THE STORIES BEHIND THE PREMIER TEAMS OF THE VICTORIAN FOOTBALL LEAGUE

GRAND FINALS

VOLUME II

1939-1978

Companion volume to Grand Finals Volume I—1897-1938

Introduction by Geoff Slattery

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FOOTBALL GAINS AN IDENTITY

**As part-time players move towards professionalism,
the AFL cements its place in the nation's heart. By GEOFF SLATTERY**

PUBLISHED in 2011, *Grand Finals Volume I* traversed the development of the Australian game of football from its formative years in the late 1890s, through Federation, the Great War, the Roaring Twenties and the Depression to the eve of the Second World War. This was not only a time when a young country gained an identity and a purpose; it was a time when football came of age as the entertainment for the masses of Melburnians. It was also the time when Dick Lee and Jock McHale and Gordon Coventry and Jack Dyer and Roy Cazaly and 'Carji' Greeves and Ivor Warne-Smith made their way into the game's formative folklore and traditions.

The Depression formalised the tribal nature of the game. If the on-field battles hadn't done so then brawling in the streets—protecting home grounds of a different nature—surely did. These were times when suburbs struggled to survive, and a time when main roads were almost demilitarised zones. Dyer, the most famous Tiger of all, whose career began in humble circumstances in round two, 1931, as a very raw 17-year-old, recorded the attitude of the time in an interview with Peter Wilmoth, published in *The Age* in 1995: "It [the suburb of Richmond] was sort of a closed shop. We were locked in. The Yarra that side. Punt Road that side. North Richmond and Victoria Street the other side. Anyone come over to us from Collingwood they were out the moment they crossed Victoria Street. And they took it a bit like that in those days, too, those young fellers who had nothing to do, they'd drive them back again. That seemed to be their enjoyment, not that I was mixed up because

I wasn't like that."[1] That last statement must be met with a wry smile; Dyer kept his 'mixing up' for the field, ruthlessly working within laws that made the shirtfront a legitimate weapon. That his time as a Tiger enforcer coincided with the release, in 1935, of the Errol Flynn blockbuster *Captain Blood* may have been a lifetime blessing for Dyer: no better nickname could be matched with a player of his swashbuckling nature, and wit.

Dyer became the spirit of Richmond, a spirit that was confirmed in the first part of the 21st century when it became club policy that Dyer's No.17 guernsey be worn by the club captain, perhaps the greatest tribute of all for a legend of the game.

The thirties had been a great period for Richmond under their formidable captain-coach Perce Bentley—with two premierships and two near-misses under his direction, and Dyer would continue that leadership through the war years, winning the flag in 1943, and falling just short in 1940, 1942 and 1944. It's testament to the circular motions of elite sport that the Tigers would not triumph again until the Tom Hafey era began in the mid-sixties; Hafey, a no-nonsense back pocket player, would take his playing patterns into the coaching box, driving the twin imperatives of discipline and long bombs into a team that was a delicious mix of blue collar workers and geniuses.

If *Grand Finals Volume 1 (1897-1938)* defined the Victorian Football League coming of age as entertainment for the masses, confirming that Australia had a game of its own, *Grand Finals Volume II (1939-1978)* describes a period when players as part-timers moved to the edge of the professional era. Total professionalism would not take place until the mid 1990s, but as the seventies drew to a close the requirements that clubs made on their players' time saw salaries increase beyond the basics of the post-war years to something that could provide the best in the game some foundation for a lucrative lifestyle.

The story that dominates this volume, however, is the story of Norm Smith and the Melbourne Football Club. Smith made his debut for the Demons in round 15 of the 1935 season, booting the first two of his record-setting 546 goals for the club, an achievement that would stand from 1948 until broken by David Neitz in 2006. Smith was a brilliant player, underrated by recent generations, his career having been overwhelmed by his astonishing record as a legendary coach.

It is clear from contemporary reports that Smith, a slight 183cm, would have fitted very nicely into the role of an unstoppable small forward in the modern era; he was an opportunist to the highest degree, but he also had

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1 Wilmoth, Peter *Up Close—28 Lives Of Extraordinary Australians.* Macmillan, 2005

an uncanny ability to draw opponents, and make the task easier for his teammates. Hec De Lacy, the doyen of sportswriters of the Smith era was glowing in his praise of the redheaded full-forward. Writing in *The Sporting Globe* in August 1940, in the middle of Melbourne's run of three consecutive premierships, De Lacy wrote: "…those who have been fortunate enough to see the Melbourne forwards in action will agree that the greatest forward in the League today is Norman Smith. Smith is robust—a great fighter but unselfish to a fault. He does not rely on the other fellows to feed him. He reverses the forward order and feeds them."[2] These were the characteristics that Smith took into his coaching career: team first, second and third.

As a coach he was the disciplinarian's disciplinarian and although his career at the helm got off to a shaky start—winning just 42 of 92 matches in three seasons at Fitzroy and his first two at Melbourne—his other great strengths, patience and self-belief, would take him and Melbourne to a pre-eminence all but unsurpassed in the game's history.

In fact, this volume of Grand Final stories should be part of every Melbourne fan's library: from the start of this book, season 1939, Smith played in six Grand Finals (one replay) for four premierships, and coached in eight Grand Finals for six premierships. Those same Demon fans would know only too well that the famous club's only other flags were in 1900 and 1926—and the curse that followed the sacking of Norm Smith in 1965 remains true to this day.

In a bizarre example of chest-thumping, the Melbourne committee sacked Smith after 12 rounds of the 1965 season (Melbourne was 9-3 at the time), claiming the coach had shown scant respect for the committee. It was a classic impasse: a proud man assaulted, in his terms, by a patrician group of administrators. The committee could not cope with a classic working-class man attacking their integrity and understanding of what made clubs work. What rankled most with Smith was that the committee claimed he lied in his dealings between them and the playing group. Frank 'Checker' Hughes would step in to coach Melbourne for the round-13 match against North Melbourne at the Coburg Oval, before Smith was reinstated. Apologies were provided and accepted, but the 'curse' remains. It is also worth noting that the rift with Smith coincided with the dramatic move of Melbourne's great captain, Ron Barassi, to Carlton. Barassi was appointed captain-coach of the Blues from 1965, an appointment that rocked traditionalists—if Melbourne's favourite son could switch clubs, was anything sacred?

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2 Collins, Ben *The Red Fox.* The Slattery Media Group, 2008

Another dominant character through this volume is the Essendon champion Dick Reynolds, who was coach or captain-coach of the Bombers in 11-Grand Finals (four flags) between 1941 and 1959. 'King Richard', like Dyer at Punt Road and McHale at Collingwood, was and remains the spirit of Windy Hill. Like Dyer and Smith and McHale he was a brilliant player who took his playing characteristics into the coach's box. Unlike Dyer and Smith, Reynolds was to leave an immediate legacy to his club, with his successor, the champion full-forward John Coleman, coaching the Bombers through one of their most successful eras, with flags in 1962 and 1965.

McHale's great era of success was to finish in 1939—the Grand Final that year being the last of his 17 in charge (from 1912). McHale was Collingwood, and his eight premierships as coach remains a League record. His reign would end in 1949, with his trusted captain Phonse Kyne to take over—an appointment not without its controversy. The Magpies first appointed Bervin Woods as McHale's successor, an appointment that would last just one practice match, before Woods handed in his resignation. Kyne would continue McHale's great work, leading Collingwood to flags in 1953 and, the one that really mattered, 1958—when they protected the 1927-30 Collingwood's team extraordinary run of four premierships. Melbourne had won in 1955, '56 and '57, and would prevail again in 1959 and 1960, but they could not overwhelm Collingwood in that famous 1958 showdown. In a remarkable twist, Melbourne would win the next 10 clashes against the Magpies at the MCG, a run that would end with Collingwood's victory in round 17, in 1966.

Then there was John Kennedy, a gangly ruckman—all arms and legs—who led Hawthorn to its first final (as captain) in 1957, and then to its maiden premiership in 1961. Kennedy was a great orator as leader, a man whose personal traits of honesty, hard work, application and integrity were imposed on all who came under his spell at Glenferrie Oval. Kennedy—advised in many areas by his brilliant centreman, and physical fitness guru, Brendan Edwards—took Hawthorn to new levels of fitness and strength in that 1961 season. They trained harder and longer than any opponent, and making the most of the sardine tin that was their home ground (Glenferrie Oval), they were able to wear down apparently more skilled sides to claim that premiership. Kennedy would come and go through the sixties—handing over the reins in 1964 to pursue his blossoming teaching career as headmaster of Stawell High School, before returning to the Hawks in 1967—but his personality is embedded in the club, made manifest by a dominating statue of Kennedy in full cry overlooking the Hawks' training ground, Waverley Park.
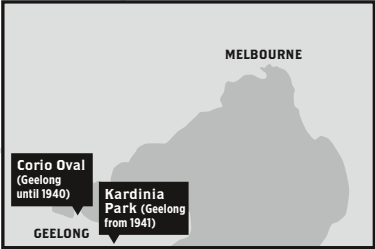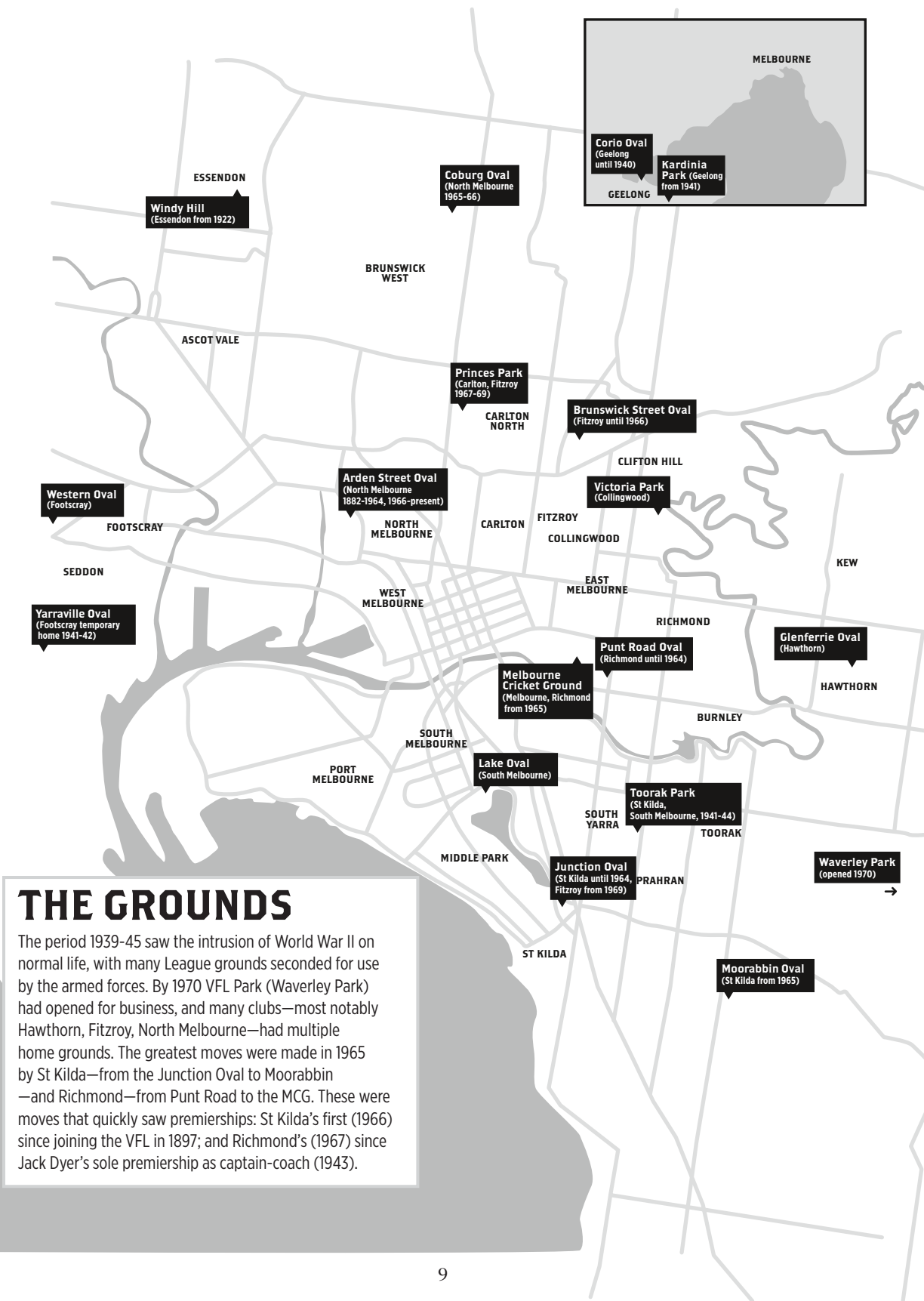
The same hardness at the ball and never-say-die approach were again represented by the Hawks as they fought back from a match-losing deficit to beat St Kilda in the 1971 Grand Final, a match that many claim as the toughest Grand Final of all. At the end of the 1976 season, Kennedy would hand over once and for all—this time to his 1971 captain David Parkin, and this time with a team that was just hitting its straps as a true power, one that would become one of the greatest teams of all eras, a story to be told in the next volume of Grand Finals.

I remember speaking with Parkin after Hawthorn had won the 1978 premiership. A year earlier in Parkin's first season as coach the Hawks had been eliminated by North Melbourne—with the Hawks as hot favourites—in the 1977 preliminary final.

His approach in victory was pretty much that of all winning Grand Final coaches, of all eras: "How do I feel?" he said. "I feel overwhelming relief. There is no other way to describe it."

Grand Final victories will do that to coaches; for players and fans it's a rather different emotion, closer to euphoria. A sense not only that a job has been done—but hell, let's enjoy the victory to the fullest extent. For Roger Franklin (who wrote of his beloved Bulldogs' sole flag—1954) and Luke Holmesby (born and bred into a passionate St Kilda family—1966) that pleasure that can only exist in recalling these historic victories. I hope that *Grand Finals Volume II (1939-78)* will provide not just historical perspective, but a smorgasbord of pleasure for followers of all of the League clubs of this era, except South Melbourne whose last success, 1934, was covered in all its glory in Volume I. Joy, for Swans fans, will come again in Volume III.

Geoff Slattery
Editor and Publisher
September 2012

MELBOURNE

Corio Oval (Geelong until 1940)

Kardinia Park (Geelong from 1941)

GEELONG

ESSENDON

Windy Hill (Essendon from 1922)

Coburg Oval (North Melbourne 1965-66)

BRUNSWICK WEST

ASCOT VALE

Princes Park (Carlton, Fitzroy 1967-69)

CARLTON NORTH

Brunswick Street Oval (Fitzroy until 1966)

CLIFTON HILL

Western Oval (Footscray)

Arden Street Oval (North Melbourne 1882-1964, 1966-present)

Victoria Park (Collingwood)

FOOTSCRAY

NORTH MELBOURNE

CARLTON

FITZROY

COLLINGWOOD

KEW

SEDDON

WEST MELBOURNE

EAST MELBOURNE

RICHMOND

Yarraville Oval (Footscray temporary home 1941-42)

Glenferrie Oval (Hawthorn)

Punt Road Oval (Richmond until 1964)

HAWTHORN

Melbourne Cricket Ground (Melbourne, Richmond from 1965)

BURNLEY

SOUTH MELBOURNE

Lake Oval (South Melbourne)

PORT MELBOURNE

Toorak Park (St Kilda, South Melbourne, 1941-44)

SOUTH YARRA

TOORAK

MIDDLE PARK

Junction Oval (St Kilda until 1964, Fitzroy from 1969)

PRAHRAN

Waverley Park (opened 1970)

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THE GROUNDS

The period 1939-45 saw the intrusion of World War II on normal life, with many League grounds seconded for use by the armed forces. By 1970 VFL Park (Waverley Park) had opened for business, and many clubs—most notably Hawthorn, Fitzroy, North Melbourne—had multiple home grounds. The greatest moves were made in 1965 by St Kilda—from the Junction Oval to Moorabbin —and Richmond—from Punt Road to the MCG. These were moves that quickly saw premierships: St Kilda's first (1966) since joining the VFL in 1897; and Richmond's (1967) since Jack Dyer's sole premiership as captain-coach (1943).

ST KILDA

Moorabbin Oval (St Kilda from 1965)