

The birth of Fitzroy Junior Football Club: 1993

One reflection.

From very humble beginnings!

By Graeme Willingham*

Cats and Dogs. By the bucket-load. Was it Goon Spike Milligan who scripted “The rains couldn’t have come at a worse time, smack bang in the middle of the monsoons!?”

For a week in the middle of June 1993 it had poured, transforming the grassy surface of the picturesque Alfred Crescent oval in North Fitzroy’s Edinburgh Gardens to an uninviting sloppy paddock.

A few residents in the comfort of their Victorian terrace houses opposite looked out to the oval from their second storey windows through the gloom, pondering how they could possibly exercise their dogs on that same space later that day.

They could have barely seen a dozen or so adults huddled together one hundred metres away, under the leafless elms, on the other side of the oval. Umbrellas and gumboots was essential attire for watching their little darlings soccering an Aussie Rules football across the sheet water.

And what a motley crew they were. The kids, that is. While they were all appropriately decked out in jumpers of the banished Fitzroy Football Club (Dyson Hore-Lacy and his still-in-existence club executive donated this first set of junior jumpers, found in a cob-webbed locker room somewhere) their colourful board shorts and socks of every AFL club tested the administration of the Hawthorn and Districts Junior Football League (later merged with Doncaster league to form Yarra Junior Football League).

(The socks problem was solved later when an anonymous patron of the old Brunswick Street terraces delivered to the club an envelope containing what could best be described as a “decent” amount of cash. Like \$1000. The note read: “Buy the boys some socks!”)

But all that official regulation was not the chief concern of the founding fathers and mothers of Fitzroy Junior Football Club who had achieved a single goal during their planning through Summer and Autumn of 1993 – providing a structure of sorts for children graduating from Fitzroy-Carlton Vickick to play the game of footy within their own neighbourhood. To have fun.

There was no such facility in Fitzroy. Changing demographics had produced an unsatisfied pool of aspiring AFL stars.

A member of the founding committee pushed the inaugural team towards the Under 11 age group because she said 10 and 11 year olds would make up the core of the team. That promise was unfulfilled. The big kids never showed up in the necessary numbers. Neither did the mum!

But it was too late. This under-age team was certainly under age, and therefore under-manned ... a few 11s and 10s, mostly 9s and possibly a few 8 year-olds. Folklore has it that a seven year-old filled in one week! Every week up against bigger, badder, uglier, meaner 10 and 11 year olds.

The result: for weeks, never a goal was scored.

Well, not until that D-Day, Downpour Day.

Late in the game, from under their streaming umbrellas, the proud parents looked east through the rain. Suddenly, about CHF, one of the old brigade (a 11 year-old) threw the mud-leaden vinyl “Sherrin” on to his preferred left boot and off it went, bouncing, then skidding, spinning backwards, aqua-planing towards the gap between the tall white perpendiculars, never deviating off its originating line because it could find no traction in the sludge.

It was impossible from their behind-ball-angle 80 metres away and through the thick rain for the faithful adults to tell just how close the ball was sliding away from them towards the line, but they could see two opponents closing the gap on the escaping ball.

The defenders dived desperately at full length into the pools of grey goal square soup to affect an all-important touch. They couldn't be the team to let Fitzroy score its first goal. Heaven forbid! The shame!

The home team players close enough to see what was really happening threw their arms in the air in exultant hope as the sliding opponents showered mud over the sodden, but watchful goal umpire.

The “crowd” at the other end started to lift their feet from the glue, hearts pounding at the prospect.

In a split second, the moment was defined. A two-finger salute, of the football variety.

Fitzroy Junior Football Club had scored its first ever goal.

The Roy Boys were back in town!

As the goal umpire received the “All Clear” salute from the central ump and raised the heavy twin white calicoes, the hooded gaggle of parents ran onto the ground, cheering, embracing and dancing, their flaying umbrellas spraying water wide. Move over Gene Kelly. This was real singing. In real rain.

Weeks of pent-up anxiety released in a single action in what was obviously another serious breach of League rules: spectators must not move onto the ground during play.

What could those high-and-dry residents along Alfred Crescent be making of this outrageous juvenile behaviour?

The goalkicker was rushed by his teammates who sprinted, as they had never done before, to be with their hero. A premiership feeling, indeed, all achieved just a dry-day Butch Gale drop kick from the home of FFC, the Brunswick Street Oval, now branded the W.T.Petersen Reserve in honour of the former Fitzroy Mayor, the late Bill Petersen.

Dyson Hore Lacy and his FFC committee might have been fighting for their rights to survive, but the emergence of a new generation of Fitzroy Lion was well and truly underway.

Only the future lay ahead.

The Under 11s cubs did not improve on that single goal that day and lost yet again. In fact, they never kicked another goal for the entire season, finishing the 12-match season with just 1.11, so they say.

It was a spiritual goal. These boys were proud to be in the den and they began to spread the word about the great fun they were having down at Alfred Crescent Oval.

The players flocked in. In Year 2, another team.

While the junior footballers were happy, the parents had to turn their minds to matters administrative. The league had set rules. Fines would be imposed for not providing umpire escorts, inappropriate field markings, incorrect coloured shorts. On the list went. The club ran foul on occasions, but it was a matter of naïve management on the part of the well-intentioned parents, rather than any ill will to conform.

In the main though, the league and competition clubs were forgiving of a club with no history.

And the players kept coming.

Lads and Mums and Dads from Collingwood junior club moved across. Future now assured.

Clubs loved coming to that beautiful park setting to play against the Fitzroy Lions. And as victory came their way, the Lions began to learn the victory song of the old FFC “We are the Boys of Old Fitzroy” to the tune of the French national anthem La Marseillaise. Some sang “We are the boys of the New Fitzroy ...”

The committee may not have been so hot on the rules of match-day management, but the junior club won the reputation of providing the best barbecue sausages in the league. Amazing what caramelised onion and a smattering of Hot English mustard can do the barbied snag.

Not your customary half-warm pie or bright pink half-drowned sav floating in fatty luke warm water at Fitzroy!

A culinary edge, which was not lost on local residents strolling through the park on match days.

So loved was the environment that parents of one eastern suburb team set up their deck chairs and chardonnayed in the sun, on the south side of the oval, with their backs to the terrace houses. What they didn't know was that earlier that day, the Fitzroy parents had dutifully shovelled dog poo from the fenceless oval before the kids arrived for the first game. A weekly ritual.

Still they came. Anyone who wanted to play football was (and is) welcome at Fitzroy.

The club had a primary philosophy of providing an organised facility for local boys and girls to play football, have fun, regardless of ability, a philosophy not necessarily shared by some of the older established junior clubs in the eastern suburbs which appeared to focus more on premierships, and adhering to the rule book.

Still they came, from Fitzroy, North Fitzroy, Collingwood, Clifton Hill, Brunswick, Carlton, North Carlton, North Melbourne, Alphington, Northcote, East Melbourne

But the presence of the little tackers on the Alfred Crescent oval was not without community conflict.

Police were called early to sort out a dispute between an adult soccer team from Doncaster and the FJFC Founding Fathers and Mothers. The soccer team laid claim to the oval. The footy parents had filled in their goalpost holes in preparation for the kids game. Stand off. Confusion. Anger. Shouting. Three Divi vans arrived. The soccerites were sent packing ... they had no permit from the Council.

Months later, a local residents group voiced its opposition to parents' cars parked on the reserve near the change rooms during the Sunday games. These cars carried footy gear for the boys, barbie food and drinks. Feelings ran high. The Council applied locks to access gates. Of course, the locks remained in place on match day, but the posts holding the locked gates were temporarily "lifted" for the day to get the essential supplies through.

However, the locked gates were kindly replaced on departure after the parents had cleaned out the dank change rooms in virtual darkness (only a few lights worked).

One protesting resident bellowed "Fascists!"

On top of all the local drama, the league wanted to see the club at an oval with a protecting fence. Yes, a league rule, an essential one though, designed for player safety and crowd control.

The club never really entertained putting that measure to the council, nor the residents. Clearly it would have wrecked the park's scenic ambience, a community treasure.

As more players arrived, it was clear the club was outgrowing that tiny oval. Then Yarra Council closed it to the footballers (and cricketers) after discovering

metal contamination in the soil, the same contamination found in the surface of Brunswick Street Oval, which had been used by amateur adult teams, and a soccer club, of all things.

The club lobbied Yarra Council for the colours' return to Brunswick Street. Change takes time and while the ovals were closed for two football seasons for resurfacing, the junior club moved to the larger Ramsden Street Oval in Clifton Hill, also using League grounds at Bulleen for home games.

At this stage, the club had eight teams. And still the players flocked in.

In 2000, the junior club was back at the home of the old Fitzroy Football Club, playing on the best surface in the league, and fielding an impressive 11 teams, including an Under 17 Colts team, which most clubs in the Yarra district just can't field. About 270 players were registered then. (Now there are over 400 from 17 teams!)

This is when FJFC started talking to the local amateur Fitzroy Reds (now Fitzroy Football Club) about streaming players into their Under 19 and senior ranks; a perfect fit for both junior and senior clubs.

In that year, Fitzroy Junior Football Club was awarded Community Club of the Year by the Victoria Football League, worthy recognition of the management and spirit of the organisation.

It also won three premierships, equal highest number of premierships won by a single club that year.

The League called on the club to manage finals at the home oval. Make sure the barbie is working!!!

This time it was the residents of Freeman Street treated to a repeating ghetto-blasted rendition of the La Marseillaise as premiership flags were draped over the balcony rail of the heritage grandstand at about 6pm on Grand Final day. Grown men cried.

No complaints nowadays about how FJFC committee runs its club. After all, you can't push around the largest club in the League!

Dogs no longer have to share Alfred Crescent on Sunday with the kids of Fitzroy playing footy. The dogs have their own area nearby. And most canine carers using the park are now picking up after their animals, but parents still check pre-match at Brunswick Street, just in case.

Alfred Crescent residents are happy because there are no cars parked on the reserve on Sunday. No more blots on their landscape.

The old Lions colours are back where they belong, in front of the historic grandstand at Brunswick Street. No complaints about the kids singing their victory song after each home-ground win.

The League is comfortable now that Fitzroy is playing at an oval that boasts a fence circumnavigating one of the best playing surface in the League, and half-decent rooms for the umpires and visiting teams, which contain some remnants of earlier Lions history.

The snags and onions are still selling well, raising funds to meet League fees, new jumpers, match day balls, training gear and First Aid kits.

But there is no public atonement at Alfred Crescent to the defining moment that projected Fitzroy Junior Football Club into a second season, and beyond.

While the Brunswick Street Oval is the W.T. Peterson Reserve, the Alfred Crescent oval has no such recognition of a community champion.

Just an idea, but who was that lad who kicked that first goal back in '93?

ends

- *Graeme Willingham was Fitzroy-Carlton Vickick Coordinator in 1992 and then a committee member and a coach at FJFC. His eldest son was in that FJFC foundation team and in now playing on Brunswick Street Oval with Fitzroy Football Club Reserves, a team coached by that FJFC Inaugural Goalkicker. This article was first published on the FJFC website in 2003.*