

Etching by artist Gustav Murtzel showing Aboriginal children playing football in 1857. Picture: Haddon Library, University of Cambridge.



New evidence on Aborigines and Aussie Rules

Story courtesy of Geelong Advertiser

By Roy Hay

THE footy season is done and dusted and trade week is behind us, so it is time for historians to put away the beanies and the scarves and get down to some serious research.

The debate about the origins of the game has died down a little but just the other day Ian Syson of Victoria University discovered a little gem while researching the early history of the round ball code in Australia.

In itself the material he discovered relates to an event which did not take place, but the implications are profound. It is one of the first pieces of contemporary evidence which links Aboriginal sportsmen to the game of football as played by the European migrants to this country.

Syson used the National Library of Australia's wonderful digitisation project, which has made research in 19th Century newspapers a completely new and rewarding experience. It enables searches for key words like football to be made with relative ease.

This time football turned up in a piece about cricket. Syson found an article about the Aboriginal cricketers who had been organised by the English cricketer, Charles Lawrence, and the nephew of a local squatter, William

Hayman, ahead of the first tour by an Australian team to England in 1868. They were on their way from Edenhope and Harrow in the western district to Geelong via Warrnambool.

On Saturday morning the party arrived at Trainors Hotel near Hamilton, where they were entertained to dinner by the host. A number of cricketers from Hamilton came out to meet them, with a view to inducing the blacks to play a game of football on Saturday afternoon; but Messrs Lawrence and Hayman declined, as the Hamiltonians had refused to meet them again on the cricket field. The troupe therefore passed through without making a call, as they were disappointed at the Hamilton Club not wishing to regain the laurels they lost two years since.

The article in which this extract appeared is in the Warrnambool Examiner on October 1, 1867. In 1988, Rex Harcourt and John Mulvaney had picked up the football reference and commented on it in *Cricket Walkabout: The Australian Aborigines in England*. But their take was somewhat different. Relying on an article in the *Hamilton Spectator* they argued lack of time made them decline an invitation to play the new fangled game of

football which Tom Wills had introduced a few years previously.

Leaving aside the question whether Tom Wills introduced football into Victoria, it looks like the Hamilton men having been thrashed at cricket in 1865 decided to get their own back by taking on the Aboriginal players at football. If that is the case then some of the western district Aborigines must have been at least familiar with the game and capable of putting up a good performance.

But the contribution to one issue simply throws up another. Tom Wills had been in Edenhope in November 1866 coaching the Aboriginal cricketers from the area in preparation for a match to be played at the Melbourne Cricket Ground. Did he teach them to play football in the white man's style while coaching them as cricketers, or was it the other way round?

Were the Aborigines naturals at the game already? In the summer of 1866-67 Wills played with the Aborigines when they toured Victoria and New South Wales, but by September 1867, however, Wills was no longer involved with the Aboriginal team, which had now been resurrected by Charles Lawrence for the tour to England in 1868. So Wills' influence on this particular group of cricketers and potential footballers, and theirs on him, remains a puzzle.

Football was booming in the Western District of Victoria in the 1860s. The Warrnambool club was started in 1861. Initially the style played was the old English game of football, but since the early rules of Australian football and the English game as codified in 1863 were quite similar it was not till some time later that a clear divergence emerged. Geelong was playing by its own rules in the early 1860s, so no doubt there were local variations in western Victoria.

There was a game at Cavendish, just north of Hamilton in 1867. The publican of McCallum's hostelry was at the centre of events on September 28. He entered into the spirit of things as captain of one side, but finding himself rather hot, indulged in a quiet swim in a small water hole. Several players followed suit by going in for regular headers, evidently to cool themselves. The match finished in a two-all draw and it was agreed that a football club should be started, although late in the season.

Another significance of the discovery of a very early invitation to an Aboriginal team to participate in a game of football is that the imperial archive, as Aboriginal scholars sometimes call material from newspapers and government records, can yield contemporary evidence of the origins and early development of modern sports and the possible links between Aboriginal games and these sports.