

SUBMISSION TO LEGISLATIVE COUNCIL SELECT COMMITTEE

AFL IN TASMANIA

INTRODUCTION

In any consideration of Tasmanian football's current state of health, a useful starting point is the 1950s. For it was at that time that the indigenous code in the state reached its zenith.

In the years 1956-1960, Tasmania achieved wins over all three of the other major Australian football states: Victoria, Western Australia, and South Australia. Its performances were such that it met the latter two on close-to-equal terms despite being significantly less populous.

The peak would be brief, however, as major changes were afoot.

Darrel Baldock's much-publicised move to St Kilda in 1962 could be said to have opened the floodgates. There had been others before him, indeed Verdun Howell won a Brownlow Medal in 1959, but Baldock was Tasmania's highest-profile star and most influential football figure. The state's best players were now being relentlessly pursued by VFL clubs and Ian Stewart, Peter Hudson, Barry Lawrence and others would soon follow 'The Doc'.

So rich was this era that four Tasmanian products of the 1950s and '60s would later become Legends of the Australian Football Hall of Fame (the Legend category is the pinnacle for those who have played, or coached, the game). It says something profound about Tasmanian football that when the state's fourth Legend was inducted in 2013, only three players from WA and SA combined had achieved Legend-status!

By the second half of the 1960s, a new evolutionary phase was entered. A trio of teenage prodigies: Royce Hart from the south, John Greening from the north-west, and Brent Crosswell from the northern midlands, all left Tasmania without having played senior football in their home state. Tasmanian football's *raison d'être* was now being re-defined: from a state in which local competitions had been the first priority for players and fans to one which was a breeding ground for Victorian football.

There was no turning back the tide of the VFL's development into a *de facto* national competition. And there were more back-breaking developments to come.

First, the VFL – which had been growing too rapidly for its own good and needed to rein in the economic excesses of its clubs – instituted a regulated player-recruitment system. This took the form of a 'national draft'. Each year, aspiring players from around the nation nominated themselves for a ballot and the VFL clubs took turns at choosing from the pool of players so created.

This meant Tasmania's best young footballers were now part of an institutionalised system which took them, and continues to take them, away from their domestic competitions without meaningful recompense. An understanding of this reality is critical to any assessment of where Tasmania belongs within the national scheme of things. This aspect alone should compel any reasonable administration to seek to redress the unfairness.

The next relevant step in the steady demise of Tasmanian football was the establishment of the so-called national league. This brought regular live television coverage and for the AFL, live TV was the

economic game-changer. The value of rights began to climb exponentially, particularly as Pay-TV arrived in the second half of the 1990s. Good for football though it may have been, this was further bad news for Tasmania. Satellite dishes meant it would no longer be possible for live coverage to pubs, clubs and even private homes to be prevented by a sporting administration. The now-national AFL gave up on its previous, well-intentioned attempts to protect local games in Tasmania from live coverage of its product.

This meant Tasmanian football now had the most direct and potent of competitors for the hearts and minds of supporters: AFL games from around Australia would be screened in opposition to the local product.

DISCUSSION REGARDING TERMS OF REFERENCE

What had begun in the 1960s as a mild zephyr blowing against Tasmanian football has become a howling headwind. And there is no turning back time. No reincarnated local competition could ever compare with the high-class national showcase that is the AFL.

The attempt to give the fans some AFL engagement via a handful of games each season in Launceston and Hobart is something, but it's not the answer. Hawthorn has been a powerhouse during the period of its relationship with Tasmania, but the Hawks are one of eighteen clubs in the competition and, as such, to the majority of Tasmanian footy fans are an enemy. The same applies to North Melbourne and its games in Hobart. Tasmanians want a team that represents THEM; one which they can support together. Hawthorn and North Melbourne can realistically claim less than twenty per cent of the total supporter-space.

Neither will a Tasmanian team in the NAB Under 18 competition, nor one in the VFL competition (Victoria's 'feeder' competition to the AFL), provide the answer for Tasmania's football fans. These are necessary projects, but they aren't teams for the masses to follow with fervour.

The argument for a Tasmanian team in the AFL relates fundamentally to the quality of football life of the state's average supporter. There is a Darwinian element to modern professional sport and, for better or worse, the success of the AFL competition is such that it trumps all else. For the tens-of-thousands of Tasmanians who passionately follow it, the only way to a quality of football existence the equal of those in the other five Australian states is via their own AFL team.

It's commonplace these days for administrations of popular sports to emphasise the concept of 'fan engagement'. And it is genuine fan engagement that Tasmania must seek. Currently, for all but Hawthorn and North Melbourne supporters, AFL fan engagement for Tasmanians is conducted via long-distance or by occasionally watching a game involving teams of which one isn't actually a fan. This is second-class fan engagement at best.

An argument sometimes used against the establishment of a Tasmanian team is that the fans are so fervent in their established AFL club allegiances that they mightn't make the switch. They might stick with their Collingwood, St Kilda, Hawthorn, Carlton, or other elite-level allegiance...

While the proof of the pudding will be in the eating, I have no doubt this won't be so. I recall being at a West Coast Eagles home game during 1987 (the Perth-based team's first year in the competition) and asking a group of local supporters about their personal experience.

Yes, they stuck with their long-time VFL loyalties, they told me... for all of about four weeks! By which time they'd become rabid Eagles' fans. And they did this because they were now feeling truly represented by something real and accessible.

There are also myriad stories of Sydney-based Victorian 'expats' who have done the unthinkable: left behind their Victorian club allegiances and become supporters of the Sydney Swans. It's what happens. Most people who go to the football do it to barrack for a team.

For these fans, as would be the case for Tasmanians were the state to have its own team, it's about more than football. It's about belonging to something. The manifestation of this would have unique force in Tasmania, a small island state which has traditionally had to fight harder than the rest for its every success.

The unifying potential of the notional Tasmanian team is something that should be impressed upon AFL administrators at every chance. As is well known, they now see their mission as being beyond mere sports administration and Tasmania's history offers them an opportunity.

For the truth is that it doesn't take much encouragement for the state to lapse into regional rivalry and dispute. Why, it was only in May's federal election campaign that politicians invited them to succumb to this default position on the matter of 'Bill Shorten's \$25 million for an AFL team in Hobart'. Unfortunately, at times, for politicians, newspaper editors, business, and even for footy fans, it becomes irresistible.

Well here's a chance for the AFL to do something to lift, and unite, an entire state. It has the switch and only has to flick it.

Just imagine a Tasmania in which a team that truly represents the state plays a home game once a fortnight, with those games shared equally between either end of the island. I have no doubt that people would travel – south-to-north and vice versa – to watch such matches... so long as they could get a seat! For the games would be feverishly patronised.

More importantly, the attendees would be standing side-by-side as Tasmanians, not as people of any particular region. Football codes around the world are powerful vehicles. The reality of a Tasmanian team in the AFL has the potential to provide the most unifying moment in the state's history. This shouldn't be under-estimated in any consideration of the benefits of such an outcome.

Of course, even something as potentially unifying as this will present challenges. In my experience, a common response from people has been: 'Yes, but where will the team be based?'

It's the hypothetical burning question. Launceston became the first regular Tasmanian home for AFL games when Hawthorn and St Kilda began playing there in the years 2002/03. Northern Tasmania has supported the game well and jealously guards its right to continue doing so. Nevertheless, it could be argued that a team of AFL players should be provided with the infrastructure and lifestyle of the capital city.

Ultimately, I would regard this as a matter for the AFL and the AFL Players' Association to have a say and, bearing in mind their right to a sense of ownership of the issue, it would be difficult for anyone to argue about the conclusion.

The team, though, would be for all Tasmanians and the equal sharing of games between north and south has to be non-negotiable.

As for the economic value to Tasmania of such a team's existence, in every way it would be preferable to the current arrangement. For the fifteen-plus years that Hawthorn have been playing games in Launceston, Tasmanian taxpayers have compulsorily funded a Victorian sporting institution. The taxpayers of no other state are forced to do this; yet Tasmania remains the one state excluded from the AFL. Think about that!

Then there's the issue of the value Hawthorn claim their Launceston games bring to Tasmania's economy. The club boasted last year of a Price Waterhouse Cooper report which concludes the Hawks deliver Tasmania an annual windfall of around \$28.5 million.

As politicians know well, there are lies, damn lies, and statistics. The PwC figure, I suspect, involves a quick, thumb-nail calculation based on Tourism Tasmania numbers for interstate visitors, with an optimistic guess taken at how these apply to Hawthorn's cohort of travellers (Ref: *Tasmanian Tourism Snapshot – Year ending December 2017*).

According to the Tourism Tasmania figures, interstate visitors to the state stay, on average, just over a week and spend around two thousand dollars each while in Tasmania. Hawthorn and PwC appear to make the assumption that 4,000 Victorians do this each time the Hawks play in Launceston. Based on four such games being played per season, the figure of \$28.5 million can be achieved. The fact that, on occasions, Hawthorn's president – Jeff Kennett – has put the value at \$40 million doesn't do a lot to inspire faith in the precision of the exercise.

If 4,000 Hawthorn supporters travel to Launceston for every game, I'd be mightily surprised. In May this year the Hawks drew fewer than 15,000 to a game on their doorstep, at the MCG! Anyway, if the figure is true, it would suggest an even steeper decline in interest from Tasmanians in Hawthorn's games than had previously been imagined. The fact is, the average attendance for these games over the past three years has fallen 23.4% on the figures of a decade earlier (Ref: *AFL Tables website – Attendances*). If 4,000 attendees are travelling from Melbourne for each game, fewer than 10,000 Tasmanians are now attending.

As for the 4,000 spending an average of a week in Tasmania every time Hawthorn comes to Launceston... I invite you to make up your own mind on the credibility of Hawthorn's claim.

What can be said with confidence is that a Tasmanian team playing eleven home games, and bringing high-membership clubs like Collingwood, Richmond, Essendon, Carlton, Sydney etc to the state, would be of far more economic value than the seven games in which Hawthorn and North Melbourne host clubs that are generally among the competition's lesser drawcards.

This is a big issue for Tasmania and one on which it shouldn't allow itself to be brow-beaten by Victorian interest groups. The state of Tasmania is a more significant entity than any one of the ten Victorian football clubs and should be confident enough to see itself in that light.

As for arguments Tasmania lacks the capacity to construct a football institution with the critical mass to survive in the AFL, the numbers and the impartial observers say otherwise.

An article written in March this year by Caroline Wilson of *The Age* in Melbourne revealed a figure which the naysayers would prefer remained hidden. It was this: the number of Tasmanians who are currently paid-up members of AFL clubs is 91,000. In case you're not familiar with where an AFL club with that number of members would sit on the current 'membership ladder', the answer is: quite close to the top. The club to have most recently joined the AFL, Greater Western Sydney, announced in July that its membership has this year, for the first time, gone beyond 30,000.

If the figure of 91,000 were to be translated to a Tasmanian team (and why couldn't it be?), such a team would be better placed than many of the current eighteen AFL clubs.

As for the general issue of whether a Tasmanian club could make ends meet, a good source of knowledge and counsel is the president of the Western Bulldogs FC, Peter Gordon. The Bulldogs have been long-term battlers within the competition, but in 2016 they won a fairy-tale premiership.

Gordon was at that time in his second stint as president (a position he still holds). The first stint had come about more than a quarter-of-a-century earlier, when he had the office thrust upon him as the club, then known as Footscray, sought to stave off the likelihood of a VFL-enforced merger. Under Gordon's leadership, the Bulldogs achieved a lifeline. It was, however, a near-death experience.

The point of this piece of history is that Gordon has known the business of club administration from both extremities of the spectrum: the darkness of likely extinction and the ecstasy of ultimate success. He is now equally familiar with the settings of failure and with those which offer sustainable existence and the chance of success.

His view about the viability of a Tasmanian AFL team? 'There is now no economic case against it,' he says. The AFL's TV rights have reached a point of sufficient value to enable it to effectively underwrite its competition. It ensures the viability of the two 'expansion' clubs, Gold Coast and Greater Western Sydney, and some of the less profitable Victorian clubs as well. This is not to say it would endlessly sustain a club with no prospect of economic viability, but it is able to ensure the maintenance of the competition of its choosing.

The challenge for Tasmania is to ensure that the settings are in place to support the state's otherwise compelling argument for an AFL team. I trust that the working party established under Brett Godfrey's chairmanship will effectively develop and state this side of Tasmania's case.

And what if the AFL still says 'No'?

Under the onslaught of a national competition from which it remains excluded, Tassie's old competitions and clubs have faded and, in some cases, died. They are like corner stores being forced out of business by an emporium with total market dominance. This is an irreversible reality. Tasmanian football's only genuine future lies with a shareholding in the big business.

The Darwinian nature of sporting evolution in the highly professionalised era was mentioned earlier. Like it or not, that's not about to change in the foreseeable future. Without an elite-level, fan-engaging, figurehead team, the indigenous code – for all its glorious history and tradition in the state – will have little future in Tasmania. I know it's a gloomy assessment, but it is the harsh reality.

If it doesn't eventuate, I find it impossible to see a future for the game beyond its current rundown condition. This is a matter about which the AFL should be forced to think long and hard, for the survival of Tasmania as a 'football state' is on the line.

As for the optimal schedule for a Tasmanian team to make its entry, there are too many unknowns in play for a date to be put on it. The state of the TV rights cycle is the predominant factor, although the circumstances of Tasmania achieving entry would determine whether the rights dictated the 'when'.

Assuming the AFL is sincere in its new-found concern for Tasmania and its recognition that the state should – at the least – be under consideration as the home for a team, it will be considering a range of possibilities. These might be expected to include:

- Tasmania becoming a 19th team in the competition, thus creating the need for what would be an unpopular weekly 'bye'
- The possibility that a twentieth team could be developed: perhaps a third team in Western Australia or a team in either the ACT or Darwin
- The relocation of a struggling Victorian club to Tasmania, which I believe would be totally the wrong model. The team needs to be Tasmanian: anything else could set it up to fail
- Or the relocation of a struggling Victorian club to create a merger with one of the two expansion clubs, such as the embattled Gold Coast (a scenario virtually identical to that involving Fitzroy and Brisbane in 1996). This could open the door for Tasmania to become the competition's 18th club, as opposed to it being the 19th, thus enabling the change to be made at virtually any time

This has been, and continues to be, a long game for those who care about Tasmanian football. Twenty years ago, as I began thinking more seriously about Tasmania's football, it occurred to me that not only isn't it a national league without the sixth state, but that the so-called national league was actually damaging the game in Tasmania, perhaps mortally. I have been keen to pursue the issue ever since.

I thank you for your efforts and for considering what I have presented.

Yours sincerely

Tim Lane

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