

Tackling a New Game



RAMS KEVIN DOTSON AND KYREN WILLIAMS, READY FOR A DOWN UNDER TOUCHDOWN

Melbourne doesn't just host sport: it adopts it, reshapes it and turns it into part of the city's identity. We've seen it with tennis in January, Formula One in March, footy all winter and spring. Now, with the NFL committing to a regular season game at the MCG and Super Bowl viewership in Australia climbing each year, American football is no longer a novelty here – it's the next code my home town is ready to make its own.

It took a snake-wrangling Robert Irwin to announce that the Los Angeles Rams and the San Francisco 49ers were set to play a regular season game in Melbourne later in the year, with a view to it becoming a permanent fixture. It's a recognition of something already happening: the appetite is here, and Melbourne in particular is ready to stage global sport at scale. The MCG is one of the few venues in the world that can host an NFL game without making it feel like an exhibition.

Some traditionalists will resist it. They always do. There will be predictable lines about "protecting local codes" or questions about whether Australia really needs another imported sport. But Melbourne has never been a zero-sum sporting city. It didn't stop loving cricket when the Australian Open grew. It didn't abandon AFL when the A-League arrived.

The NFL's rise here has grown organically through broadcast access, fantasy football, social media and Australian player pathways. When we see local tacklers and punters like Jordan Mailata, Michael Dickson and Mitch Wishnowsky making NFL rosters, the league stops feeling foreign. It becomes reachable – personal. For years, the Super Bowl was treated like a curiosity in Australia: a Monday morning spectacle people watched for the ads, the halftime show or the novelty of helmets

and shoulder pads. Not anymore. Walk into pubs on Super Bowl morning and you'll find packed rooms, jerseys from multiple franchises and fans who know the difference between a nickel package and a blitz. Friendship groups take leave to treat it like a sporting holiday. The building of these rituals could come down to the fact that Australians appreciate tactical complexity in sport. That's why AFL analysis shows thrive, why cricket strategy segments rate. The NFL is a strategist's game disguised as a collision sport. Once fans get past the surface, they stay for the chess match.

Melbourne knows how to wrap a week, not just a game, around a sporting event. Expect fan festivals, live sites, junior clinics and cross-code involvement.

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Plus, the time zone quirk of NFL games landing in our morning slots has actually helped rather than hurt its popularity. It turns the experience into a daytime event instead of busier evening background viewing. Long brunches and extended watch parties become communal instead of passive.

Will the NFL ever rival AFL or cricket in our cities? Probably not, and it doesn't need to. Success isn't measured only in dominance. It's measured in staying power, turnout and engagement.

The Super Bowl used to feel like something we watched from afar. Now, with a regular season game on the way and NFL culture embedding itself in the city, it feels like something we're about to host – and host loudly. Melbourne doesn't just welcome big sport. It absorbs it. The NFL is next. ■

Lachlan Mitchell is a Melbourne-based sports journalist and writer, covering stories across horse racing and beyond, and is eagerly anticipating the NFL's arrival in Melbourne.

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