

An Open Letter

to American Sports Fans:

An Author's Appeal for Adventurous Thinking

There once was a time, long ago in my life, as a teenager in the 1980s, when I felt as you might right now about American sports. The full scope of professional spectator sports consisted of the big four — Major League Baseball, the NFL, the NBA, and the NHL. If that plate wasn't full enough, there also was NCAA football and basketball. At least that was what I once thought.

Soccer? That was a fringe sport played by kids who weren't tough enough to play football. Golf? That was a leisure sport played mostly by rich old guys. Auto racing? That was only a boring alternative to bridge the gap (the “dead period”) between the end of football season and the beginning of baseball season. I once had all these uninformed misgivings about these “other” sports.

But then, one strange summer wee-hours morning during the early '80s, after my father and I returned home after spending one of our many nights at Shea Stadium, cheering on the New York Mets, something truly magical happened. I flipped the TV channel to that new cable TV network, ESPN, which would show just about any sport at any time of day. What I saw looked bizarre. It wasn't quite outdoor basketball on grass, or soccer, or American football, but it looked like an odd combination of all three.

Was I hallucinating?

The commentators' had Australian accents and the players were wearing basketball uniforms. Officials were standing behind parallel

goal posts without crossbars and dressed in white lab coats and hats. They'd stand ramrod straight and point their index fingers like Old West gunslingers when the egg-shaped ball went through the posts. The confetti and toilet paper raining down from the stands only added to the intrigue.

I wasn't hallucinating. I was watching Australian Rules football.

I couldn't bring myself to turn the channel. Neither then, nor any other late night thereafter, whenever I found it. It was as if I was picking up some strange broadcast transmission from a planet in another dimension and I was trying to decipher the message. I couldn't have imagined then that these "transmissions" would change my life. But they did.

After a few years, ESPN stopped showing "Aussie Rules" as it was nicknamed, but my memories of it lingered, refusing to fade away from my consciousness. About 15 years later, in my adulthood, when I was planning my first Australia vacation, in 1999. I wanted to attend a live sporting event while there. Only one would do. I attended an Aussie Rules match at the Sydney Cricket Ground — a season-opener on my last full day in the country. I returned to America totally hooked. Thankfully, a new American TV network, Fox Sports World, showed weekly live matches, which fed my growing habit.

As I'd learned, Aussies call their national game "footy" and I have religiously followed it ever since.

For whatever reason, many Americans I meet still mistakenly think, when I'm telling them about my love for Australian Rules football, that I'm talking about rugby, or soccer. They often ask me, "What do you love so much about Australian football?"

My answer never wavers: "What's *not* to love?"

The ball appears to have a mind of its own when it bounces, making for a continuous, ferocious fight for its possession and the very idea of choreographed plays, as found in most American sports, ludicrous. With no timeouts, the action never stops. Aussie Rules is an unscripted, spontaneous action adventure. If American football were a tune, it would be classical: highly structured, with orchestrated

melodies, phrasing and harmonies. Footy's rhythm is mercurial and improvisational, like freestyle a cappella freestyle rap or a be-bop jazz or punk rock jam session.

If you don't believe human beings are capable of flying, just watch footy players make magnificent grabs of the ball by catapulting off the ground onto the backs and shoulders of other players, then defying gravity by hanging in the air before clutching their prize and triumphantly tumbling to the ground. Fans of AFL clubs are as tribal, if not more so, than American fans, with family loyalties to some reaching back to the 19th Century. Rivalries between AFL clubs boil over in intensity.

Yet, there's a childhood innocence about some AFL clubs' time-honored traditions, not found in the more jaded world of American professional sports. Every week, on the field, just before the start of a match, players run through a giant crepe paper banner decorated in big letters, spelling out a timely, playfully boastful slogan that their club's biggest boosters — members of the official cheer squad — has spent the week making. During matches, footy players don't preen for the TV cameras, literally beat their chests, or engage in other attention-seeking antics, as many American athletes do after executing the most routine or biggest plays.

In the locker room immediately after a match, Australian footballers on the winning club will link arms and joyously belt out the words to their club's anthem, to tunes sounding like they were borrowed from Broadway musicals. At the end of the season, players pitch in and take a trip together. The absence of surnames on the backs of player jerseys reinforces the notion that this is a team, not an individual sport. All these elements make the game culturally and uniquely Australian.

I never envisioned I'd ever open my heart and mind to embrace the Australian Football League as much as my first love, Major League Baseball and come to cherish one of its clubs, the Fremantle Dockers, as dearly as my beloved Mets.

But both things happened.

Footy has taken me back to Australia a dozen times, led me to

make special, lifelong friendships with both footy-loving Australians and Americans (yes, there are a few thousand!) and even played a part in my courting my my American wife. I found American men and women — some of whom had never before played any sport — spending their weekends playing alongside homesick Aussie expats who had brought the game with them, in the amateur United States Australian Football League. As a teacher, I've introduced the game to enthusiastic boys and girls, armed with yellow and red Australian footballs and a library of YouTube clips.

In doing so, I've eliminated their many misconceptions about Australian Rules football. It is not, by nature, a violent game. Footy doesn't have American football's body armor and hard plastic helmets with metal bars that can be, and often are, used as weapons. Australian football, whose physical demands require players to run the equivalent of seven to nine miles a match; have pinpoint accuracy in kicking off both feet; play offense and defense; tackle and break tackles; and make intelligent decisions while possessing the ball, is arguably, the world's most challenging sport to play.

Finally, after almost 120 years since the rules were first codified, American athletes are making their first marks in Australia's great game. In 2015, Jason Holmes, the first born-and-bred U.S. athlete played in a regular-season AFL match. In 2016, Kim Hemenway and Katie Klatt became America's first two women to play in an AFL-sanctioned women's match. Later that year, Mason Cox debuted as the second American AFL player and was the first to kick a goal in an AFL regular-season match. Thanks to the AFL's recruiting in America, and its partnership with the USAFL, more talent may be on the way.

This breakthrough has happened only because these athletes opened their hearts and minds to learning about an international sport they'd never before heard of. Now I invite you to do the same. If the extent of your sports universe is "the big four" plus "the NCAA two," I challenge you to expand it by reading this book. The American men and women whose journeys I've closely followed the last few years have

incredible stories to share, of sacrificing everything to become professional athletes — taking up an unfamiliar game in an unfamiliar land.

After reading this book, maybe you'll fall in love with footy. Maybe not.

But you may certainly be inspired by a group men and women who followed their improbable dreams.

Prologue

Australian Rules Football 101

It's Not Rugby!

Reading this guide will guarantee you one thing: You'll never again mistake rugby with Australian Rules football. Ever.

The two sports are about as different as basketball and volleyball. How the myth started that Australian Rules football and rugby are the same — and persists in the United States — is anyone's guess. Rugby is English in origin and made its way to Australia, Australian football was, and remains, uniquely Australian, with its variant invented and played by its Indigenous people, perhaps a few thousand years ago.

Basics: Games are played 18-on-18 by competing teams. (Each squad has four reserves that can be brought on at any time, as temporary substitutes, as in basketball or American football). Matches are played on grass oval fields that, like Major League Baseball fields, vary in dimensions. The average oval size is 180 x 150 yards — much wider and longer than American football fields.

The teams try to outscore each other by kicking a leather football more egg-shaped than an American one, through a pair of parallel, crossbar-less goal posts at the oval's opposite ends, which are 20 feet high and 21 feet apart, for goals.

Matches start much like an opening tipoff or jump ball in basketball, but with a “field umpire” bouncing the ball in the middle of the oval, in the “center circle” inside the larger, “center square.” Then, the two teams' ruckmen — the tallest players — battle to tap the ball to

a smaller, more mobile teammate, who attempts to advance it toward goal. “Ruck contests” between these players take place during the center square bounces that begin each of the four quarters of play, or in “boundary throw-ins” by the umpire after the ball goes out of bounds, or in “ball ups,” after the umpire blows the whistle and determines no player has clear possession of the ball.

Players are positioned in the forward line, back line and mid-field, but may go anywhere on the field. Depending on which team has possession of the ball, as in basketball, all players play offense and defense.

Rules: Players may only pass the ball to their teammates by “handballing” (holding the ball in one hand while striking it with an opposing closed fist) or kicking. Throwing or handing off the ball is illegal. So is running with it for more than 15 meters (16 yards) at a time, without bouncing the ball or touching it to the ground. As with traveling, in basketball, players violating that rule are penalized for “running too far.”

If a player’s kick travels at least 15 meters, the player “marking” (catching) it on the fly may either back up from the spot where they’ve marked — which, if an opponent steps over, concedes a 50-meter penalty — and kick or handball the footy, unchallenged, or may immediately “play on,” by running, kicking or handballing.

Tackles are legal, but can only be made between a player’s shoulders and knees. Tackling outside those areas are illegal “high contact” or “tripping” infringements, penalized by a free kick to the illegally tackled player. If a player has prior opportunity to kick or handball before getting tackled and doesn’t, the player is penalized for “holding the ball,” with the tackler winning a free kick. This is the most highly disputed rule interpretation in the sport, which is why in every footy match you’ll hear the home team’s fans roar, with gusto, “BALL!” in an attempt to convince the field umpire to penalize a visiting player.

Players may not intentionally kick, handball or paddle the ball with their hands toward the boundary line, with no teammate in the vicin-

ity, so that the ball will roll out bounds to stop the clock, gain territory for their team, or avoid getting tackled. This penalty is called “deliberate out of bounds,” or more commonly “deliberate.” It’s similar to NCAA and NFL football’s “intentional grounding” rule, penalizing quarterbacks for intentionally getting rid of the ball to avoid losing yards from getting sacked.

Similar to the NFL’s pass interference rules, AFL defenders attempting to “spoil” (bat or punch away) balls in flight that their opponents are trying to mark may not push them in the back, chop their arms or hold them. Similarly, players may not jump on others’ backs or shoulders to use them as springboards unless they’re making a legitimate attempt to mark the ball. For unsportsmanlike or other egregious physical actions, there is no penalty box, no yellow or red cards, no technical fouls and no ejections. An offender is sanctioned with a 50-meter penalty and an AFL umpire may “report” the player to the league’s Match Review Panel for a hearing the following week.

Scoring: “Major” scores are six-point goals, which may only be kicked between the two tall goal posts, either through the air or on the ground. If the ball hits either of the goal posts, or a player touches it before it goes through them, or if a kick goes between one of the goal posts and one of two shorter, adjacent “behind posts,” the kicking team scores a “minor” one-point “behind.”

Defenders may concede a behind by carrying it through the goal square, between the goal posts. This is called a “rushed behind,” and is legal, only if, in the umpire’s judgement, there’s no option to pass it to a teammate. This is similar to an NFL player conceding a safety by running the ball out of his own end zone.

A team’s total score is its tally of goals, plus behinds. Thus, Australian football final scores read with the goal number, then a period, then the behind number, with the total reached by multiplying goals by six, then adding one for each behind. Example: In the 2016 AFL championship match, the Grand Final, the Western Bulldogs defeated the Sydney Swans, 13.11 (89) to 10.7 (67).

Statistics: The most important statistics for a ruckman, the position Australian scouts are recruiting most American former college basketball players to play, are “hitouts,” “hitouts to advantage” and “marks.”

Statisticians credit ruckmen with hitouts when, against their direct opponents, they successfully tap the ball toward a teammate during a center bounce or boundary throw-in. A hitout to advantage is even better, as it shows how successful a ruckman is in providing a teammate “first use” of the ball. A team in attack mode, in the forward 50 meters of the ground often will deploy two ruckmen — one for potential ruck contests and another to “rest” in the forward line, to be a tall target for a teammate to kick to, close to the goal square, so that the resting ruckman can mark, then attempt to kick a goal. Teams also use this strategy in defense, with one of the ruckmen stationed in the backline, to spoil an opposition kick to the goal square, or serve as a tall target to kick to, up the field, for a counterattack. Midfielders and ruckmen have a symbiotic relationship; midfielders depend on ruckmen to tap the ball to them in ruck contests.

Unlike American sporting culture, in which individual performances in team sports often are measured by one’s scoring tallies, Australian football metrics most highly value the number of possessions a player accumulates. Possessions or more commonly called “touches,” or “disposals,” help denote which players have the most influence on a match. To put it in an American context, if the NBA were to view its players through an Australian Rules football lense, the league’s most valuable player wouldn’t be the scoring champion; it would likely be the player averaging the most assists, combined with offensive and defensive rebounds.

The Australian game has become dramatically more athletic and strategically complex since the late-1990s, when it wasn’t uncommon for the league’s top goal kickers to amass in excess of 100 in a season. Center half forwards or full forwards were celebrated and idolized for their brute strength in marking contests and their goal-kicking prowess. But since the turn of the 21st century, midfielders, because they follow the ball wherever it goes, run the most and rack up the

most possessions, are the AFL's glamor boys. Fittingly, midfielders, also known as "on-ballers" are responsible for steering their team out of defense and into attack and vice versa, their domain is colloquially known as the "engine room" or the "coalface." To use a baseball parallel, just as a team never can have too many good pitchers, a footy club can never have too many good midfielders.

Umpires working the field and boundaries see much more of the midfielders compete than other position players, so when it comes time for umpires to vote on a match's best players, midfielders are the most likely to garner votes. The player who accumulates the most umpire votes in matches wins the coveted Brownlow Medal; the equivalent to a North American pro sports league's most valuable player.

Timing: Matches are played in four 20-minute quarters, with "time on" (stoppage time) progressively added throughout each (as in soccer's halves), for when the ball goes out of bounds, or after a goal has been kicked and then returned for an ensuing center bounce. There are *no* timeouts — only 6-minute breaks after the first and third quarters, with a 20-minute halftime intermission. Tie scores at the end of regular season matches result in draws, but in post-season "Finals," scores are settled after two additional 5-minute periods. Until 2016, if the AFL Grand Final was a draw after four quarters, the two sides replayed the game the next week. Under the new AFL rules, two additional five-minute halves, plus time on, are played after a draw. In the event of a tie after that, the final siren would sound after the next score, whether a goal or a behind.

Gear: Players' team uniforms consist of "jumpers" or "guernseys" (like sleeveless basketball jerseys), shorts, socks and "boots" (cleats). Pouches inside the backs of players' jumpers, below the neck, contain GPS monitoring devices that record — among other metrics — their speeds and distances. In a long upheld tradition that epitomizes team, not individual focus, players' surnames aren't on the backs of jumpers. Players tend to favor lower numbers.

History: Though “footy,” as Australians affectionately call it, was first codified in the 1850s and predates the first professional American football league by more than a half-century, a growing number of Australian scholars cite historic anecdotal evidence to illustrate its ancient origins with the indigenous Gunditjmara people of southwestern Victoria, who developed *marn grook* (“game ball”) using a ball made of possum skins.

Leagues were organized in Victoria in 1858 and the first known recorded match happened. Historians recognize Australian cricketer Thomas Wentworth Wills — a man who grew up in southwestern Victoria among Aboriginal people and spoke at least one Aboriginal language besides English — as inventing modern footy as a way for his fellow cricketers to remain fit during the off-season.

Organization: The Australian Football League (AFL), the sport’s nationwide, elite competition, has 18 clubs — 10 of which are based in the state of Victoria and nine of those 10 in the Melbourne area. The imbalance is a result of the league’s evolution from its beginnings as the Victorian Football League (VFL) before its 1980s expansion to other Australian states. The VFL exists today as a minor league feeder to AFL for affiliated clubs, whose reserve players compete there.

AFL clubs draft teens from top statewide under-18 leagues. Australian universities do not have sporting competitions like America’s NCAA. Some minor league footy clubs, though, may carry the moniker “University” in their nomenclature, as homage to their origins. AFL teams play a weekly, 22-game season, from late March/early April through late September/early October, only catching a breather during rotating, consecutive mid-season bye weeks. The top eight clubs play four Finals (playoff) rounds. The top four clubs enjoy a “double chance,” in which they may lose a first round “qualifying final,” but not be eliminated until losing a follow-up match. The two surviving clubs square off in the Grand Final — traditionally, the last Saturday in September — at the 100,000-seat Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG).

Though many Americans mistakenly assume Australian Rules football is rugby, footy may not be as obscure in America as you might think. In fact, there's a very good chance a group of amateur men and women are playing it in your city.

The non-profit United States Australian Football League (USAFL) has been around since 1996, played its first matches the next year and today boasts about three-dozen clubs across the country in multiple divisions. Some men's teams, like the Orange County (Calif.) Bombers and Austin Crows and women's clubs such as the Boston Lady Demons and New York Lady Magpies share nicknames with AFL clubs. Other USAFL clubs, such as the Minnesota Freeze, St. Petersburg Starfish, San Francisco Iron Maidens and Columbus Jilla-roos created completely original identities.

The USAFL season runs through the American spring and summer, with teams competing in an annual national tournament two weeks after the AFL Grand Final, in mid-October. Most teams are coached by Australian expats and players are a mix of people of varying ages, skill levels and experience, from both countries.

An American national men's team, the USA Revolution and a national women's club, USA Freedom, compete around the world in international tournaments, including the International Cup, in Melbourne. The next such event is scheduled for August 2017.