

What I'm thinking

with Ashley Browne

Changing the pages of history

Should early VFA premierships be counted towards the overall tallies of AFL/VFL foundation clubs? Former Geelong president Colin Carter makes his case.

Geelong opens its 2023 season at the MCG on Friday night and, according to the AFL's record books and pretty much every Cats fan, the club will be seeking its 11th premiership.

But according to a growing cadre of football historians, last year's thumping Grand Final win over Sydney was the club's 17th flag; go back-to-back and it will be celebrating No.18.

The proposition is spelt out in the just-released book *Football's Forgotten Years*, written by former Geelong president and AFL Commissioner Colin Carter.

Carter contends there was organised Victorian football as far back as 1870, with a premier team determined.

Among the clubs that took part in that semi-formal competition were Geelong, Melbourne, Carlton and South Melbourne (now Sydney).

When the Victorian Football Association was formed in 1877, Essendon and Fitzroy (which later became part of the Brisbane Lions) also featured, as did St Kilda.

It was those seven clubs, together with the rapidly emerging Collingwood (formed in 1892), who broke away from the VFA at the end of 1896 to form the Victorian Football League, which is formally the first iteration of the competition we know and love today.



ADDITIONAL FLAGS: A case is being made that Geelong's 2022 premiership was the club's 17th, not its 10th.

In the book, Carter offers examples from the formation of the VFL through to the early 1920s – both in official publications such as League annual reports, the *Football Record* and its predecessors, as well as various newspapers – of premierships won before the VFL's formation given equal weight to those won after 1897.

For example, a newspaper report of the 1909 annual meeting said of the victorious South Melbourne, "premiers after 19 years of failure".

Carter also included many other examples of such reporting.

The turning point came in 1924, the year VFA champs Footscray knocked off VFL premier Essendon in a post-season challenge match suggested by Dame Nellie Melba as a fundraiser for wounded war veterans.

Tensions between the two competitions were then at their fiercest and after that the League and football media counted only premierships won since the VFL's formation.

But Carter calls this "revisionist history" and uses the book to prosecute the case that games played should join premierships won between 1870 and 1896 in the game's official records.

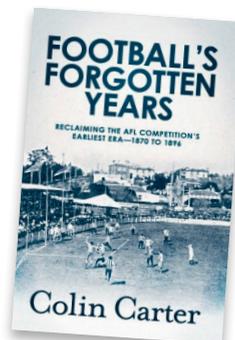
They are reflected in the *AFL Record Season Guide* in the Australian Football Hall of Fame section, but not on the League's official website afl.com.au.

Much of the numbers from that era have already been crunched through the detailed work of historians such as Mark Pennings, who has painstakingly compiled scores and match reports from games played during the pre-VFL era and has published them in several volumes.

It is an impressive piece of football scholarship.

For its part, the AFL is open to at least discussing Carter's proposal, and there seems genuine commitment towards establishing a heritage

In his book, Carter mounts a strong argument for change



Football's Forgotten Years by Colin Carter. Published by Slattery Books. RRP: \$29.95.

committee to consider this and other ideas to properly acknowledge and celebrate the history of the game.

In his book, Carter mounts a strong argument for change.

He walks through the history of the time, makes his case and rebuffs the various arguments against it. Once a management consultant, always a management consultant.

But there remain nagging doubts.

Should premierships, which were awarded by a consensus of experts at the end of the season – as was the case in the very early days – carry the same weight as a Grand Final result?

The game was fundamentally different back then.

Team representatives, not field umpires, were still determining free kicks in the early 1870s, while behinds did not count on the scoreboard the year Melbourne was adjudged to be the champion team ahead of Albert Park and Carlton, and didn't until 1897.

It is also indisputable that the VFL was a breakaway competition, so it requires a leap of faith for the eight original clubs to claim the premiership records of the body they chose to no longer be part of.

Perhaps the answer is for the premiership table to be amended to differentiate between those won before 1896, then from 1897-1989 (the VFL era) and finally from 1990 when the League was rebadged as the AFL.

AFL CEO Gillon McLachlan seemed genuinely engaged by the question posed by Carter when he launched his book at the Melbourne Cricket Club library last month.

But he was equally pleased (or perhaps relieved) that the answer will be determined by whoever will soon be taking his place. **R**

[@hashbrowne](https://twitter.com/hashbrowne)