

Origins of the Game



A statue next to the Melbourne Cricket Ground on the approximate site of the 1858 "foot-ball" match between Melbourne Grammar and Scotch College. Tom Wills is depicted umpiring behind two young players contesting the ball. The plaque reads: "Wills did more than any other person - as footballer and umpire, co-writer of the rules and promoter of the game - to develop Australian Football during its first decade."

History of Australian Football (courtesy of Wikipedia)

There is evidence of several unique forms of "foot-ball" being played in the Victorian Gold Fields which may have shared a range of influences. The Geelong rules began to take shape around 1856, although they were never codified. The Melbourne rules were formed through a series of experimental matches and eventually became dominant.

A letter by [Tom Wills](#) was published in *Bell's Life in Victoria & Sporting Chronicle* on [10 July 1858](#), called for a "foot-ball club" with a "code of laws" to keep cricketers fit during winter.^[14] This is widely regarded as the most significant milestone in the organisation of Australian football. It was during 1858 that references to the first "foot-ball" clubs in Melbourne began to appear, including Richmond Cricketers, St Kilda and Melbourne. His letter attracted football players to an experimental match, at the Richmond Paddock (later known as [Yarra Park](#) next to the [MCG](#)) on [31 July 1858](#). Few details of

the match have survived, though it is known that Wills both played in and umpired the game.

On [7 August 1858](#) a famous match between [Melbourne Grammar School](#) and [Scotch College](#) began at Richmond Park, which was umpired by Wills and McAdam and also involved Scotch headmaster [Thomas H. Smith](#)^[15]. A second day of play took place on 21 August and a third, and final, day on 4 September.^[16] While the full rules that were used is unknown, the match was played with a round ball, the distance between the goals was approximately half a [mile](#) (approximately 4 times longer than the modern MCG playing surface), there were 40 players per side and one goal each side was scored with the game being declared a draw. The two schools have competed annually ever since for the Cordner-Eggleston Cup.^[17]

Some regard these early matches as the first matches of Australian Football, however to many it is clear that the game was still in the process of evolving.

The First Rules

The Melbourne Football Club rules of 1859 are the oldest surviving set of laws for Australian football. They were drawn up at the Parade Hotel, [East Melbourne](#), on [17 May](#) and signed by Tom Wills, William Hammersley, J. Sewell, J. B. Thompson, Alex Bruce, T. Butterworth and Thomas H. Smith. The meeting was chaired by Wills and in attendance were journalists W. J. Hammersley and J. B. Thompson.^[16] Accounts of the people directly involved differ. Some sources also claim that [H. C. A. Harrison](#)^[18] and Thomas H. Smith^[19] were also present. Eleven simple Melbourne Football Club Rules were laid out, printed and, most significantly, widely publicised.

The influence of [English public school](#) and [university](#) football codes, while undetermined, was clearly substantial. All members of the committee had experience of English games. It is claimed that Tom Wills, himself an exceptional rugby player, wanted to introduce [Rugby School](#) rules but the other men felt Rugby School's rough play and offside rules would not suit players older than schoolboys or the drier Australian conditions.^[20] The club did look at the Rugby School Rules but also those of [Eton](#) ([Eton field game](#)), [Winchester](#) ([Winchester College football](#)) and [Harrow](#) ([Harrow football](#)). What is clear is Wills intentions, when during this meeting he made the now famous declaration "No, we shall have a game of our own".

Some historians postulate that Wills could have been inspired by [marngrook](#), ball games played by the [Aboriginal](#) people in western Victoria. Wills was raised in Victoria's western districts and is said to have been fluent in the local dialect and frequently played with local Aboriginal children on his father's property, Lexington, near [Ararat](#).^[21] Others dismiss this as an unsubstantiated romantic notion.

While it is clear even to casual observers that [modern Australian rules football is similar to Gaelic football](#), the exact relationship between the two codes is a [matter of controversy among historians](#). Although [gaelic football](#) was not codified until 1887, some claim that [Irish](#) games ([caid](#) and [hurling](#)) were played in Australia as early as 1843.^[22] Historian B. W. O'Dwyer suggests that some of these elements of Australian rules may be attributed to the common influence of older Irish games as the rulemakers would have been familiar with these games.^[22]

Early Competition in Victoria



A game at the [Richmond Paddock](#) in the 1860s. A pavilion at the [MCG](#) is on the left in the background. (A [wood engraving](#) made by Robert Bruce on [July 27, 1866](#).)

The [Champion of the Colony](#) (precursor to the [Brownlow Medal](#)) is an individual football award which was first granted in 1858.

Notably in 1859 several new football clubs formed including the [Castlemaine Football Club](#), [Geelong Football Club](#) (which Wills directly helped to form) and the [Melbourne University Football Club](#). While many one-off matches are recorded to have taken place between several early teams from Melbourne's suburbs and country Victoria (such as the

[Ballarat](#) and Geelong competitions), in the early days many had not yet formed clubs for regular competition.

The first ever trophy for Australian Football, awarded by the Royal Caledonian Society of Melbourne and played under the Melbourne Rules was contested in 1861 between the Melbourne Football Club and Melbourne University, and was won by University. The competition continued into the early 1860s with the addition of other teams from Melbourne's suburbs. Two further competitions, the [South Yarra Challenge Cup](#) and "Second Twenties" were held between the late 1860s.

There were some rival rules which eventually gave way to an acceptance of the Melbourne Rules, the most notable being the Geelong rules. The requirement to bounce the ball while running was introduced in a redraft of the Melbourne Rules in 1866 by H. C. A. Harrison and his rules committee to satisfy the Geelong Football Club.^[23] Behind posts were introduced at this time are also believed to have come directly from the Geelong rules. The new rules became known as the Victorian Rules.

Spread of the game in Australia and New Zealand

Gradually the game – known at first as "Melbourne Rules" became "Victorian Rules" and then "Australian Rules" following its spread from Victoria into other Australian colonies, beginning with [South Australia \(1860\)](#), [Tasmania \(1864\)](#), [Queensland \(1866\)](#) and [New Zealand \(1876\)](#). In 1877, the sport's first [governing bodies](#), the [South Australian Football Association](#) and the [Victorian Football Association](#) were formed on the [30th of April](#) and the [7th of May](#) respectively. The game began to be played in [New South Wales](#) in 1877, in [Western Australia](#) in 1881 and the [Australian Capital Territory](#) in 1911. By 1916, the game was first played in the [Northern Territory](#), establishing a permanent presence in all [Australian states and mainland territories](#).

The precursors of the [South Australian National Football League](#) (SANFL) and the [West Australian Football League](#) (WAFL) were strong, separate competitions by the 1890s. However, factors such as [interstate rivalries](#) and the denial of access to grounds in Sydney caused the code to struggle in New South Wales and Queensland. A rift in the VFA led to

the formation of the [Victorian Football League](#) (VFL), which commenced play in 1897 as an eight-team breakaway of the stronger clubs in the VFA competition. By 1925, the VFL consisted of 12 teams, and had become the most prominent league in the game.



A New South Wales player marks over a West Australian opponent in the goal square at the 1933 [Australian Football Carnival](#) held at the [Sydney Cricket Ground](#).

The first [intercolonial match](#) had been played between Victoria and South Australia in 1879. In 1908, a Jubilee Australasian Football Carnival was held to celebrate 50 years of football. The carnival included teams from Victoria, South Australia, Queensland, New South Wales, Tasmania and New Zealand.^[24] For most of the 20th century, the absence of a national club competition—and the inability of players to compete internationally—meant that [matches between state representative teams](#) were regarded with great importance. Because VFL clubs increasingly recruited the best players in other states, Victoria dominated these games. [State of origin](#) rules were introduced in 1977, and saw Western Australia and South Australia begin to win many of their games against Victoria.

The Effects of World War

Both [World War I](#) and [World War II](#) had a devastating effect on the sport of Australian Rules. While scratch matches were played by Australian "diggers" in remote locations around the world, the game lost many of its great players to wartime service. Some competitions never

fully recovered. World War I saw the game in New Zealand go into recess for three quarters of a century. In Queensland, the state league went into recess for the duration of the war. VFL club University left the league and went into recess due to severe casualties and the WAFL also lost two clubs. [The ANZAC Day clash](#) is one example of how the war continues to be remembered in the football community.

A National Competition Emerges

In 1982, in a move which heralded big changes within the sport, one of the original VFL clubs, South Melbourne, relocated to the [rugby league](#) stronghold of [Sydney](#) and became known as the [Sydney Swans](#). In the late 1980s, strong interstate interest in the VFL led to a more national competition; two more non-Victorian clubs, the [West Coast Eagles](#) and the [Brisbane Bears](#) began playing in 1987. The league changed its name to the [Australian Football League](#) (AFL) following the 1989 season. In 1991, it gained its first South Australian team, [Adelaide](#). During the next five years, two more non-Victorian teams, [Fremantle](#) and [Port Adelaide](#), joined the league. The AFL, currently with 16 member clubs, is the sport's elite competition and the most powerful body in the world of Australian rules football and continues to seek further opportunities to expand into new markets.

Following the emergence of the Australian Football League, the SANFL, WAFL and other state leagues rapidly declined to a secondary status. Apart from these there are many semi-professional and amateur leagues around Australia, where they play a very important role in the community, and particularly so in rural areas. The VFA, still in existence a century after the original schism, merged with the former VFL reserves competition in 1998. The new entity adopted the VFL name and remained a primarily state based competition. State of origin games declined in importance, especially after an increasing number of withdrawals by AFL players, and Australian football State of Origin matches ceased in 1999. The second-tier state and territorial leagues still contest interstate matches.

Australian football internationally



Action from a 1999 Aussie Rules match in [Nauru](#) at the [Linkbelt Oval](#)



Japan's national team, the [Samurai](#) vs Melbourne Vietnam from 2006 tour of Australia.

Aussie Rules is played at an amateur level in countries around the world. At least 20 leagues that are recognised by the game's governing body, exist outside of Australia.^[25] Although semi-professional players have come from outside of Australia, and there have been several [players in the VFL/AFL who were born outside Australia](#), no player to learn the game overseas has yet played a game in the Australian Football League.

The growth of Australian rules internationally went into rapid decline following [World War I](#). After [World War II](#), the sport experienced a small amount of growth in the [Pacific](#) region, particularly in [Nauru](#), [Papua New Guinea](#) and later [New Zealand](#).

Australian rules football is emerging as an international sport much later than other forms of football such as soccer or the rugby codes, but has grown substantially as an amateur sport in some countries since the 1980s. Initially the sport has grown with the [Australian diaspora](#), [aided by multiculturalism](#) and assisted by [exhibition matches](#) and [players who have converted to and from other football codes](#). In Papua New Guinea, New Zealand, [South Africa](#) and the [United States](#) there

are many thousands of players. [Great Britain](#), [Canada](#), [Japan](#), [Denmark](#) and [Sweden](#) have also shown strong potential in the sport amongst local players in the lead up to the [2008 Australian Football International Cup](#).

The AFL became the defacto governing body when it pushed for the closure of the [International Australian Football Council](#) in 2002.

Australian rules football is played professionally only by men in Australia and is major [spectator sport](#) only in [Australia](#) and [Nauru](#) with the exception of occasional [exhibition games](#) staged in other countries and carnival type events overseas.

International Rules Football

Since 1967 there have been many matches between Australian rules football teams (mainly from Australia) and [Gaelic football](#) teams (mainly from Ireland), under various sets of hybrid, compromise rules known as [International rules football](#). In 1984, the first official representative matches of International Rules were played, and these were played annually each October between the AFL and the [Gaelic Athletic Association](#) between 1998 and 2006 as part of the official [International Rules Series](#) which attracted large crowds and media interest in both [Ireland](#) and Australia, however the series was cancelled in 2006 due to escalating violence between the two sides.

Traditions of the game



Before the start of each AFL games, players run through a banner constructed by supporters.

Australian Rules is a sport rich in tradition and [Australian cultural](#) references, especially surrounding the rituals of gameday for players, officials and supporters.

As part of their uniform, players wear shirts called [guernseys](#). Guernseys are similar to [basketball](#) shirts, but of a more robust design, often referred to in Australia as "jumpers". In the early period of the game's development players often wore sleeveless lace-up tops which gradually disappeared between the 1960s and early 1980s. A few players choose to wear a long sleeved variation of the modern guernsey design. Players wore full length pants, before adopting shorts in the 1920s. Tight-fitting shorts were a notable fashion trend in most leagues in the 1980s and some players began to wear [hamstring](#) warmers. A brief experiment with [lycra](#) by the AFL in the State of Origin series was quickly abandoned for more traditional wear. Padding is rare, but some ruckmen wear shin pads and thigh pads and players with head injuries sometimes wear soft helmets. Long socks (football socks) are compulsory, and mouthguards are worn by most players. Boots with moulded cleats or studs for gripping the ground are worn (screw-ins have been banned from most leagues since the 1990s).

Traditionally, umpires have worn white and were sometimes referred to as "white maggots"^[26] amongst supporters. AFL umpires now wear bright colours to also avoid clashes with the player guernseys and AFL goal umpires now wear t-shirts and caps, rather than the traditional white coat and [broad brimmed hat](#) (similar to what was worn by many cricket umpires) which they wore before the 1990s.



Cheersquads at Australian rules football matches behind the goals wave giant Pom-poms or floggers to signify a goal



Meat pies are a tradition at Australian football games.

Typical supporter wear includes the team [scarf](#) and sometimes [beanie](#) (particularly in cooler climates) in the colours of the team. Team guernseys are also worn by supporters. Team flags are sometimes flown by supporters at the start of a game when a goal is scored, and when their team wins.

Before AFL matches, it is traditional for teams run through a [crepe](#) banner constructed by the cheersquads of each team. These often feature messages and slogans for the team in the context of the match, such as congratulating a player on a landmark number of games and more recently also sponsorship messages. The banners and sometimes also streamers are used in important local football matches such as finals. As players run through the banners, the team's song (or [fight song](#)) is sometimes also played or sung. The fight song is also sung by the winning team.

Australian rules supporters don't use the word 'root' for support (the word 'root' is [Australian slang](#) for 'sex'), but instead "barrack" for their team. Though other cultures have had an influence at various points in its history, Australian football tends to have different atmosphere to sports like soccer and American Football. Partly due to Australian culture, Australian rules spectators are generally more solitary animals. With the exception of small official cheersquads, spectators at Aussie Rules matches will rarely engage in support for their teams with

organised chants. Instead, each individual spectator will most often shout their own support using the nickname of their team ie. "Carn the Crows !" or "Carn the Maggies". In contrast, cheersquads are highly organised, have their own rituals and almost always congregate behind the goals during games. Most professional clubs have official cheersquads which will sometimes wave enormous coloured [pompoms](#) known as *floggers* after the umpire has signalled a goal. American style [cheerleading](#) is very rare.^[27]

[Meat pies](#) and [beer](#) are popular consumables (sometimes noted as a tradition) for supporters at Australian rules matches. At AFL matches mobile vendors walk around the ground selling such pies, yelling out the well-known call of "hot pies, cold drinks!"

At the end of the match, it is traditional for a [pitch invasion](#) to occur. Supporters run onto the field to celebrate the game and play games of [kick-to-kick](#) with their families. In many suburban and country games, this also happens during quarter and half-time breaks. In the AFL in recent years, this tradition has been more strictly controlled with [security guards](#) to ensure that players and officials can safely leave the ground. At the largest AFL grounds, this tradition has been banned completely, to protect the surface, much to the discontent of fans. But smaller grounds ([Skilled Stadium](#), for example) still allow fans onto the field after the game. Sometimes a mid-game *pitch invasion* is expected for various highly anticipated landmark achievements (such as a player kicking a record number of goals).

Popularity



Australian rules football is popular amongst indigenous communities.

Australian rules football has attracted more overall interest among Australians (as measured by the Sweeney Sports report) than any other football code, and, when compared with all sports throughout the nation, has consistently ranked first in the winter reports, and most recently third behind [cricket](#) and [swimming](#) in summer.^[28] In some of the southern states, it is the most popular sport of all sports. As a football code, it is the most popular form of football in the [Northern Territory](#), [South Australia](#), [Tasmania](#), [Victoria](#) and [Western Australia](#). It is less popular in [New South Wales](#) and [Queensland](#), although there has traditionally been strong support for the code in regions within those states, such as parts of southern New South Wales including the [Riverina](#) and parts of Queensland such as [Cairns](#) and the [Gold Coast](#). The AFL teams from Brisbane and Sydney have attracted a strong increase in crowds, television audiences participation when they both recently won premierships. Demographic and migration trends have affected all football codes in recent years, but most significantly Australian football in Queensland, where Australian football has greatly increased in popularity over the past decade.

It is particularly popular amongst [indigenous Australian](#) communities. Indigenous Australians are well represented in professional AFL players: while only 2.4% of the population is of indigenous origin, 10% of AFL players identify themselves this way. Although it is a popular winter code cricket and swimming still eclipse it during the summer.

Australian rules is the national sport of [Nauru](#).

Attendance



A capacity crowd at an AFL game at [AAMI Stadium](#) in Adelaide.

Australian rules football is the most highly attended spectator sport in Australia: government figures show that more than 2.5 million people attended games in 2005-06.^[29] In 2007 (including finals matches), a cumulative 7,049,945 people attended [Australian Football League](#) premiership matches, a record for the competition.^[30] In 2005, a further 307,181 attended [NAB Cup](#) pre-season matches and 117,552 attended Regional Challenge pre-season practice matches around the country.

As of 2005 the AFL is one of only five professional sports leagues in the world with an average [attendance](#) above thirty thousand (the others are the [NFL](#) in the United States and [Major League Baseball](#) in the U.S. and Canada, and the top division soccer leagues in [Germany](#) and [England](#)). In 2007, the average attendance of 38,113 made the AFL the second best attended domestic club league in the world, after only the NFL in the United States.

The [Melbourne Cricket Ground](#) is the largest stadium used for Australian rules football and the permanent home of the [AFL Grand Final](#). It is one of the [largest sporting stadiums in the world](#) and was the venue for the record Australian rules football attendance of 121,696 at the [1970 VFL Grand Final](#), between [Carlton](#) and [Collingwood](#) - which game was also historic, in that it heralded the dawning of a new style of football - still largely in use today, wherein handballing was introduced more to commence the attack from the back line. Redevelopment since

then to a mainly seated stadium has reduced the current capacity to approximately 100,000.

In addition to the national AFL competition, some semi-professional local leagues also draw significant crowds. Although crowds for state leagues have suffered in recent years, they continue to draw support, particularly for finals matches. The South Australian [SANFL](#) drew an attendance of 309,874 in 2006 and the Western Australian [WAFL](#) drew an official attendance of 207,154. Other leagues, such as the Victorian [VFL](#) (including a Tasmanian side, the [Devils](#)), [Northern Territory Football League](#) and the popular country league [Ovens & Murray](#) also charge admission and draw notable crowds (but with no available attendance figures).

Outside of Australia, the game has drawn notable attendances only for occasional carnival type events, such as International tests and [exhibition matches](#).

[\[edit\]](#) **Television**



Part of the [2006 AFL Grand Final](#) pre-match entertainment. The AFL Grand Final is one of the most watched sporting events on television in Australia and attracts a growing world-wide audience.

The national AFL is the main league which is shown on television in Australia and around the world.

The 2005 [AFL Grand Final](#) was watched by a record [television](#) audience of more than 3.3 million people across Australia's five most populous cities—the [five mainland state capitals](#)—including 1.2 million in [Melbourne](#) and 991,000 in [Sydney](#).^[31] In 2006, the national audience was 3.145 million, including 1.182 million in Melbourne and 759,000 in Sydney.^[32]

According to [OzTAM](#), in recent years, the AFL Grand Final has reached the top five programs across the five biggest cities in [2002](#), [2003](#), [2004](#), [2005](#) and [2006](#). In [2007](#), it was #1 in metropolitan markets. Australian rules football has achieved a #1 rating in the sports category in both [2004](#) and [2005](#).

Some of the more popular regional leagues in Australia have the "match of the week" televised locally and free-to-air on [ABC Television's](#) respective state networks. The SANFL is the most popular of these regional competitions measuring a total of 1,415,000 television viewers in 2007.^[33]

Some of these regional leagues also attracted a national audience through free-to-air broadcasting on television networks such as [ABC2](#). OzTAM began measuring these audiences in 2006. Despite a large number of complaints, ABC2 withdrew all of these broadcasts in early 2008.^{[34][35]}

Australian rules also has a nominal but growing international audience. Since 2005, some AFL matches have been shown in the Pacific Rim region for the first time through the [Australia Network](#). The AFL Grand Final is broadcast to many countries and attracts many million viewers worldwide. This audience has grown to approximately 30 million viewers from 72 countries.^[36]

According to [Roy Morgan Research](#), more Americans watch Australian Rules Football than Australians. A poll taken between April 2002 and March 2004 showed that 7,496,000 North Americans compared to 7,004,000 Australians watch Australian Rules Football at least occasionally on television.^[37]

New media

The AFL website was the #1 most popular [Hitwise](#) Australian sports website in 2004, increasing in market share by 9.86% over that year.^[38] In 2006, other consistently high traffic websites in the Australian Top 20 included AFL Dream Team, (Trading Post) AFL Footy Tipping, BigFooty.com and Bomberland.^[39] In 2006, the search term 'afl' represented the highest number of search terms (2.48%) that delivered users to Hitwise sports category listed websites.^[40] Statistics show that Victorians consist of 43% of all visits to the AFL football category.^[41]

Participation



A [Women's Australian rules football](#) Match between the [Melbourne University Mugar](#)s and the [Darebin Falcons](#).

In 2006, a total of 615,549 registered participants played Australian football in Australia.^[42] Participation 7.84% between 2005-06.^[42] The [Australian Sports Commission](#) statistics show a 42% increase in the total number of participants over the 4 year period between 2001-2005.^[43]

Australian rules football is played in more than 30 countries around the world.^[44] In 2004, there were a total of over 25,000 participants outside of Australia.^[45] This has grown to about 35,000 people in 32 countries playing in structured competitions outside of Australia^[46]

Many related games have emerged from football, mainly with variations of contact to encourage greater participation. These include [Kick-to-kick](#) (and its variants such as 'Markers Up'), [Auskick](#), [Rec Footy](#), [Women's Australian rules football](#), [9-a-side Footy](#), [Masters Australian Football](#), handball and longest-kick competitions. Players outside of Australia sometimes engage in related games on the fields available, like [Metro Footy](#) (played on gridiron fields) and [Samoa Rules](#) (played on rugby fields).

Australian rules in popular culture

For many years, the game of Australian rules football captured the imagination of Australian film, music, television and literature.

The Club, a critically acclaimed 1977 play by [David Williamson](#), deals with the internal politics of a Melbourne football club steeped in tradition. The play was adapted as a film, directed by [Bruce Beresford](#) and starring [Jack Thompson](#) and [Graham Kennedy](#), in 1980.

Many songs inspired by the game have become popular, none more so than the 1979 hit "[Up There Cazaly](#)", by [Mike Brady](#). Brady followed the hit up with "[One Day in September](#)" in 1987. Both are frequently used in Grand Final celebrations.

Australian Football Hall of Fame

For the centenary of the VFL/AFL in 1996, the Australian Football Hall of Fame was established. In that year 136 identities were inducted, including 100 players, 10 coaches, 10 umpires, 10 administrators and six media representatives.^[47]

The selections have caused some controversy, mainly because of the predominance of VFL players at the expense of those who played in other leagues in the years before there was a national competition.

The elite *Legend* status was bestowed on 12 members of the Hall of Fame in 1996: [Ron Barassi](#), [Haydn Bunton Senior](#), [Roy Cazaly](#), [John Coleman](#), [Jack Dyer](#), [Polly Farmer](#), [Leigh](#)

Matthews, John Nicholls, Bob Pratt, Dick Reynolds, Bob Skilton and Ted Whitten (see above list for further details).

The following ten members have been promoted to the status of "Legend" since 1996: Ian Stewart (1997), Gordon Coventry (1998), Peter Hudson (1999), Kevin Bartlett (2000), Barrie Robran (2001), Bill Hutchison (2003), Jock McHale (2005), Darrel Baldock (2006), Norm Smith (2007) and Alex Jesaulenko (2008).^[48]

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