

**Lovin' Footy
in
QLD and NSW**

How to get enough AFL in the
expansion states

Wayde Gniel

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DEDICATION

To my family, friends and footy.
A special mention to my beautiful wife, Suzie, for her
support and patience.

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PREFACE

The word “expat” loosely describes someone who lives away from home. My aim in writing this book was to help the Footy Expats – AFL fans moving away from Melbourne and other traditional football towns – adapt to a strange environment where AFL is not the dominant sport.

I wanted to put together a guide that not only braced them for what’s to come, but gave them all the tools I could think of to make sure they got enough footy in their adopted homes. It may be a tough transition, but that doesn’t mean Expats can’t love their footy while living in Queensland or New South Wales.

Before we get started, I would like to acknowledge a couple of things about this book.

The first is that I have lived in Queensland for the past 20 years and not New South Wales. Despite this, I encourage Expats in New South Wales to read it because I feel the experiences are closely tied through similar sporting markets. As you’ll see, I happily put my hand up when touching on topics I’m not so sure about.

Secondly, the details are accurate at the time of writing, however in today’s world it doesn’t take long for costs, products and packages to change. The goal was to give readers inspiration on their journey rather than up-to-the-minute figures. Where possible I reference sources for these and invite readers to visit The Footy Expat on Facebook for further updates (give us a “Like” while you’re there).

Well, that’s all I have to say except I sincerely hope you enjoy the book and get as much out of reading it as I did writing it.

Yours in footy,

Wayde Gniel
The Footy Expat

MY EXPAT STORY

I know why you're reading this book. You have a big problem and you don't know what to do about it. The truth is, you've seen it coming for a while but chose to sweep it under the carpet. It was easy because heading interstate was exciting and you were so busy taking care of everything else. Besides, everyone told you it wouldn't be so bad. They said you'd get used to it. While you weren't entirely convinced, you certainly didn't expect it would all come to a head so quickly.

How am I doing so far? Am I getting close?

Ok, enough teasing. Let's just get it all out in the open – you miss footy, don't you?

You miss the weekends and the way they used to be, from Thursday night selection to the Monday post-mortems. You miss the build-up to big games: Anzac Day, Dreamtime at the 'G and all the other blockbusters. You even miss the rubbish from your mates when your side gets thrashed. Your football world has been turned upside down and you're wondering how you'll survive.

There is hope

The good news is I can help you! In this book, I'll show how to get enough AFL in the expansion states so it doesn't feel like you've landed on another planet. Even better than that, I'll explain how it's possible to love footy up in Queensland and New South Wales.

Who am I? My name is Wayde and I'm a Footy Expat just like you. At 15, I was suddenly uprooted from the footy-mad Melbourne culture by my family and dragged to Queensland; at that point a virtual AFL-free zone and a world away for someone whose life revolved around the game.

While a lot has changed since the mid 90s, I believe fellow fans making the same move are still in for a shock. Poor free-to-air TV coverage, rare opportunities to attend their club's games and a weaker footy culture in general are just some of the things they'll need to get used to. It's a real challenge from a footy lover's perspective and can turn into a long struggle for the unprepared. Many never fully adjust and find the lure of home too strong; some unfortunately don't have the choice and battle away, forever feeling just that little bit lost.

Having felt first hand just how tough this transition can be, I wanted to spare future generations of Expats the pain I went through. In my years as a footy lover in Queensland I've worked out the keys to survival and I want to pass it all on. The good news is that there are now heaps of options compared to when I first arrived and, with a little help, Expats don't have to suffer like they used to.

Before we get down to business I wanted to share my own Expat story for two reasons.

Firstly, I want to establish my credentials. You wouldn't read a book on marriage written by an 18 year old, so why would you read this unless I had lived, breathed and worked my way through a situation like yours?

Secondly, I want to lift your spirits. Believe me, when you read how hopeless my situation was all those years ago you're guaranteed to feel better!

So, here we go. I hope you like horror stories...

The beginning

My journey began in early 1994, when the wave of Victorians leaving for the sunny state of Queensland was at its peak. I can still picture in my mind the exact moment when my old man told us we were heading to a town called Toowoomba, about an hour and a half west of Brisbane. Toowoomba? I couldn't even pronounce the word let alone find it on a map!

A million questions ran through my mind. What about school? What about my friends? Most of all...what about footy? I had no idea where this place was, but I knew enough about Queensland and rugby league to know my life was about to be turned upside-down.

Let me demonstrate what sort of footy nut I was because it'll give you some idea how big of a deal this all was. Some might call the behavior below embarrassing, but the fact you're reading this book means you're probably nodding to yourself thinking, "I did that!"

- My earliest football memory was going to Collingwood v Carlton at the old VFL Park in 1985 and crying as the Blues kicked away to record an easy victory.

(**Note:** yes, I'm a Collingwood supporter. Please don't put the book down in disgust! More importantly, I'm an Expat just like you and I'm on your side now.)

- When Paul Salmon kicked the opening two goals of

the 1990 Grand Final against Collingwood I also cried.

- I used to know almost every number worn by the players on club lists. For me, the guys kicking dew off the grass in the reserves were just as easy to name as Peter Daicos or Tony Lockett.
- When not playing kick-to-kick with the other kids in our cul-de-sac, I was inside kicking a balloon around and commentating my own imaginary games. In one match I recall, Ian Fairley from North Melbourne kicked 27 goals playing from Centre Half Back against the Swans.
- My temper when watching Collingwood games was infamous. Remote controls were thrown, glass was broken and I also took a few swings at my older brothers. I think I did all three when St. Kilda upset Collingwood in the 1992 elimination final!

I could go on and on, but I think you get the point. Footy was everything to me and my world was about to come crashing down.

Leading up to the big move, my dad had assured me that AFL was alive and well in our new hometown. He'd gone up a few months earlier to make a start in his new job and scope it out. It all sounded ok to be honest. He'd watched a few games on TV and caught site of local matches while driving around. He was even able to reel off a few of the club names. It was very comforting to hear at the time but, looking back, it also filled me with false hope and that made it so much worse when our plane touched down in August of that year.

Where are the goal posts?

The first thing I noticed in the car while making our way to Toowoomba for the very first time was the lack of goal

posts on the drive. Around Melbourne you can't go more than a couple of blocks without seeing a set, but there was nothing like that up here. Plenty of rugby posts, but no AFL. At the time I brushed it off and put it down to a bit of bad luck in our choice of route, however as we settled in during the closing rounds of the 1994 season the harsh reality of following football in Queensland began to hit home.

The very first week, amidst all the worry about the move, a new school and the rest of it, I remember looking forward to one thing: Collingwood v Essendon on a Friday night. At least then I could sit back, enjoy the game and feel "normal" again. At the time, a Friday night game in Melbourne was shown on Channel 7 at 8:30pm with an hour delay. Obviously the situation hadn't fully sunk in yet and I simply expected to flick it on at the same time to catch what was a do or die game for the Magpies at that stage. Instead, I got a B-grade movie re-run that made my face drop.

After frantically reaching for the TV guide to see what the hell was going on, I found the best they could do was a chopped up replay of the game starting at 11:30pm. I wasn't happy! Of course I stayed up to watch it, but I did so wondering, "Is this what I'll have to put up with?"

The very next day my mood brightened a little when I discovered a Saturday game out of Melbourne was shown live every week, which was a small bonus considering you couldn't even get that back home. But, it still felt very much like putting a Band-Aid on a broken leg. One game did not make up for all the others I would hear absolutely nothing about or all the other footy stuff I'd miss. *The Footy Show?* 11:30pm on a Thursday night. Sunday panels? Forget about it. The Brownlow? No chance.

Back in those days pay TV, the Internet and mobile phone Apps were a dream and if you couldn't watch the game the next best thing was to listen to it on radio.

Unfortunately this was even less help! Instead of tuning into Rex Hunt losing his marbles on 3AW, all I could get in Toowoomba was a scratchy ABC broadcast. For the Collingwood v West Coast elimination final that year I sat by my clock radio and fine-tuned the reception constantly just to hear whatever I could. Sure enough the commentary dropped out right at the death and only returned to reveal we'd lost by two points. As torturous as that sounds, there was simply no other way.



“What about the newspaper?” I hear you ask. Well, it was the most disappointing of all. A paragraph or two on Monday and maybe a ladder right at the back next to the local golf results. I’m not joking! Sick of this poor excuse for a sports section, I quickly sniffed out a newsagent that imported copies of the *Herald Sun* to get me by. It took two days to get to us, which meant I wasn’t reading Sunday’s paper until Tuesday, but I didn’t care. Taking in every word on those pages was like heaven.

Playing the game wasn’t without its challenges either I was soon to find. There’s a pretty healthy junior set up in Toowoomba now starting with programs like Auskick,

however back then a social match every now and again seemed to be the only option. For someone who'd played competitively since 8 years of age, a friendly kick-to-kick in a park didn't cut it. I could do that at home!

Instead, I waited eagerly for another two years until I was old enough to mix it with men and made my debut as a 16-year-old back pocket in the seconds for the University Eagles. I can say without exaggeration this was one of the happiest times of my life, let alone my time as an Expat. I was playing with two brothers and getting a kick in a side that would go on to win a senior premiership at the end of my second year. In one of those priceless bits of family folklore, the starting centre line for the Grand Final that day consisted of my two brothers and me. The old man still beams about that one!

Hitting rock bottom

Toowoomba was finally feeling more like home as the local footy hummed along, but it didn't last and I was soon to plunge into another crisis. The start of 1998 marked the beginning of my time in Brisbane as a university student and the lowest point in my life as far as footy goes. No money, no car, no local team, no friends that liked AFL and very little improvement in media coverage made those four years very tough.

Deep down, the embers always flickered. I filled in for my old team on the odd occasion and felt the same enjoyment as I always did. In the couple of times I made it to the 'Gabba I still got goose bumps catching sight of the grass for the first time, and, I still caught myself daydreaming about all sorts of wonderful footy memories. The problem was I had no way of staying connected.

When my studies wrapped up at the end of 2001, I was suddenly faced with the same crossroads many prized draftees encounter: should I stay or should I go back home?

In the end, the lure was too strong and the move back to Melbourne was made.

Upon arrival I immediately signed up at my old junior club, Dingley, where my brother was a senior player and settled in nicely. For six months I had a blast feasting on footy once again, however unfortunately the job hunting wasn't going as well. I couldn't find any work and, as luck would have it, I ended up being offered a position back in Brisbane. I couldn't say no for a number of reasons, but I knew the price of acceptance would be a starving Expat existence once more...or, so I thought. This time, things were different!

The recovery begins

The end of 2002 had ushered in a new era of broadcasting with the TV rights taken off Channel 7 for the first time in 40 years and shared between Channel 9 and 10. Also, pay TV was cashing in on the action and paving the way for increased coverage right across the nation.

Perhaps the biggest change though, at least for me, was happening on the Internet where you could now get live match updates via game tracking graphics, written commentary and statistics. For the first time ever I had a way of following every match and I can remember spending hours glued to the computer screen during 2003 doing just that.

Although this was an almost pre-historic way of following the footy by today's standards, it was a huge step forward and helped drag me out of the Expat doldrums. The flame was not only alive again, but for the first time ever it had a source of oxygen to keep it going. It was only a gentle breeze, but it was enough.

It was right about this time a key Expat principle dawned on me: keeping your football passion alive is all about getting enough footy. It doesn't matter how or in

what form it comes, as long as you get enough for your own needs. Living a successful Expat existence depends on it!

With these new tools at my disposal, my recovery as a footy fanatic was now on its way and I never looked back. A couple of years later I even decided to lace the boots up again for my old side back in Toowoomba. I was still living and working in Brisbane, but it didn't matter. I was more than happy to make the 250km round trip twice a week to train and play with my mates. If we were playing a team like Goondiwindi, a further 250km south of Toowoomba, I'd spend close to nine hours on the road before walking in the front door again.

After two wonderful years, and back-to-back premierships if you don't mind, escalating work commitments and other circumstances put an end to my playing comeback. As much as I tried to continue – even doing the pre-season training in stubborn denial – the practicalities meant I simply couldn't make it work. I think the reason I held on so tightly was through a fear of what happened the last time when I stopped. I fell into a football abyss and was scared history would repeat. But, once again, things were different.

Information at your fingertips

It was now 2008 and information technology was revolutionising the football industry. SuperCoach had been around a few years and already hooked thousands of Kevin Sheedy wannabes. The smartphones were about to land, although most mobiles already had web browsing capability or at least some kind of basic sports news service. The Facebook phenomenon was also starting to spread and with it the kind of community feel that would spawn official club pages and a host of other groups where people could connect.

While I couldn't have possibly imagined the full extent of what was to come, I sensed a new age was on the horizon and it offered me great comfort when faced with a non-playing future once again. People asked at the time, "If you love playing the game so much, why don't you continue in Brisbane somewhere?" It was a very valid question and I suppose it came down to the camaraderie I'd enjoyed at the Toowoomba club. To me, a huge part of playing footy was running around with good mates and the thought of rocking up to a totally new club didn't appeal at all. If it came to the crunch and I felt footy slipping from my fingertips like it did the first time, I simply wouldn't have had a choice. This time, however, I didn't feel as though I had to play to get enough football.

I should to point out again that not every Expat will feel the same. I know some that simply couldn't get by without the cut and thrust of week-to-week participation. On the other hand, there are fans that love the game just as much but never touch a Sherrin. Maybe they did as a kid and fell away because they weren't superstars? Maybe they got badly injured? Who knows? The point is it doesn't matter what type of food your footy diet is made up of, only that you get enough of it.

What it means to get enough footy

I'll finish my story by saying the last couple of years have been bliss from an Expat point of view. I've been able to find the right mix for my own appetite and it feels good – really good.

Sometimes I think back to what it was like and shudder. It might sound ridiculous for some to hear that I feel much more content and complete as a person, however they don't understand what football means to me. It's in my blood and gives meaning and structure to my life like not much else can.

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Even to this very day when I wonder what I was doing around a certain time, football helps me find the answer. For example, if you were to ask me what was happening in my life around August 1991, off the top of my head I couldn't tell you. If I line it up with football, however, it all starts to come back to me. Footy facts instantly fill my mind and from there I can start to fill in the gaps.

I know there are other Expats out there that have football just as tightly woven into their fabric as I do. They're the inspiration for this book. I want to show them living outside of Melbourne, Adelaide or Perth doesn't mean you have to give up on football. It's actually quite the opposite!

So, let's get into it. The siren has sounded, the umpire has blown his whistle and we're ready for the first bounce.

WHAT IS FOOTY LIKE IN QUEENSLAND AND NEW SOUTH WALES?

Before I start talking about the nuts and bolts of getting enough footy in Queensland and New South Wales, we need to take stock of the situation. What is footy actually like in these states? How does it fit into the local sporting landscape? How are the local leagues set up? Do people even care about AFL or do the rugby codes cast too big a shadow?

You might think I'm wasting time with such questions, but knowing the answers is important because it helps make sense of your new surroundings. Looking back now, I wish someone had sat me down all those years ago and told me exactly what I'm about to tell you.

To start this exercise I want to give you, as they say in street talk, "the down low". This is my own opinion on where our game sits in the hearts and minds of people in Queensland and New South Wales. You can read all the spin you like from the AFL administration or spend hours on the internet trying to piece it together yourself, but

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there's no one better placed to tell you how it really is than another Expat.

For the sake of simplicity, I've distilled this large and complex topic down into five key findings.

1 The sporting culture is different

Don't get me wrong, there are rugby league fans who swear their footy is just as much a religion to them as any AFL fan. They go to all the games, get dressed up head-to-toe in club colours, barrack as hard as anyone and sulk just as long after a loss. The main difference, as I see it, is there's simply not as many. The same goes for rugby union and soccer.

A good way to explain it is there's more grey area in the sporting market. In Melbourne, Adelaide and Perth, it's black and white and AFL all over. There's very little room, and in some cases tolerance, for anything else. In Queensland and New South Wales it's heavily slanted toward rugby league, but the public as a whole are more likely to float around and jump on a feel-good winning streak – regardless of the code. This tendency, I suspect, is probably worse in Brisbane than Sydney because there's only one NRL team and no tribal-like rivalry to really stir the passion. As a result, you'll notice a couple of things:

1. The cities lack the same intense sporting energy generated by our fanatical love of AFL.
2. “Bandwagon” support does come into play and it can be tricky to negotiate.

To appreciate the sporting culture in these cities from an AFL player's perspective, you only need to look at the players themselves as they feel the different energy as much as anyone. “Once the season was over, I found I was still pretty keen to get to Melbourne – it's the Mecca of football, after all,” said Nathan Buckley when asked why he wanted to leave the Brisbane at the end of 1993. “I eat, sleep and breathe the game. Brisbane is a rugby city and you don't realise how much until you live here. Melbourne is the only place to be if you want to experience real football culture.”

Twenty years later, Jesse White reinforced this sentiment when interviewed for the Collingwood website. "First of all, it's pretty exciting coming to a side that's got a massive fan base. I haven't played an intra-club match in front of so many people. It was fantastic," he said. "During training (at Sydney) we'd throw a bib on and just have a match, so to have so many people like this organised to get all the fans down and then also to have the Family Day is great."

When Lance Franklin played the first practice match in his record \$10 million move to Sydney, a crowd of about 1,000 turned out after an intensive 24-hour promotion. For a team that trains in front of a handful of fans, the turnout thrilled Swans officials. "This is massive for us," said former player and now manager Tony Morwood.

This type of culture also means people do jump on the bandwagon from time to time and it can be a bit weird for Expats because such wild fluctuations of support are unheard of in AFL capitals. To give you an example of how testing it can be, I'll go back to my own experience during the reign of the Brisbane Lions.

Throughout the "bad news Bears" days and the first few years of what looked like a failed merger, Brisbane as a city only showed somewhat of a passing interest in AFL. People could probably sit through a game if there was nothing else on the TV and maybe even name a few players, but that's as far as it went. Until 2001 of course!

Like the rest of us, they were caught a little off-guard by the Lions' upset victory over Essendon and the premiership was more of a pleasant surprise than a joyous occasion; kind of like the mild sense of pride when someone you've never heard of wins gold at the Olympics. From an Expat viewpoint, I was initially very happy about the win thinking it could help AFL take off and create a better football environment for the "real" fans around town. However, as the Brisbane juggernaut set a collision course with Collingwood in two consecutive Grand Finals, the sudden

explosion of love caused me more than a little grief.

The first thing that got to me was the sheer weight of numbers I was up against. Although everyone loves to hate Collingwood in Melbourne, there's still a massive army of fellow supporters to lean on, including your own family. For Expats, these sources of football comfort thin out dramatically and there will be times when you'll feel all alone. I was well aware of this fact before the 2002-2003 Grand Finals, however it went to another level when the bandwagon reached full steam.

The second thing that rattled me was the banter that went on. These supporters cheer just as loudly at a game and trade insults just as forcefully if things get heated, however, at the end of the day, they'll be over it half an hour later while you're still stewing. Because they don't care about their club as deeply and because it's an acquired thing rather than a lifelong passion, I gradually realised they'll always have the upper hand. My tip is never take exception to what they say because it's an argument you can't win!



While all this bandwagon talk doesn't sound like much fun at all, you'll be relieved to hear it's not that bad most of

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the time and many won't encounter anything like what I describe. My example is simply a pointer to what can happen as a worst-case scenario in a more fluid sporting culture and what Expats might need to deal with if a local side "takes off".

2 Inter-code rivalries can unsettle you

Expats may have their hands full dealing with part-time footy fans, but that's not the only test they'll face. The inter-code rivalry between rugby league and AFL can also suck them in from time to time.

For me, I never felt this type of hostility as intensely as the club v club stuff I just talked about, but it still takes a bit of getting used to. Coming from a place where AFL reigns supreme, it feels quite odd to hear people criticising the game and developing a thicker skin might be necessary on this level as well.

The inter-code push and shove is really played out on two levels: the public and the media.

For the public, you get a bit of casual bagging from rugby league fans every now and again. "Aerial ping-pong" and "girl's sport" are two I've heard most from those not too fond of our game. If you ever get a chance to get past these one-liners, points such as the game not being international and matches dragging on for too long will often be put forward as major faults as well.

While these barbs can be unsettling initially, they eventually lose their sting when you've heard them a hundred times and realise arguing is pointless. The truth is most genuine rugby league fans don't give a toss about AFL and are only saying these things to needle you.

In the media things are usually more masked, but you get the impression rugby league journalists are threatened by AFL and the apparent war being waged on their game. The *60 Minutes* news program ran a story on this topic way back in May 2008, when Greater Western Sydney and the Gold Coast were still being formed. I've included the full transcript below as I think it accurately reflects how many rugby league commentators think.

INTRODUCTION PETER OVERTON: *It's war! The Titans of Australian sport are at it hammer and tongs fighting for new territory, new fans. The first shots were fired by the AFL when the Swans invaded Sydney. Then rugby league retaliated, sending the Storm troopers into Melbourne. Mere skirmishes. Now it's getting serious. Aussie Rules has its sights on the rugby league heartland, launching new teams in western Sydney and on the Gold Coast. And the stakes are astronomical with millions and millions of dollars in revenue up for grabs. So, stand by for the mother of all battles for the hearts, minds and pockets of Australian footy fans.*

STORY PETER OVERTON: *It's Saturday in the heart of rugby league country, but these kids are playing a very different game. This is the birthplace of teams like Sydney's famous Rabbitohs, but AFL is taking over. The Maroubra Saints is now one of the fastest-growing junior sporting clubs in the entire country.*

MUM 1: *Good boy, Johnny, go Johnny!*

PETER OVERTON: *You guys really get into this, don't you?*

MUM 1: *Yeah, we love it. Look forward to it for the whole week.*

PETER OVERTON: *Aussie Rules is what mums like Tanya Ozziel and Christine Foote want their kids to play.*

MUM 1: *We followed the Swans, we used to go to the games and he woke up one day and he said "Mum, I want to play AFL."*

MUM 2: *All kids have to make a choice. He's 12, just started high school. AFL or Rugby League? And he said "AFL all the way."*

PETER OVERTON: *Out in Western Sydney, rugby league stalwart Mark Geyer is seeing the AFL invasion first hand.*

Aussie Rules is stealing kids away from his game at such a rate he fears for the future.

MARK GEYER: *They're coming to get us and if we don't show some sort of resistance before you and I know it they'll take over.*

PETER OVERTON: *You use words like 'missile', 'infiltrate', you speak like it's a war?*

MARK GEYER: *Well that's the mentality we've got to have. I regard AFL as a very slow-moving Tsunami coming to engulf rugby league.*

PETER OVERTON: *It may start with the kids but this is where*

the real war is being fought. Hundreds of millions of dollars is at stake in sponsorship and television rights. And in this bitter fight for the hearts and minds of Australia's sporting public, traditional loyalties are being tested and old allegiances broken.

COMMENTATOR: *We are under way now, and Sydney will take it away...*

PETER OVERTON: *I would never imagine seeing you at an AFL game on a Sunday afternoon?*

GARRY JACK: *No Mate. If you'd told me 20 years ago, I would've thought you were joking. But ah, yeah, I'm here most weeks when they play at the SCG.*

PETER OVERTON: *If you needed proof of the new football landscape, just take a look at the Jack family.*

COMMENTATOR: *Jack to the line! Jack will score.... Jack giving chase, and Jack's got him.*

PETER OVERTON: *Garry Jack is a rugby league legend. So, the hill used to be over there, didn't it?*

GARRY JACK: *That's it. Right over there.*

PETER OVERTON: *But today, he's at the SCG to watch his son Kieren - a rising star for the Sydney Swans.*

COMMENTATOR: *Jack can play on, Sydney's first for the quarter and the crowd come alive.*

KIEREN JACK: *I came across this game of AFL, that was so free flowing and I just enjoyed so much, for me, the decision was pretty easy in the end because I was just loving it.*

PETER OVERTON: *What was it like for you when Kieren said - "I want to play Australian rules"?*

GARRY JACK: *He didn't actually say that... He sort of said "How would you feel, dad, if I didn't play league next year I just played Aussie rules? How would you feel? And I said...*

KIEREN JACK: *Tell the truth.*

GARRY JACK: *I said... "OK", I said "OK, if you want to" I didn't blow up, did I?*

Did I blow up?

KIEREN JACK: *Oh, I can't remember.*

PETER OVERTON: *I think that was a "Yes"*

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GARRY JACK: No, no, no. I said, "If you want you can." But I thought he'd just play it for a year and come back to league. Bad judge, aren't I?

COMMENTATOR: He lines it up from 45... he needs it to hold its line, it does!

PETER OVERTON: The name of the game is to get bums on seats and the Sydney Swans are pretty good at it now. It's taken them 25 years but today's crowd is just under 30,000. About average for a home game at the SCG and enough to make a rugby league administrator very envious. It's little wonder, then, that the AFL is pushing so hard for a second Sydney team as well as a new one on the Gold Coast.

ANDREW DEMETRIOU: I think what we want for our code is to make sure that, in the two fastest-growing markets in this country, the Gold Coast and western Sydney, that AFL football has a presence there.

PETER OVERTON: So it's a fight against the NRL?

ANDREW DEMETRIOU: They're your words Peter, they're not mine. We've been talking about this for the best part of 4 or 5 years.

PETER OVERTON: If this is war, Andrew Demetriou is the AFL's Commander-in-Chief. Andrew, is this about greed, empire building? The AFL will do whatever it takes no matter the cost?

ANDREW DEMETRIOU: I don't think it's anything to do with greed. It is about growing our code and we will do what we have to do to support our investment.

PETER OVERTON: But the reality is you want to be number one.

ANDREW DEMETRIOU: I think we already are, Peter, last time I checked.

COMMENTATOR: Thurston chips over the top and ... what a moment!

PETER OVERTON: Facing off against Demetriou is league boss David Gallop. In its centenary year, rugby league's taking some big hits - clubs in financial crisis, stagnant crowds - but Gallop is standing his ground. Are you saying to the AFL - "Come and try and get our turf but do so at your peril?"

DAVID GALLOP: *You're coming into our territory there's no doubt about that. The numbers reflect that we dominate. We'll continue to put our foot on the pedal and good luck to you coming into our territory.*

PETER OVERTON: *The NRL is fighting back. Shoring up its turf in Queensland with the new Gold Coast Titans. But in traditional AFL territory the going is a lot tougher. Melbourne Storm came to Victoria 11 years ago and has won two premierships. So what is your basic interpretation of rugby league rules?*

BILLY BROWNLESS: *Ah, 12 gorillas this side 12 gorillas that side they run at each other. And whoever is the biggest gorilla gets the bananas.*

PETER OVERTON: *But, according to AFL legend Billy Brownless, league will never be more than a novelty here.*

BILLY BROWNLESS: *There's no science, not a lot of Pythagoras's theorem or anything to it, not a lot of science. You just get it and run and crash.*

PETER OVERTON: *Are you saying that AFL is full of science?*

BILLY BROWNLESS: *Yes! A lot more intelligent. A lot more exciting to watch.*

PETER OVERTON: *We've only been here five minutes.*

BILLY BROWNLESS: *We've been here 20 minutes and the score is 0-0. It's a bit like soccer.*

MATT GEYER: *My name is Matt Geyer, I've been here for 11 years. I'm one of the old guys as you can see.*

PETER OVERTON: *It is this entrenched prejudice that has convinced the NRL the best way to win converts is at the grass roots.*

MATT GEYER: *(To group of kids) Do you want to learn how to do that?*

KIDS REPLY: *Yes!!*

PETER OVERTON: *What do you know about rugby league.*

BOY 1: *I know it can be a rough game.*

BOY 2: *I know Matt Geyer debuted 1997, played for 11 years, retiring this year.*

PETER OVERTON: *How do you know all that?*

BOY 2: *Just do.*

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PETER OVERTON: *Would you like to play rugby league?*

BOY 2: *Yeab.*

PETER OVERTON: *So what team will you guys be following in rugby league?*

ALL KIDS IN UNISON: *The Melbourne Storm.*

PETER OVERTON: *It's what the AFL has been doing for years. Ever since the Swans came to Sydney 25 years ago, they've been doing the hard sell to kids. It's how they won over converts like Kieren Jack.*

PETER OVERTON: *This is a rugby league house, if I've ever seen one.*

GARRY JACK: *Yes, Peter, certainly plenty of photos and history here from obviously my career and the boys as they're getting older.*

PETER OVERTON: *As one of the greats of the game, Kieren's dad Garry fully expected his boy to follow in his rugby-league footsteps. Was Kieren a good league player?*

GARRY JACK: *Oh yeah, he was a very good league player. He was a good half back, or five eighth. I coached him when he was 14. I was the last one to coach him before he swapped over to Aussie rules. But, besides that, he would have been a very good league player if he had stuck with it.*

PETER OVERTON: *Your voice sort of softened when you spoke about that.*

GARRY JACK: *Oh, it's close to my heart isn't it. It was a sad day when we lost him.*

LEWIS ROBERTS THOMSON: *You've got to get your middle finger on both sides of the ball running through the grooves.*

PETER OVERTON: *You go first, I don't want to embarrass you. Kieren's not the only promising youngster being won over by Aussie rules. So fingers down there?*

LEWIS ROBERTS THOMSON: *Try and get the ball, probably, pointing up and down a bit...*

PETER OVERTON: *The Swans have also snared rugby union blue-blood Lewis Roberts Thomson and Paul Bevan, who like Kieren, came from a legendary league family.*

LEWIS ROBERTS THOMSON: *Hey, sign him up!*

PETER OVERTON: *I'm just wondering if you're playing AFL*

so you don't get a face like your Dads?

LEWIS ROBERTS THOMSON: *Well yeah, that's one of the reasons, yeah. Yeah, he's busted his nose a few times and his face is looking a bit bad now. But you know, that's just part of the game. You know he won't be happy that I said that, actually.*

MARK GEYER: *When I grew up round here they called it 'the Bronx'. It was such a hard area, and rugby league was it. I never thought I'd see the day where I'd see an AFL poster out this way it's happening on a very constant basis. Every time you look around, there's more posters going up.*

PETER OVERTON: *If anyone knows how successful the AFL has been in poaching kids, it's legendary hard man, Mark Geyer. He now coaches a junior league team in Sydney's west and he is constantly losing youngsters to the other code. They even tried to sign up his own son.*

MARK GEYER: *Go mate! Yes, good try. The AFL at the moment are like a large octopus with their tentacles everywhere. The NRL are like a little goldfish trying to swim against the tide. I think we've got to turn into a shark and start devouring this octopus.*

PETER OVERTON: *But the AFL octopus will take some stopping. Its Gold Coast team kicks off in 2011 and the Western Sydney team the following year. And that's only the beginning. Is a third Sydney team a possibility?*

ANDREW DEMETRIOU: *Who knows? It's the largest population in the country. In 50 years why would you rule that out? Who knows if we'll have a team based out of Australia?*

PETER OVERTON: *So is that a little bit of a 'yes'?*

ANDREW DEMETRIOU: *I don't know. I just don't know. All I'll say is you can never say never.*

PETER OVERTON: *Do you admit you've got a fight on your hands?*

DAVID GALLOP: *Yes, but it's not a fight that's particularly new.*

PETER OVERTON: *Who's got the best troops?*

DAVID GALLOP: *I certainly believe we do. We are going well in our 100th year, and we'll be going well in 100 years from now.*

Lovin' Footy in QLD and NSW

PETER OVERTON: But try telling that to the mums from the Maroubra Saints. From where they stand there's no question about what game is the winner.

MUM 1: It's a very family orientated game. It's geared to the kids. Everything's about the children.

PETER OVERTON: So you see it as the national sport?

MUM 1: Oh God, yeah. It's as Australian as Vegemite and I think our kids should be growing up on it. It's brilliant.

While they're not all on such high alert as Mark Geyer, there's a general wariness that's hard to miss. They see AFL as a cashed up, aggressive enemy, best ignored and not spoken of; in fact, it only gets mentioned when a scandal pops up or when they can use our code to have a dig at the failings of their own. As you can imagine, this tension has only escalated in recent times with the arrival of the expansion clubs and the defection of a couple of league superstars.



3 Talking footy goes to a whole new level

While the move to Queensland or New South Wales almost certainly means less footy chitchat in your day-to-day life, it doesn't mean the quality goes down as well. In somewhat of a quirky twist, I think it actually goes the other way and you'll find conversations become a lot more satisfying than they ever were. Why? I'm convinced it has something to do with that old saying about not knowing what you've got until it's gone. In this case, not having someone to talk footy with around every corner will make you relish the chances that do come your way.

Expats lucky enough to jump straight into a local footy club environment probably won't feel this as much. They'll immediately have enough contact to keep their conversation levels high. That's fantastic and why, as you'll see later on, it's one of my leading suggestions when it comes to getting enough footy in your new home. Instead, I think it's the busy dads and non-playing fans that will relate to this most. For them, these moments will feel like little rays of sunshine in their day. That might sound like a load of you-know-what, but trust me, after a while you'll grab any chance you can to have a decent conversation. It still happens to me all the time.

Just recently we'd had a bit of trouble at work with a faulty alarm system and a technician was called out to take care of it. He walked into the office door hurriedly stuffing his earphones away and looking like he was in another world. My boss noticed this and asked what he was listening to. "Ah, just the latest AFL trade week updates...probably not of interest to you, though", he quickly added, almost apologetically. My boss smiled and nodded in my direction, "no, but talk to him!"

About half an hour later on what was supposed to be a 10-minute job, we were still blabbing away and he hadn't even touched his tools! As it turned out he was actually a

Carlton supporter – a Collingwood fan's sworn enemy – but I didn't care and neither did he. We were both just rapt to get stuck into some meaty football topics and share our own stories; which is another thing you'll soon find fascinating because Expats love a yarn about other Expats. What town they came from, what club they played for, who they happened to play with – sometimes with a healthy dose of bull dust sprinkled on top – all of a sudden will have you hanging on every word. For me at least, hearing these provides a nice mixture of comfort and nostalgia; comfort because I know other people have travelled the same path, and nostalgia because I always see a little bit of myself in every tale told.



What football does in this sense is allow strangers to strike up an immediate connection they couldn't possibly form otherwise. For Expats, it represents a big opportunity to find new friends in their new home and build a better footy environment along the way, so I encourage you to use the power as often as possible.

4 Top-tier local leagues have a rich history

With the background I've given so far of AFL in the expansion states, a new Expat could be forgiven for expecting the local competitions to be pretty ordinary; a couple of leagues here or there, with a poor standard on and off the field. If you've played some top-level footy back home, a re-location to Queensland or New South Wales is now probably sounding like a huge step backwards.

Well, you'll be relieved to hear that is not the case at all. Despite the lower profile of the game at the highest level, grass roots footy is doing well and will only get better as the AFL pumps more dollars into these areas.

Perhaps the most surprising thing about all of this is how far back these local competitions go. The health of the game may have benefitted from big spending in recent times, but the foundations were built on the century of footy that came before it. That's right, Aussie Rules has been played in these parts for over 100 years!

4.1 History in Queensland

The last thing I wanted was to turn this book into a history lesson, but I thought a brief summary was required because it'll show that:

- a) The game has been taken seriously for a long time in these states, and,
- b) There's some proud old clubs rich in history and tradition.

According to a number of sources, the story in Queensland, astonishingly, seems to have begun as far back as the 1880s, well before the rugby codes had a chance to take hold. In 1883, Queensland boasted more than 300 teams and the following year played New South Wales in

some kind of ancient state of origin. Although hard to believe, legend has it a touring Essendon side was defeated around this time by a team from Ipswich (40km west of Brisbane). Amazing, huh?

The early 1900s seemed to be the start of a long downturn for the game when it narrowly missed out on being taken up by local schools during a ballot to determine their preferred code. As history records, the outcome probably wasn't helped by the fact the game was referred to as "Victorian Rules" at the time. Can you imagine how different things could've been if it had got voted in to mainstream schooling way back then?

Undeterred, the supporters of the game forged ahead and during the 1920s clubs such as Mayne, Windsor and Yeronga were formed. The 1930s saw the emergence of the Taringa, Morningside, Coorparoo and Kedron clubs and after the war Wilston Grange and Sandgate were also added. In 1946 the first Grogan Medal, named after former Mayne secretary J.A. Grogan, for the league's best and fairest was awarded. Although a fire in the Queensland Australian National Football League offices destroyed many records of the time, it's generally acknowledged that leagues in Townsville, Cairns, and Mt Isa were also being established at this point.

The 1960s saw the first appearance of the QAFL, the name it would keep for 40 years, and the formation of leagues in Mackay, the Darling Downs and Rockhampton.

During the '80s, Queensland was officially put on the map when it won consecutive national championships and the Brisbane Bears formed in 1987. From there it continued moving in the right direction with the re-location from the Gold Coast to the heart of Brisbane in 1993, a finals appearance in 1996 and the merger with Fitzroy in 1997. These events were major stepping stones on the way to what can only be described as the golden era of footy when the Brisbane Lions came within a whisker of winning four

premierships in a row from 2001-2004.

With the establishment of AFL Queensland around about that time and 100 years ticking over a few years later, it was fitting that a Team of the Century was chosen in 2009 to celebrate this remarkable story.

4.2 Queensland Team of the Century

If the average fan was asked to have a crack at naming this team there are a few standouts most could rattle off. Voss, Dunstall, Akermanis, Ashcroft and Crosisca readily come to mind for me, but it starts to thin out a bit from there as far as household names go. I have to admit I personally don't know a great deal about a large chunk of this team, however they were obviously celebrated players that made an indelible mark on Queensland football.

B: Marcus Ashcroft, Dick Verdon, Wayne Stewart

HB: Gavin Crosisca, Don Smith, Zane Taylor

C: Scott McIvor, Doug Pittard, Des Hughes

HF: John Stackpoole, Dick Parton, Barry Clarke

F: Ray Hughson, Jason Dunstall (vc), Owen Backwell

R: Ken Grimley, Michael Voss (c), Jason Akermanis

INT: Keith Leach, Alex McGill, Noel McGuinness, Mal Michael, Gordon Phelan, Clem Ryan.

For interest's sake, I've also included a selection of Queensland players that were on club lists at the start of 2015. Looking through the quality on offer here shows just how far Queensland has come in recent times. You get the feeling a few of these would've been automatic inclusions in the Team of the Century had it been announced a decade later.

Queensland players on club lists at the start of 2015:

David Armitage (St. Kilda), Rohan Bail (Melbourne), Claye Beams (Brisbane), Dayne Beams (Brisbane), Courtenay Dempsey (Essendon), Charlie Dixon (Gold Coast), David Hale (Hawthorn), Shaun Hampson (Richmond), Jarrod Harbrow (Gold Coast), Lachlan Keefe (Collingwood), Luke McGuane (Brisbane), Daniel Merrett (Brisbane), Adam Oxley (Collingwood), Ricky Petherd (Richmond), Andrew Raines (Gold Coast), Nick Riewoldt (St. Kilda), Zac Smith (Gold Coast), Josh Thomas (Collingwood), Rory Thompson (Gold Coast), Kurt Tippett (Sydney), Joel Tippett (North Melbourne), Jesse White (Collingwood), Brendan Whitecross (Hawthorn), Dayne Zorko (Brisbane).

4.3 History in New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory

Despite being around for just as long and producing several bona fide legends of the game, for some reason it proved a much trickier task to get good information on the history footy in New South Wales. From what I could get my hands on, it seems the New South Wales Football League (NSWFL) was born in 1903 with eleven clubs contesting the opening season.

In these early times, the NSWFL vigorously promoted the game in schools and the Victorian Football League (VFL) even held premiership matches in Sydney in an effort to establish the code. For a short period things were looking rosy and the game was seen to be taking off, but things were to turn sour very quickly. In 1908, largely through the switch of codes by local hero Dally Messenger, the battle for football supremacy suddenly swung in favour of rugby league.

(Note: After such a decisive role it's not surprising to see

that Dally Messenger is now an icon of Rugby League, with the equivalent of the Brownlow medal named in his honour.)

While footy remained popular, it had received a vicious blow and was gradually worn down by the combination of player poaching and limited ground access. The game plugged away under these hostile conditions for decades with only a few highlights to speak of. One of those came in 1933 when the Australian National Football carnival was held at the Sydney Cricket Ground and several matches drew large crowds, particularly those involving New South Wales.

In 1980 the NSWFL became known as the Sydney Football League and in 1982 the first tentative steps towards a national competition were taken when South Melbourne relocated to Sydney. In 1998 the Sydney Football League was renamed the Sydney AFL before changing again a decade later to AFL Sydney.

For the Australian Capital Territory (ACT), footy can be traced right back to the formation of the territory with the first recorded match held in 1911 and the seeds of a league planted by three teams playing matches at a couple of venues (including the same ground that would eventually be known as Manuka Oval).

In 1924, the first official league was formed and went by the title of the Federal Territory Australian Rules Football League. With new clubs jumping on board it became known as the Canberra Australian National Football League (CANFL) in 1927 and held that name until 1975 when it swapped to the Australian Capital Territory AFL (ACTAFL).

Over this long period, Aussie Rules was seen as the premier sport in the region and it was only the expansion of the rugby codes, starting with the Canberra Raiders in 1982 and followed by ACT Brumbies in 1996, that toppled AFL

off its mantle. The quick success of the Raiders, in particular, captivated the locals and helped league get the strong grip it enjoys to this today.

In 1998, the AFL Commission took over operations of the ACTAFL and is now known as AFL Canberra. Just like their Queensland counterparts, the NSW/ACT Team of the Century was compiled in 2011 to celebrate 100 years of existence...and, what a team it is!

4.4 New South Wales and ACT Team of the Century

Wow! I don't think anyone could even dream this side would be so strong. When you break it down there's serious royalty on almost every line and some of the biggest names to ever strap on the boot. With all-time greats like Carey, Hird, Bunton and Jesaulenko in the side, they could give the mighty Vics, Croweaters and Sandgropers a shake.

B: Bernard Toohey, Craig Bolton, Leo Barry

HB: Neale Daniher, Gordon Strang, Dennis Carroll

C: Michael Conlon, Paul Kelly, Shane Crawford

HF: Terry Daniher, Wayne Carey, James Hird

F: Alex Jesaulenko, Bill Mohr, John Longmire

R: Brian Gleeson, Brett Kirk, Hayden Bunton Snr

INT: David Murphy, Percy Bushby, Billy Brownless, Ricky Quade, Dean Solomon, Brett Allison.

Coach: Allan Jeans

Once again I put a list together of players involved in the AFL at the start of the 2015 season. Although there's a heap of talent here as well, I think the current crop would face a much harder task of forcing their way into the company of the team above compared to their Queensland counterparts.

NSW/ACT players on club lists at the start of 2015:

Taylor Walker (Adelaide), Brent Staker (Brisbane), Sam Rowe (Carlton), Jarrod Witts (Collingwood), Tom Hawkins (Geelong), Hamish McIntosh (Geelong), Phil Davis (Greater Western Sydney), Luke Breust (Hawthorn), Taylor Duryea (Hawthorn), Isaac Smith (Hawthorn), Matt Suckling (Hawthorn), Sam Gilbert (St. Kilda), Adam Schneider (St. Kilda), Craig Bird (Sydney), Brandon Jack (Sydney), Kieren Jack (Sydney), Ben McGlynn (Sydney), Jarrad McVeigh (Sydney), Dean Rampe (Sydney), Dylan Addison (Greater Western Sydney), Daniel Cross (Melbourne), Jason Tutt (Carlton), Josh Bruce (St. Kilda).

4.5 Top-tier local leagues today

Ok, enough reminiscing, let's move on to the present. How do the top-tier competitions in these states look now? Well, as it so happens, the three regions have been bundled together into a neat package and now all belong to the same league: the North East Australian Football League (NEAFL).

It all happened at the end of 2010 when the QAFL (including a team from the Northern Territory) and AFL Canberra (including the Sydney Swans reserves team) joined forces. The first season also saw the introduction of teams from the new AFL franchises: the Gold Coast Suns reserves and the Greater Western Sydney senior side, before they were admitted into the AFL the following year.

The two leagues were converted into two conferences: the Northern Conference, serving Queensland and the Northern Territory, and the Eastern Conference, serving New South Wales and the ACT. Teams from the two conferences played matches against each other throughout the home and away season, before staging a separate finals competition to determine both a northern premier and an

eastern premier. The two premiers then played each other in the NEAFL Grand Final.

In 2012, two more clubs joined the Eastern Conference from the AFL Sydney competition, and, with Greater Western Sydney's senior team elevated, its reserves side entered the NEAFL in partnership with the University of Western Sydney.

The evolution continued in 2014-15 with the conference system abolished and the trimming of several clubs to form the one 11-team competition, which, at a glance, looks like this:

- 2 teams from the Australian Capital Territory: Ainslie and Eastlake.
- 3 teams from Sydney: Sydney Swans reserves, Sydney Uni and UWS Giants.
- 5 teams from South East Queensland: Aspley, Brisbane Lions reserves, Gold Coast Suns reserves, Redland and Southport.
- 1 team from the Northern Territory: NT Thunder.

With the structure understood, you're probably wondering what the standard is like. I'll get to that in a minute, but one thing is for sure: the AFL knows it has to be good! "We're working to enhance the talent pathways for talented players in the northern states, and we're proud to see that this league provides local players with the chance to play top quality football around New South Wales, the ACT, Queensland and in the Northern Territory," National AFL Second Tier Manager Simon Laughton explains. "We are committed to ensuring that the NEAFL competition is strong and robust, and this year's streamlined format will ensure that matches are competitive and challenging in every round."

How good is it at the moment? The lazy way to measure it is to look at the number of players with AFL experience

running around. Obviously Brisbane, Gold Coast, Sydney and Greater Western Sydney have their listed players, many of which are future stars of the game, however you'll probably recognise a few other names on 2015 club lists:

Richard Tambling (played for Richmond/Adelaide, current club is NT Thunder), Josh Hunt (Geelong/Greater Western Sydney, Southport), Nick Salter (Port Adelaide, Ainslie), Jack Anthony (Collingwood, Southport), Peter Yagmoor (Collingwood, Redland), Cheynee Stiller (Brisbane, Aspley), Tom Young (Collingwood/Western Bulldogs, Sydney University), Nathan Bock (Adelaide/Gold Coast, Southport), Lewis Stevenson (Port Adelaide, Sydney University), Liam Patrick (Gold Coast, NT Thunder) and Jared Brennan (Brisbane/Gold Coast, Southport).

In addition to those better-known faces, there are a couple of other points of interest in the wider playing group.

The first of these is the NT Thunder, which is a fascinating team on paper and often features great indigenous names like Rioli, Cockatoo, Motlop and McLean. You can imagine how exciting their games would be!

The other is the number of Expats on the lists of these clubs. When you look through there are plenty of blokes recruited from strong suburban clubs in Victoria, South Australia and Western Australia. Who knows, there could be a few from back your way?

The last thing I want to tick off as far as understanding the NEAFL goes is the game-day experience. What does a day at the footy look like in this league? Is it anything like the VFL?

Although I had seen the odd game or two back in the QAFL days, I thought the best way to answer this question right now was to scratch all that and start afresh. So, I

attended a few games during the 2014 season with my investigator hat on and came back with a collection of notes. Here they are:

- Crowd (the negative) – if I wanted to see how good the atmosphere could get at a regular season match, I thought the local derby between the Brisbane Lions and Gold Coast reserves sides would be a good place to start. Although both were at the wrong end of the ladder during the season, I found the crowd was decidedly light on and strangely subdued as well. It was certainly nowhere near the same feel as a VFL game and even the average suburban games in Melbourne would easily match it for excitement.

It was a similar story when I saw the Lions take on a smaller, standalone club in the Aspley Hornets. These types of clashes are sometimes the most heated because of the David v Goliath subplots that get the spectators fired up, but, once again, it all felt pretty flat despite the tight score line.

- Crowd (the positive) – the flip side of the smaller crowds was far more freedom to roam around as you please. I was able to take a leisurely stroll onto the field at the breaks and stand within a few feet of the huddle to hear every word the coach Gary O'Donnell was saying. On one side of me I had Andrew Raines listening intently and on the other a group of supportive onlookers, including Justin Leppitsch, Pearce Hanley and Claye Beams. No matter whom you support or how old you get, standing around in that company is always a thrill!
- Cost – as you'd probably expect there was no admission cost for these games, with the open nature of most grounds making it impossible to enforce anyway. While it's great to have no one at the gate taking your money, it also means there's no one

selling *Records* – as far as I know the NEAFL doesn't do them – and very few staff to man the canteen etc.

- Facilities – in short, very much like the typical suburban ground, right down to the boundary line parking in some cases. Every ground is different in layout of course, but the basic social club, canteen, scoreboard and change rooms are pretty much all you can expect to see, with the odd makeshift stand also making an appearance.

Some of the clubs try to put on a bit of a show for the kids, with jumping castles, face painting and little league stuff going on, but I don't think it's a fixture at all games.

5 The future is rosy

Back home you probably weren't too fussed if the Giants didn't last, the Lions folded or the NEAFL ceased to exist; but, as an Expat, all that changes! You mightn't fully appreciate it yet, but the health of the game up here is now woven into your own happiness as a football lover and, therefore, you need it to be strong.

Luckily for us, I predict footy is here to stay and the four current AFL clubs will be around for a long time. I'm reluctant to use the words "boom" or "thrive" in the short term at least, and I don't think it'll ever swallow up the other codes as some predict, but it will continue to grow. Below I've set out four good reasons why this is the case.

5.1 First reason: the AFL administration

Everyone has heard about the pile of money getting thrown around by the AFL when it comes to the expansion clubs. Some fans get wound up thinking every cent is paying for first round draft picks and maybe a star or two for them to pinch. This is simply not the case.

Most of the money is being pumped in at grass roots levels to improve infrastructure and make sure growth can be supported when it comes. Importantly, it appears this investment is paying off quite handsomely. The following figures for New South Wales and the ACT, taken from AFL annual reports in 2012-13, tell only part of the story:

- A record high in participation numbers was reached in 2012, with 148,230 players across the region for the year, a growth of 8.64 per cent. This was followed by another 20 per cent increase in 2013.
- Participation in the AFL Auskick program increased by 7339 participants to a total of 48,965, the highest

total for any state or territory (a position held again in 2013). Regions leading this growth included Sydney South, where participation was up 137.8 per cent, and Western Sydney, up 43.4 per cent.

- Multicultural initiatives flourished, with more than 900 students from Intensive English Centres participating in AFL programs in 2012. Meanwhile, the AFL Indigenous Academies program had 247 participants in 2012, ballooning to 1734 in 2013.
- The opportunities for school students to participate in AFL continued to grow, with the total number of goal post sets installed over the past six years climbing above 120 and the launch of an Independent Schools Competition in 2013.
- The AFL Sydney Women's competition welcomed a new team to its competition in 2012 and 2013 for a total of 12 teams, while the 2013 AFL Women's National Championships Division 2 title was won by the ACT and representatives from their 10 teams.

For Queensland it's just as heartening:

- Total participation reached 137,989, up 10 per cent in 2012 and a further 8.5 per cent in 2013.
- Queensland again recorded the largest AFL school participation in Australia with 88,292 primary and secondary school students, an increase of almost 5000. In 2013, this figure topped the 100,000 mark.
- 40,009 female participants, an increase of more than 300 per cent in 2012. In 2013, Cairns hosted the Women's National Championship – the first time the event had ever been held outside a capital city.
- More than \$5 million worth of funding secured for statewide facilities development in 2012, culminating in the opening of the Burpengary AFL precinct in

2013. Overall, more than \$40 million of infrastructure projects were completed.

- The Multicultural Schools Program was launched in Brisbane and the Gold Coast.
- Queensland independent schools competition developed a stand-alone division for the Great Public Schools' Association (GPS).
- The AFL Auskick program was delivered on Palm Island for the first time in five years.
- An under-six competition was piloted with 56 teams across Brisbane.

5.2 Second reason: Suns and Giants the next powerhouses

The most exciting part of what I just ran through has to be the tremendous health of the Auskick program and the increased uptake in the schools. In the AFL's perfect world, all those young kids will grow up supporting strong, successful clubs and that would go a long way to keeping them in our sport. It's no wonder the Suns and Giants were given such generous handouts to begin with!

Some experts might argue that all the draft picks in the world doesn't necessarily guarantee on-field success and this plan could yet fall on its face. While I believe there's truth to that statement, I also think it would have to take some seriously bad decisions from those clubs to fall short of consistently competing for top four positions in the near future.

5.3 Third reason: Expat migration and the next generation

Sporting passions are very much an inherited thing, passed down from parent to child as soon as they're born.

While you hear the odd story about kids breaking family tradition to make a name in another field, most just end up carbon copies of their folks. For footy, this rite of passage is probably the hardest to escape of them all, with new born babies instantly wrapped up in St. Kilda blankets, given Melbourne teddies to cuddle and dressed in Hawthorn jumpsuits. What hope do they have?



When I first came to Queensland, there weren't many other kids showing casual interest in AFL. You'd never see hats, shorts and jumpers worn in the streets, nor would you see a car of youngsters pile out at the shops on a Sunday morning wearing their footy gear. Well, in the 20 years these sights have started to creep in and I suspect it has much to do with the parent/child thing I speak of.

The Expat children pulled out of Victoria during the 90s are now all grown up, having children themselves and passing on their love of footy as a part of this cycle. This means Queensland and New South Wales are poised with a full generation of homegrown footy fans ready to catapult

the game to another level.

Just out of curiosity I did a bit of research into how many Victorians had made the move north, particularly in the 90s when the trend seemed to hit a peak. A report produced by the Victorian State Government in 2008 on interstate migration explained the numbers and driving forces for the movement well:

The early 1990s recession had a major impact on the Victorian economy. Major restructuring of public and private sectors, particularly in the public service, manufacturing and energy generation industries, was occurring alongside depressed investment in high employment sectors such as building and construction. In net terms Victoria lost nearly 30,000 people to the rest of Australia in 1993–94, with no net gains recorded from any states or territories. Net loss to NSW and Queensland was particularly high (6,010 and 18,060 respectively).

While migration stabilised in the period shortly after on the back of an economic recovery, the report goes on to say Victoria still lost a total of nearly 40,000 people to Queensland and New South Wales in the 2001-2006 period alone. That's a full-scale flood of Expats no matter how you look at it – without even thinking about any other states – and only now are we beginning to see the flow-on effects.

5.4 Fourth reason: local media no longer in the way

As of ten years ago, and maybe even less, sports news only came via newspapers, magazines and television. That was it! What was or wasn't covered depended almost entirely on the local media and what they deemed newsworthy at the time.

In rugby league capitals such as Brisbane and Sydney, this meant AFL was given precious little airtime and it had a

massive stifling effect on the growth of the game. As I painfully recalled in my story at the start of this book, it almost squeezed the life out of a die-hard fan like me and goodness knows the impact it had overall.

Well, times have changed. Technology has completely stripped the local media of their control and no longer is the sporting public at their mercy. You can read, listen to or watch whatever sport you want, whenever you want. Heck, you can even watch every game of the New England Patriots over in America if that's your thing!

The power is now well and truly in your hands and surviving as a footy fan is only a matter of being shown how. That's the main goal of this book and it's time to get crackin'...

HOW TO GET ENOUGH FOOTY IN QUEENSLAND AND NEW SOUTH WALES

The second part of this book is dedicated to what I described earlier as the nuts and bolts of following footy in Queensland and New South Wales. In the upcoming pages I'll hand over everything I know, including some priceless local knowledge, so you can pick and choose the most suitable way to get enough footy.

Before I begin, I just wanted to explain again why this exercise is so important. Leading up to your big move, you were probably told something like, "It'll be right, just get Foxtel!" The problem with this magical quick fix is it ignores all the other elements of a football diet. Just as you can't live off hamburgers meal after meal, you can't expect to get by on television alone when it comes to football. It simply doesn't work that way.

Living in Melbourne or any other football town meant you didn't have to try to keep it in your life. As soon as you're born you're plugged into a pipeline rich in footy nourishment from all kinds of sources. It's always been

there and always will be. Take a moment and have a think about all the parts of your life that had something to do with footy. How many were there? How much time did you spend doing them? At a glance there's:

- Talking footy with family, friends and work colleagues.
- Playing footy.
- Watching live games of AFL and any other league whenever you wanted, e.g. VFL.
- Popping in on your AFL club's training before big games, checking out family days etc.
- Attending sports nights, breakfasts, grand final parades and other special events.
- Flicking through the paper every day.
- Listening to the radio in the car on the way to work, in the garden or relaxing with a drink on the back deck.

With all the bits and pieces making up your footy diet, you can see how inadequate the Foxtel-only concept really is. Moving interstate tears you away from all the other stuff and you'll quickly need to find ways of replacing it or you'll starve. The rest of the book is dedicated to showing you the options you have at your disposal for this task. Becoming an Expat may be full of potholes, roadblocks and detours, but you'll see there's nothing that can't be overcome with the right attitude (and maybe even my helping hand).

1 Use the media

As I painfully recalled in my opening story, the media was little help when I arrived in Queensland back in 1994. The Internet was just starting, television coverage was patchy and the local newspapers hardly acknowledged the game existed. The two-day wait for the *Herald-Sun* might sound like a joke, but it was honestly the only way to get a good bite of footy news.

Now, the media is a smorgasbord for footy fans and it continues to expand year by year. Rather than help Expats find enough scraps to get by, which was the challenge in my time, it's all about understanding how all the options work and then making the right choices for your lifestyle. If you can do that successfully, you'll take the first big steps toward loving footy as an Expat.

In keeping with the structure of this book, I have broken this section down into smaller, more manageable bits. Specifically, I've started with the more traditional forms of media and progress through to the latest and greatest.

1.1 Television and other viewing options

Television, both free-to-air and pay TV, is unquestionably a huge part of following football interstate, but as you've already heard I don't think it's not enough by itself and here are a couple more reasons why:

1. You can't take it everywhere – well you actually can with mobile devices, but the fact is you won't always be able to sit there and watch a full game. Some situations demand your attention for long periods at a time and a split-second score check is all you can squeeze in.
2. It doesn't cover all levels of the game – I can tell you

right now there's very little chance of getting lower leagues in Queensland or New South Wales, even on Foxtel. It's not like Melbourne where you can watch the match of the round in the VFL or catch up with suburban footy via community channels. The last time I checked the ABC up here did screen a replay of the VFL, but you had to wait until 3am on a Wednesday to see it!

With those points in mind, I believe you're much better off with a plan of attack that doesn't place all of its eggs in the TV basket. I'll let you make up your own mind anyway after you read what all the viewing options have to offer, starting with free-to-air.

1.1.1 Free-to-air

To set the scene, the five-year broadcast deal in place for the 2012-2016 period offers viewers in Queensland and New South Wales the following (as published on the AFL website):

- A minimum of four matches per week on free-to-air, with all matches shown live.
- All nine matches per week live on Foxtel and Austar and Fox IP television and live on mobile via Telstra.
- One match per week live on IP television via Telstra.
- All 42 matches involving the Brisbane Lions and Gold Coast Suns or Sydney Swans and Greater Western Sydney Giants broadcast on free-to-air television multi channels, either live or on delay. Home matches near live on free-to-air and live from Fox Sports on Foxtel and Austar.
- Friday night matches live on free-to-air multi channels and live from Fox Sports on Foxtel and

Austar.

- Three Sunday matches played. All matches to be shown live from Fox Sports on Foxtel and Austar. One match shown live on free-to-air multi channel.
- Two Saturday night matches played. Both matches shown live from Fox Sports on Foxtel and Austar. One match shown live on free-to-air multi channel.
- Two Saturday afternoon matches played. Both matches shown live from Fox Sports on Foxtel and Austar. One match shown live on free-to-air multi channel.

The next deal, signed by the AFL in August 2015 for the 2017-2022 seasons, promises pretty much more of the same with the major differences being the introduction of Thursday night as a showpiece fixture and 11 fewer free-to-air games shown per year.

On paper all that doesn't look too bad for the free-to-air market, however there are a few curveballs in there that aren't immediately obvious.

For a start it means the pre-season action is a complete wipeout with Foxtel having exclusive rights to that competition, in whatever form it holds. Most people would probably say that's not the end of the world, but I think deep down we all enjoy the role it plays in the build up to a new season.

The second point is there are only four televised games each round, which isn't so bad in itself because it's basically what Melbourne gets and it at least guarantees a game for each of the main timeslots: Friday night, Saturday afternoon, Saturday night and Sunday afternoon. Sometimes they even squeeze in a fifth game on the public holidays and, as a long-suffering Expat, I can live with that spread. I can even live with the hour delays that pop up from time to time. Contrary to what it says in the broadcast deal, I've noticed these only seem to apply to games where

local sides aren't playing and mainly in the early twilight timeslot of 3:20pm.

There are a few parts, however, I feel are pretty disappointing and I expect won't sit well with other Expats. One is the unwavering commitment to the local clubs. Both Lions and Suns in Queensland or Swans and Giants in New South Wales are shown no matter what and it can be very frustrating. It doesn't matter how big other games are, the programming is set and there's nothing you can do about it.

A real howler that always sticks in my mind here was the Round 20 clash between Sydney and Collingwood in 2013. At that stage Sydney was locked in the top 4 and Collingwood had shown a spike in form with impressive wins over other top 8 contenders. What game was shown on free-to-air that night instead: Gold Coast v Melbourne at Metricon Stadium.

Without meaning to sound harsh, it was a side with no chance of making the finals against one close to rock bottom. To make matters worse, it was played on a slippery night in front of many empty seats. If ever a game was to be switched on the grounds of greater public interest, this was it. I get the fact the AFL is only trying to promote the game, but it's little consolation for the fans and neutral observers who want to watch the best games.

Another gripe I have with free-to-air is the rigid programming before and after games. It seems the priority of the broadcasters is to stick to their scheduling as closely as possible, even if that means signing off at just the wrong time. On 7mate, the Anzac Day clash of 2014 cut out just as the Collingwood players were entering the change rooms to all the cheers and backslaps. Fox Footy, on the other hand, showed it all before crossing to the next live telecast. It might sound like a trivial matter, but supporters love seeing their boys celebrate a win and free-to-air is poorer for the fact it doesn't always deliver in this area.

Rounding out the failings I can see is the lack of

extended football programming. All the fun, news, and analysis that come from shows like *The Footy Show* are almost completely lost for Queensland and New South Wales viewers.

The Footy Show on Thursday night has always been given airtime and that continues to be the case, however it's on late, after the rugby league version has finished up. For the 2014 season it was penciled in for an 11:40pm start and ran until 1:30am. I've stayed up on the odd occasion, particularly in the early days, but with school or work the next day it's not something you can easily maintain. *Footy Classified*, as another example, has only been shown since the digital multi channels came along and cops the nasty timeslot of 12am on Monday nights.



When it comes to the weekend programming, the pre-game show on Channel 7 isn't always on before the game as it's supposed to be either. I can only recommend you check your local guides for that one because most of the time the broadcast starts at 7:30pm and jumps pretty much straight into the action. Likewise, Sunday panel shows have bobbed

up every now and again over the years, but always turned out to be a temporary fill for the channel rather than a season-long fixture. Just when you were starting to get used to it they'd suddenly take it off again. Talk about a sick sense of humour!

Then there are the special annual events the football community celebrates: the Brownlow Medal, All-Australian awards, AFL draft, Grand Final breakfast etc. None of these see the light of day. To give you an idea of how much these are ignored, since moving to Queensland I have only ever seen one Brownlow Medal count on free-to-air. Even then, it was only a highlights package late at night I had to tape because of school the following morning.

While this is all sounding pretty bleak, there are some good things happening, such as the emergence of National Indigenous Television (NITV) and the footy flavour it adds to freeview. Their flagship footy program is the *Marngrook Footy Show* on Thursdays at 7:30pm, hosted by Grant Hansen and including former AFL stars such as Gilbert McAdam, Ronnie Burns and Chris Johnson. As described on the channel's website, the show gives an Indigenous take on the AFL with a strong focus on Indigenous contribution and achievement. It also covers staple content such as team selection for each round, match previews and general footy discussion.

In keeping with their strong grass roots theme, you can also catch the odd match replay on NITV. I've seen VFL grand finals, SANFL grand finals, Northern Territory football carnivals and interesting documentaries on all sorts of topics. If you're stuck with free-to-air and looking for football programming with a difference – or just more programming full stop – I recommend checking in with this channel regularly.

Overall, the free-to-air line up in Queensland and New South Wales makes it easy to see why many are forced down the path of Foxtel. For those thinking of doing the

same, the following section is compulsory reading.

1.1.2 Foxtel

Despite having so much extra programming, including all the goodness on Fox Footy, less than 10% of Australians are pay TV account holders. I'd hate to think Expats were missing out because they didn't know how the subscriptions work or had thrown it all into the too expensive basket, so I'll quickly run through it here.

As it turns out, Foxtel has a number of package options and if you're only after the footy it can be quite affordable. This set up I'm about to run through is exactly what I've got at home and I can tell you it's worked beautifully for me.

To get underway, all you have to do is jump onto the Foxtel website (www.foxtel.com.au) and click on the "Get Foxtel" link at the side of the page. From there you're led through an easy-to-follow, step-by-step process that gives you the options to choose from.

The most basic package you can get is the Essentials package, which looks like this:

- \$47/month.
- Over 35 channels (including some sport: Fox News, Sky Racing etc.).
- iQ/Mystar (equipment that allows you to pause, rewind, replay, record live TV).
- *Gθ* (more on that shortly).

From there, you need to add the Sports package on top to get the Fox Footy channel, which involves:

- Extra \$25/month.
- 10 sports channels, including three Fox Sports

channels, Fox Footy and two ESPN channels.

Apart from the on-going monthly cost you can see there of \$72, there's a one-off installation cost and an equipment fee, both of which were \$75 at the time of writing. Maybe it's just me, but there always seems to be some kind of deal floating around you can cash in on as well. This time there was a "no-lock in contract" bonus on offer, but a couple of months later it might've been the fixed fees waived or, if you're really lucky, both.

Overall, you can work out that the minimum cost to get the Fox Footy channel into your home under a similar contract would be \$222 for the first month and \$72/month thereafter. Pretty reasonable, I think!

(Note: just before publishing, Foxtel dropped basic subscription prices via their new Entertainment pack to \$25/month.)

If you had a few spare bucks lying around and wanted to enhance your viewing experience, there are a few extra trimmings available that might tickle your fancy. For instance, if standard definition wasn't doing it for you, a HD box can be obtained for an extra \$10/month. If the kids and their cartoons were blocking your blockbusters, additional boxes for other rooms can be arranged for \$25/month more and a \$75 one-off equipment fee per box. If standard remote controls are too boring, you can get one in your club's colours for \$49.

With the "how" and "how much" analysis done, there are a couple more points I'd like to make about Foxtel.

Firstly, don't underestimate the value of the iQ equipment and the ability to record live TV. If you want to keep watching *The Footy Show* without turning into a vampire, or catch up on a game whenever you please, this little beauty makes it possible. I record every Collingwood

game just in case it's so good I want to watch it again and again! While there are personal video recorder devices like Fetch TV in the market that let you record free-to-air, they obviously don't have the same access to live footy as Foxtel.

Secondly, I'd recommend downloading TV guide Apps to your phone to make sure you don't miss a thing. You can get printed guides in the paper and delivered through your Foxtel subscription, but for convenience and accuracy I'd go with the Apps. Although there's only one Foxtel App, there are several for free-to-air ones and personally I find *OzTV* does the job nicely.

Foxtel made its name beaming into homes via television sets, but recent times have seen it turn mobile through two other viewing options: Foxtel *Go* and *Play*.

1.1.3 Foxtel Go

Foxtel *Go* is basically a direct link between what you're watching at home and a mobile phone or tablet, e.g. iPad. If you have a residential account you can sign up for *Go* and watch all the same channels no matter where you are on up to three devices. The App can be downloaded for free through *iTunes* or *Google Play*.

1.1.4 Foxtel Play

Foxtel *Play* works in a similar fashion to normal Foxtel TV, but streams over the Internet instead and is watched on devices such as Play Stations, Xbox 360s and PCs. This is how the folks at Foxtel describe it:

With Foxtel Play you choose where and when you want to be entertained. Foxtel Play streams TV over the internet, allowing you to watch on a range of different devices whether you're enjoying Live TV or catching up on a TV episode or movie on demand. All you need is one of the compatible devices and an Internet connection to get started.

You can register up to three devices to your Foxtel Play account (only one Xbox 360), watch on two devices at the same time and you can even change your device choices once a month. Plus you can watch a selection of your Foxtel Play channels on selected Apple and Samsung portable devices through the Foxtel Go App.



Just like the standard TV version, the sign up process for *Play* involves the selection of different packages. Once again there's a basic package upon which the extra programming is added, however this time there are four and they're called "Genres":

- Documentaries.
- Entertainment.
- Kids.
- Drama.

From there, access to footy is only a matter of topping up one of those options with the Sports package through your "premium pick". The minimum cost to get to this point is \$75/month, split between \$25/month for the

Genre package and \$50 per month for the single premium pick. As you may have already noticed this is roughly equal to the monthly cost of the standard TV access, however a bonus of going mobile is you aren't required to pay \$150 worth of one off installation and equipment fees.

If you want to know more about the Foxtel *Play*, including the full list of compatible devices, check out www.foxtel.com.au/foxtelplay/howitworks.

1.1.5 Telstra T-Box

The next viewing option is another one delivered to your home via the Internet, this time with the help of Telstra's *T-Box*. Their website says:

Telstra T-Box is more than just a set-top box; it's your personal video recorder that lets you record, pause and rewind free-to-air TV.

Plus, with T-Box connected to your high-speed Telstra home broadband service, you can rent movies and TV episodes or add Foxtel on T-Box to get up to 30 of the most popular Foxtel channels on a month to month contract.

For Expats, that very last statement is gold because it means the Fox Footy channel is available on here as well. New customers have a choice of four "Bundles" that cater for different download volumes, however to get Foxtel you need to sign up for the Entertainer bundle as the bare minimum, which includes:

- 100GB broadband per month (ideal for regular use, including some video and gaming).
- Free wi-fi modem for new customers.
- Local and national landline (no mobiles).
- \$120/month on a 24-month contract.
- \$59 activation fee for new customers.

- Includes *T-box* and Foxtel “Get Started” package with 11 channels.

From there you can add the Sport package (\$25/month) and you’re good to go. A touch more expensive per month than the standard TV option obviously, but you get a few extras in the package that might appeal to some. As suggested with Foxtel *Play*, it pays to do the research and the place to go is www.telstra.com.au/entertainment/tbox.

1.1.6 AFL Live Pass/AFL.TV

The final viewing option steps away from the Foxtel stable and comes in the form of an *AFL Live Pass* from the AFL’s website (www.AFL.com.au). It comes with some pretty cool features I’ll get to in a minute, and, unlike the other viewing options, you can give them a free, two-week test run by hopping on AFL.com.au and creating an “AFL Login powered by Telstra ID”. If you like what you see you can secure a pass for a week (\$4.99, not available in *Google Play*), a month (\$14.99) or a full year (\$89.99).

The main attraction of the *AFL Live Pass* is the ability to stream live games on a computer or mobile device through the *AFL Live App*, but the fun doesn’t stop there. Subscribers also have access to other premium content like advanced statistics, including heat maps, shot charts and live interchange data. There’s also an exclusive line up of programming throughout the week that covers all the round action, team selection, player interviews, fantasy football and even flashbacks from the AFL archives.

If you want to know more about *AFL Live Pass*, head to the AFL website or visit go.telstra.com.au/helpandsupport/-/afl-live-2014.

1.1.7 Additional Internet viewing thoughts

I'll finish off the Internet viewing options with a few stray thoughts on the topic. Before I begin I should probably clarify I'm not a Telstra customer and I don't currently use *T-Box*, *Play* or *AFL Live Pass*. I have, however, closely considered them at various stages and these are the observations that stuck in my head for one reason or another.

To make the most of these viewing options, you're best off switching all your communications across to Telstra. They're the only provider with unmetered downloads for AFL-related viewing, which means there's no risk of incurring the massive fees that come with breaking data limits. This might not be an issue if your current contract allows unlimited downloads, but not everyone is in this boat and, with live streaming capable of chewing up a couple of gigabytes per game (10-15MB per minute), it can become a very expensive exercise.

This may change in the future, but for the moment at least there's still a nagging reliability issue with Internet streaming. As the Telstra website explains:

As Foxtel on T-Box channels are streamed to the T-Box using the Internet, the quality of these channels may decrease if multiple devices in the home are using the same connection...If your BigPond Broadband service has been slowed (also known as "shaped", which is common practice when download limits have been exceeded), the T-Box will not work.

While there are devices like home network extenders that can be used to boost performance, they add extra cost and some customers might feel they're better off waiting until such doubts are removed altogether.

You can pause and rewind Foxtel on *T-Box* and *Play*, but you can't record. This feature is exclusive to the standard

Foxtel subscriptions and the equipment that comes with it. Perhaps not a deal breaker, but something to keep in mind if you're the busy type that can't always watch live games.

1.2 Print

While the printed media is shrinking by the day and everything going digital, I think the trusty, old newspaper will hang in there for a while yet. It has a tactile, page-turning quality that can't be replaced by a computer screen and sitting down with the paper and a coffee on a Sunday morning is one of life's simple pleasures. Because it's the cornerstone of so many daily routines, being able to get your hands on your favourite paper when moving interstate carries an importance beyond the footy within its pages.

As you already know, the situation isn't good here and a move north poses a big threat to the printed stuff. It doesn't mean you'll never see the *Herald Sun*, *The Age* or *Inside Football* ever again, but you'll need to work harder to do so or be prepared to go about it in a different way.

1.2.1 Newspaper

I still vividly remember the massive hole that was left when I could no longer get my hands on the *Herald Sun* right at the start of my Expat journey. Unfortunately, not much has changed in those 20 years. You can still pick one up from a newsagency, but it will have to be the day after, it will cost more (\$1.90 compared to \$1.30 and likely to rise further) and not every newsagent does it so you might need to go for a bit of drive. For those in New South Wales, I think you're in for more of the same, except I have heard of copies being available on the same day in some city-based newsagencies. To check for sure, ask around and see what they say.

The *Herald Sun* did offer an interstate home delivery

service at one stage, however regular enquiries I've made over the years to their customer support centre (customersupport@heraldsun.com.au) have confirmed this will no longer be available due to the cost of freight.

For *The Age* readers, the predicament is even worse. In fact, during my time in Queensland I can't recall seeing a print edition sold in any newsagent. This might have something to do with the fact I'm more of a *Herald Sun* man, but I'd be more than surprised if it was widely available.



That leaves *The Australian* as far as decent footy content goes. Being a national newspaper, it's freely available within the northern states and that alone makes it attractive for Expats wanting a traditional paper experience. In my opinion, its footy coverage isn't anywhere near as good as the *Herald Sun*, but it's still better than the local options that are heavily skewed toward rugby league.

All in all you can see it's a bit of a battle and the much

easier way to read whatever newspaper you want is through the digital subscriptions available on their websites.

I actually remember when these were a bit of a novelty, posting only a fraction of the content you found in the printed edition. Back in those days everything was free and access unlimited. Not so anymore! With so much stuff available, things are getting serious and freebies are almost extinct. Most sites will give you a “taster” with a limited number of free articles, e.g. *The Age* has 30 free articles per month; some ask you to register in exchange for a few more, e.g. the *Courier Mail* jumps from two per day to five, however that’s usually just a ploy to fill your email inbox with promotions and newsletters. If you want to cut through the crap, so to speak, you have to cough up for a subscription. Well, almost. From what I can see there are two exceptions.

The first is *News.com*, which is the hub of all News Limited papers, including the *Herald Sun*, *Courier Mail*, *Daily Telegraph* and a heap of regional offshoots. For some reason, and it probably won’t last, this site still gives you unlimited access to all of its footy content. I don’t think it has absolutely every article the *Herald Sun* publishes, however it draws from the same writers and I think it’s more than good enough for those resisting a digital subscription.

The second I want to mention here is *Foxsports.com* (another one belonging to the News Limited group). While it has a limit of eight articles per week and a maximum of 24 with registration, there’s a nice sweetener in there for Foxtel account holders who automatically receive full access to the website for free. It’s a pretty handy deal I reckon and one that tends to slip through the cracks.

I realise there’s a lot to absorb there, so I’ve gone to the trouble of compiling the subscription options for each paper. I also decided to include the costs and package structures even though they proved to be extremely volatile, with constant shuffling and re-positioning observed while

writing this book.

1.2.1.1 Herald Sun/Courier Mail/Daily Telegraph

You can find all the digital subscription information for these three papers on their websites: www.beraldsun.com.au, www.couriermail.com.au and www.dailytelegraph.com.au. The pricing usually starts at around \$3 or \$4 per week for an introductory period, then doubles to regular pricing from there.

As with the pricing itself, the features of a full digital package are forever changing, however they typically look something like this:

- Unlimited mobile and web access.
- Unlimited *taste, body + soul, Escape* and more.
- Unlimited *Confidential, Best Weekend* and more.
- Unlimited *Lifestyle* special features.
- *Fox Sports* match news videos and 24/7 live streaming of news.
- Expert opinion and video content.
- *SuperCoach Gold*.
- *Herald Sun* digital print edition.
- *Herald Sun* iPad App.

You already know the *Herald Sun* no longer home-delivers printed copies interstate, but that doesn't stop you getting the local papers on your doorstep each morning if so desired. While they once again pull from the same group of sports journalists, they have nowhere near the volume of the *Herald Sun* and I personally don't bother with them anymore for AFL news. To me, what you get looks very much like an editorial exercise; they have gaps to fill in their spread and include articles that fit over ones of real interest.

Nonetheless, I know some people read the paper for

more than just the sports section and like to know what's happening in their town. For them, a combined 7-day delivery and full digital package is available for \$5 per week initially and \$10 per week thereafter.

For Expats in regional areas, these options also apply to the local papers – Gold Coast (www.goldcoastbulletin.com.au), Townsville (www.townsvillebulletin.com.au) and Cairns (www.cairnspost.com.au) – although there doesn't appear to be corresponding News Limited publications for New South Wales.

(Note: Expats from South Australia and Western Australia will be able to find subscription options through their News Limited publications at *The Advertiser* (www.adelaidenow.com.au) and *The Sunday Times/Perth Now* (www.perthnow.com.au). The most widely read newspaper in WA, *The West Australian*, owned by Seven West Media, also has subscriptions available (au.news.yahoo.com/thewest/).)

1.2.1.2 The Australian

Being under the News Limited banner as well sees the digital subscription for *The Australian* (www.theaustralian.com.au) follow the same pricing structure as the other papers, however the content is quite different.

The features of the full digital package typically look something like this:

- Access to *The Australian* and *Business Spectator* websites, tablet Apps and mobile sites.
- *The Australian* tablet App (iPad and Android).
- The *Business Spectator* premium iPad App.
- *The Australian* digital print edition.
- Premium content from international news partners.

I've already commented on the superior footy flavour in *The Australian* compared to the local papers and why that makes it a legitimate daily paper option. The big negative as far as I can see is it doesn't print on Sundays, which means it lets you down on the best footy news day of them all.

1.2.1.3 The Age/Brisbane Times/Sydney Morning Herald

The other big news corporation in Australia is Fairfax Media, the publishers of *The Age* (www.theage.com.au), *Sydney Morning Herald* (www.smb.com.au) and *Brisbane Times* (www.brisbanetimes.com.au). The relationship between these papers is very similar to the News Limited model, but with one major difference: the *Brisbane Times* is an online paper only.

There are four packages to choose from:

1. Website Access

- \$15/month
- Read an unlimited number of articles.
- Access to exclusive eBooks.
- Access to exclusive discounts, events and competitions.

2. All Digital

- \$25/month.

The same as Website Access, plus:

- Unlimited access to our award-winning tablet Apps.
- Interactive quizzes, crosswords, Sudoku free in the iPad App.

3. All Digital Plus Weekend (only *Sydney Morning Herald*, no *Brisbane Times* print edition).

- \$25/month.

The same as All Digital, plus:

- Saturday and Sunday newspaper delivery.

4. All Digital Plus 7-day (only *Sydney Morning Herald*, no *Brisbane Times* print edition).

- \$44/month.

The same as All Digital, plus:

- Everyday newspaper delivery (7 days).

1.2.2 Magazines

For some reason there's never been much competition in this area, with the market dominated by one publication for as long as I can remember: *Inside Football*. I've always thought there was enough room for another magazine with a fresh angle, however that boat has probably sailed with the digital boom now holding everyone's attention.

1.2.2.1 Inside Football

Despite being over-priced and a touch tired in my opinion, *Inside Football* continues to soldier on after decades in the game. While that may sound critical, I actually love the magazine and am very pleased it hasn't fallen by the wayside because it can be a handy option for Expats. We're a hungry bunch and a publication like this still has a role to

play; especially when it comes with home delivery right across Australia!

In this case, subscription options (available at www.sen.com.au/sport/inside-football) are built around the number of issues you'd like to receive per year:

- 10 issues: \$39
- 18 issues: \$101
- 36 issues: \$195

If locking in at least 10 issues is too much of a commitment, you can always get it off the rack for \$5.95, which I'm pretty sure is the same everywhere else anyway. The only difference is it usually hits the shelves the next day, i.e. Thursday rather than Wednesday, and, as you probably guessed, it can be a bit of a lottery as far as finding newsagents that stock it.

If you strike out with the local newsagencies then a digital subscription might have to be the way forward here as well. Once again, it's a matter of choosing the number of issues you want:

- 1 issue: \$3.50
- 10 issues: \$29.50
- 18 issues: \$53.10
- 36 issues: \$106.20

There's also a phone App available, although it appears nothing more than a virtual storefront for the following digital subscription options:

- Single issue: \$6.49
- 3-month subscription: \$58.99
- 6-month subscription: \$119.99
- 12-month subscription: \$229.99

I haven't used the digital subscriptions myself and therefore can't add much to sway you one way or another. On the surface, I find it rather odd the cost for a single issue on the App is more expensive than the printed copy and almost twice as much as the digital version.

1.2.2.2 AFL Record

Ah, the *AFL Record*; it holds such a special place in the hearts of all footy fans. Just the sight of one takes me back to pimply-faced kids in red aprons yelling, "Records, get your records!" I also can't forget the massive pile of them sitting on my brother's bookshelf at the end of the '80s, each one carefully marked with the goal kickers and scores for each quarter. I remember him saying, "You don't take footy seriously unless you get a 'Recs!'"

Expats can still grab this marvellous piece of game day action even if they can't be at the ground, although it has become decidedly tougher over the last year or so. The AFL website had a range of subscriptions in both printed and digital format for the 2014 season, however these weren't available in 2015 and I unfortunately get the feeling it might stay that way. Individual newsagents do occasionally stock them, but you will need to do some searching to find a reliable supplier.

1.2.2.3 Season guides

This genre has always been lapped up in AFL circles because of fans like me that love to spend hours daydreaming about the upcoming season. As far as Expats are concerned, it's a familiar tale unfortunately with these magazines even more hit and miss in newsagencies; so much so, you're better off giving up on finding the proverbial needle in a haystack and searching online instead.

The pick of the bunch in my eyes is the *AFL Record*

Season Guide, which can be ordered from the same place as the *Record* subscriptions I just spoke about for \$39.95 (with shipping and handling extra). It contains over 1000 pages of official statistical history, as well as details on the draft, profiles on every player and more.

If you were looking for change from \$20, the *ABC Footy Magazine*, available on the ABC online bookstore for \$8.95, looks pretty good and is described as the “must-have” season guide, “packed with player and team profiles, statistics, and exclusive insights from AFL experts and footy legends.” Slattery Media, the company behind the *AFL Record*, also comes to the party with *The Punters Guide* for \$14.95. It appears to have a more tactical edge, claiming to be, “filled with expert advice to help you win on the punt or dominate the office tipping competition.”

1.3 Radio

Just like the *AFL Record*, footy fans have a deep love affair with radio, particularly those brought up on a trusty wireless.

As a kid, I definitely relied on it more than most. With an older brother playing senior footy by the time I was 10 and the old man heavily involved as well, the majority of Saturdays were spent at the suburban grounds in southwest Gippsland rather than the MCG or VFL Park. I'd run the car battery flat listening to icons like Rex Hunt and Tim Lane on 3AW.



Just like everything else, this football vein was slashed when my family made the move up north. You could get the odd scratchy reception here or there, but the days of listening to uninterrupted coverage through the big Melbourne stations were gone forever.

Sadly, not much improvement was seen through the rest of the '90s and into the '00s. With the emergence of Internet streaming you could occasionally get some radio while you followed a game on the AFL website, however dial-up connection meant the quality was average and dropouts routine. Plus, it was usually only available for the bigger games that were on television anyway. Back then Expats just had to face the fact that their beloved radio was a genuine casualty of their new life and get on with it.

It wasn't until the latest broadcast rights deal that things started to turn around. Through ABC Local Radio and their *Grandstand* sports program, AFL could finally be heard in Queensland and New South Wales just like back home. All listeners had to do was find the transmission frequency for their area with the ABC's frequency finder (www.abc.net.au/radio/frequency-finder) and they could tune in to a minimum of three games per week, including all Friday

night games.

At the same time, vastly improved mobile services and the new world of phone Apps meant all the favourite footy stations were starting to creep within reach once again. Today, through the free *AFL Live* App, all the big boys like Triple M, SEN, 3AW, 5AA and 6PR are just a smartphone away. It's almost like the good old days once again!

I say almost like old times because there are a few things that aren't quite the same. The biggest difference between the App-based radio and the real deal is the App only cuts in for game time. While you get about 30 minutes either side for pre- and post-game talk, you don't get any of the weekday programming (not on the *AFL Live* App anyway).

It's not exactly free like conventional radio, either. Well, it is for Telstra customers, but for everyone else the data goes against your monthly quota and just like visual streaming you need to make sure you stay within the limits to avoid copping hefty fees.

To get some idea of how much it chews up, I recorded a 10-minute patch through the *AFL Live* App that took up around 3 megabytes (MB). Extending this out to a full game with an average duration of 120 minutes would see 36MB taken up; if you wanted to listen before and after the game, say about 3 hours worth in total, it'd reach approximately 54MB. I've even read this figure can be as high as 150+MB! Not as thirsty as watching a game, but still potentially dangerous if you don't have enough download room.

So, is the *AFL Live* App the only way to get live radio out of Melbourne, Adelaide or Perth? For now, the answer is yes. The radio stations like Triple M all have Apps of their own, however due to copyright laws they can only post podcasts of their footy programs rather than broadcast live calls. The only other option I know about relates to live VFL coverage, where you can catch the match of the round through the *Red Time Sport* App. I also know Collingwood have added a VFL radio portal on their official club App,

although I'm not sure if or when others will follow suit.

What about the local airwaves in Brisbane and Sydney? If the *AFL Live* App doesn't work out for whatever reason, is there any chance of catching some action there? Besides the ABC, there are only two other stations that have anything to do with football.

1.3.1 Triple M

You can tune in to Triple M in Brisbane (104.5FM) and Sydney (104.9FM), but they only cover Lions or Swans games depending on where you're listening. The commentary team in Brisbane over the last few years has included the likes of Richard Champion, Bill MacDonald, Peter Everitt and Belinda Mellen, while in Sydney Troy Luff, Brad Seymour and John Kehoe have called the action.

1.3.2 National Indigenous Radio Service (NIRS)

Available in Brisbane (93.3FM) and Sydney (97.7FM) as well, however they only cover one to two games per week depending on the draw. Their chief callers include Barry Denner, Andrew Browne, Travis Fitzgibbon, Peter Cardamone and Graham "Smokey" Dawson, with expert backing from the likes of Gilbert McAdam, Peter "Crackers" Keenan and umpiring great, Glenn James.

1.4 Websites

As you'd expect with the Internet explosion, there are a squillion websites about footy floating around in cyberspace. To keep this section to a reasonable length I had to narrow it all down to the main types and briefly comment on what they offer.

1.4.1 AFL and club websites

AFL.com.au is the official home page of the AFL and is undoubtedly the number one resource for any footy fan. All the latest news, results, broadcast details, merchandise and fan competitions are packed in there, however the bottom blue section of the home page is where the treasure really lies for Expats. If you have any ambitions to play, coach, umpire, volunteer or work in the industry, this is the place to start and I urge you to pay regular visits here or at least subscribe to their newsletter.

The site also acts as a gateway to the individual club websites, where fans can spend hours sinking their teeth into everything on offer. For the Expat, these are the sections I think offer the most value:

- News – if your club is coming to town, I highly recommend you check in during the weeks leading up to the game to make sure you don't miss a thing. Ticketing information, gate opening times, club functions (including family days and interstate supporter groups), merchandise availability and even the cheer squad seating are often released in the build up to a road game.
- Player profiles – being stuck up north means you can miss quite a bit of detail about the players, especially draftees, and this is a great way to catch up. For instance, I never knew one of Collingwood's first round draft picks in 2013 was from my old junior club. When I found out, I jumped straight on to the website to find out more!

Clubs do a great job nowadays giving access to the players. Through the interviews, profiles and exclusive behind-the-scenes vision posted regularly you get an insight that simply wasn't possible in years gone by. Thinking about that now, one of my

favourite players as a young fella was Tony Francis and throughout his 9-10 years at Collingwood I can only remember him interviewed once!

- Coverage of events – nowhere else will Expats be able to get as much in-depth coverage of special events and functions than the club websites. The Collingwood website streams live written commentary for significant events on the club calendar like the Copeland Trophy and Annual General Meeting (AGM) using a program called *Cover-it Live*. They also cover the VFL this way, which as an Expat I love, but I think Geelong is the only other club that does it that way unfortunately.

1.4.2 AFL Players' Association website

Besides the club websites, another good opportunity to connect with the players comes via the Player's Association website (www.aflplayers.com.au). Just like the association itself, this website is all about the players and shines a torch on the behind-the-scenes work they do. If you want to see the social side of being an AFL footballer, the community work they do, the personal development activities they undertake, the diets they follow, or even take a trip back to their roots, this is the place to visit. It also gives them a platform to speak out on the biggest issues in football, such as racial vilification and player welfare.

Of course there is some fun stuff thrown in as well, including a "Playerpedia" where you can click on your favourite player and bring up their personal page with stats, related articles and feeds from their social media accounts. You can even see what music they're listening to!

1.4.3 Fox Sports Pulse website

While you're beginning to see how to stay connected at

the AFL level, what happens with your local club when moving to Queensland or New South Wales? How do you avoid losing touch there? Of course your old mates will be happy to fill you in as much as they can, but you won't want to spend all your precious catch up time going through the goalkickers, best players and what not. This is where *Fox Sports Pulse* (www.foxsportspulse.com.au), formerly known as *SportingPulse*, slots in beautifully.

It's also an extremely handy tool for getting to know your new local leagues better. You can find what teams are in your area, where they play and when the next home game is; perfect for the snooping you'll need to do, but more on that shortly.

Another string to the *Fox Sports Pulse* bow is its role as a supplier of technology services to grass roots sport. On the website they claim you can:

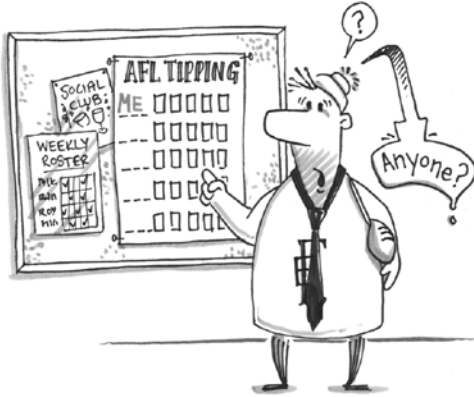
Transform your sports organisation by using our robust, proven, and fully integrated sports management solution...Whether it's creating you an exceptional website, helping you streamline your registrations and payments process, or integrating your member database and competition management system, the team at Fox Sports Pulse is committed to making your sports administration life easier.

This mightn't be of much interest to the Expats just finding their feet, but who knows, if you get involved with a local club down the track this could be something to call upon.

1.4.4 Tipping websites

Back in the old days, becoming an Expat almost certainly meant this pastime was on the chopping block for good. Local clubs might have had something going on down at a pub or in the clubrooms, but that's about all you could hope for. You'd either have to learn about rugby

league quick smart and play along at work or give it a miss altogether.



Nowadays, there are more Internet tipping competitions to join than you can handle. You can win some massive prizes or even join your old workplace's competition to settle a score or two.

Just to give you an idea of what's out there, I'll run through a few of the more popular sites.

1.4.4.1 ESPN Footy Tips

I've had more to do with this site than any other, mainly through my brother's work competition back in Melbourne. Before it came along I used to send my tips via email down to my brother, who'd then pass them on to the poor guy trying to manage it all on a spreadsheet. While it was better than nothing, websites like this are clearly streets ahead.

All you need to do is register on the site (www.footytips.com.au), set up a profile and from there you can run private competitions, tip against mates in head-to-head

battles, and, of course, you automatically enter the site-wide competition with thousands of other tipsters. You can even view your tipping history and have tip reminders sent to your inbox. With a free App available, it only takes a spare minute late on a Friday afternoon to enter your kiss of death anyway.

Other features on the site are:

- A simple form guide section you can use to help place tips, including expert picks, betting odds, injuries etc.
- Multiple sports to tip from.
- A fan forum, although it doesn't seem to get much activity. Hang tight because I'll give you some other forum options to try soon.
- \$5000 awarded to the site-wide winner and weekly prizes of Gold Class movie tickets. In my opinion, the site's strength is more about giving tipsters a place where they can run large-scale competitions with accuracy and convenience rather than huge prizes. There are better competitions for that!

1.4.4.2 Carlton Draught AFL tipping competition

With a dedicated sponsor like Carlton Draught, you know there's going to be some serious coin up for grabs in this competition. The \$20,000 purse and the fact it's run through the AFL website makes it very much a heavyweight in the tipping world.

Just like the ESPN site, it has all bells and whistles for a very complete tipping experience. It also runs a few minor competitions during the year and a top tipster for each round, all with impressive prizes attached.

The prize cabinet includes:

- \$20,000 first prize for the overall winner.
- Top tipster for each round gets a Sherrin footy and a free 12-month *AFL Live Pass*.
- The *Pick 5 from 5* competition has a \$1000 prize for the last man standing. Everyone is entered automatically and, starting in Round 5, you need to pick 5 or more winners per round to stay in it. The last person standing wins the money. It's much tougher than it sounds by the way; four rounds into the 2014 competition and 130,000 of the 156,000 contestants had been eliminated!
- *The Gauntlet* competition starts in Round 11 and sees another \$1000 up for grabs. It's a similar knockout-style competition, however you need to pick at least one winner each round to move through. Once again it sounds dead easy, but all you need is a big upset to thin the field very quickly.

1.4.4.3 SportsBet and TAB competitions

To be honest, I'm not a huge betting man and I don't really know much about these sites beyond the promotional details. I threw them in here anyway because you don't need a betting account to enter, so it is a genuine tipping option for everyone (you do need to be over 18 though).

Once again there's some big money up for grabs, with Sportsbet (www.sportsbet.com.au) claiming the title as Australia's richest free tipping competition by giving away more than \$1,000,000 in cash and prizes for 2014, including up to \$10,000 for each round and a mammoth \$100,000 for the overall winner!

For the TAB (afl.tabfootytipping.com.au), the overall winner has the option of taking \$20,000 cash or the chance to win \$1,000,000 by correctly selecting the winner of all 9 AFL finals. While that sounds like heartbreak waiting to happen, the people at TAB are good enough to guarantee \$10,000 in

the event the sweetener goes sour, if you know what I mean.

1.4.4.4 Club competitions

A handful of clubs – Adelaide, Collingwood, Essendon, Greater Western Sydney, Hawthorn, Port Adelaide and St.Kilda – run their own tipping competition on their websites, with the biggest point of difference being the major prizes are usually linked to club sponsors. For instance, the Collingwood competition puts up a holiday from their airline sponsor Emirates and Essendon a car from Kia. Along with the big stuff, the competitions can give you a chance to win some pretty cool, club-specific prizes like tickets to Best & Fairest functions.

1.4.5 Forums

If you play footy, belong to a supporter group or go to the game each week with a bunch of friends, you probably wouldn't even know footy forums exist. You can talk about footy as much as you want, whenever you want. Unfortunately not everyone has that luxury and for these people a place where they can engage in meaningful conversation is a real treat. As an Expat, the chances are you'll fall into this category at one point or another.

Despite offering such a valuable service, there are surprisingly very few genuine forums out there. I say genuine because there are plenty of websites where people can comment on all sorts of footy topics; *Facebook*, newspaper websites and even phone Apps encourage users to post messages in some form or another. The problem I find with these is they're not always controlled well. Without a governing body filtering comments and enforcing codes of conduct, things can turn ugly pretty and "trolls" start turning up just to pick a fight.

With that established, easily the biggest and best footy forum on the web is *Big Footy* (www.bigfooty.com). Boasting over 100,000 members, numerous smaller forums, frenetic daily activity and a polished operation, this is the place to go if you're struggling to find anyone to talk footy with. Registration is free and all you need to do is set up your profile before jumping right in.

As you'll see when you go there, most of the activity occurs within the individual AFL club forums, with some having over 20,000 separate threads (discussion topics) and 1,000,000 posts. Now that's a serious conversation!

For Expats, you'll even find forums on *Big Footy* for most local leagues in Queensland and New South Wales. If you're sizing up teams in your new hometown, you'll be able to do a good chunk of groundwork right here, all in the comfort of your own home and without saying a thing! Of course, asking questions is what forums are for, so fire away if you feel someone can help you find answers.

Although *Big Footy* is definitely the way to go, I thought I'd briefly mention another forum that can come in handy.

The *Whirlpool Forum* (forums.whirlpool.net.au/) is described as the Australian Internet and technology discussion forum. While technology is clearly the name of the game here, some general footy threads can pop up from time to time. While that may be of interest anyway, the real value comes from the technological expertise flowing from the pages in this site. If you're experiencing a few hiccups with issues such as television reception, Internet connection, phone or mobile device coverage, this forum is not a bad place to go for some free advice.

In closing, there are a few new players in the forum market, some with significant backing like *The Crowd* from Fox Sports, which makes you think they could do well in the future. At this point in time though nothing I've seen compares to *Big Footy*.

1.4.6 Blogs

Forums are great value because, among other things, they get to the heart of what other fans think: no media, no spin, no experts (other than the self-proclaimed ones). If the raw opinion thing appeals to you as well, you should take a peek into the world of blogging. Just doing a search for “AFL blog” in *Google* will give you a healthy list discussing all sorts of topics and asking for feedback. Who knows, you may find one or two speaking enough sense for you to visit regularly.

If you consider yourself handy with a keyboard, you might even want to set up your own. There are plenty of free sites that give you all the tools you need and before long you too could be broadcasting your views to the world! Just type “free blogs” into *Google* once again and you’ll be on your way.

Perhaps the most popular blog around at the moment is the satirical sports blog, *Titus O’Reily* (www.titusoreily.com), which is well worth a look to see what blogging is all about. The *Big Footy* website has a blog of its own and links to others as well, so it’s also not a bad place to start if you’re curious.

1.4.7 Statistical websites

All footy fans love nothing more than a good stat. I know I certainly do! After each round I spend more time picking through the inside 50s, contested possessions, disposal efficiency, tackles and the like than I do reading the articles.

Not surprisingly I also find stats from the past to be just as fascinating. When faded memories of games I attended as a youngster pop into my head, I get a real kick out of going back and re-discovering who did what on the day. Maybe it’s just a nostalgic Expat thing, I don’t know.

Anyway, there's one site that caters for this type of footy fetish perfectly: *Footywire* (www.footywire.com).



It has an extensive archive of statistics across a whole range of categories, including fixtures, players, teams, player rankings, team rankings, Rising Stars, AFL drafts, Brownlow medals, ladders, coaches, attendances, Fantasy football and video highlights.

Although it was hard work trying to find out more about the site's origins, I did stumble across a profile on the *Only Melbourne* website (www.onlymelbourne.com.au). Aside from giving us some background, this brief introduction also reinforces what I was saying about our love of statistics:

After years of scouring the net searching for a website which provided detailed statistical reports and rankings for our favourite footy players and teams, we gave up and decided to create our own.

Don't get us wrong, we love all the online newspapers and, of course, the official AFL website but we were just unable to obtain the type of information on statistics and team/player profiles that we were looking for.

FootyWire has recently been working closely with ProWess Sports to explore the options available for the presentation of AFL statistics

on the web. Look out for further developments of this in the upcoming months.

The one knock I have on this site is it “only” goes back to 1987. If you want to go deeper into history then another website called *AFL Tables* (www.afltables.com) might do the trick. It doesn't cover as many stats as *Footywire*, but goes all the way back to 1897.

The last one to mention here is australianfootball.com and I've left it to the end because it's an ever-expanding hybrid of blogs, essays, stats and other points of interest in all leagues and all eras. As founder Adam Cardosi explains, the website is, “an ambitious attempt to create a comprehensive online home for the history, culture, and stats of the great Australian game.” With backing from Slattery Media and contributions from prominent industry sources, it's hard to see australianfootball.com not succeeding in this endeavour.

1.4.8 AFL Record archives

To round off on the websites, I'll slip in a little gem I stumbled across a while back: the State Library of Victoria's *Football Record* collection (www.sl.vic.gov.au/football-record). History buffs and Record enthusiasts that don't know about this one already will be stoked to hear the library has scanned copies of every issue dating back to 1912. It's a great site for those that don't mind the odd trip or two down memory lane.

1.5 Social media

1.5.1 YouTube

I think this site is an underrated resource when it comes to footy. The fact you can search almost anything and be virtually guaranteed a snippet of footage in return is so

exciting to me. While the AFL and media companies release a lot of their official news, interviews, game highlights and other vision on here, the beauty of *YouTube* in my opinion is the original stuff posted by fans.

If you type in the name of your favourite player, the chances are someone out there has put together a highlights package and slapped on a rocking music track to create a spine-tingling tribute. It can be very addictive and I've spent hours at a time glued to the screen watching these, as well as taking in crunching tackles, spectacular marks, amazing goals and various other highlights. In that sense, *YouTube* is a massive footy archive and a must-visit for Expats.

1.5.2 Facebook

We're definitely heading out of traditional football territory with this one, however more and more content is finding its way onto the monster social networking site.

To give you some idea of what to expect, there are basically three different types of footy pages on *Facebook*:

1. Official club pages – basically an extension of the club websites, with all the photos, news and tweets re-posted here. If you're a heavy user of *Facebook* it doesn't hurt to "Like" this page and get these updates coming through your feed, however there's no added value to speak of.
2. Fan pages – these pages are created in devotion to clubs or players, with some allowing other *Facebook* users to join as members and post as well.

On the surface, these pages seem like a good place to connect with other fans, however I find the banter that goes on degenerates into nasty slanging matches far too often. That's right, even among supposedly like-minded supporters! If talking trash is a bit of harmless fun in your eyes then they could be

worth a look; if you want more substance and less angst, I'd probably steer clear. They also tend to struggle with spam in my experience.

3. Critic pages – the third type of Facebook page is similar to the second, but this time it is mutual contempt bringing people together. The Collingwood Football Club and its supporters tend to be the most popular inspiration for these groups, with pages such as *What has 100 legs and 4 teeth? The front row of the Collingwood cheer squad!* attracting 41,000 Likes. Other pages celebrating the fact certain clubs lose, cry or suck are also pretty common and can be a laugh if you don't take things too seriously.

1.5.3 Twitter

The real value of *Twitter* in a football context is the constant news feed it provides. Now that I think of it, if you "Follow" the *Twitter* accounts of the major newspapers, the AFL itself and your club, there's probably no chance you'll miss any announcement ever again!

Besides doing exactly that, I check in on *Twitter* every so often just to see what some of my favourite players are getting up to. Although there's no great depth to be found, it does give you a glimpse into their daily lives and a different look at their personalities. If you want to follow your favourite players as well you can easily do so by searching for them on *Twitter* or using the Playerpedia on the Players' Association website as previously mentioned. For a good cross-section of players and athletes from other sports, have a look at www.tweeting-athletes.com.

The media have also experimented heavily with different ways of using *Twitter* and the interactive experience it gives, however they're yet to really hit the mark in my opinion. A good example is a *Twitter*-based program on the AFL website called *#AskTheCoach*, where users put questions to

coaches over an hour to get some instant feedback. While ideas like this are great in theory, they're always going to be let down by *Twitter's* 40-character maximum and clichéd responses.

1.5.4 Instagram

Instagram is similar to *Twitter* in that it can give quick snapshots into the lives and personalities of players, but this time in the form of photos. There's not a lot of pure footy content to be found here obviously, but, once again, if you have an interest in the personal lives of the players then it can offer that via everyday photos of family, friends, pets and social outings. The off-season break tends to see activity heat up in this regard!

A lot of the *Instagram* photos come through the *Twitter* feeds anyway, so if your head's spinning at the thought of another social media App then you can probably give this one a miss.

1.6 Phone Apps

Since it hit our shores in 2008, the smartphone has been a real game changer because it's literally brought footy to our fingertips. We can get it whenever we want, wherever we want...and we obviously want it by the truckload!

On the back of this appetite, developers have been working like crazy to create all sorts of Apps for us to snap up. Just a simple "AFL" search in the App store on my iPhone returned a staggering 290 plus entries and it's not slowing down any time soon. From instant score updates through to coaching, just about every corner of the industry is catered for.

Despite the way things have taken off, most of the Apps remain completely free. Some come with a token price tag of either \$0.99 or \$1.99 and a few get up around the \$10

mark, however these are more likely to be games more than anything else. Importantly, you can get everything you need to closely follow footy without spending a thing!

Before I starting picking apart the different categories available, I need to clarify all of my experience in this area is with an iPhone. In most cases it seems the same developers simply adapt the Apps to the Android operating system and sell them on *Google Play* instead, so Samsung users and the like can still get a lot from this section.

1.6.1 Club Apps

Every club has their own official App available and, as they all come from the same developer, offer similar features closely linked to the club websites.

There are heaps of unofficial club Apps out there as well, however in my opinion they tend to suffer with content restrictions. To give you an example, I still have an unofficial Collingwood App that no longer updates the *Twitter* feed because of a copyright ruling long ago. To make up for these shortcomings, many unofficial versions will include novelty features such as the club's song to create the illusion of greater value.

1.6.2 Trivia/gaming/fun Apps

This is a huge category and the Apps in here can range from plain trivia to sophisticated action games like *AFL: Gold Edition*. Growing up with gaming dinosaurs like Commodore 64 and Sega Megadrive means the full-on action games are a bit over my head and I tend to dabble in the basic, yet terribly addictive ones like *Flick Footy*.

I'd like to make special mention here of one App I stumbled across a little while back called *Hawkspotter*. What it does is allow Hawthorn supporters to see where other Hawthorn supporters are in the crowd so they can all sit

together. How good is that? This kind of thing would be a very handy tool for Expats going to the footy in Queensland or New South Wales, pitted against hostile crowds and looking to gather some strength in numbers. It seems to be the brainchild of a tech-savvy Hawks fan and therefore not available for all clubs unfortunately, but I can't help to think something like this might catch on.

1.6.3 Footy scores/news/statistics Apps

These Apps are a staple of every modern-day fan as it allows you to check the scores no matter where you are or what you're doing. I can still recall back in the mid '00s when live sporting updates to your phone came via SMS, containing just a scoreline and time clock (if you were lucky). I couldn't even begin to guess how many texts I burnt through on my Nokia 3310, but it didn't matter because the need to know was far greater – especially if the game was a cliffhanger.

Now I can use any number of free Apps to follow the game in so much detail that I may as well be there. It's not only the AFL either. You can check on any league, anywhere in Australia. *Fox Sporting Pulse* still covers these levels better than anyone, but many Apps are now expanding their scope to at least include the state leagues, e.g. *Footy Live* from Sportsmate Mobile.

1.6.4 Grass root Apps

Taking the grass roots theme even further is a class of Apps that can be customised for suburban clubs and allow their users to view news, results, images, videos, events, merchandise, contacts, team selection etc. I've never personally seen them used and don't know much other than the fact they come from the one developer called Third Man Apps Pty. Ltd. Nonetheless, they could be worth

looking into if you want to stay informed with your old or new team.

1.6.5 Magazine and newspaper Apps

Apart from the *Inside Football* App, there aren't many footy-specific options out there. I guess the news-style App is an already crowded market and maybe the major newspapers are thinking why bother. I thought the *Herald Sun* and their *Superfooty* section might have put something together, but I couldn't find anything apart from the odd game or two with their name attached.

1.6.6 Viewing Apps

I went into quite a bit of detail about the viewing options right at the start in the section on television. With *AFL Live* or Foxtel *Go*, you have the ability to watch any game, anywhere and at any time on a mobile device. Brilliant!

1.6.7 Tipping Apps

All the major tipping websites have Apps available. I certainly appreciate the convenience of tipping on my phone because out of everything in my weekly footy routine, remembering to put tips in on a Friday is a weird weakness. I've lost count of how many last minute efforts there have been, mixed in with the occasional failure to tip at all.

For those struggling to pick a winner, or contenders looking for a competitive edge, the *H2H AFL Predictor* is an intriguing App. It claims to be a "statistically-based scientific predictor" that "merges statistics, technology and your knowledge" to come up with a winning formula you can use to improve your tipping performance.

1.6.8 Betting Apps

Betting Apps, like betting itself, are big business and very much a mature genre in this field. All the big agencies like Sportsbet, TAB, Centrebet and Bet 365 allow you to punt on everything imaginable without leaving your armchair. Simply log in to your account and away you go. If you're taking part in their tipping competitions, you can take care of that too while you're there (well, I know Sportsbet allows you to do this).

1.6.9 Coaching Apps

If you're a budding Kevin Sheedy, the App world has also got you covered. Titles like *iCoach AFL*, *Sportzstats AFL*, *AFL Pro* and *Scott Pendlebury's Master Class* provide drills, skills, tactics, stats keeping and other essential tools for coaches teaching the game.



Many Expats are dragged into coaching, especially in the junior ranks, simply because they have a stronger footy background than most in a developing market. I'll talk more about this soon, but for now I just want to point out there's a wealth of handy resources available in this area should you

need it.

1.6.10 Fantasy footy Apps

I've got an entire section devoted to fantasy football coming up because I absolutely love it and so does just about every fan I know.

With such a huge and passionate following, the Apps for these games are taken pretty seriously and attract a lot of scrutiny. I remember there was backlash from users when they were suddenly charged for the App one year after it being free for so long. Maybe I have an over-active imagination, but I think the uproar played a big part in it being free once again the following year.

Anyway, if you play fantasy footy the chances are you'll be keen to get the App. In my opinion they're fantastic for getting score updates while games are in progress, however I personally prefer the more spacious website layout for the very serious task of managing my side.

1.6.11 Apps for new Expats

For the final word on Apps, I've tried to extract those of specific use to Expats. There wasn't a great deal unfortunately, however I did find one that could make a difference: *Queensland Megafan*.

This is sold as the official phone App for fans of live sports and entertainment in Queensland and supplies users with all there is to know about the stadiums before you go there. They can browse upcoming matches and events, check stadium maps and seating plans, view transport options and more.

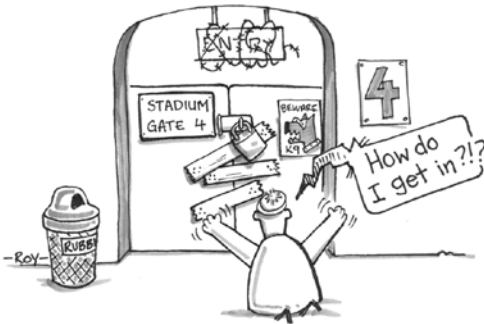
This type of App holds more value than you realise when moving interstate and attending games for the first time. An unfamiliar stadium in a new city with different public transport is a recipe for disaster as far as a day at the

footy goes.

A recent personal experience at Gold Coast's Metricon Stadium was a timely reminder of how beneficial something like this can be. While I had been to the stadium once before and managed pretty well, I was still unsure about a lot of things. To make matters worse, I was heading to a pre-season game, which meant certain services and facilities were scaled down or shut off completely. To cut a long story short, I ended up missing the entire first quarter because parking restrictions weren't clearly explained on the Suns website. I can't help but think this App would've helped enormously.

The Gabba is a different story for me because I've been going there for 15 years now and it's just as familiar as the MCG would be to most Melburnians. Despite my own level of comfort, I can see plenty of potential traps and strongly recommend new Expats get this on their phones to avoid them.

Unfortunately there doesn't seem to be an equivalent at the moment in New South Wales, but I expect that to change sooner or later.



1.7 Fantasy footy

For Expats that haven't entered the world of fantasy footy yet I have just one thing to say: do it!

As you can guess, I'm a fanatic and with hundreds of thousands of participants across the handful of versions available, I'm not the lone ranger. They've become so big that dedicated websites like *fanfooty.com.au* and *dreamteamtalk.com* have sprouted and the *Herald Sun* has assembled a team of experts.

For those not yet hooked, you're probably wondering what the fuss is all about. Of course there's the battle-of-wits and bragging rights side to it, but for me the best thing about getting involved is the way it crams more footy into a weekend. Suddenly every game is attention grabbing. It could be Round 23 and 15th v 16th at a rain-soaked, wind-swept Aurora Stadium, but even that will have you glued if your fantasy team has something riding on it. Not only that, fantasy footy can also provide consolation when your real team has a loss. A shocker on Friday night that would ordinarily ruin the weekend can now be softened through a victory in the virtual world. Trust me; it really does work that way.

If you're totally unfamiliar with how it works, all the versions out there are based on a point scoring system attached to player stats. Each one is different, however, as examples players might collect 4 points for an effective kick, 8 points for a goal, 3 points for a hitout and so on. Matches are decided by the team that gains the most points for each round and, in the major competitions at least, all teams play each other once before a finals series is held at the end – usually coinciding with the end of the AFL home and away rounds. A salary cap to make team selection more challenging and realistic is also common, although the finer details vary as you'd expect.

1.7.1 SuperCoach

SuperCoach, along with *AFL Dream Team*, is one of the big two AFL fantasy competitions. Incidentally, both games are designed and run by a company called Vapormedia through their simulated sports arm, Virtual Sports.

One of their biggest claims to fame is the fact they use the AFL's official stats system created by Champion Data, which makes scoring far more complex and meaningful than simply adding up points.

The competition is offered through the News Limited group of newspaper websites and participants can complete the online registration form on any of these, e.g. www.beraldsun.com.au/supercoach.

The prize money on offer is staggering with the highest scoring *SuperCoach* team over the season pocketing \$55,000.

1.7.2 Dream Team

Dream Team is an interesting one because after 12 years of running off the AFL website they broke away on their own in 2014 to launch "*The Real*" *AFL Dream Team* (afldreamteam.virtualsports.com.au). Unhappy with how the virtual game was evolving in recent years, this rebellion of sorts was driven by a desire to get back to fantasy basics like limited trades, realistic salary caps and, "a few more bells and whistles".

One of those bells or whistles is the *League-of-Champions Eliminator*[®] competition. From Round 6 the best-scoring 32,768 coaches from Round 5 take part in a separate knockout challenge for the chance to win \$2,500.

The overall winner of the main competition pockets a cool \$40,000, with a consolation of \$2,000 to the runner up and \$1,000 for minor placings.

1.7.3 AFL Fantasy

Into the hole on the AFL website created by *Dream Team* steps *NAB AFL Fantasy*.

The total value for the major prize in season 2014 was \$30,712.95, consisting of:

- \$25,000 from NAB.
- 2015 AFL Silver membership valued at \$695.
- 12-month AFL Live subscriptions valued at \$89.95.
- A Grand Final package for two people worth \$4,928.

1.7.4 Others

The final two competitions have been bundled into the “other” category because they’re smaller versions without the huge funding and a more customised gameplay.

The first one is *Sportal Fantasy* (fantasyafl.sportal.com.au), which is run through the Sportal website and, as it turns out, also comes from the team at Vapormedia. Without getting into too much detail, this competition differs from the larger ones because it’s exclusively a weekly competition rather than season-long. It also allows you to set up direct rivalries so you can prove once and for all you’re more of a coach than your best mate will ever be.

As suggested, the prize money here isn’t much to get excited about – the best weekly score each week wins a \$100 e-Gift Card from Fangear.com – but the chance to settle an argument or two between friends can be very tempting.

The second one is *Ultimate Footy* on *The Age* website and it takes customisation to another level by handing over almost complete control to the participants. You can tinker with the set up of your own league to get it just the way you like, even to the point of controlling the point value of every stat. It also does something I haven’t seen in any

other competition and that is award medals to the best player across the league; a fantasy Brownlow of sorts.

The prize structure is very different here as well and takes on an “everyone wins a prize” flavour. Rather than focussing on highest points, participants can win items like TVs for best team name and recruiting first-time managers to the game.

2 Stay involved with your AFL club

Now that you can see how to plug back into the main AFL pipeline through using the media, I want to lower the eyes and focus on how to stay in touch with your club as an Expat.

I think the first thing to do is get rid of the elephant in the room and admit the move will test you in this regard. That's just the way it is because it won't be possible to watch the boys play every week, pop in to see them on the track or keep an eye on the young fellas in the VFL, among other things. Despite that, you can still do enough up here to feel like you're a true supporter. It mightn't have the same week-to-week, every-step-of-the-way intensity, but if you tweak your thinking a fraction you can find just as much meaning and purpose.

How? The way I see it, Expats actually have a very important role to play for their club. Rather than a forgotten has-been in a far-flung footy outpost, you are the opposite: you are a proud ambassador spreading the word, waving the flag of support in hostile territory and giving encouragement where it's needed most. Are you still feeling like a fake? I didn't think so!

With the pep talk out of the way, here's what you can do to continue showing the love.

2.1 Don't miss your club on the road

The first rule is a no-brainer. With two Queensland and New South Wales sides these days, you're guaranteed at least one road trip each year and it goes without saying you'll be there. Like a moth to the flame, Expats can't resist when their club comes to town!

I actually find these occasions to be more like a celebration than just another game. You can see the excitement on every Expat's face as they make their way to

the ground having looked forward to that night ever since the draw was released. Win, lose or draw, most will leave content because they got to show their true colours again; the Saint, Tiger or Bulldog inside of them.

As silly as it sounds, we can consider ourselves a pretty lucky bunch in this regard. I'll go into this idea more at the end of the book, but only Expats get to experience this pure sense of joy I'm talking about. The old saying about not knowing what you've got until it's gone is true, but for us relief comes one or two nights a year and we get to have it all again. And boy, do we make the most of it!

Anyway, back to the business at hand. Unfortunately, only having one or two big games to plan for each year doesn't necessarily mean you'll get it right. From missing out on a ticket altogether to tripping up on transport, the chances of souring the experience go through the roof in unfamiliar territory. The truth is you have work pretty hard to ensure you don't mess it up.

2.1.1 Ticketing

The first thing to take care of is booking your seat because nothing happens unless you get a ticket in your hot little hands. Just like back home, the place to go will be either Ticketmaster (www.ticketmaster.com.au – Lions, Suns and Giants games) or Ticketek (www.ticketek.com.au – Swans).

One of the best things you can do is hop onto these websites and register for email alerts so you can grab tickets as soon as they're released. This becomes mandatory if you support one of the bigger clubs because reserved seat games are common with smaller ground capacities and that means everyone must have a pre-purchased ticket. You should also be wary of the bandwagon affect I talked about in the first half of the book because tickets can become much harder to get when a local side gets on a roll. A clash that filled half the stadium one year can be an instant sell-out the next.

Club websites are very good at giving plenty of notice, however tickets generally go on sale to the public three weeks before the event. A summary of prices can be found at www.afl.com.au/tickets/ticket-prices.

2.1.2 Stadiums

Near the end of the previous chapter I raved about a phone App called *Queensland Megafan* and its value. Although there didn't seem to be an equivalent in New South Wales, it doesn't mean Expats there have to head blindly into the fire either. A similar type of analysis can be found on the Austadiums website (www.austadiums.com), with every stadium covered from every angle, including:

- History.
- Capacity.
- Official address.
- Seating maps.
- Stadium features: electronic screen, lights, roof etc.
- Public transport information.
- Parking.
- User ratings.
- Links to the official stadium website, where you can usually get even more guff on all of the above as well as ticketing, upcoming events and even nearby accommodation.

I can't stress it enough. Doing some homework will ensure your first attempts at visiting these stadiums run smoothly. It'd be a crying shame if it all turned into a nightmare because you were running late, had terrible seats or got a nasty parking fine. The AFL website also offers plenty of information on the stadiums and is a good alternative resource.

2.2 Become a member

One sure fire way not to miss out on any your club's interstate activities and support them in an official way is through membership, of which you really have two choices.

2.2.1 Interstate club membership

Going back a few years, this suggestion would have been laughed off. Why bother forking out for a membership when you can only see one game a year? These days, clubs appreciate the value of supporter memberships much more and offer all kinds of flexible packages to make it worth their while, no matter where they are.

I'm not going to list every club here because it'll take up too much space and can be easily viewed on their websites. Instead I'll give you a couple of examples of the various interstate packages offered by Essendon, mainly because it shows how the bigger clubs deal with the issue of the larger crowds and potential blockouts.

Essendon National Membership benefits:

- Cost: Adult \$145, Junior/Squadron \$75.
- Reserved seat for one Essendon game played in your home state – If Essendon are fixtured to play twice in your home state you can choose which game you would like to attend or you can guarantee a seat at both games at an additional cost.
- Access to 2 home games in Melbourne. Etihad Stadium: you must upgrade to a reserved seat. MCG: for large drawing games you may be required to upgrade to a reserved seat. General admission access cannot be guaranteed and is always subject to capacity.
- Access to member presale for weeks 1-3 Finals

Lovin' Footy in QLD and NSW

games when Essendon participate.

- 2 editions of the e-Bomber Magazine in April & December.
- Full voting rights (18 years+).
- Member pack including cap (men's), lap blanket (ladies'), lanyard, lapel pin, fixture magnet and bumper sticker.
- Free entry to Essendon VFL home games at Windy Hill.
- 10% discount on all full priced Essendon merchandise at any Bomber Shop location: Windy Hill, Tullamarine and match day outlets (excludes memorabilia and some exclusive items).

Essendon Digital Membership benefits:

- Cost: Adult \$50, Junior/Squadron \$25, Family \$125.
- Receive three member-exclusive emails delivered straight from the coaching staff to your inbox each week, including team selection, post-game video interview and post-game write-up.
- First to know club news and partner offers.
- Full voting rights (18 years+).
- 2 editions of the e-Bomber Magazine in April & December.
- Access to member presale for weeks 1-3 finals when Essendon participate.
- Member pack including fixture magnet and bumper sticker.
- 10% discount on all full priced Essendon merchandise at any Bomber Shop location: Windy Hill, Tullamarine and match day outlets (excludes memorabilia and some exclusive items).

2.2.2 Interstate supporter groups

If you just can't see enough bang for your buck with the membership then becoming a member of an interstate supporter group could be the next best thing. They give fans outside Victoria the chance to get together to watch games, attend events or just talk about what's happening at their club. Most importantly, they give Expats an instant social network they can plug into as soon as they land in their new home.



Clubs usually have all the information on interstate supporter groups on their website. Carlton, for instance, have their own dedicated support group liaison officer who helps co-ordinate groups all around the country, including New South Wales and Queensland. They seem to get up to all sorts of fun, with social events like wine tours, race days and mystery bus trips listed alongside serious footy activities like live games and trips back to Melbourne.

If all of that sounds like a blast, hop onto your club's

website and see what groups are near you. If there aren't any, maybe you can start one up!

2.2.3 AFL membership

While the club membership and interstate supporter groups hold genuine value for Expats, I thought I'd finish up something that doesn't: an AFL Membership.

On the surface you'd be forgiven for thinking such a membership might cater well for the expansion market. Unfortunately this is not the case and you shouldn't waste your money trying to sign up or continue if you're already a member. Basically, an AFL Membership entitles members access to MCG and Etihad Stadium but none of the non-Victorian venues due to the individual clubs, not the AFL, coordinating these games.

2.3 Travel back home

So far we've looked at doing whatever we can to support our club without travelling too far. On the other side of the coin, there's nothing to say you can't fly back to Melbourne, Adelaide or Perth whenever the mood strikes. Ok, cost might come into it because not all of us have a private jet waiting at the airport, but I know from experience it can be done quite cost-effectively if you're not insistent upon 5-star luxury.

First of all, we are Expats and this shouldn't be forgotten. Most of us will still have family and friends calling us back home for birthdays, weddings and other special occasions, so why not use these opportunities to slip in a game of footy? It's even better if you can shack up with them and save on accommodation. The same goes for work trips as well.

Personally, I've been lucky enough to cash in on both to see plenty of games over the years. With a Collingwood

father, a Melbourne stepmother and a long weekend to top it off, the Queen's Birthday clash has been the main draw card in this regard.

If you're an Expat without the family, friend or work opportunities, you needn't despair either. There are quality travel companies that offer mouth-watering footy packages at very reasonable prices. It might not be something you can do every week, but for a special treat every now and again it's hard to go past.

2.3.1 Any Game, Anywhere

Any Game, Anywhere (www.anygameanywhere.com.au) is affiliated with Virgin Holidays and their travel products are built around the following core features:

- Packages for two adults.
- Flights selected by passengers through traditional online booking methods, with Friday-Sunday trips typical.
- A range of accommodation options, generally close to the city and with a variety of room choices.
- Additional activities around the game can be organised where possible. These include attending other games, theatre tickets, tours, cruises, restaurant bookings and even scenic flights.
- Car hire also available.

All the power is in your hands and you can pick your flight, hotel and game tickets as you please. It can be as budget or luxurious as you want. After playing around on the website it appears the \$500 per person mark is what you can expect to pay as a minimum for two people spending two nights in 3-star accommodation around Melbourne, which includes a discount for booking in advance.

2.3.2 Travel and Sports

Along similar lines is *Travel and Sports* (www.travelandsports.com.au), although they seem to push the tailored angle even further with more choice in airlines, a wider variety of transport options and a more scope to complement your holiday with other activities. As they put it:

When visiting other parts of the country, you may want to take in some of the local attractions. Take in a show or concert, a tour down the Great Ocean Road or climb the Sydney Harbour Bridge...whatever takes your fancy, our dedicated consultants are always happy to cater for your every need.

2.3.3 Sportsnet Holidays

While the other two can look after the budget-conscious, *Sportsnet Holidays* (www.sportsnetholidays.com) have more of an eye on the premium end of the market. Although they're across a wider range of sports and sporting events, for the footy fan they say:

[We] promise to deliver you an AFL experience to remember. Brilliant accommodation, official club functions and exclusive access to some of your favourite AFL stars...Sportsnet is the team to back when it comes to securing those invaluable and limited packages. With us, it's not just about football, it's about putting you there as history unfolds.

With access to corporate boxes at the MCG and Etihad Stadium, including packages for marquee games like Anzac Day, this could be the ideal choice for an Expat or group of Expats wanting a taste of sporting luxury. It's hard to tell exactly how luxurious things can get though because they don't advertise prices and operate through booking

enquiries only.

2.3.4 Clubmates Travel

The next travel option is different to the others because most of us will never get the privilege of experiencing their packages. The reason being *Clubmates Travel* (www.clubmatestravel.com) is a very special company that provides travel opportunities for passengers with intellectual disabilities.

As the website explains:

The original company Ozmates Pty Ltd was founded in 1995. As a small but focused business its original aim was to provide supported travel to passengers with intellectual disabilities who wanted to travel Australia...Nowadays, Clubmates is a firmly established global company, proud to be able to assist anyone with a disability in the creation and enjoyment of their perfect holiday.

For Expats with a disability and an obsession for AFL, this perfect holiday could come in the form of the *AFL Comes Alive* tour. Each year *Clubmates Travel* organises one trip to Melbourne from each of the major cities, taking in two games, an MCG Tour, a VFL fixture and a relaxing walk around the city that conveniently swing by some AFL merchandise outlets. Sounds good to me!

2.3.5 Scowt

The final “travel” option has been slipped in here even though it doesn’t have anything to do with a plane. Instead, it looks to bring a slice of AFL to you by providing the opportunity chat with the players. The fees range from \$135 to speak to a youngster starting out and reach \$250 for an established star like Brett Deledio, Jamie Elliot or David Mundy.

As it's only early days for the company they suffer slightly from a small selection of players, however the thought of speaking to a Peter Daicos or Gavin Brown as a young Magpie fan would've blown my mind, so I have no doubt *Scout* (www.scout.com.au) is one to keep an eye on.

2.4 Build your cave

It's funny what becoming an Expat can do to people. Everyone is different, but there are definitely several common traits that kick into gear once your new life begins. Another one of these is greater interest in collecting merchandise and memorabilia.

Maybe it's a symptom of trying to hold on to the past; to gather up anything serving as a reminder to what we held so dear and perhaps left behind in the move. Whatever the cause, you're lucky there is now an accepted part of the everyday household called the man cave; a special place where a man is free to surround himself with all the good things in life. This magic little room is the perfect outlet for these urges and it can be an extremely therapeutic project to tackle. Not only that, but being an Expat gives you a couple of aces to stick up your sleeve should such plans be met with resistance from your better half.

Firstly, they'd have to be made of stone to say no to something that will unquestionably cheer you up and help you get through this tough time.

Secondly, they'll probably get something out of it. Admit it or not, football plays a big part in the lives of women as well. It normally doesn't consume them like it does the blokes, nonetheless, it's always been in the background of their lives as well and they'll be missing it too.



Sounds great, huh? Can't wait to get started? Before you rush off and grab your tools, there's a small catch I need to talk to you about. I'm sure you're getting sick of hearing this over and over, but, once again, it's won't be as easy getting your hands on these types of products anymore.

Starting with merchandise, there is of course online shopping and you can get a huge selection that way if you're happy to wear the shipping costs. What happens if you're not that kind of shopper though? What if you like walking into a store and having a good look around? Also, it's no big deal to buy a coffee mug online because you know what you're going to get, but what happens when you need to size up something properly?

The first port of call back home would usually be The AFL Store. It has 11 outlets strewn across the southern states, but unfortunately none in Queensland or New South Wales. They do cater for the online shopper quite well with 15% off first orders and access to exclusive offers, but, once again, it doesn't solve the problem of physically

getting to a store.

Trying the major sporting chains like Rebel Sport or Amart All-Sports won't get you far either. In Queensland at least, they tend to have a patchy selection of apparel and maybe a bin of Sherrins if you're lucky. The chances of getting decent stuff for clubs with smaller supporter bases are even slimmer. So, where can you go? I felt I had to give you something in the way of local merchandise options, so I scoured the Internet and managed to find only three.

In Queensland, What's Your Team in Redcliffe, 30-40 minutes north of the Brisbane CBD, is worth a look. On their website they boast, "one of Australia's largest selections of Rugby League, AFL, Union and Soccer merchandise." They also pride themselves on being a small family business with a dedication to the fans, which means if they don't have it they'll do whatever they can to help you find it. Not a bad thing to keep in mind considering the challenges you face.

On the south side of Brisbane, Goodscore at Ashmore on the Gold Coast looks to be the place to go. They cater for just about every sport imaginable, however appear to be much stronger in the AFL department than the rest.

In the ACT, The Jersey Megastore looks like a very similar sort of business to What's Your Team as their website speaks of a reputation for going out of their way to supply quality merchandise, especially where it has proven very hard to obtain otherwise. Once again, a very handy ally to have!

That's basically it as far as merchandise outlets go. The Lions, Suns, Swans and Giants all have stores at their respective home grounds that open during the week, however I'm not so sure they give a you-know-what about other sides. Out of desperation I did a bit of calling around to see what their official stance was and the response didn't fill me with a great deal of optimism. They said some stock is organised when opposition clubs come to town, but it

really depends on how easy the merchandise is to order. For example, the Lions have their jumpers made by ISD and find it much easier to stock other clubs made by the same company. If your club isn't under the ISD banner, e.g. Collingwood with Star Athletic, you mightn't find much joy here either.

Beyond those options, things dry up very quickly. Visiting clubs often open up temporary booths outside the ground on game day for their supporters and it could be worth having a peep there. Club websites will let you know either way in the lead up to games, so I'd recommend checking before the game rather than going for a long, fruitless walk around the stadium.

For those with kids, the merchandise scarcity will also affect them. For example, it was only a recent trip to Adelaide that reminded me collector cards still exist. I walked into a newsagent in the city mall and the first two displays I passed were chock-full of AFL goodies, including the cards. You definitely don't see that in Brisbane! If your young bloke is into this stuff, online is definitely the way to go through websites like *footycards.com.au* or the AFL Trading Card Collecting Group (*www.afltcc.com.au*).

Now, anybody who has even seen a real a man cave will know mass-produced merchandise like scarfs, posters and bar mats can only take you so far. That kind of gear is perfect for fleshing things out, but to really make the room shine you've just got to have some limited edition pieces in there as well. You know, history-making team photos, signed footballs, framed guernseys – all that wonderful business.

The availability of official AFL memorabilia items in Queensland and New South Wales pretty much reflects the more basic merchandise. There are shops around, however they tend to do more rugby league than anything else, with only a spattering of other sports. You're better off going online and getting something shipped up rather than waste

your time looking around.

While that's not what you wanted to hear, all is not lost. A man cave is also a great place to commemorate personal triumphs and there are several excellent sports framing companies around that can do all that for you, just the way you want it. Cherished team photos from back home, a premiership medallion or a milestone game – the moments *you* celebrated can be captured forever.

My own personal experience is with a business in the Brisbane suburb of Stones Corner called Champions, The Sports Memorabilia Display Co. (www.championsport.com.au). They produce some beautiful pieces that make visiting their store a feast for the senses in itself. While I can't comment on Sydney, I'm sure a quick search under "Sydney sports memorabilia" or "Sydney sports memorabilia and framing" would tell you what's on your doorstep there. That's how I found my guys after all!

3 Stay involved locally

So far we've covered the easy stuff in a funny way. Keeping in touch with footy at the AFL level, in most cases, only takes a bit of nous with a keyboard and can be done at your own pace. What do you do if the armchair or stadium seat isn't enough? What if the fire in the belly still burns for competition? In other words, how do Expats stay involved in the game on a playing, coaching or administration level?

The first thing I have to say is: don't wait. Get back on the horse straight away, especially if you want to keep playing. In my experience, the longer I stayed out of the game, the harder it was to find my way back.

Fitness is an obvious hurdle here. Just a year or two without much exercise while you get your new life on track and the thought of a pre-season will make excuses very easy. Without confidence in your body and touch in your hands, doubts can start to creep in and nothing puts the brakes on a comeback quicker than the threat of making a fool of yourself!

There are other factors that come into it that perhaps aren't as recognisable. One I can certainly relate to is the "new kid" syndrome. Up until the move, many Expats would've played their whole lives at one club, with the same group of mates and felt very much at home doing so. In contrast, pulling on a different jumper with a group of blokes you don't even know can feel a bit strange. Just like the new kid at school, you also feel the pressure to prove yourself all over again and slowly build relationships from scratch. Some thrive on this kind of challenge, but for many it's very daunting and, once again, can make excuses very easy.

Rolling up your sleeves and getting straight into it while you're still in transition mode is much better because you don't give these fears a chance to become paralysing. Trust me, that's the way it works!

3.1 Keep playing

To keep playing, the first decision you have to make is what league to join and, in Brisbane or Sydney, the choice will largely come down to the standard. Unlike Melbourne where there can be a few leagues around the same level, these cities have less choice and there's typically a bigger gap to the next rung. If you're in a regional area, you're kind of stuck with whatever's going.

The next call is which club to join. It can be a tough choice because it's not something the average footballer has much experience with. Back home you're normally born into a local club and a good percentage play out their days on the one patch of grass. Some move around a bit on the back of better money or playing opportunities, but in those cases there's a reward attached and the new destination is rarely a total unknown like it is here. How do you select a team when there's no financial carrots, no friends already playing and you have no idea what the club is all about?

One approach is to suck it up and just give any team a go. There's definitely nothing wrong with that and I actually envy those with such a relaxed, open attitude. For those who are more reserved, some investigation is normally required before they feel comfortable enough to make a move.

To do this you can sign up with player recruitment sites such as Footy Recruits (www.footyreruits.com), hit up the *Big Footy* forums, or even just snoop around on the AFL Queensland and New South Wales websites, however nothing gives the same clarity as physically showing up and watching a few games. Just one half of one game will tell you a lot about the club involved, their players, coach, supporters, facilities and how you see yourself fitting in. Is the coach measured and tactical, or a raving lunatic yelling at his players to "hit 'em hard"? Are the players committed and taking their footy seriously, or are they joking with their

mates over the fence? Do the supporters get drunk and yell abuse, or are they supportive and knowledgeable? Is the home ground a cow-paddock with no lights and a tin shed for clubrooms, or is it a nice surface with good facilities? There are no right or wrong answers to these questions; the only thing that matters is what fits best.



With the most suitable team in the most suitable league chosen, what else can you expect when playing footy in the expansion states?

Obviously I couldn't possibly know the ins and outs of every league across Queensland and New South Wales, however there are a few defining characteristics when compared to footy elsewhere. These include:

- Player numbers – as you could probably guess, numbers can be a problem for a lot of clubs. Unlike Melbourne and other traditional footy towns where clubs normally have two senior sides plus leftovers, it's pretty rare in the expansion territories.

Players doubling up or no reserves side at all; even the dreaded forfeit isn't unheard of in these parts, especially the bush. While you have no choice but to carry on and accept the situation for what it is, it does take away from the contest slightly if you're lining up on a guy who's already played or only turned up to watch his brother-in-law. It can, and does, happen.

The peculiar thing about the playing stocks is they can be feast or famine in some leagues. Once again, the fluctuations are felt more in regional areas, particularly in towns with large universities or roaming work forces like the army. It certainly was the case in Toowoomba, where the flow of army personnel and university students could make or break a team's fortunes.

- Teams coming and going – the net result of an erratic player base and plenty of high-growth areas, especially in South East Queensland and Northern New South Wales, is another phenomenon you don't see much of in Victoria: teams coming and teams going.

I've seen examples of both firsthand over the years. In the plus column right now there are spots like Ormeau, smack-bang in the middle of the Brisbane-Gold Coast corridor, where new fields are popping up and clubs are being established. On the other side of the ledger you only need to look as far as my old stomping ground to see how shaky it can be. In the 20 years since I first arrived, teams from surrounding population centres like Gatton, Kingaroy and Chinchilla, as well as some in Toowoomba itself, have flickered in and out of existence.

- Small crowds – the size of this gap was really brought to my attention during the 6-month stint I had back

in Melbourne. Having only played senior footy in Queensland to that point, I remember being taken aback when I ran out for my debut at Dingley. It seemed like people were everywhere! A bustling social club, full ring of cars around the ground and even one of those inflatable waving men on the hill next to a pop-up bar full of rowdy locals. It was magnificent! I grew up watching this very team at this very ground, however as a kid I had no awareness because it had always been that way.

Fast-forward to 2006 and my return to senior footy in Toowoomba; the contrast couldn't have been greater. Whereas you had a buzzing crowd full of noise back in Melbourne, there were games up here where the players themselves would be forced to retrieve the ball after a goal. It's not quite as bad in the city as you'd expect with a greater population, but the general interest isn't high enough to pull many onlookers beyond family and friends to most games.

- Heat – yes the climate is warmer in the northern states, especially Queensland of course, and humidity can at times make things uncomfortable, but you'll be pleased to hear it doesn't really affect you from a footy point of view. Well, in my experience it didn't. There were days that felt boiling hot and days that felt ice cold, but you get that anywhere. Jumping head first into a pre-season in Cairns will give you a shock, no question about it, but if you give it a bit of time you'll be fine.

3.2 Keep the “oldies” playing

The more mature guys – still hungry for the contest, but with their best footy behind them – will be relieved to hear master leagues (or “Supers”) are alive and well in the expansion states as well.

Personally, I think these competitions are tremendous and it's great to see them thriving across the country. In years gone by, once a player hit 35 his days were numbered. Some freaks managed to squeeze out a few more years at a good standard, but the majority were thrown onto the scrapheap or forced to find a spot somewhere in the lower grades. With these master leagues now in place, there's a clear, appropriate next step for men of vintage to take.

When put that way, it's actually quite surprising it took as long as it did to get to this point. I used to hear of old fellas getting together for a kick around Toowoomba and Brisbane, but it always sounded like some kind of footy underworld not many knew existed. Thankfully it's now well and truly established and providing a heap of joy to many old warriors.

As far as the competitions go, I don't think there's much difference in how they run compared to Victoria. In Sydney (www.sydneyaflmasters.com) the minimum age appears to be a tad lower at 32, while in Brisbane (found on www.foxsportspulse.com) it's set at the more conventional 35. Both hold games between April and August over a number of age divisions and both offer the chance to attend the annual AFL Masters National Carnival and nominate for the state representative sides.

As expected at this level and age group, both organisations also heavily promote the “fun, fitness and friendship” side of the game, inviting anybody to join in regardless of experience or ability.

3.3 Keep the kids playing

3.3.1 Auskick

Earlier in the book I cited figures from the AFL Annual Report that painted a very encouraging picture for the uptake of the game in the youngest age group: the Auskick

kids. With that national program going from strength to strength, the question of keeping the youngest kids involved comes with an easy answer.

Simply head to the Auskick website (www.aflauskick.com.au) and enter your postcode in the Centre Locator at the top right of the screen for the closest club to you. From there it's only a matter of registering online, which comes with a bonus free footy pack, before your little one is all set to go.

If you're not familiar with how it runs, the Auskick program is for boys and girls between the ages of 5-12. The cost can vary from \$30-70, however the website encourages you to contact your local centre to check beforehand. The sessions are weekly, starting around 9am in most cases and lasting 90 minutes, with a typical schedule looking something like this:

8:50am: Arrive at the ground, have kick with mum, dad and friends.

9:00am: Assemble groups according to age/ability and move to allocated areas.

9:05am: Play warm-up games (fun activities and games).

9:15am: Skill teaching, guided by leader coach for groups and facilitated by parent helpers.

9:45am: Skill games incorporating the skills taught for the day and previously.

10:05am: Break into teams according to age/size/ability and play a match.

10:30am: Hand out encouragement awards, have drinks and depart.

An important message to pass on here is the fact the Auskick program relies heavily on the contribution of parents to co-ordinate, coach and set up. If you're considering getting your child involved at one of these centres, why stop at watching them from the sidelines? Why

not join the committee or simply donate your time on the day? It's the perfect way to spend quality time with your kid/s and you'll also be doing a good service to our great game (I'll get around to more on that shortly).

If you're thinking all that sounds good but are terrified at the thought of controlling so many kids, the website has a heap of material on there for guidance, including session plans, coaching tips and other useful advice. There's also a special kids page chock-full of good, clean fun in the form of activities, games, competitions, photos and tips from their AFL heroes.

3.3.2 Juniors

While it's fantastic the pint-sized kids are so well looked after, many will be wondering what becoming an Expat has in store for teenagers.

Finding a junior club and getting a game isn't an issue anymore. The same process for finding a senior club can be used and many have both anyway. You can also use the "Play Like a Pro" link at the bottom of the AFL website to see what's in your area and everything should fall into place for the majority of junior Expats.

The more pressing concern is what it means for a kid with real potential and realistic ambitions of getting drafted in a few years. Will the move ruin any chance of them being noticed by the AFL clubs? As a father the last thing you'd want to do is hurt your son's shot at the big time! To answer this, let's take a look at the elite junior talent pathways in Queensland and New South Wales. It will make you feel a whole lot better if you can see there are clear, well-worn channels in place for kids to be noticed, developed and recruited.

3.3.2.1 Representative opportunities

The good news right off the bat is there are plenty of higher level opportunities in both Queensland and New South Wales following a traditional structure.

In Queensland, the progression through the age groups looks like this:

- Under 12 Schoolboys (state carnival/team. Run by Education Queensland/AFLQ).
- AFLQ State Under 14 Development Championships (seven regional teams and PNG).
- Under 16 Schoolboys (state carnival/team. Run by Education Queensland/AFLQ).
- AFLQ State Under 16 Development Championships (seven regional teams + PNG).
- AFL National Under 16 Championships (AFLQ Young Scorpions).
- AFLQ Scorpion State Summer Development & Preparation Program (100 players max.).
- AFL National U18 Championships (AFLQ Scorpions).

The seven zones provide good coverage across the state, coming from North Queensland, Gold Coast North, Gold Coast South, Brisbane North, Sunshine Coast, Brisbane South East and Brisbane West, as well as the team from Papua New Guinea.

In New South Wales and the ACT, the format is similar with the biggest difference being the absence of a schoolboy competition at this point in time:

- AFL NSW/ACT Under 13 State Zone Trials.
- AFL NSW/ACT Under 14 State Zone Trials.
- AFL NSW/ACT Under 16 State Zone Trials.

- AFL National Under 16 Championships (AFL NSW/ACT Rams).
- AFL NSW/ACT Under 18 State Zone Trials.
- AFL National Under 18 Championships (AFL NSW/ACT Rams).

Once again, the seven zones cover all corners of the state and consist of the Cats (ACT and South Coast), Northern Heat (Northern New South Wales), Pigeons (Sydney South and the Illawarra), Pioneers (Western Sydney), Starz (Sydney City), Rebels and Stingrays (Southern New South Wales).

3.3.2.2 Academies

The first serious steps toward nurturing talent from north of the Murray were taken in 2005 when the AFL introduced the New South Wales scholarship program. For five years, clubs were able to sign and develop youngsters in exchange for first rights to drafting them when they reached the minimum age.

With the introduction of the expansion clubs looming in 2010, things stepped up a cog or two when the scholarship was scrapped and plans were drawn up for each of the four northern clubs to run their own academies. The clear goals of these “footy factories” were to attract, find and develop first-choice athletes as young as 12 to feed these clubs and bolster the overall talent pool for the benefit of the game.

The programs they use are modeled on the successful AIS-AFL Academy curriculum that focuses on thoroughly preparing young athletes for life as professional footballers via six core elements: physical preparation, skill development, nutrition and recovery, personal development, athlete and career education, AFL policy and ASADA policy.

As you can see, these academies are more than just kick-

to-kick with other talented kids!

Each academy is assigned an exclusive zone from which they can draw the talent:

- AFL Lions Academy – Wide Bay, Darling Downs, Sunshine Coast, Brisbane North, and the northern parts of Brisbane West and Brisbane South East regions.
- AFL Gold Coast Academy – Cape York, Cairns, Townsville, Mackay, Capricornia, Gold Coast, Northern Rivers New South Wales and the southern parts of Brisbane West and Brisbane South East regions.
- AFL Sydney Swans Academy – North Eastern quadrant of New South Wales, inner north and south of Sydney metropolitan area.
- AFL Greater Western Sydney Academy – Southern and Western New South Wales, inner west of Sydney metropolitan area.



3.3.2.3 Australian Institute of Sport (AIS)

In addition to the club-based academies, the AIS takes around 60 of the best young players into their system each year over two age groups – level one (Under 16) and level two (Under 18) – with the 2014 squad containing seven players from New South Wales and the Australian Capital Territory and four from Queensland.

For a bit of background, the AIS-AFL Academy commenced in 1997 and in that time, as the website proudly claims, 33 graduates have played in a premiership, 25 have been named an All-Australian at least once, 18 have won their club's best and fairest, 11 have been the number one selection at the NAB AFL Draft, four have won the NAB AFL Rising Star and three have won the Norm Smith Medal. In 2013, there were 204 graduates on AFL lists for a combined tally of 13,827 AFL games. Not a bad track record I'd say!

With a strong combination of representative and academy opportunities forming the framework for elite junior talent development in Queensland and New South Wales, I think the answer to the original question is: no, moving interstate won't be a killer blow to your kid's footy dreams. In fact, with a shallower pond you could argue there's greater chance your son will stand out more!

3.4 Keep the women playing

Those with a good memory might recall one of the statistics I cited to prove the growth of the game was Queensland's 300 per cent increase in female participation since 2011. That is an astounding figure and the rise has continued to the point where a national women's competition is in the works for a planned 2017 kick-off. All this suggests the battle to stay involved locally now doesn't stop at the men, so what's in store for women wanting to

continue or start playing in their new home state?

As a summary, the female participation pathways start with the Auskick program and go right through to the National Women's Championships for girls 17 years and over. Along the way, they can find girls-only or mixed competitions up to 14 years of age and gain representative selection at the Under 16 Schoolgirl Championships and the Under 18 AFL Youth Girls National Championships. Perhaps the pinnacle in the career of a female footballer at this point in time is the AFL Women's High Performance Academy (HPA), where 40 of the best players from around the country are exposed to a program similar to that of the AIS-AFL Academy.

While female footy has clearly taken off in recent times, I personally know many girls who were pulling on the boots long before it held such popularity. My old side in Toowoomba first fielded a women's team about a decade ago, maybe longer, and has been very successful over the journey. They even managed to achieve premiership glory in a pretty strong Brisbane-based competition.

Seeing firsthand the passion and commitment they had for the game, travelling long distances every second week to give it their best, was a real pleasure. The fact they could've taught some of the men a thing or two about the game showed me there was a bright future for female participation on the horizon and it certainly comes as no surprise from where I sit to see it doing so well.

If the girls in your family are keen, head to the AFL Community website (www.aflcommunityclub.com.au). It has a full section for women containing all the information they need as well as direct contact details of the people they can ask for further assistance.

3.5 AFL 9s

With the competitive demographic sorted out, what can

the more socially driven AFL enthusiasts do for fun and fitness? If you're thinking not much because with footy you either "go hard or go home", you'd be wrong. There's a new version of non-contact footy sweeping the nation and it's called AFL 9s (afl9s.com.au), although you might know it better as the Cadbury 9s from the TV ads with Dale Thomas and Adam Goodes.

I say "new" loosely because the concept has been around for a while. I actually played it during my high school years in Toowoomba, with the 9-a-side format perfect for limited numbers and the smaller, rectangular field of play very handy considering rugby pitches were in much greater supply.

The current incarnation of the game looks to be pretty close to the format I played back then, with just a few tweaks to make it more appealing to the masses. Importantly, it carries over most of the traditional rules of AFL with only a few major differences:

- Mixed teams – consistent with other social sports like netball, AFL 9s encourages the opposite sex to have a crack. They even get 9 points if they snag a goal! If your significant other loves the footy as much as you do, why not join together. You know what they say: a couple that plays together, stays together!
- Field of play – as hinted at, an AFL 9s field is rectangular in size and divided into three zones: forward, midfield and defence. At the start and re-start of play the 9 players on a team must be divided so that 3 players are in each zone of the field. Once the game starts or re-starts, players are free to move anywhere.
- Scoring – the scoring system is the same as normal, except for the 9-point goals for the girls and the fact only the three forwards can score from shots taken

within the forward third.

- No contact – in the social world of AFL, all physical contact is banned. This means a touch replaces a tackle and you can't hold, push or bump an opponent.
- Turnovers – unlike normal footy, if the ball touches the ground as a result of a kick, handball or marking attempt, or when the ball goes out of bounds, it's an automatic turnover to the opposition. Better get to work on that disposal efficiency!

The cost for each game varies slightly across the competitions, but usually falls between \$8 and \$12 per person, per match. As with any social sport the standard can be highly variable, however you can discuss this with organisers to find a closer match once you get underway.

If this holds any interest, the first step is to register on the website. AFL 9s runs at different times in different places and all the details are also available on the site.

At the start of 2014, Queensland had competitions played at 14 separate venues: Yeronga, Wilston Grange, Wynnum, Bayside, Caboolture, Gold Coast, Lockyer Valley, Sunshine Coast, Nambour & Hinterland, Toowoomba, Warwick, South Burnett, Wide Bay and Cairns.

While New South Wales and the ACT had 28: North Shore, Moore Park West Fields, Moore Park Robertson Road Fields, Inner West, North Rhyde, Northern Beaches, Holroyd/Parramatta, Hills District, Mt. Pritchard, South West Sydney, Rooty Hill, Camden, Wollongong, Southern Illawarra, Bathurst, Scone, Orange, Bermagui, Pambula, Wagga, Coolamon, Albury, Griffith, Finley, Deniliquin, Broken Hill, Phillip (ACT), Dickson (ACT).

3.6 Umpire

The idea of running yourself ragged for two hours while

copping abuse isn't everyone's cup of tea, but if you can look past that umpiring is a great way to get involved at the heart of the contest and make a valuable contribution to the sport at the same time. Best of all, you'll be welcomed with opened arms by the AFL who are fully aware of the job's bad rep and the need to get more umpires on board.

Against that background, the AFL state websites do their best to talk up the appeal of becoming an umpire. Fun, fitness, personal development, career and travel opportunities, as well as some generous cash incentives are all highlighted as reasons to get involved. For those like me who had no idea what an umpire got paid, the going rate in Queensland starts at approximately \$25 for a 48-minute Under 12s game and can reach \$130 for a senior field umpire. At the elite end, AFL umpires can earn up \$90,000 a year, which isn't bad at all considering you get the best seat in the house too!

If you're interested in umpiring in Queensland, the AFLQ Community Umpiring Development Officer is the person to chase. Currently Pierce Field (Pierce.Field@aflq.com.au) seems to be the man responsible for all aspects of umpiring, including registration and accreditation.

In New South Wales and the ACT, this role is split into three areas: Luke Olsen in the West (luke.olsen@aflnswact.com.au), Jock Hillgrove in the ACT and the South (jock.hillgrove@aflnswact.com.au), and Carl Fletcher in Sydney and the North (carl.fletcher@aflnswact.com.au).

3.7 Donate your time, money, expertise

If your days of running around are behind you once and for all, the best thing to do is put your hand up for a coaching, administrative, volunteer or sponsorship role.

3.7.1 Coaching

For Expats with coaching ambitions the best places to get information are, once again, the AFL state websites. These have sections devoted to everything coaching related, including a page of vacancies.

First-time coaches may not know that to coach AFL anywhere in Australia you must have at least a Level 1 accreditation for the age group in question – Junior (Auskick to Under 12), Youth (Under 13 to Under 17) or Senior (18+). This means an official AFL coaching course will need to be their first port of call.

To do this, you have to register on the AFLQ or AFL NSW/ACT website and then attend the one-day course when it rolls into your part of the state. The cost of a Level 1 course is \$165 and involves a competency-based assessment where the budding coach must prove they are, “capable of conducting and communicating the basics of the game to players of different ages.”

Once accredited for 12 months, talented Level 1 coaches with a desire to take on a higher level, e.g. representative teams, can undertake a course to reach Level 2. This time a two-day course (\$285) is combined with a season-long workbook and a practical assessment to ensure graduates can, “plan, prepare, conduct, review and adapt a year-long program of coaching.” There are only a few Level 2 courses conducted annually.

Right at the top of the coaching tree is Level 3. The Level 3 course is for AFL, state league and elite junior development coaches wanting to learn more about technology, public relations and cutting edge programs.

I think the idea of coaching appeals to many and you only have to look at the fantasy football craze for evidence of that. With the amount of time we spend thinking about football it’s inevitable we come up with our own opinions, theories and even tactics we think work better than others.

It kind of makes you wonder why more people don't give it a shot, especially at the lower levels. Maybe it has something to do with a little voice inside the head that says you're not good enough or someone else would do a better job. Back in Melbourne, for instance, these doubts are understandable because it's a very competitive environment with many astute football brains around. What you need to remember, however, is it's a totally different story up here. While there are experienced and knowledgeable people, including many Expats of course, it's still a developing market at the end of the day. After the top layer of know-how it drops away much quicker and this represents an exciting opportunity to make your mark.

To put it another way, you might see yourself as just a regular football fan, with a normal football upbringing and unspectacular playing career, but, rest assured, you have a massive advantage: you're an Expat! You arrive here with more football pedigree than most and instant credibility within the local football communities. Because of this, new arrivals from Victoria, South Australia or Western Australia are routinely pumped up as some kind of experts just because they come from those states. This is especially the case on the paddock where just about everyone is presumed to be a star until they prove otherwise.

3.7.2 Administration/volunteering

I've lumped these two together because in small suburban clubs they go hand in hand. Some key positions might carry a token payment as a necessary sweetener to entice applicants, however unless you're at a bigger club in a bigger league, financial rewards won't be much to speak of. Even AFL clubs admit they wouldn't exist if it weren't for the tireless work of dedicated volunteers, so you can imagine how essential they become further down the chain.

Now, I'm not an expert on how all clubs are run, but

from what I've seen a fair percentage get by on a threadbare administration consisting of a President, Treasurer and not much else. There are no committees, departments or managers helping out with core matters like insurance, sponsorship and football operations. These people do it all and there's still a ton of other tasks to be taken care of, especially on game day with trainers, canteen workers, line markers, scoreboard operators...the list is endless.

Can you imagine the impact an extra pair of hands has on these clubs? Better yet, what if those hands were the skilled hands of a qualified trainer, financial officer or insurance broker? Even better yet, what if those hands came for free because the person loved the game and wanted to see his local club thrive, not just survive?

If you want to stay involved in the game in a non-playing capacity, you can make a world of difference by simply showing up and donating your time.

3.7.3 Sponsorship

Considering the shoestring budget clubs have at their disposal, the next best thing to lending a hand is contributing financially. For the extremely busy Expat that doesn't have time to scratch himself, let alone be hands on in a footy club, this could be the best way to connect with a local team.

Sponsorship for local footy clubs usually comes in one of two ways: personal donations or corporate backing.

For personal donations, the thing I'd say is you don't need to hand over your life savings to make your presence felt. There are plenty of smaller costs you can pick up that will be greatly appreciated and a few hundred dollars for new guernseys, footballs or trophies can really hit the spot.

For the corporate sponsorship, I realise new Expats won't be in a position to start throwing money around, but those who can have the opportunity to completely change

the fortune of a club. With other sports like rugby league enjoying a higher profile and hogging much of the corporate dollar, many clubs in the lower levels struggle to get any support. In many cases, the biggest cash injection they get year to year is from players' memberships, which can only stretch so far.

While I'm not here to preach, I think it needs to be pointed out that such decisions shouldn't be made purely from a business point of view. Unless you're a small pub that doubles its patronage by drawing the players in, you probably won't get much bang for your buck. On the other hand, if you're doing it because you love footy it can be a very rewarding experience with far greater impact than you could dream of.

3.8 Use the state league websites

As a final word on staying involved at the local level, I can't encourage you enough to make full use of the AFL community (www.aflcommunityclub.com.au) and state league websites. I've repeatedly referenced these throughout this section and that proves they are the best resource for anything to do with football in Queensland (www.aflq.com.au) and New South Wales/ACT (www.aflnswact.com.au).

4 Get proactive

A couple of points in the previous chapter hinted at an element of higher purpose and contribution for the growth of the game. In the remaining pages of this book, I want to take this thinking even further to help fully explain why I believe Expats are more than ordinary fans.

To start with, we have the amazing power to help build a better footy environment and control our footy destiny. The conditions may not be as hostile as they used to be, but there's still work to be done before AFL can truly call Queensland or New South Wales home. The administrators at the top are doing their bit, but our efforts as foot soldiers on the ground are vital for creating the stronger footy culture we all crave.

In addition to the roles I've already mentioned, there are several other ways we can bolster the game.

4.1 Take care of junior

Most parents can't wait to deck out their newborn in club colours and pass on the traditions of their family. This ritual has been going on since footy began and it's obviously not going to stop because you move interstate. Rather, it will probably become more important than ever and I see that as a good thing for the health of our game.

This process is the single biggest weapon AFL has in its expansion because every child to Victorian-born parents is another person living, breathing and promoting the game. Such a swell has the potential to carry AFL to the top of the sporting tree and that's why taking care of junior is a sworn Expat duty.

For the tots, get all the teddies, beanies, dummies and jump suits they can handle. By the time they're three or four they'll be ready for their first footy. At eight, they'll be hounding you for kick-to-kick and to go to matches. At that

point the course is set and they'll eagerly push their own way through the steps that follow.

4.2 Wave the flag

Back in Melbourne, what I call casual barracking is everywhere. You see people wearing club shirts, jumpers, jackets, hats and scarves down the street and cars drive by with membership stickers proudly displayed or seats blanketed with their club's covers. In Brisbane, this behaviour isn't as commonplace and you rarely see footy stuff other than at games.



Moving into this environment can see Expats go either of two ways. Some sense they're pretty much on their own and shelve it in an effort to blend in. Others, myself proudly included, go the opposite way and continue waving the flag. I remember the first thing I did when I got my first car as an 18-year-old was slap a big Collingwood sticker right in

the middle of the back window. I thought that was just fantastic! Even now I take my dogs for a walk in Collingwood running shorts and head to the beach in Collingwood boardies.

Although it's each to their own here, it'd be a shame if Expats go into their shell. As silly as it may sound, I get a real kick out of seeing anything AFL because it just doesn't happen that often. Whether it's a Hawthorn premiership sticker on a car or a kid bouncing a footy on his way home from school, these sights always bring a smile to my face. On my grocery run every Sunday, I see the same elderly Magpie supporter walking up and down the aisles wearing his 2012 membership hat. Even though we haven't spoken to each other (yet), I somehow like the guy already. It's another Expat thing you'll get used to!

Carrying on with your own casual barracking habits is so important because it does two things: it helps other Expats feel better, just like I've explained, and it also plays a quiet role in changing the culture of the place. Think about it for a second, if people in your neighbourhood started wearing basketball singlets all the time and the sport was in your face at every turn, you'd probably expect general interest to rise. It's the same with AFL.

Although all the casual barracking you did back home can be done in Queensland and New South Wales, there's one exception you mightn't immediately think of: the personalised number plate. If you have one already you're probably thinking it'd be the perfect way to show your true colours, and it is, however the bad news is you might not be able to keep it. While the government authorities recommend checking first, the chances are you'll have to swap over to local plates and that could mean the end because at the moment Personalised Plates Queensland (www.ppq.com.au) and myPlates in New South Wales (www.myplates.com.au) don't do plates for interstate clubs. There is a large range of colours available and with a little

creativity you can still get your message across, e.g. CATS01, but it kind of lacks the same punch.

4.3 Spread the word

Along with the hats and bumper stickers, you should also be willing to talk about footy as much as possible. This is probably a bit more of a challenge, particularly in the early stages of a move because, once again, in a new social circle people try to fit in rather than push their own interests. Even if an opportunity pops up, it's rarely taken because it's much safer to keep their mouth shut.

Despite the difficulties, I urge you not to clam up completely because you never know where it could lead. Asking a hardcore Canterbury Bulldogs fan at your office, "how good do the Kangas look this year?" probably isn't a good idea, however keep in mind these cities have a more fluid sporting base, which means you could just as easily find someone who is actually interested.

If you're lucky enough to make a connection with someone this way, it can make things a lot easier for you in the early stages of your transition by giving you an outlet to talk footy, watch footy and even go to the footy. When I first came up from Melbourne and was struggling with the switch of schools, I was fortunate enough to strike up this kind of relationship with another kid in my class. We were never going to be best mates, but during those first few months of my Expat life I was extremely grateful he was there simply because of his small interest in AFL.

Over time you'll obviously become more comfortable in your surroundings and speaking up about footy can take on a different role. Instead of using it to find a friendly face in a world full of strangers, you can use it to organise a night at the footy, recruit more numbers for your team or build up a work tipping competition.

4.4 Be an agent of change

The three points I've mentioned so far in this section are things you can easily do in your day-to-day life to gradually improve your own situation and keep the game moving forward. If all that seems a bit too slow and you feel there are some things that need to be fixed immediately, you have to go straight to the source instead.

Unfortunately there are no official feedback channels established by the AFL to do this and if you read some of the comments floating around online it drives many fans crazy. The only way you can really have your say is by writing to the AFL headquarters at:

140 Harbour Esplanade, Docklands VIC 3008, or
GPO Box 1449, Melbourne VIC 3001

If that doesn't work, I think writing to your club would be a logical next step. For address details, head to your club's website. I've also heard of grievances being aired via the official AFL *Twitter* account. You might be more likely to get a quick response this way, but probably not the depth you're looking for.

Other than writing or tweeting, the best option I can see is to join the AFL Fans Association (aflfans.org) and lobby for the change you want to see that way. Their website states their philosophy, goals and roles as:

The AFLFA has been established to give AFL fans a vehicle to express their views and have their voice heard regarding our great game. We all recognise that Australian football today is a business as well as a sport. However, it's the fans who keep this business afloat. If we did not turn up week after week to support our clubs, there would be no AFL.

The players have the AFL Players Association, the coaches have the AFL Coaches Association and the umpires have the AFL

Lovin' Footy in QLD and NSW

Umpires Association. However, the fans have very little representation. The AFLFA aims to change that and to give fans a real voice in the future direction of our great game.

Please help spread the word about the AFLFA to your friends, family and co-workers – the AFLFA is only as strong as its members. We are by far the largest group of stakeholders in the game. Together we can make a difference!

It might surprise some to know a body like this even exists, but they've been around for a while and gained real clout in December 2013 when they were incorporated as a not-for-profit organisation. If you feel a specific problem needs more attention, it certainly couldn't hurt to see what the AFL Fans Association can do.

5 Embrace the evolution

Along with the opportunity to help expand the game, what else makes Expats more than just fans? What really sets us apart from the rest?

I have a theory I call The Expat Evolution that accounts for the changes that gradually come to all the footy fans leaving Melbourne, Adelaide, Perth or any other football town. The theory is based on my own personal transformation and that of other Expats I've known closely over the years.

I've been hinting at it throughout the book, but in essence it goes something like this: as an Expat, you become more of a real supporter than you ever were!

It sounds crazy, I know. How can I possibly be a better supporter up here?

Well, it is possible and it's all to do with the perspective that comes from leaving these cities. Don't get me wrong, it can be tough in many ways, but the flip side has a wonderful silver lining that comes from seeing things in a totally different light.



To explain what I mean, the well-known “fishbowl” example works well. All your life you’ve been swimming around in this footy fishbowl, caught up with everything happening in that space and unaware of anything beyond the glass sides. As an Expat, you get scooped out of these surroundings and for the first time you can see there is so much more going on. It won’t happen overnight, but what this different perspective does is allow you to appreciate the game on a much higher, more fulfilling level.

Rather than just a week-to-week rollercoaster of hopes, expectations, disappointment and bragging rights, you start to enjoy the contest and spectacle for what it is. The passion is still there, but it enters into areas you never really considered. No longer is it all about the score at the siren and the ups or downs that come with that. It’s just as much about the courage, skill and drama on display in every minute of our glorious game. It’s the kind of shift that has you thinking for the first time, “Hey we lost, but what a cracking game!”

Essentially, you become a genuine supporter rather than just a fan; there is a big difference! You’ll find yourself sulking less after a loss, more patient with your club and certainly less likely to bag your own players. The thick and thin mentality you’ve always talked about becomes a reality and the love of your club grows even stronger because of it.

Being outside the bowl has this effect because with it in plain sight, you start thinking more about what it means to you. You’re not peering into it and wondering who’s winning or losing, you’re cherishing it as a whole. You’re remembering kick-to-kick with mates in the street, the long conversations with your old man, the smell of eucalyptus in change rooms and the skill of the heroes you watched take the field. You’re admiring it for the huge part it’s played in your life and how it’s helped shape you as a person; all the lessons learnt and good times had. Us Expats are a nostalgic bunch!

All of a sudden, your club getting the “W” every week doesn’t seem so important. Yes, you want them to win, but now there’s something else going on. You realise it’s the game and what it stands for that really matters: a force that brings people together from all different families and backgrounds; a massive part of our culture and individual identities at the same time.

Now you can fully appreciate why I believe you are more than just a fan. This new outlook turns you from a mad, one-eyed club fanatic into someone who celebrates and supports the game; someone who can talk footy with a perfect stranger and feel like they’re catching up with a mate; someone who believes going to the footy is an occasion to savour; someone who wants to see AFL expand into the heart and minds of more Australians and will do their bit in this pursuit.

To me, The Expat Evolution is exciting because it means the move you’ve just made – as scary, frustrating and weird as it can be – is actually a step forward for your footy rather than a step back. It’s a journey that helps you become a real supporter of both your club and the sport. If you embrace it, I guarantee you’ll love footy in the expansion states just as much as I do.

Thank you and I wish you all the best.