

# 1970 AUSSIE RULES SETS A RECORD

One of the largest crowds ever to attend any sports event in Australia — at 121 696, roughly 1 per cent of the entire continent's population — passed through the turnstiles at the Melbourne Cricket Ground on Saturday, 26 September 1970, to watch Carlton beat Collingwood in the Grand Final of the Victorian Football League.

This great mass of spectators once again highlighted the tremendous popularity of what is without doubt our greatest homegrown sport — Australian Rules football.

The game had its genesis in a letter written by Thomas Wentworth Wills, a twenty-three-year-old former Rugby schoolboy and Victorian captain in inter-colonial cricket, to the popular Melbourne sporting newspaper *Bell's Life in Victoria*.

Published on 10 July 1858, his plea for the formation of a 'football club' to keep cricketers fit during winter led to a meeting by a few sportsmen on the Richmond paddock three weeks later.

After kicking a ball around for a while, they drafted a few rules for a game which, Wills insisted, had to be 'our own' and not subject to the rough tackling of rugby, which 'he considered unsuitable for grown men engaged in making a living'.

The first recorded match of 'Australian Rules' football took place between Scotch College and Melbourne Grammar School on 7 August 1858 — although what rules there were differed substantially from those today.

Each side had forty players, but even so — or perhaps because of this — scoring was not an easy matter. Reported the *Melbourne Morning Herald*:

*Both masters and boys appeared to reach the acme of enjoyment and most jubilant were the cheers that rang out among the gum trees and the she-oaks of the park when Scotch obtained a goal. This event occupied nearly three hours.*

With at least two goals required to win (a rule dropped in 1869), the match continued for three successive Saturdays before being declared a draw.

In May of the following year, *Bell's Life* reported the formation of the Melbourne Football Club and the appointment of a committee, headed by Wills, to draw up suitable rules.

This provided the organisation and impetus the fledgling sport required to

survive and prosper — to such an extent that in June 1875 the *Australasian Sketcher* noted:

*It is now twenty years [sic] since a half-dozen footballers from the old country met one afternoon at the Parade Hotel on Richmond Road. Together they drew up a code of rules which have been accepted as rules for football all over the country.*

*The rules are very simple and have worked well. So well, in fact, that any player fresh from Rugby, Winchester, or Eton can early accommodate himself to them after a very short acquaintance. The ball used in all matches is the small Rugby oval ball.*

*The ground is usually 200 yards long and 50 or 60 yards wide and marked off by posts and rope. It is a pretty sight when the rival twenties, in their distinguishing uniforms and knickerbockers, line up for the 'kick off'. If the weather is at all damp, the neatness of the uniforms is quickly destroyed after half an hour's play with its inevitable spills.*

*The game is played in the colonies with great vigour and determination, and is maintained for two or three hours at a time with unflagging energy. Fortunately, very few serious accidents have been recorded against these veritable exponents of 'muscular Christianity', although the rough element is frequently displayed. Sometimes a free fight may develop over some disputed goal.*

*It is a manly pastime, one requiring fleetness of foot, quickness of eye, and stamina. Success in matches depends on the men working together*

*and obeying their captain.*

By 1864 the new game was being played in New South Wales, with the first intercolonial matches taking place in 1877; six years later it had spread to all the Australian colonies.

When the Australian Football Council was formed in 1906, H. C. A. Harrison, who had helped Wills codify the rules, was elected chairman.

The following year Victoria won the first triennial interstate carnival — and has been defeated only a handful of times since.

Australian Rules football is today a multi-million dollar industry, particularly in Victoria, but also in South Australia, Western Australia, and Tasmania – and is also making inroad in New South Wales.

From humble beginnings as a keep-fit exercise for cricketers, it now draws more support than all the other combined football codes in the country.