australia—History.

Australian football.

Sex discrimination in sports—Australia.

Other Creators/Contributors:

Hess, Rob—author.

Dewey Number: 796.336

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*For Rachel and Claire.*

Brunette Lenkić

*In memory of my maternal grandmother, Frances Kampman (née Penhalluriack), 1897–1977. Raised in Ballarat, ‘Fanny’ was an employee of the textile and clothing firm, E. Lucas & Co., whose workers were known as the ‘Lucas Girls’. She planted several trees in the town’s famous Avenue of Honour and is likely to have witnessed the sell-out football match between the Ballarat Lucas Girls and the visiting South Melbourne Khaki Girls at Ballarat’s Eastern Oval on 28 September 1918, which raised funds for the Arch of Victory.*

Rob Hess



The well-worn boots of Melinda Hyland (top) and Debbie Lee's guernsey and a selection of her medals (bottom) were displayed at the 2015 'Bounce Down!' exhibition, to mark 100 years of women's Australian Rules football. The exhibition was held at the State Library of Western Australia.

*Courtesy of Melinda Hyland, Debbie Lee; images courtesy of Brunette Lenkić*

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Merchandise produced for the women's exhibition games in 2015.  
*Courtesy of Select Australia*

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# Foreword

My desire to play Australian Rules football began half a century ago when my father was the local policeman based in the very working-class suburb of Footscray, and my brother Richard and I would spend endless hours at the Western Oval cheering on the red, white and blue.

We would be dropped at the ground by Dad, who would then go to work at the nearby Footscray Police Station. We would support the Under-19s, Reserves and Senior team every round and play the occasional game amongst ourselves as members of the Footscray cheer squad – it was a great thrill.

It ignited in me a passion to not just watch and appreciate the game, but to promote the idea of women's football.

We are now on the eve of a national women's league similar to the Australian Football League in structure. It cannot come quick enough if we want to capitalise on the growth in our game, attracting not just participants, but spectators and supporters from every corner of our great country.

So you can see that much has happened in recent years and much more is about to happen advancing the interests of women's football.

I congratulate the authors of *Play On! The Hidden History of Women's Australian Rules Football* on the remarkable job they have done in charting a century of Aussie Rules football from a uniquely female perspective.

Our great game has always been enjoyed and played by people

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of all shapes and sizes, age groups, socioeconomic backgrounds and religions. As a community, we are now finally accepting that gender is no barrier to playing Aussie Rules, either.

Susan Alberti AC

## Authors' Note

Playing football has been a hard-won right for generations of women. Knowing what to call the thousands of female players over the past century has presented its challenges. The usual convention when writing about sport is to use player surnames after the initial mention. However, to underline the historical context in *Play On!*, we have continued to use first names, such as 'Myra', 'Gladys' and 'Trixie', when referring to women who played before the formation of modern leagues. Modern players, on the other hand, proudly refer to themselves as 'footballers', so we use their surnames.

In terms of the game they are playing, the name of the code has varied over the century to include monikers like 'footer' and 'footie' and, more recently, 'Australian football'. For most of the time women have been playing, it has been referred to as 'Australian Rules football' (along with its nickname, 'Aussie Rules'). 'Australian Rules football' is the name that will be used in this book. Similarly, for the sake of clarity, it will mostly be referred to as the 'women's game' to differentiate it from the 'men's game', even though in both cases, juniors also play.



Foy and Gibson, 1917, in team uniform.

*Back row:* Nettie Green, Olive McKenna, Eileen Oliver, Ruby Foster

*Second row:* Hilda Fraser or Ethel Gillies?, Rita Thorn, Robert Davidson (factory manager), Gladys Golding, Lissy Taylor, Daisy Watson

*Third row:* Hannah Martin, Beattie 'Big' Binney, Hilda Fraser or Ethel Gillies?, Eileen O'Connor (captain), Dorrie Donaldson, Maudie Davidson

*Front row:* Doris Godfrey, Ina Carlton, Alice Rowe (vice-captain)

*Courtesy of State Library of Western Australia, 004998D*

## Prologue

# Before the Beginning

Running, kicking and chasing a football are skills as innate in some girls as they are in some boys. Much of it happens informally, in the backyard, the street or at a park. However, as early as 1880, the *Bendigo Advertiser* reported on ‘the latest novelty spoken of – setting up a local women’s football club. The idea followed the formation of a female cricket team and the suggestion that a female football team could maintain ‘the celebrity of the district’. It did not go ahead because the ‘idea was . . . considered a little too advanced’.<sup>1</sup>

A decade later, pesky women continued to kick footballs. One young woman was brought before Bendigo’s City Police Court in 1892, along with two young men, all three charged with ‘kicking a football in the street’. However, the police prosecutor asked that the charge against the woman be withdrawn because she had merely kicked the ball back to the players when it had come near her. The charge was duly dropped and another of those in the court ‘jocularly remarked that if women were once admitted as footballers, they would soon get the franchise extended to them’.<sup>2</sup>

The idea of a women’s competition continued to be floated, often satirically, in places as diverse as Burra, South Australia (SA) in 1906, Perth, Western Australia (WA), also in 1906, and Broken Hill, New South Wales (NSW) in 1910.<sup>3</sup> Australian Rules football was very popular in Adelaide, and a ladies’ versus gentlemen’s match was advertised in the union paper, the *Daily Herald*, in 1910.

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Original costumes and a burlesque struggle for the ball will amuse the multitude at the Jubilee Oval on Saturday, November 5, when a fancy dress football match in aid of 'The Daily Herald' Extension Fund will be played as a screaming farce.<sup>4</sup>

The last two words deserve close attention: a 'screaming farce' actually meant that many of the men would be dressed as women. Crowd estimates for the game varied between 2000 and 6000, and it was noted, 'After the parade the football match took place, and while there were 50 or 60 followers of all classes, sizes, and of both sexes at the start they soon dropped out, and took part in a less strenuous form of amusement.' Of those listed who did run out the game – all men – their costumes included 'sailors, clowns, nurses, policemen, and blackfellows', as well as a half-man half-woman, scarecrow, 'lubra and piccanninie', cowboy, fair maiden, girl scout, swagman and kangaroo.<sup>5</sup>

While it is likely that women (or men, possibly dressed as women) may have participated in carnivalesque matches in Victoria during the late 1880s and 1890s<sup>6</sup> – and there is an uncorroborated but intriguing newspaper report from the seaside town of Williamstown, in 1886, of a women's scratch match featuring players with 'skirts tucked up', drop-kicking and marking 'the sphere' (supposedly observed by an anonymous office boy 'while out on an errand')<sup>7</sup> – these examples do not suggest any attempt at forming an organised competition. There is also a suggestion in the Melbourne *Argus* of a 'Men v Women' game in 1914. However, closer analysis shows the 'women' were men playing in drag, given that 'feminine talent will be pretty well the same as that which distinguishes a pantomime "dame"'.<sup>8</sup> Traditionally, pantomime 'dames' are played by men.

In the early days of Australian Rules football, so-called 'muff' games were common. The term was used for novelty matches played mostly in regional Victoria and SA between 1880 and the

end of World War I. Muff games were matches much like the modern E.J. 'Ted' Whitten Foundation event, where celebrities and former players, often in costume, scramble for the ball in a game only loosely resembling football.

As with the 'screaming farce', comical costumes were encouraged, female costumes were invariably included, and players were expected to perform in character. At a match in Bendigo in 1889, the crowd favourites were two 'bobbies' who brandished their oversized batons (made from inflated bladders) liberally: 'Anon they would arrest a female character for a too vehement exhibition of football, and "run her in," in the orthodox manner, to the intense amusement of the spectators.'<sup>9</sup> Another feature was to use props, such as the three-foot sphere at a game reported in the Echuca district of Victoria in 1912.<sup>10</sup> Aside from costumed burlesques, other configurations included teams of fathers and grandfathers versus bachelors, sailors versus soldiers, and former players versus current players.

That women's games were not also called muff football is a little surprising. However, perhaps it was because in WA, where the women's game first took off, the term was rarely used. It tended to have an outing only when a local newspaper reprinted an article from interstate. This was a common newspaper practice, and the original source sometimes went unacknowledged. Such was the case with the *Kalgoorlie Miner*, which published a table-turning article in a 1907 edition.

The long piece was headlined 'Women in Male Attire'. It detailed the case of Rosa Bonheur, a 'celebrated animal painter', officially allowed the privilege of wearing male clothing when she attended horse fairs in order to capture animal likenesses. It was noted at the time, 'At least three other women – a sculptor, a scientist, and a journalist – hold a like permission from the French Government, and utilise it to the full.' The article mentioned other times when it was 'permissible' for women to dress like men, including gardening,

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farming, mining, hunting, cycling, mountaineering and some sports, although the sight of women footballers so attired 'has not been edifying'.<sup>11</sup>

As far back as 1895, the *West Australian* newspaper sniffed about the 'interesting, if it be absurd, development' of 'the female footballer', referring to British women playing soccer. The article finished on a self-satisfied note: 'Ladies, however ingenious and versatile, are apparently not designed for football playing. They have not attempted it in this colony, popular as the game is here, and the fact does credit to their sense of reason and humour.'<sup>12</sup>

Imagine the writer's surprised dismay that it would be in Perth, WA, in 1915, where organised teams of women began playing the home-grown football code – Australian Rules football.

## Chapter 1

# Perth Pioneers

It starts with a photograph of 18 women and one man. The women are dressed in silk: skirts, blouses and stockings, with jockey-style peaked caps. The man is wearing a suit and tie. This is a female Australian Rules football team of 1917, from Perth, WA. The women are probably wearing silk because they work for Foy and Gibson, a large, upmarket department store that stocks yards and yards of the fabric and advertises it widely. Many of the women are employed in the workroom as seamstresses and, as well as showing off their employer's product, are showcasing their own sewing skills.

The black-and-white image is particularly fine, taken at the Ruskin Studios, which has set itself up as a leader in quality photography. The players and the company manager, for that is who the man is, gaze steadily at the camera. Even though the women are composed and their hair is tucked up in their caps, small vanities and hints of personality show through.

Doris 'Dorrie' Donaldson is wearing a necklace with what appears to be a pearl drop pendant and her cap is plumped, suggesting she has long hair. Rita Thorn, Beattie 'Big' Binney and Daisy Watson look ready to smile. Gladys Golding is wearing rimless glasses. Olive McKenna's modest demeanour belies her mischievous sense of fun.<sup>1</sup> Many of the players have folded white handkerchiefs in the breast pockets of their playing uniforms. The woman in the centre of the frame holding a football is the team captain, Eileen O'Connor. She will have a full but short life, dying of kidney failure at the age of 30.

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More than 80 years after the image was taken, a doctoral student in Victoria researching workplace football was looking through a coffee-table book of handsome photographs.

‘The pictures were presented without any contextualisation,’ said Peter Burke, now a social historian working as the Research Ethics Coordinator at RMIT University, Melbourne. ‘The selection seemed to be based on novelty impact; there was little background or accompanying captions or text. My interest was piqued because the book included one of the Foy and Gibson’s team photos.’ The title given to the photograph was ‘Women’s Football Team, Perth, 1900’. The accompanying text read:

Although Australian Rules Football has never become a fully organised sport for women, there have been local competitions and matches over the years. A typical formation is this company team of ladies, playing for Foy & Gibson’s department store in Perth. Their ladylike looks and lovely uniforms might be an indicator that the rough-and-tumble game of football is peculiarly unsuited to women.<sup>2</sup>

Burke followed that curious tangent across the country, tracing the photograph to the State Library of Western Australia archives and verifying that it came from the World War I (WWI) era, not earlier. He wrote a journal article entitled ‘Patriot Games’, and subsequently included a chapter on women’s football in his doctoral thesis.<sup>3</sup>

Among his key sources of information was Ada Emery (née O’Connor), one of Eileen O’Connor’s younger sisters and a football player herself. Despite being 102 at the time she was recalling her footballing days, Ada remembered details small and large, including the names of almost all the women in the photograph, as well as where games were played. She also recalled that the Foy and Gibson team outwitted opponents on practical matters, such as



keeping their voluminous skirts from blowing up in the wind by the strategic placement of hooks and eyes inside the garments, turning them into quasi-shorts.

Australian Rules football has always encouraged women to stray into territory beyond what is socially acceptable. Despite its reputation as a tough, masculine game, females have had a distinctive role in the way the code has developed. Even before the rules of the game were first written down in 1859, the press were commenting favourably on the large and visible presence of ‘the fairer sex’ as spectators at scratch matches played on unfenced parklands in Melbourne. There were few facilities and both male and female fans were inclined to creep over the arbitrary boundary line during matches, often interfering with the movements of the players. Some even preferred to watch matches from underneath a tree in the middle of the makeshift playing arena, despite the dangers involved. As formal clubs and facilities for football began to be set up, and regular Saturday afternoon competitions developed, rivalries between teams representing towns or suburbs soon

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Foy and Gibson versus the Fremantle-based Economic Stores, WACA ground, 1918.

*Courtesy of State Library of Western Australia, 1122220PD*

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emerged. Young girls and women proudly displayed the colours of their 'tribe' when they sat around the perimeter fences of ovals or in specially constructed stands for 'ladies'.<sup>4</sup>

Newspaper articles described females sitting stoically in the rain, decorating their prams in club colours, yelling abuse at the umpire and, quite often, leaning over the boundary line to jab him with a hatpin or strike him with an umbrella.<sup>5</sup> Such descriptions are enduring reflections of the passionate commitment that women have displayed for Australian Rules football since its origins. Their level of involvement is unique among the world's football codes. Sketches and photographs from the earliest decades of the game supplemented reporting of the remarkable numbers of women in the crowd. The phenomenon was also noted in annual reports from some of the major clubs in Victoria, with 'Ladies and Gentlemen' addressed at the meetings of members, and women listed by name as donors or financial supporters in club documents. This was in contrast to other codes in Australia and around the world – for example, in rugby union, where a strong, exclusive, masculine culture often prevailed and females were usually marginalised or ignored.<sup>6</sup>

One reason the game was so attractive to female supporters could have been the male flesh on show. Although the sexual attraction of athletic men in shorts should be viewed cautiously as a primary reason for its female following, the idea is supported by some historical evidence. In 1873, the *Australasian* published a poem extolling the athleticism of the players. The opening lines are:

Around the boundaries hundreds of spectators stand,  
The scene presented to us is strikingly beautiful and grand,  
Our men are as tough as trees with deeply earthed roots  
And the ladies quite mutually pronounced them really  
'Killing' in their new knickerbocker suits.<sup>7</sup>

The very early uniforms often took the form of cricket attire and were modest. By 1873, however, the streamlined knickerbocker suit, with lace-up, knee-length breeches and sometimes sleeveless tops, exposed flesh in the same daring fashion that tighter fitting shorts are viewed today. Sport, and particularly football, during the sexually repressive reign of Queen Victoria, enabled women to appreciate male bodies without fear of censure; the *Australasian's* poet recognised that women at the football were admiring the participants for their looks and physique as well as for their skill. However, it is women's involvement as players for the past century that reveals the pull of the game.

One of the earliest references to females wanting to play football comes in the October 1876 issue of *Patchwork*, the school magazine of the Presbyterian Ladies' College in Melbourne. According to Ray Crawford, one young girl was so dissatisfied with the popular, though largely genteel, pastime of croquet that she suggested a football club be established at the school, citing how much 'fun, enjoyment and excitement' boys seemed to have in that game.<sup>8</sup> There is no record that the club was formed but the student's plea indicated a desire by females to take the field as players.

Burke's research points to Loton Park, in Perth, being the venue for the first organised games of women's Australian Rules football.<sup>9</sup> The first games were midweek, lunchtime matches between two teams from Foy and Gibson, one drawn from the factory workers and the other from the shopgirls. Although the precise dates are unknown, it seems the games were played just a few months after Australian troops took part in the Gallipoli campaign of April 1915.

It is not clear exactly when Ada O'Connor started playing, though she remembered that as a convent schoolgirl she had to get permission from the nuns for one game where she was required to fill in at short notice. They allowed her to play on the proviso that she return to school immediately after the match. When Ada joined her sister, Eileen, at Foy and Gibson after finishing her schooling,

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she played as a tall, speedy winger in the workplace football team. In pre-match entertainment, she won a running race and was awarded a silver bust of Lord Kitchener, the British war minister at the time. His is the face with the handlebar moustache on WWI recruiting posters. He points his forefinger and exhorts: 'Your country needs YOU'. Kitchener died on a warship in 1916, amid claims of mismanaging supply lines to troops fighting in France.

Despite Kitchener's damaged reputation, which may have been slow in filtering through to Australia, the choice of Ada's trophy pointed to patriotic fervour. The time after the failed Gallipoli campaign was a contentious period in Australian history. It was marked by significant pressure on sporting organisations, particularly football clubs, to cease their activities. Burke's study of the emergence of women's football in Perth is set against a backdrop of class tensions created by heated national conscription debates in 1916 and 1917, and in the general context of the development of workplace football teams.

Virtually all the women's teams that played football in and around Perth during the course of the Great War were associated with specific workplaces. Burke observed that employers almost invariably sided with imperialists in British military conflicts; it was not long before business owners 'were joining the rising patriotic chorus', and becoming closely aligned with recruitment drives.<sup>10</sup> Throughout 1915, many of the annual, informal workplace football matches continued, but the government and most employers were united against the continuation of semi-professional forms of sport.<sup>11</sup> As the war dragged on, suspending workplace sport became another way for employers to show their patriotism and many of their teams and competitions were disbanded.<sup>12</sup> There were, though, situations where employers encouraged football as a means of building patriotism, and some games continued on the agreement that if an admittance fee was charged, then it had to be donated to a wartime or patriotic cause.

Perhaps the most intriguing aspect of Burke's research into the women's game is the idea that Perth employers encouraged female football as a way of shaming able-bodied men into enlisting for war service. WA was fiercely patriotic. It voted overwhelmingly for conscription in both referenda held during World War I; in the second referendum, held in 1917, it was one of only two states to do so. (The 'yes' vote in Tasmania won by only a small margin.) Referenda are notoriously hard to win, needing a majority of states to record agreement from a majority of voters, and the move was defeated nationally both times.

Following the popularity of the initial women's games, many of the large WA retail firms followed the Foy and Gibson example and organised football teams chosen from their female employees. In 1916, other Perth stores such as Boans, Economic and Bon Marche, as well as the retail trade in the port town of Fremantle, were represented in what was becoming a thriving competition.<sup>13</sup> There was a further expansion in 1917 when two teams in the Goldfields, drawn from the retailer Montgomery Brothers, set up their own competition. Making their foray into the sport even more noteworthy is that their games were played under lights.

The Goldfields initiative was sanctioned by the War Council and helped Millie Stanton, a charity queen candidate, raise money for the Goldfields Patriotic Fund. For the last two matches, Kalgoorlie players christened themselves 'The Belgians', though it is unclear whether this was in honour of relatives serving in Ypres or Passchendaele, or simply to align themselves with a patriotic cause.<sup>14</sup> The grand final saw the Kalgoorlie team 3.5 (23) defeat Boulder 0.1 (1).

In first promoting the idea, the *Kalgoorlie Miner* lightheartedly reported that the Kalgoorlie players would be 'selected from the most famous footballers serving behind the millinery counters of Montgomery Bros.', against a team from the retailer's Boulder store, 9 km away. As if to underline the propriety of the event, the

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last sentence of the article mentioned an item from the illustrated English papers of female munition workers playing soccer against a military team.<sup>15</sup> The Goldfields women ended up playing four matches over a month, three at the Kalgoorlie Trotting Ground – with trotting supporters urged by the Kalgoorlie Boulder Trotting Club ‘to do their utmost to make the fixture a success’ – and one at the Kalgoorlie Recreation Ground.<sup>16</sup> Matches were scheduled for 8 p.m. Advertisements highlighted ‘FOOTBALL BY ELECTRIC LIGHT’ and the first match report mentioned that ‘the girls lined up on well-illuminated grounds’.<sup>17</sup>

The Boulder side named 19 women in their playing positions; the Kalgoorlie side also had 19 named but without positions given. The teams were trained by coaches, and the players were said to be ‘deadly earnest’ about the games. The Boulder players wore white hats with ribbons and the Kalgoorlie team green caps with bows but no other description of their uniforms was given.

Significantly, the match report of the ‘grand final’ carried information about injuries:

One girl left the ground as the result of a knock in the eye, and another had to be escorted from the field. Apart from these casualties, several others heroically battled on, with bruised arms and shins and one was conspicuous by a black eye.<sup>18</sup>

This was quite rare in the reporting of early female football games, suggesting that injuries were uncommon or else that reporters self-censored their writing in this regard. Otherwise, reports of the Goldfields games were written as straight sports reports, selecting similar details about the ebb and flow of matches as were reported for men’s games. Match reporting of women’s football in Perth carried a different flavour, possibly because the reporters were less likely to actually meet any of those they offended if they were critical.

The fact that reporting of women's matches in Perth began in 1917 and not earlier may have been linked to the power of paid advertising. The first advertisement appeared in connection with female football on 22 September of that year, promoting a charity match to be held a week later.<sup>19</sup> It was repeated a number of times before the match. Advertising may have conferred more status on the sport or it may simply have drawn the attention of journalists to the fact that women's games were being played. Whatever the reason, the reporting had a knock-on effect, so that other women's matches being played around the same time were also reported.

Although many of the women's games during the Great War were played to raise money for the war effort, some had a different, charitable purpose. Geraldine 'Gell' Howlett (also known as 'Geldie') and three other candidates in a 1917 contest raised money for the Parkerville Children's Home.<sup>20</sup> This was a facility set up by nuns in the foothills east of Perth for child migrants and children who were orphaned, neglected, unwanted or needed temporary care.

Before the federal government established a social welfare net, people living in poverty relied on the charity of their fellow citizens. The Ugly Men's Association in Perth was one such charitable body, with the motto 'Help the helpless'. Its fundraising activities were varied and some would be considered improper today, such as the 'Coon Queen' competition, held for white women, but raising money for 'darkies', via entertainment and sideshows at 'Coon Town' set up on the Perth foreshore.<sup>21</sup> The Ugly Men experimented with titles for a parallel fundraising model for their female counterparts, running several 'Ugly Girl' competitions before rebranding the idea. The renaming resulted in two titles being used interchangeably and Gell Howlett's candidacy was labelled by both: 'Popular Girl' and 'Popular Lady'. This preferred usage was common in Perth between 1917 and into the 1950s, and in other parts of WA, particularly in the south-west of the state, the Goldfields and Geraldton.<sup>22</sup> Similar competitions were also

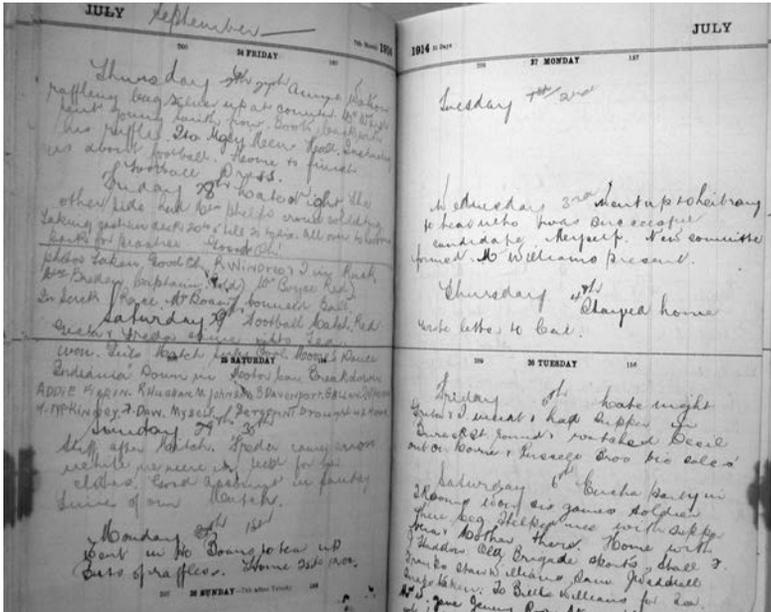
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popular in other parts of Australia, though some states preferred to call them 'Queen' competitions.

Although the structure of the competitions is hazy, it seems that candidates were sponsored by a workplace or other organisation, such as a hospital or sporting club. Gell was sponsored by her employer, Boan Brothers (known as 'Boans'), a department store. Dances, concerts, euchre parties and raffles were common fundraisers. Direct voting, generally at one penny per vote, also boosted totals. However, candidates were encouraged to be innovative in how they raised money, and many of the early women's football matches in WA bore the imprint of the Popular Girl influence.

Gell's involvement is particularly interesting because her 1917 diary includes the first known references to women's Australian Rules football by a player.<sup>23</sup> An entry on Thursday, 27 September, of that year mentioned that she received instruction on how to play and recorded: 'Home to finish Football dress.' She also noted on the Friday: 'All over to Lotons [*sic*] Park for practice.' There was a brief entry following the match on the Saturday and then the observation on the Sunday: 'Stiff after Match.' She possibly curtailed her own observations of the game by deferring to a newspaper report because she also commented: 'Good account in Sunday Times of our Match.'

Gell, a ledger keeper, and her sweetheart, Edward Cecil 'Ceil' Rice, who worked for Boans as a clerk, corresponded regularly while he was overseas fighting on the Western Front. Although none of Gell's letters to him survive, her diaries portray a young woman enjoying a busy social life within the bounds of the wartime restrictions. It seems she kept Ceil informed of news from home. His letter dated 1 March 1918 (France) mentioned receiving a parcel that included 11 letters from her dated from 30 September to 2 February. He responded to her news that she had played football:



So Geldie, you have put your hair up. Oh well I will like you just as much hair up or down but I wish I'd been there to see you play in the football match, I am glad you enjoyed yourself, just as well I wasn't there or I'd have gone silly barracking.<sup>24</sup>

The first of the matches organised for Howlett is especially significant because four newspapers reported on it. It took place on 29 September 1917, at Subiaco Oval. Examining the articles together gives a sense of players trying hard but lacking many essential skills, as illustrated by the *Daily News* report published immediately after the match:

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Geraldine 'Gell' Howlett's diary, held by the State Library of WA, contains the first known mention of women's football by a player. Thrift may account for the fact that she used a 1914 diary to record her day-to-day life in 1917.

Courtesy of Daryl Lenkic

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The game was not so much an exhibition of their football qualifications as a display of handball and throwing, and, more especially a test of their staying powers. Girls who underwent training for the contest were able to make some showing, while those not used to such exertion soon tired and became 'passengers' to their respective teams.<sup>25</sup>

The *West Australian* was critical of the standard of play:

As a game of football it was a failure, although the majority of the players went into it with vigour. There was not a good kicker on either side, but some of the players showed a fine turn of speed. Bouncing the ball was out of the question, and throwing it was very common, the umpire, however, not taking any notice of these offences.<sup>26</sup>

The *Western Mail's* coverage was notable for including a photograph of the winning team. The image showed 20 women in three rows in an outdoor setting, with the celebrity Victorian umpire, Henry 'Ivo' Crapp, who had come to live in WA, standing to the side.<sup>27</sup> The accompanying text indicated, 'The game was arranged by the employees of Boan Bros. to forward the interests of Miss G. Howlett's candidature in the popular lady competition in aid of the Children's Home'. Boan, elected unopposed as a Member of Parliament just a few months earlier, was recorded as having 'set the ball in motion' in front of 'a good attendance'.<sup>28</sup> Only the *Sunday Times* gallantly suggested that the 'fair sex at football make a delightful showing', that 'all were triers' and that 'four quarters of ding-dong fun had been provided'.<sup>29</sup>

The participation of employees of Boans in the match is instructive. The firm's founder, Henry 'Harry' Boan, who arrived in Perth in 1895, was strictly anti-unionist, and his firm soon became known for employing women.<sup>30</sup> He was also a generous corporate

citizen, had close business links with Britain, gave generously to the Patriotic Fund and other charities, and was an active supporter of the conscription campaigns.<sup>31</sup> In a period of political turbulence and department store rivalry, Boan encouraged the women in his store to play football for ostensibly charitable purposes. However, it seems apparent that female teams in general, and the Boans' team in particular, were perhaps also used as weapons in the public debate over the continuation of male sport, and were, deliberately or not, associated with support of the conscription referenda.

Another detail worth mentioning is that the *Western Mail* piece about the match referred to the players' 'striking apparel'. Even though the contest was promoted as a 'fancy dress' football match it seems that the women played in a uniform, consisting of caps, scarves, long dresses, stockings and presumably boots.<sup>32</sup> Although football games where both male and female participants dressed in a range of theatrical costumes were played in the late nineteenth century, and continued to feature as novelty events well into the twentieth century, it seems that many female footballers in Australia during the time of the Great War wore similar garb to the original Foy and Gibson teams (as photographed in 1917). So, even though described as 'fancy dress' football, the wartime games were quite distinct from other contests where varied costumes were often meant to be grotesque or to parody fictional or historical characters. In this sense, the identical dresses and other accessories worn by the women, restrictive though they must have been for any form of sport, signified that they were wearing uniforms and that their contests were more legitimate than those occasionally played by participants in clown costumes or animal masks.

Many of the earliest newspaper reports carried scant details on training, rules or length of games. However, Ada O'Connor remembered that women played to the same rules as the men. A sifting through match reports suggests that umpires were usually

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more lenient during women's games, though rules or the size of grounds were usually not modified.<sup>33</sup>

The players in early reports were commonly described as 'enthusiastic', a seeming euphemism for having little or no skill. However, as 'season' 1917 progressed, the *Daily News* noted some improvement:

There was also a greater disposition to play the ball rather than the 'man,' and to pick up the ball instead of kicking it along the ground, than was the case with the girls at recent contests of a similar kind.<sup>34</sup>

The game being described in this case was part of the Eight Hours' Day sports carnival at Claremont Oval. The intention of organisers in staging a women's football game was hinted at by the *West Australian's* assertion that the committee 'have paid special attention to providing humorous events, and feel sure that their efforts will be appreciated by the public'.<sup>35</sup>

The use of sport – including the novelty of women playing football – to lift morale and offer diversion during times of war and crisis may have lightened the general mood. The female footballers' efforts were in contrast to another, less popular activity by some women of the era – presenting men in civilian clothing with white feathers to brand them as cowards. It is unknown whether Eileen O'Connor, her sister Ada, or other players understood that they were possibly being used as pawns in the divisive debates over enlistment and duty. The pair's great-niece, Carole Murphy, who was Peter Burke's intermediary with Ada, said Ada did not mention the patriotic aspect while reminiscing about her footballing days.<sup>36</sup>

Murphy has been researching her family history for several years and is especially fond of the 1917 women's football photograph. She is also the self-nominated 'keeper of the flame' where the memory of Eileen O'Connor is concerned. Eileen was much loved by her

family, who mourned her premature death. Her sisters continued placing *in memoriam* notices in the *West Australian* for decades after she had died, and they pressed roses from her garden as keepsakes. A red, beaded, georgette evening dress she owned was passed on to her niece, Murphy's mother, and was then safeguarded by Murphy until the fabric eventually perished. Aside from photographs, Murphy still has her great-aunt's First Holy Communion medal.

Eileen was about 21 at the time the football team photograph was taken. She had blue-grey eyes, was a redhead who did not freckle and was said to be six feet tall. Her teammates unanimously elected her to be their captain. Perhaps she had natural authority because she was also a shop steward. She was one of the older sisters in a family of eight girls, two of whom died young. Her early life was spent at Yarloop, a timber-milling town, 120 km south of Perth; the story went that if a footy team was short of players, the O'Connor girls were called in to do service. Their cousin and playmate, Fred Wimbridge, later became a champion footballer.<sup>37</sup> At some point after their mother died in 1904, the six remaining girls moved to Perth and five of them eventually lived together in a house in Highgate, with their aunt as housekeeper. There is a photograph of all six ranged alongside Eileen's car in 1920. Eileen's diverse interests included patronage of the Perth Dinghy Club, Pekingese dog breeding and attending horse race meetings.

Carole Murphy speculates that Eileen must have been a progressive, independent woman, possibly because of the early death of her mother. Eileen was a businesswoman, moonlighting at first while still employed by Foy and Gibson. She bought sewing machines that she set up on the verandah of the Highgate home, where she and her sisters made men's shirts and baby and children's clothing. Stock was sent by train to their aunts in Yarloop, who sold it to locals. Eventually, when Eileen left Foy and Gibson and set up her own shirt-making business in West Perth, she took some of her workmates with her. She and Ada appear to be in a 1918 Foy

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and Gibson football team photograph but their names are not on subsequent team lists.

Eileen's strength of personality was the sort needed if female football was to continue past the stage of being pure novelty and a blip on the upturned social order of war years. Certainly, the Perth pioneering example began to spread. In addition to the game being played in the Goldfields, a women's match is recorded in 1918 at Geraldton, 430 km north of Perth, won by a team called the Dreadnoughts, after the class of superior English battleships.<sup>38</sup> The same name had been used by one of the Perth teams playing in the match at Claremont Oval the previous year.

Eileen O'Connor, Gell Howlett and Harry Boan could be seen as the trio who propelled the women's game in its infancy: Eileen as a strong-minded and athletic leader, Gell through her energetic fundraising and the promotion that accompanied it, and Harry as the businessman with the clout to ensure that influential people turned up to matches.

Boan's background and status are also important because of the possibility that he was a link-person in the diffusion of women's football to other states. Victoria's capital city, Melbourne, is the acknowledged point of origin for Australian Rules football itself, and therefore had a more developed football culture than other Australian cities. However, the first well-documented evidence of a match between two female teams in Victoria did not take place until a game was played in Ballarat on 28 September 1918.