

GROUNDS FOR DISPUTE

A decade of disputation between the Victorian Football Association,
various municipal councils and their football clubs.

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Abbreviations

COM	Committee of Management
MCC	Melbourne City Council
MCG	Melbourne Cricket Ground
NMCG	North Melbourne Cricket Ground
NMFC	North Melbourne Football Club
PMC	Port Melbourne Council
PMCC	Port Melbourne Cricket Club
PMCRR	Port Melbourne Cricket and Recreation Reserve
PMFC	Port Melbourne Football Club
PMRR	Port Melbourne Recreation Reserve
VFA	Victorian Football Association
VFL	Victorian Football League

Conversions

Australia adopted decimal currency in 1966. The conversion rate of pounds, shillings and pence into dollars and cents was as follows: twelve pence made up one shilling, twenty shillings made up £1 and £1 equalled \$2.

GROUNDS FOR DISPUTE

PART 1 - UNDER NEW MANAGEMENT

Readers of *A Family Feud*,¹ will recall that the Port Melbourne Cricket Club's (PMCC) control of the Port Melbourne Cricket and Recreation Reserve (PMCRR), exercised through a government appointed Committee of Management (COM), had been gradually eroded over the three decades since 1886, when the Board of Land and Works gave the club permissive occupancy of the Reserve. Nevertheless, when the Victorian Football Association (VFA) resumed its competition in 1918 after a two year interval, the PMCC was still in control of the Reserve, the only concession gained by the Port Melbourne Football Club (PMFC) being minority representation on a sub committee set up to manage the Reserve during each football season.²

The Port Melbourne Council (PMC), which had opted for brokering a compromise between the warring clubs rather than acting on the result of a referendum that it had sponsored in 1912, and which called upon it to take control of the management of the Reserve, was closely monitoring the new arrangements.³

Events took a dramatic turn on the afternoon of 12 December 1918 when the grandstand was razed by a fire. The fire broke out 'in some unaccountable manner in the cricket club pavilion', and 'in less than half an hour the large wooden structure was reduced to a heap of charred and smouldering wood'. The fire brigade managed to save the press box and caretaker's cottage, both of which were close by and to the windward of the grandstand.⁴

The cost of replacing the stand, estimated at £750, far in excess of its insured value of £250, placed additional pressure on the PMCC in its struggle to retain control of the Reserve.⁵ Somewhat naively the club asked the PMC for a donation of £500 or a loan of £750, offering in return two seats on the COM. In addition the club asked the council to remove the stone-breaking depot at the corner of Raglan Street and Williamstown Road, a facility that had provided ammunition for successive generations of Port supporters intent on sending off opposition supporters. The idea was to replace the depot with an ornamental reserve that would beautify the approaches to the ground.⁶

Matters were complicated by the fact that the PMC was, at the time, actively seeking land for the erection of houses for soldiers returning from the war. There was a great deal of public sympathy for this initiative and the destruction of the grandstand provided an opportunity for those advocating the release of land to suggest that the sporting clubs vacate the Reserve and, with assistance from the council, re-establish themselves on land reclaimed when the old salt water lagoon was filled.⁷ Although the new location was more central and aesthetically more pleasing than the semi-industrial area surrounding the existing Reserve, reservations were held about whether there was sufficient land available at what was known locally as the Lagoon Oval for the needs of a senior football club.

The mayor, Dick Gill, who had been the strongest supporter of the PMFC at the council, called a public meeting to discuss the issue. The outcome was a narrow majority in favour of asking the council for a donation of £500 towards the cost of a new grandstand at the existing Reserve.⁸

Thomas Testro, the long serving president of the PMCC, doubtful that the council could, or would, find the money, took the precaution of enquiring whether the bank would extend overdraft facilities to the PMCC. The response was, not without a guarantee to set against the facility, something that the club could not provide. The club then considered issuing debentures, but decided against that idea over concerns that the debenture holders would not make their customary donation towards the running of the club.⁹

In the meantime the PMC had received advice from the government that it did not have the power to borrow money to use either as a subsidy, or as a loan to the COM unless it had control of the Reserve. The PMCC's offer of minority representation on the COM fell short of this requirement.¹⁰ Testro sought a meeting with the council but it was doomed to failure before it began. The PMCC was not prepared to cede control of the Reserve and the PMC's hands were constrained by the government's advice. The PMCC then announced in March 1919 that it intended to use the insurance from the old stand to build two new brick dressing rooms, claiming that a fine new stand would eventually rise above these rooms as donations were made.¹¹ It was a pipedream.¹²

The dressing rooms, with the temporary open seated 'Testro Stand' in front, were duly built in 1919 at a cost of £320.¹³ While the oval itself compared favourably with any in the competition the absence of a decent covered grandstand, combined with primitive sanitary conditions, was an embarrassment to the club at a time when it was on the verge of a successful decade, and drawing relatively large crowds. In 1923 the *South Melbourne Record*, which had increased its coverage of Port Melbourne's affairs following the demise of the *Port Melbourne Standard* in 1920, seized the opportunity to criticise the PMC over the condition of the Reserve. Ignoring the fact that the PMCC was responsible for the management of the Reserve, the *Record*, a strong supporter of the unwelcome overtures being made by the South Melbourne Council to the PMC for an amalgamation of the two councils, claimed that the parlous state of the PMCRR could be transformed into something 'just as attractive' as the South Melbourne Reserve by an amalgamated council.¹⁴ No one could deny the poor state of the Reserve, but blatantly motivated political criticism such as this from a hostile neighbour was never likely to influence the PMC.

The COM attempted to support the council by improving the sanitary conditions, including the construction of a new lavatory for ladies, however it was clear that the PMCC did not have the financial resources to do anything about erecting a new grandstand. On this matter all that the COM could do was to point out that in an endeavour to provide some shelter the PMCC had erected a small wooden stand at a cost of £250 to accommodate 500 spectators 'some years ago' while a second stand, 'only recently constructed, held 600 more'. These costs together with the £325 that it had spent on the erection of the two dressing rooms meant that there was no more money available.¹⁵

At the time the members of the COM were Councillor Owen Sinclair, former Councillor Arthur Hester, Thomas Testro, the president and Robert Murdoch, the secretary of the PMCC.¹⁶ Although still unrepresented in a formal sense, the interests of the PMFC were now receiving a more sympathetic response, as evidenced by the fact that the COM voted to allocate an amount of £75 over and above the amount due to it under the agreed formula.¹⁷

By April 1925 new grandstands were either planned or being built at several VFA grounds.¹⁸ This may have created a sense of civic embarrassment within the PMC for, after years of prevarication, the council suddenly decided to take some action over the management of the

Reserve. The Mayor, Patrick Murphy, Sinclair and the local MLA, James Murphy, requested that the government appoint a COM made up of members of the PMC. They also suggested that an additional strip of land one chain wide and 800 feet long be added to the south-western end of the Reserve.¹⁹ The council confirmed this request with a letter to the Secretary for Lands asking that steps be taken for control of the Reserve to be vested in the council and nominating in the meantime Councillors Thomas Smith and Edward Cremer to fill the two vacant positions on the COM arising from the death of Morrice and Hester.

The PMCC attempted to head off the council's move. It wrote to the Minister for Lands stating its case to remain as the controlling body for the Reserve and asking that he receive a deputation. The Minister instead received a deputation from the PMC. Here there was general agreement that control of the Reserve should be vested in the council. Sinclair, the only member of the COM present was concerned about the impact that this would have on the ageing Testro, who had devoted much of his life to the interests of the PMCC. He asked that 'out of respect for the Chairman – Mr. Testro – who had been heart and soul in the matter since its inception, nothing, with the exception of filling the vacancies with members of the council, should be done at present'. This course of action was agreed and Smith and Cremer were appointed members of the COM in July 1925, to continue in office so long as they remained members of the PMC.²⁰

Stubborn to the last, the PMCC made one more attempt to retain control of the Reserve. It again wrote to the Minister nominating two of its own members to fill the vacancies. There is no evidence to suggest that the club ever received a response. The PMCC, or, more accurately its president, Thomas Testro, was then finally forced to acknowledge that it was beyond the club's resources to finance the construction of a new grandstand, and to admit that it could no longer continue as manager of the Reserve. In December 1925 the COM met and agreed to the following resolution:

'That the Management and Control of the Port Melbourne Cricket Ground (sic) be vested in the Municipality of Port Melbourne'.

In May 1926 the PMC was finally appointed as the COM of the land permanently occupied by the PMCC and known as the PMCRR.²¹

In anticipation of its formal appointment the PMC adopted a recommendation by the COM that the city engineer prepare estimates for the erection of a new grandstand and other sundry improvements to the Reserve.²² James Murphy then advised the council that the Minister for Lands proposed to gazette a notice installing it as the controlling body for the Reserve, thus enabling it to proceed with the mooted improvements.²³

In June the engineer indicated it would be necessary to relocate the caretaker's cottage. The estimates indicated that a new grandstand to seat 1,500 people would cost £8,000, a new perimeter fence £1,000, a new caretaker's cottage £700, turnstiles, gates and press box £350 and alterations to the oval fence, new men's conveniences, new water service, re-arrangements to the embankments and improvements to the playing arena £1,500, making a grand total of nearly £12,000.²⁴

At its annual meeting in September 1926 the PMCC formally agreed to hand over control of the ground to the PMC free of compensation. In return the council passed a resolution granting the club free use of the ground during cricket seasons.²⁵ This gesture by the PMC was fleeting to say the least as three years later the PMCC made a grant to the PMC of £31.²⁶

Thomas Testro eventually died in office on Monday 29 September 1930, having completed 26 consecutive years as president of the club. He was 84 at the time of his death. Over 300 mourners attended his funeral.²⁷ In a curious twist of fate, he was predeceased by Owen Sinclair, whose somewhat premature death occurred in June 1927.²⁸ He was 64 at the time and, unlike Testro, did not live to see the foundation stone for the new grandstand laid on 12 November 1927.²⁹

When the PMC became the COM in 1926 the Reserve was still legally known as the PMCRR.³⁰ The word 'cricket' was not deleted from the title until 1947, when it became the Port Melbourne Recreation Reserve (PMRR). The 1874 Order was eventually revoked in October 1947 and a new Order made in December of the same year temporarily reserving what was now eight acres as a site for public recreation.³¹ A further Order permanently reserving the eight acres as a site for public recreation was made in October 1963.³² The PMC, through its nominees, remained the COM until the Kennett Government consigned the City of Port Melbourne into history in 1994.

PART 2 - A DECADE OF CONFLICT MANAGEMENT

After such a long period of unrest and controversy, it would be reasonable to anticipate that the future management of the Reserve would be relatively untroubled. However, as the final scenes of the bitter internecine dispute were being played out the seeds were being sown for another bitter and lengthy dispute over the Reserve. On this occasion the ground manager, now the PMC, was drawn into a bitter dispute with a body outside the municipality - the VFA. The catalyst was the second great depression to occur during the club's history.

When the PMFC competed in the final series in 1920 and '21, its semi-final games were played at the old East Melbourne ground on the site of the Jolimont railyards. This ground, the home of the East Melbourne Cricket Club, had also been home to the Essendon Football Club since 1882. When the land was resumed by the Railways Department the VFA was forced to find a new venue for its 1922 final series.³³ Although it was not a neutral ground, the VFA decided to play its finals at the North Melbourne Cricket Ground (NMCG), the home ground of one of its constituent clubs.³⁴ The finals were played there until 1925, when the North Melbourne Football Club (NMFC) became a member of the Victorian Football League (VFL).

Although the Melbourne City Council (MCC) was the ground manager of the NMCG, the VFA decided to find another venue for its finals series. In the face of strong criticism from the Brunswick Football Club, which had just opened a new grandstand at its home ground in Brunswick, the VFA announced its decision to play its 1925 final series at the Motordrome, a venue controlled by Melbourne Carnivals Ltd, a company run by the sporting entrepreneur John Wren.³⁵ The Motordrome, on the site of the old Olympic Park in Swan Street, was enclosed by a steeply banked motor and cycling track. The spectators were perched above the embankment looking down and well removed from the action below. Watching the football must have been almost a surreal experience. In a bid to cement his relationship with the VFA Wren staged an interesting program of entertainment for the crowds, the highlight being an attempt by the renowned amateur cyclist R. W. (Fatty) Lamb to set a new 20 mile motor paced record, complemented by novelty car races with women passengers, followed by a motor car race for Baby Austin Sevens.³⁶ As the crowds were comparable with the preceding year when the finals

were held at the NMCG, the VFA was no doubt satisfied with the arrangements as the 1926 and 1927 final series were held at the same venue.³⁷

Unrest Begins

At the conclusion of the 1927 final series the growing unrest among the municipal councils that had outlaid considerable amounts of ratepayers money on the development and upkeep of VFA grounds bubbled to the surface. It was a matter of considerable interest to the PMC, as it had only just committed itself to the expenditure of £12,000 on the PMCR, including the erection of a new grandstand. Other councils had made similar financial commitments and they were not impressed by the fact that profits from the VFA finals were going into the pocket of a private entrepreneur when they could have been returned to the councils.

In 1927 the VFA competition comprised ten clubs: four in the northern suburbs, namely Brunswick, Coburg, Preston and Northcote; two inner southern clubs, being Port Melbourne and Prahran; Camberwell in the eastern suburbs; Brighton and Williamstown on either side of the bay, and Geelong. Yarraville replaced Geelong in 1928. In 1929 when Oakleigh and Sandringham were admitted, the VFA became a stable 12-team competition.

The four northern suburban clubs were clustered together, thereby creating a strong core of spectator support for VFA football. It was mainly the councils of these clubs, together with the PMC, that had spent significant funds on the VFA grounds located within their municipalities. It is not surprising therefore that the Coburg council took the initiative and called a meeting of representatives of the nine Melbourne based councils with VFA clubs to discuss the venues chosen by the VFA for its final series.³⁸

The VFA appears to have read the warning signs arising from this meeting and Cr. Herbert Edwards was able to report to the PMC that the VFA was keen to use VFA grounds for the finals rather than see the profits go to the private operator of the Motordrome or to the MCC.³⁹ True to its word, the 1928 final series was shared between Coburg, Port and Brunswick, which hosted the grand final. In the meantime some of the councils revealed an entrepreneurial streak of their own. The Preston and Port councils courted Australian Speedways for motorcar racing, while the PMC also let the ground for a multitude of uses, including senior and junior football, industrial football, senior and junior cricket, professional foot-running, baseball, band practice and for meetings.⁴⁰ Everyone seemed satisfied with the new arrangements.

When the VFA announced the venues for the 1929 final series it revealed that it was not necessarily as captive to the expectations of the councils as the 1928 arrangements seemed to indicate. The grand final, and the right of challenge final if needed (it was) were to be held at the Melbourne Cricket Ground (MCG).⁴¹ The prestige of having been granted access to the MCG mollified to some extent the irritation of the councils over the revenue lost from a local grand final, even though the remaining finals were scheduled at either Brunswick, Coburg or Northcote. However the councils should have been alerted now to the fact that the VFA was keen to 'showcase' its grand final at a central, neutral venue, and was prepared to ignore the wishes of the councils on this matter. On a more parochial level. the PMC was incensed that it had been overlooked for a final, and let the VFA know about its disappointment in no uncertain terms.⁴²

On the eve of the 1930 season the NMFC made a surprise bid for the final series, offering to accept 5% of the gate in comparison with the usual 10% charged by the ground managers of the VFA club grounds.⁴³ When the time came for the VFA to make a decision it was revealed that as a result of the North Melbourne offer several ground managers had reduced their asking price. Northcote and Williamstown matched the 5% offered by North Melbourne; Brunswick, Oakleigh and Preston offered 6%, while the offers from Coburg, Prahran, Port Melbourne and Yarraville (the Footscray City Council) remained at 10%. The Brighton offer was 'not available', while the Camberwell council did not respond. It is difficult to comprehend the degree to which there was any collusion between the councils and their respective football clubs over what had become a very political issue. In the case of Port Melbourne, however, it is worth noting that Tom Griffin was both president of the PMFC and Mayor of the City.

After the Port Melbourne delegate, Walter Power, had unsuccessfully moved that the finals be played at Port Melbourne, Brunswick and Coburg, an exhaustive ballot was taken. Brunswick, and Northcote were deleted in successive ballots before North Melbourne won the final ballot with 11 votes. Coburg had gained 5 votes and Port Melbourne 2. As a result, the VFA opted to play the finals at North Melbourne and declared Brunswick and Coburg as the reserve grounds.⁴⁴

The response was swift. The PMC passed a motion condemning the VFA decision to overlook VFA grounds where councils had outlaid large amounts of money on ground improvements.⁴⁵ More ominously, it indicated that the VFA ground managers would 'have to act to protect their interests'.⁴⁶

It was clear that Griffin had devised a plan of action to place pressure on the VFA to recognise the desires of the ground managers. Firstly, the Port Melbourne Citizen's Progress Association announced its support for the PMC's protest to the VFA. It should be noted that Walter Power was one of two vice presidents of the Association and Councillor Harry Southward was its secretary.⁴⁷ Griffin then announced that he intended to move that the PMC call a conference of interested parties to form a Municipal Football Association with a view to 'remedying the situation next year'. He received immediate support for this initiative from the Coburg council.⁴⁸

It was then announced by the PMC that it intended to advertise for 'other sports' to use the PMCRR at the finish of the VFA's home and away season, and it would therefore not be available for junior football finals played under the auspices of the VFA due to the VFA's decision to play its finals at North Melbourne.⁴⁹ The VFA was clearly stung by the turn of events and indicated its willingness to meet with representatives of the conference convened by the council in December 1930.⁵⁰

A New Player Emerges

In May 1931 the PMC moved to convene a meeting of all municipalities controlling grounds on which VFL and VFA football was being played, with a view to forming an association of ground managers (GMA).⁵¹ The two Councillors primarily responsible for this initiative were Harry Southward, the PMFC treasurer since 1928, and Tom Griffin, who had been president since 1929. Southward a South African immigrant employed by the Baptist Church, and Griffin, a local chemist who hailed from Lancefield, a rural community to the north west of Melbourne, had embraced their new community with relish. Typically, as outsiders they were more sensitive to criticism of the suburb than the more hardened locals, and on this occasion they

were in the vanguard of the fight with the VFA, leading the council's strategy, and ensuring that the football club remained supportive, but at arm's length.

There is no evidence to suggest that any of the municipal councils that managed VFL grounds participated; however there was strong support for the initiative from the four VFA municipalities in the northern suburbs. While the PMC welcomed this support, it was nevertheless suspicious about the influence that these clubs wielded within the VFA. It would appear from decisions made by the VFA over the venue for its finals that there was a narrow majority that favoured a central, neutral ground, such as the Motordrome or the NMCG. This preference had only been reversed in the face of growing resentment from the inner suburban councils that had spent a lot of money on their grounds. From the Port Melbourne perspective, once the decision was taken in 1928 to use VFA grounds, a clear preference had emerged in favour of the northern suburban grounds, in particular Brunswick and Coburg.⁵²

The resentment at this preference emerged soon after the Brunswick, Coburg and Port councils were advised that their grounds should be reserved for the 1931 finals of both the VFA and the Victorian Junior Football Association.⁵³ The VFA responded, claiming, quite reasonably, that as the majority of its support was located in the inner northern suburbs, where three of the four clubs clustered together – namely Brunswick, Coburg and Northcote – it was only logical that these grounds should be used. The PMFC opted to leave the matter in the hands of the PMC, a small distinction given the personnel involved. The PMC responded by advising the VFA that the PMCRR would be let next year (1932) to the highest bidder, and that the VFA would be invited to lodge a tender.⁵⁴ Once again the VFA had reacted to external pressure, deciding to award the grand final of both competitions to the PMCRR. It was the first VFA grand final to be played at the Reserve.

It was not a good year for the VFA. Not only was it under siege and seemingly beholden, at least on the issue of grounds, to a new and powerful lobby group in the form of the GMA, but it seemed to read into this movement the seeds of another breakaway movement by the eight strongest clubs into a new Municipal Football Association (MFA). The spectre of 1896 obviously still hung over the VFA ranks. These concerns were raised with the club delegates at the conclusion of the season but all of the delegates denied any knowledge of such a move. However, S. Allen, a Coburg delegate, did admit that some club secretaries had had a 'preliminary meeting to discuss reform', but he denied that there was any question of disloyalty to the VFA.⁵⁵ The degree to which many of its clubs seemed to be beholden to their municipal council, whether willingly or not, together with the strong hand held by these councils and their willingness to use it, was clearly unsettling the VFA.

In March 1932 the VFA, aware that the GMA had met recently, asked representatives of the councils involved to meet with its Executive to discuss the rental charges asked by the councils for the use of their grounds.⁵⁶ There is no information available about the outcome of this meeting. However, as the time for making a decision about the 1932 finals series approached, it emerged that the VFA had not only invited Carnivals Ltd. to quote for the use of the Motordrome again, but it had also approached the Trustees of the Exhibition Building for the use of the Exhibition ground, located on the northern side of the Exhibition Building, as well as the ground managers for the Carlton, North Melbourne and Richmond grounds.⁵⁷ This action infuriated the GMA councils, Coburg accusing the VFA of a breach of faith, while the Brunswick council announced that it would ignore the VFA and let its ground to the Metropolitan Amateur Association for its final series. Inevitably the rumours of a breakaway

movement gathered pace, with Preston, Northcote, Brunswick, Coburg, Prahran and Port being named as the likely defectors.⁵⁸

While it was clearly in the interests of the GMA councils for these sorts of rumours to circulate, the *Age* at least was aware of the distinction between the councils and their football clubs, whose delegates were part of the decision making process of the VFA, observing that there was some dissention around the VFA table between the inner northern clubs, and those clubs wanting a central venue. There were concerns, it said, that the 'weaker clubs were having too much say'. It was a vexed question for the VFA clubs, as there was no doubt about the strong level of support for the VFA competition in these areas.⁵⁹ When the VFA next met Allen, the Coburg delegate moved that the finals be played at the Coburg ground, while Walter Power moved that they be played at Coburg and Port. The delegates were clearly weary and uncertain about how to deal with the conflicting interests, the *Age* reporting that the discussion was deferred after a 'rambling debate'.⁶⁰

At this same meeting, another confusing, albeit related thread to the issue materialised. Melbourne was now in the depths of a devastating depression and football crowds were down as men and women had to make stark choices about how to spend what little money they had. Players were moving to wherever they could earn some money by playing football, and clubs, aware that to hold them could make a difference about whether a family could eat, were loathe to stand in their way. The VFA was concerned that the standard of its product was declining as a result of the loss of these players. Tom Griffin, who stated bluntly that the VFA could not hold its players because they could not match the VFL payments, moved that the VFA appoint a sub-committee to examine the matter.⁶¹ There was more to come from this initiative. For the moment this was a diversion. The main game was still where to play the final series.

The Coburg council was still proactive about its claims and it sought the support of the PMC for another meeting of the GMA over the approach by the VFA to 'outside bodies'. In the meantime the PMC had considered the question of calling tenders for the use of the PMCRR regardless of the needs of the VFA.⁶² At the same time the PMC announced that it had secured the agreement of the Preston council that it would consider taking action if the VFA selected non-VFA grounds for the finals.⁶³

In the end the VFA cracked under the pressure. Although claiming that it not broken any agreement by approaching the proprietors of other grounds, it had decided to use neutral VFA grounds for its final series, nominating Coburg and Port Melbourne as its preferred options.⁶⁴ The agreed rent was set at 6% of the gross proceeds.⁶⁵

Then, like two drunks who keep finding another reason to continue their fight, the GMA and VFA immediately squared off for another dispute. Within two weeks of announcing its decision to play the finals at VFA grounds, the VFA announced that it intended to pass on to the public the increase in the government's amusement tax and, as a result, admission to its games would increase from sixpence to seven pence. While it should be acknowledged that the VFA had every right to set admission charges for its own product, it was astounding, given the recent history of its relationship with the ground managers, that it should embark on this course without consultation. Perhaps, having just caved in to the pressure exerted by the GMA over the venue for the finals, it felt the need to show some independence. If so, it was not a sensible issue to choose, given that the PMC, and, no doubt other councils as well, were deeply concerned at the level of poverty emerging among its citizens in the middle of the depression.

Griffin immediately announced that he resented the lack of consultation and foreshadowed a challenge from the GMA. The Brunswick council expressed its disgust at the VFA's decision and reaffirmed its decision to make its ground available to outside bodies.⁶⁶ And *The Age* once more raised the spectre of a breakaway competition initiated by the GMA councils, in particular the councils hosting inner northern VFA clubs.⁶⁷

When the VFA met with the GMA to discuss the selection of the grounds to be used for the finals, de Chene, the Coburg representative, sought an undertaking from the VFA that it would use VFA grounds as a matter of policy. In response the VFA denied that it only had resorted to VFA grounds for the current year because other venues were not available, and indicated its concern that should a team like Camberwell qualify for the finals it would not make sense for it to have to play at a venue like Coburg. The reasonableness of this point prompted the formation of yet another sub-committee, the brief for this one being to examine the case for a neutral, central venue for the finals. Griffin was appointed a member of this sub-committee, as well as the one looking into the problem of losing players to other competitions – particularly the VFL.⁶⁸

When the two bodies met again they managed to reach an agreement that the GMA councils would impose a fee of 6% of the gross proceeds for finals, even though the Coburg council had previously asked the VFA for 10%. However, suspicions lingered among the GMA members that the VFA was now keen to use the Exhibition ground as a central venue for its finals.⁶⁹

Readers will recall that in November 1931, when rumours of a breakaway competition first emerged, the delegates were called together by the VFA and an assurance of loyalty was sought. At the time the Coburg delegate admitted that some secretaries had met to discuss the need for reform of the competition, not to canvass a breakaway. In support of this it was also reported that at the meeting the Oakleigh delegate had raised the possibility that moves were afoot to drop Sandringham and Camberwell because of lack of local support, Brighton due to poor accommodation at its quaint seaside ground in South Road, and Yarraville 'because Footscray was too strong'.⁷⁰

The structure of the competition was under discussion within the clubs, even though the catalyst was undoubtedly the GMA's push for the use of its grounds for the finals. Griffin's position as a member of the two key sub committees placed him at the heart of the VFA's policy formulation and he did not like what he heard, as, seemingly out of the blue, the PMFC was threatened with expulsion. It seems that in the course of discussions at a meeting of the VFA's Welfare sub-committee, 'a northern suburbs club' suggested that Port Melbourne should be one of the two clubs being considered for exclusion from the competition.⁷¹

Clearly Griffin had a number of enemies among the delegates, many of whom blamed him for his organisation of the GMA 'which forced the VFA to use its own grounds when they preferred the Exhibition Oval'. Griffin reported the matter to the PMC, claiming that the move was a 'direct insult to the City of Port Melbourne', which had the VFA's most central ground; and as a result, the PMC decided to refer the matter to its legislative committee.⁷²

Support came from Hec de Lacy, a prominent sporting writer with the *Sporting Globe*. He seized on the startling news and immediately wrote a passionate article in defence of the club, claiming that it was a victim of hostility from some clubs.⁷³ In the middle of this controversy the VFA's Welfare Committee visited Port to satisfy itself that the ground and its appointments were

satisfactory for the staging of a finals match. The members apparently had no cause for complaint.⁷⁴

Unfazed by the storm whirling around it, the VFA proceeded to consider not only the merits of holding future finals, but also for the VFA match of the day to be held at a genuine central venue, independent of any club. Griffin, as a delegate of the PMFC, indicated his opposition to the proposal, adding as he reached for his other hat, that the GMA would need more information about the proposal before expressing an opinion. Trainor, a delegate from the Northcote Football Club, then gave a notice of motion to rescind the previous motion, already agreed to, that the grand final be played at either Coburg or Port Melbourne.⁷⁵ Clearly, unlike the situation at Port Melbourne, there was a difference of opinion between the Northcote council, a staunch supporter of the GMA, and its football club.

As it transpired, the finals were played at Port and Coburg – the latter club hosting the grand final – leaving the Welfare sub-committee to continue its deliberations about the structure of the competition; in particular, whether to delete two teams or divide the competition into two groups.⁷⁶

As 1933 opened, the community was still in the grip of a depression so deep that it seemed to have no horizon. Harry Southward had resigned from his formal position as treasurer of the PMFC but certainly not his ongoing interest in its fortunes. Five years as treasurer of an organisation in such a cruel economic climate was surely long enough for any one person to bear. Moreover, he had replaced Tom Griffin as the Mayor of the City in September 1932, a move which would have given no comfort to the VFA.⁷⁷

Southward wasted no time in demonstrating that he would continue the fight on behalf of the PMC, reporting to council in April that he had carried two motions before the GMA, one opposing the proposal for a neutral central ground for the finals and the other opposing any move by the VFA to increase admission charges. He added that the VFA was again seeking a meeting with the GMA to discuss these issues.⁷⁸ Admission charges were obviously on the table as far as the VFA was concerned, as the VFL announced that it proposed to lift its charges from one shilling (grandstand) and sixpence (outer reserve) to 1/4½ and ten pence respectively.⁷⁹

Clearly the VFA, and for that matter the VFL, had every right to set whatever admission charges they felt reasonable. However, municipal councils were at the coalface of public misery at this time and it was for this reason that the PMC at least decided to oppose the move on behalf of the men and women in their community who had precious little relief in their lives apart from following the fortunes of the local football club.⁸⁰ Moreover, in these socially troubled times it had already been demonstrated that men were prepared to take direct action where they felt aggrieved. In the previous season when Port visited Coburg to replay a game that had been abandoned after a successful protest from Port that the bell had been rung inadvertently five minutes before time at the end of the first quarter, 200 men broke down the fence and entered the ground free as a protest at having to pay an entrance fee for the replay. There were similar scenes at the Sandringham ground on the same day.⁸¹ In the face of these protests the VFA was clearly courting trouble, lending credibility to the councils' stance over the move to increase the admission price.

The serious nature of the dispute was underlined when *The Age* reported that there was a genuine threat to the VFA's opening round in 1933, due to take place on Easter Monday, 17 April.⁸² Southward again consulted the PMC, concerned that the threat to the ground's

availability could have serious consequences for the PMFC. The council was resolute in its view that it was unthinkable for the VFA to increase prices when wages were being halved, and it resolved to advertise the availability of the PMCRR in the event that the VFA decided to boycott its own grounds. Readers should note that 10 of the 12 grounds were council controlled.⁸³ On this occasion it was the GMA that pulled back from the brink, a majority of the councils opting for a deferral of one month. As a result the VFA opening round went ahead at the usual VFA grounds, with the increased admission charges in place.⁸⁴ However it was a truce, not a capitulation as the more militant councils withdrew to consider their position.

There is no doubt that the PMC, through Griffin and Southward, was a driving force within the GMA. The Preston council supported the PMC's stance on what was now two issues of dispute – increased admission charges and a central neutral ground – while the Coburg Football Club, fearful of losing the use of its ground, supported the position adopted by its council. Interestingly, although the Northcote council supported the GMA, the Northcote Football Club, through its delegate Trainor, supported a central ground.⁸⁵ On this basis, it is hard to resist the temptation to conclude that the Northcote Football Club was the 'northern suburbs club' referred to by Griffin as the club calling for the expulsion of the PMFC from the VFA. Griffin had also said that the club concerned was not kindly disposed towards the PMFC. As the two clubs were, at the time, in the middle of a long and violent feud, one that lasted for most of the 1930s, the case against Northcote is irresistible. Meanwhile the VFA was pressing ahead with plans to play a 'match of the day' as well as the final series at a central venue, the attention now being focussed on the Motordrome.⁸⁶

At this point in the dispute it is reasonable to assume that the main thrust within the GMA was coming from the Port Melbourne, Brunswick, Coburg, Preston, Northcote and Williamstown councils. This alignment amounted to six votes out of ten, the number of councils with VFA grounds. The situation is not so clear when it comes to the clubs and their delegates. The Port Melbourne delegates were staunchly behind their council. It could hardly be otherwise given that Griffin and Southward were the delegates for most of the time that the dispute festered. The same could probably be said for the delegates of the clubs that represented the above municipalities, except for Northcote, which had already been revealed as supportive of the VFA. The fact that the VFA was staunchly proceeding on a course of action which was opposed by the GMA suggests that the remaining clubs supported their parent body. That would certainly be the case for the Oakleigh, Camberwell, Brighton and Sandringham delegates, whose clubs stood to gain most from a neutral central venue. The unknowns, both council and club, were Prahran and Yarraville, whose council was Footscray, now represented in the VFL by the Footscray Football Club.

I have already said that the dispute was taking place in the shadow of a devastating depression. In Port Melbourne, the Labor-dominated council was heavily influenced by the struggle of the working class men and women that they overwhelmingly represented. It was natural that it would oppose a measure such as increased admission charges for one of the few pleasures in life available. It was also duty bound to ensure that its assets, such as the PMCRR, returned the maximum rent possible, so as to minimise the drain on its scarce resources. It could not be seen to stand by and watch money that could be returned to the municipality go into the pockets of already rich sporting entrepreneurs such as John Wren, the Proprietor of Carnivals Limited.

It seems to me no coincidence that the other councils supporting the objectives of the GMA also had a Labor majority. That said, it seems to follow as night follows day that the opposing councils were generally speaking from conservative voting electorates with non-Labor councils.

The position adopted by the Prahran and Footscray councils in this dispute would be interesting to know.

What we do know is that in May 1933 O'Connor, a Prahran delegate, moved, and Hocking, an Oakleigh delegate, seconded a motion that was supported by the Northcote delegate Trainor, that the VFA sign an eight-year agreement with Carnivals Limited for the use of the Motordrome. The motion was carried 8 votes to 3, the dissenting votes coming from the Coburg, Preston and Port Melbourne delegates. The Brunswick Football Club was not represented at the meeting, but sent a letter opposing the motion. Work began immediately on upgrading the Motordrome, now known as Olympic Park.⁸⁷

The extent to which the position of both sides had become entrenched could be seen when the VFA announced that it proposed to reach an agreement with Carnivals Ltd. to use Olympic Park from 1933 to 1940 from the last Saturday in April to the last Saturday in October. Under the terms of the agreement the VFA would play 22 first grade matches at the ground as well as at least two semi-finals and two finals.⁸⁸

The VFA's decision was a body blow to the six councils that had led the battle on behalf of their residents. The PMC persuaded the GMA to defer any action for a month, as it was concerned that the PMFC could become a scapegoat within the VFA.⁸⁹ However, it took its own unilateral action, causing something of a sensation by denying the club the use of its ground for practice. The club practiced on Fisherman's Bend while the council threatened to close the ground.⁹⁰

The serious escalation of the dispute prompted J. J. Liston, the president of the VFA, to enunciate the four alternatives for the future of the VFA. They were:

- a) becoming a second division to the VFL with promotion and relegation,
- b) do nothing and just carry on,
- c) declare itself as a purely amateur body,
- d) throw in its lot with Rugby or Soccer.

He dismissed the first alternative on the basis that the VFL regarded its clubs as 'untouchable'. He also rejected the second alternative on the basis that the players would be poorly paid, if at all. The remaining alternatives did not appear to be worthy of comment.⁹¹

The situation had now reached a stalemate. The GMA complained that the dividends its councils received from football were so low that they barely covered the cost of interest payments on the cost of improvements carried out on the various grounds, yet they continued to oppose the VFA's increased charges.⁹² For its part the VFA stated that it was tired of the GMA's 'pinpricks' and would not buckle in the face of its threats.⁹³

When the PMC received a request from the VFA that it confirm the availability of the PMCRR on and after Saturday 17 June at the new prices fixed by the VFA, the council did so with the proviso that the admission charges would revert to the previous level as requested by the GMA 'as from next Saturday', June 24, when the PMFC was due to play a home game. The council then endorsed the stance taken by its delegates to the GMA, and empowered them to act as they saw fit in a forthcoming meeting with the VFA.⁹⁴ The council was clearly determined not to give way on either of the two issues at stake, namely admission charges and a neutral central ground.

Presumably the VFA's request to the PMC had been made to all of the councils with VFA grounds, as an announcement was made that the Preston, Coburg, Brunswick, Northcote, Port Melbourne and Williamstown councils had denied the VFA the use of their grounds for the round set down for 17 June. The VFA acted quickly and the round went ahead with two games scheduled for grounds supported by GMA councils, Coburg and Preston, transferred to the grounds of their opponents, Camberwell and Sandringham respectively, where the councils were more sympathetic to the VFA.

The Age roundly criticised what it considered to be a selfish and highhanded approach by the GMA, expressing its support for the VFA's push for a central ground. It also claimed that the general view was that the GMA was not really opposed to the increased charges introduced by the VFA, but had chosen to oppose the VFA on it in the hope that should it be successful it would pave the way for a victory over the VFA on the issue that really concerned them, the central ground.

The GMA responded to the transfer of the two matches by placing a ban on the use of the Coburg and Preston grounds by the two football clubs. Coburg was forced to make other arrangements for training while Northcote, whose ground was also closed, trained at the ground of the VFL club Fitzroy. The Preston council immediately announced that its ground was available to the VFA, effectively breaking ranks with the GMA. For its part the PMC, although concerned that the PMFC could suffer from the decision, announced that it could not agree to increased prices when men's wages were falling and that, as a consequence, it had no option other than to remain loyal to the GMA. It closed the ground to the PMFC again, forcing it to train on Fisherman's Bend. It also announced that it strongly resented the Preston council over its backdown.

This attack was met with a stinging response by a clearly divided Preston council. The council claimed that it had agreed to send three delegates to a conference of municipalities controlling grounds on which VFA football was played, but there had no mention of this in correspondence from the GMA secretary, Town Clerk of the City of Port Melbourne and former Port player, Syd Anderson. Cr. Jones announced that while the council was opposed to the VFA's increased admission charges as well as its proposal for a neutral, central venue, a majority of the council was opposed to denying the Preston Football Club the use of its ground. In defence of its position he claimed that the Preston Football Club had a legal agreement with the council to use the ground for the 1933 season, and council had no intention of breaking the agreement. Two of the three council representatives on the GMA, Crs Adams and Mott had, according to Jones, voted to close the ground without the authority or knowledge of the majority of the council. The third representative, Cr. Norris, aware of the intentions of the other two, had decided not to attend the GMA meeting. Followed the statement from Jones, Crs. Adams and Mott resigned their position as delegates to the GMA, being replaced by Crs. Jones and Swan.

Liston went on to the attack in the columns of the VFA-friendly *Age*, denouncing the GMA over what he called its dictatorial stance and its refusal to agree to independent arbitration on the issues. The GMA changed its mind and called for independent arbitration on the question of admission charges.⁹⁵

When the Minister for Lands, Albert Dunstan, announced his agreement to arbitrate the dispute, the GMA opened all of its grounds to the VFA at the new increased charges. The Minister then announced that pending his decision the VFA's higher charges should stand, but that the VFA and the GMA should look at the way the gate takings were distributed. As a result the VFA

announced that it was prepared to give the GMA councils an additional penny per person. The GMA argued in response that the increased prices would result in a fall in attendance and therefore less revenue to distribute it the GMA.⁹⁶ The Minister then announced his decision in favour of the VFA. Although unhappy with the outcome, the GMA had no choice other than accept the decision of the arbitrator, and the dispute over admission prices ended there.⁹⁷

As this dispute was coming to a conclusion, a reminder was given that the other half of the dispute was still alive. On 26 June the Northcote Football Club played its home game against Williamstown at the Motordrome.⁹⁸ The game attracted the smallest crowd for the round and the poor gate of £8 each represented a loss to both clubs.⁹⁹ It was a small victory for the GMA as the experiment was not repeated.

Nevertheless the final series was held at Olympic Park, where the aggregate attendance figure of 15,000 for the first three finals was well below the figures for 1931 (26,000) and 1932 (17,000 for only two games). However, the grand final attendance for 1933 of 12,000 was better than the 10,000 crowd for 1931 when the game was played at the PMCRR, and 9,000 in 1932 when the game was played at Coburg. Because of the variable factors involved, such as the relative drawing powers of the teams involved and the variable weather, caution should be used in drawing any definite conclusion about the relative merits of the neutral central venue as opposed to GMA grounds. However, it's reasonable to say that the neutral central venue was less successful than the VFA might have hoped.

The two bodies met again after the 1933 final series and agreed on nothing. Liston again went on to the attack, claiming that municipalities had no right to interfere in the running of the VFA and its policy of a central ground, asserting that the VFA was justified in attempting to accommodate the patrons who lived in the outer suburbs. At the same time the rumours of a breakaway Municipal Football Association were still being circulated, this time with Williamstown, Liston's own club replacing Prahran in the chosen six.¹⁰⁰

The GMA responded by indicating that it intended to take a stand over the further use of Olympic Park, following a meeting at which the Brunswick, Preston, Northcote, Coburg, Williamstown and Camberwell councils were represented. It is not clear from the report whether the Camberwell council had actually joined the main protagonists or whether it attended the meeting and opposed the decision.¹⁰¹ The position of the Oakleigh council was however in the public domain, it having indicated in August that it had rejected affiliation with the GMA.¹⁰²

Griffin and Southward reported back to the PMC on the GMA meeting, indicating that the GMA was still strongly opposed to the VFA's agreement with Carnival's Limited for a central ground at the expense of VFA council grounds. More ominously, they reported that the GMA had decided to call Liston's bluff with what was perhaps a bluff of its own, namely that unless a satisfactory agreement was reached with the VFA by 21 December 1933 arrangements would be made to form a 'new body' which would have the sole right to use the council grounds. The VFA 's response was to confer with its arch-enemy, the VFL, seeking assistance in making alternative arrangements for grounds for the 1934 VFA season. Liston asserted that the VFA would not cave in to the GMA demands.¹⁰³

The VFA then announced the outcome of its discussions with the VFL. The two previously hostile bodies had agreed as follows:

1. The League and Association guarantee each others grounds by imposing disqualification on players of either body, or affiliated bodies, playing football on such grounds except under the control of the League or Association.
2. The League and Association shall not grant affiliation to any body formed to control football on any such ground which may be withdrawn from the control of either body.
3. The law in regard to the transfer of players between VFL and VFA to be terminated forthwith.
4. The Association to adopt the laws of the Australian National game of football as adopted by the Australian National Football Council.
5. An agreement covering the above points and all other matters of difference existing between the League and Association to be executed forthwith to cover a period of three years.

The *Record* took the view that the agreement strengthened the hand of the VFL in its dealings with the VFA. In effect the price of securing the co-operation of the VFL in the VFA's dispute with the GMA was that the ban on the transfer of players had been lifted, therefore making it easier for the financially powerful VFL clubs to poach the best players from the VFA clubs, and that the VFA was now obliged to play under rules set effectively by the VFL.¹⁰⁴

Fortified by the agreement with the VFL, the secretary of the VFA, R. Keon-Cohen, wrote to the GMA at the beginning of 1934 stating that the VFA 'refused to comply with the ultimatum of the GMA that the use of Olympic Park as a central ground should be abandoned' and that it would not repudiate its contract with the proprietors of Olympic Park' nor would it 'consent to compromise its honour even if the GMA's threat (of a breakaway competition) was carried into effect'. The letter concluded with the statement that the VFA in future have nothing to do with the GMA.¹⁰⁵ In response the GMA reaffirmed that individual ground managers would no longer negotiate separately with the VFA but would only act through the GMA.¹⁰⁶

The GMA, under the chairmanship of Cr. J Green, a Northcote Councillor, then did two things. It sought a meeting with the body responsible for the management of VFL grounds with the obvious intention of acquainting its members with the GMA's cause. It also resolved that it would only negotiate with the VFA or any municipal council on the terms of its demands on the VFA. It also decided to notify those VFA clubs using GMA council grounds that the grounds would not be available to them for the coming season.¹⁰⁷ The latter move had the support of the Port Melbourne, Brunswick, Camberwell, Coburg, Northcote, Preston and Williamstown councils.¹⁰⁸ As a result the PMC resolved on 13 February 1934 to accept a recommendation from the COM for the PMCRR that the PMFC be informed 'that the Port Melbourne ground will not be available for the forthcoming season'.¹⁰⁹

The VFA was now in the position where it could only be certain of having access to five grounds, those used by the Brighton, Oakleigh, Prahran, Sandringham and Yarraville football clubs. The Camberwell council had moved over into the GMA camp. The VFA immediately began negotiations with the ground managers for the VFL grounds at Richmond and Fitzroy, the proprietors of the Exhibition Oval and the Showgrounds, as well as suburban grounds in Heidelberg, Caulfield, Sunshine and Fairfield. At the same time the PMC advertised the availability of its ground for Saturday sport, a move which resulted immediately in an application for permission to use the PMCRR for season 1934 from the secretary of the Royal Caledonian Soccer Club.¹¹⁰ The prospect of a normal VFA season was decidedly bleak as the VFA also announced its intention to 'bring in other clubs to fill the gaps', while the clubs using GMA grounds met to consider their position.¹¹¹

The Age rallied in support of the VFA, claiming that the GMA had lost credibility among its supporters by continually shifting ground in the face of concessions offered by the VFA. It claimed firstly, that the GMA had offered to compensate the VFA clubs for any loss occurring as a result of games played at the proposed central venue. After a rejection by the GMA, based on the view that there was no limit on the number of games that would be played at the central venue, the VFA countered by stating that no club would be expected to play more than two games at the central venue. Having had this overture rejected by the GMA, which claimed that there was a principle at stake in turning its back on the VFA grounds the VFA made a further concession that no home and away games would be played at the central venue. This was also rejected by the GMA.¹¹²

At the next meeting of the GMA a proposal was put on the table that took most delegates by surprise. It was that the VFA should abandon its plan to play 20 home and away games at the central venue and in response the ground managers would offer all VFA grounds for the finals free of charge for two years, and thereafter at a fee of 6% of the gross takings, such agreement to run for a period of 10 years. A prolonged and at times bitter debate followed. In the end it was not possible for a unanimous position to be reached, however it was agreed to put the offer to the VFA. Some representatives noted that this action would come as a surprise to the councils that had supported the formation of the GMA and some were unlikely to agree to the making their grounds available for the finals free of charge when revenue could be obtained from other sources to help defray the capital outlay. Another problem was that the GMA could only speak for seven of the 12 VFA grounds. Doubt was also expressed whether the VFA would accept any form of charity at the expense of the ratepayers of so many suburban municipalities when it was a professional sporting body.¹¹³

To date the VFA clubs whose councils were at the core of the GMA had been largely silent although it was clear from reports of the delegates meetings at the VFA that the Northcote football club opposed its council's position on the GMA, and was firmly in the VFA's camp. Also, there is no doubt that the PMFC had placed itself in the hands of its council. The position of the other clubs was not known, the only conclusion that can be drawn is that they were supportive of their council, willingly or otherwise. The GMA's less than enthusiastic offer resulted in a rift between those clubs.

An unknown club apparently called a meeting of the seven clubs involved. According to the sources that leaked the information to *The Age* the purpose of the meeting was to discuss the whole situation. Some clubs learnt that the meeting was in fact called to discuss the possibility of forming a breakaway competition. When this information became known the meeting was cancelled. Apparently unaware of the cancellation, delegates from the Preston, Northcote and Camberwell clubs turned up only to find that their colleagues from Port Melbourne, Williamstown, Brunswick and Coburg had cancelled the meeting. It is reasonable to deduce from this the position of the seven clubs regarding the dispute. Northcote's position was already in the public domain. As the Preston council had already fallen out with the GMA over the withdrawal of the Preston ground from the football there is no reason to believe that the Preston Football Club should adopt a position opposed to its council, while the Camberwell council had only recently joined the GMA's cause.

The three clubs who attended the cancelled meeting expressed their displeasure at what they considered a discourteous action by their fellow clubs and stated their loyalty to the VFA. Under no circumstances, they said, would they be part of any breakaway movement.¹¹⁴ The breakaway movement, if in fact there was one in the wind, was now dead in the water.

At the same time the Coburg and Northcote football clubs were applying pressure on their respective councils to reach an agreement with the VFA, the Coburg club in particular fearing abandonment.¹¹⁵ The PMC, which had intended to allow the PMFC to use the ground for training during the crisis made its position crystal clear as Griffin, still the president of the club, aborted his motion to allow the club to use the ground pending resolution of the dispute, asserting that the matter was now in the hands of the GMA.¹¹⁶

The impending start of what would have undoubtedly been a shambolic season perhaps concentrated the minds of the protagonists. Clearly it would have been disastrous for the VFA to begin a season without half a dozen of its best and most crowd-pleasing clubs. The stakes were not so high for the councils that comprised the GMA, but they too would have been aware of how unpopular such a scenario would have been with a significant proportion of their residents, even though they were convinced that there was an important principle at stake. It was no surprise therefore that both parties pulled back from the brink and fashioned an agreement to the dispute. The fact that the agreement was labelled as temporary says much about the intransigence of the parties and the depth of their commitment to their particular side of the argument.

The agreement was that the central ground would be used for finals only for two seasons, after which the position would be reviewed and, if felt necessary, amended or cancelled. Southward reported back to the PMC, indicating that while he was not keen to give way, he did so reluctantly 'rather than penalise the local club'. He added that the GMA had, however, gained a valuable concession by being given representation on the VFA. The council then moved to officially make the PMCRR available to the PMFC.¹¹⁷ Griffin made no bones about the hardline adopted by the council's representatives, complaining that the councils had not stood by their principles, and 'by jellybacking' had got what they wanted at the expense of the GMA.¹¹⁸

In June *The Age*, a strong supporter of the VFA throughout the course of the dispute, published some interesting figures indicating that the clubs whose councils supported the GMA had been punished at the gate by the football going public. It claimed that the gate takings of the seven 'GMA clubs' were estimated to be £150 less than the gate takings of the five 'non GMA clubs'.¹¹⁹

Some credibility for the figures came from a report made to the PMC by Griffin, who indicated that seven VFA clubs were in a precarious financial position. In the case of the PMFC, he pointed out that while the club had received £6 from the gate for its match against Sandringham, it owed the council £6/14/0 for expenses for the match and still had to pay its players. He went on to say that as the council had £12,000 invested in the ground for the erection of a new grandstand, and the return from football matches was not even sufficient to meet the interest charges. Accordingly, it was in the interests of the ratepayers for changes to be made to the VFA and that the council should support an enquiry into the competition. Southward added that unless the VFA could increase its patronage the council had to look at some other code.¹²⁰

As this situation was not unique to Port Melbourne, it was clear that more would be heard about the future of the VFA in the ensuing years. The first clue that something might be in the offing was a report in the *Sporting Globe* that the VFA clubs had been assessed against a variety of criteria. The sobering news for the PMFC was that it had not fared well in the assessment.¹²¹

While this intrigue was taking place the figures for the 1934 finals were disastrous. In accordance with the agreement the first three finals were held at Olympic Park and attracted crowds of only 5,000, 3,200 and 4,000 respectively. The grand final, which was held at the Showgrounds after a one-week postponement on account of inclement weather attracted a mere 2,000 spectators. This game, between two strong, well-supported teams from the inner northern suburbs in Coburg and Northcote, was a gate-taking nightmare, and the result spelled the death knell for the VFA's central ground experiment.

In February 1935 the *Record* reported that the PMC was concerned over the financial state of the PMFC, noting that the PMCRR was costing the council £24 a week. Concern was also expressed that the VFA appeared to be doing nothing to improve the competition so as to attract more patrons.¹²²

It would be mistaken to think that the GMA was always united in its stance, for the pressure on the group was enormous. Moreover the structure of the group where each council had two representatives – some of whom had power to act and others who did not – was bound to create tensions. An example of this occurred in March 1935 when the usually reliable Brunswick Council rocked the boat by claiming that the GMA's chairman Cr. Green was from Northcote, and was biased against the VFA. This claim was ridiculed by some members of the GMA, one Councillor going so far as to recall that it was not so long since the Brunswick Football Club had resigned from the VFA mid-season in a fit of pique, inferring that it was true to form therefore for the Brunswick council to do the same to the GMA. Cr. Beasley asserted that the two representatives on the GMA, Crs. Jacobs and Dunstan, had been loyal to the GMA, and that the Mayor of Brunswick, Cr. Wraith, who had apparently made the criticism of the GMA, had been a well-known critic of the GMA from the start.¹²³

Delegates of the Northcote Football Club had censured the VFA president for accepting the position of president of the Victorian Soccer Association. This does seem a surprising appointment, but the Northcote club had been very loyal to Liston and the VFA in its struggle with the GMA. On the other hand Griffin announced, quite properly, that 'sport is sport' and we at Port Melbourne have already congratulated Liston on his appointment.¹²⁴ On the face of the history of the dispute over the preceding five years it seems that all three parties, the Brunswick council, the Northcote delegates and Tom Griffin had acted contrary to what most observers would have anticipated.

Following the disastrous attendance at the 1934 grand final at Olympic Park it was no surprise to learn that the VFA finals in 1935 were held on VFA grounds, the semi finals at Prahran and Coburg, the preliminary final at Brunswick and the grand final at Prahran. The VFA had apparently reached some accommodation with Carnivals Ltd. over their contract and the Prahran club, whose council had left the GMA after an early flirtation, was rewarded with the two finals, including the grand final. The PMC had been asked by the VFA to indicate its conditions for the use of the PMCRR for the finals but it was apparently overlooked.¹²⁵

As season 1936 opened the PMC confirmed to its representatives on the GMA that they had the power to act on behalf of the council at the forthcoming GMA meeting, a further indication of the united front the council felt for the principles being fought for by the GMA.¹²⁶ At the subsequent meeting the GMA was upset to learn that the VFA had summarily appointed two of its members, Gray and Southward, to the VFA under the terms of the agreement reached previously, without giving the GMA the courtesy of discussing the matter themselves.¹²⁷

Although it was hardly needed the PMC must have felt reinforced in its position after it received a deputation from the committee representing the Port Melbourne unemployed seeking free passes to VFA football matches held on the PMCRR, a submission that the council referred to the GMA.¹²⁸

By 1936 the PMFC was in the middle of one of the worst periods in its history. After a very successful post war period, albeit one that netted only one premiership, in the seven years from 1933 to 1939 the club finished in third, tenth, ninth, twelfth, ninth, eighth and eleventh position respectively. In one particular game in 1936, against Oakleigh, the attendance was as low as 400. Of these only about 200, many of them children, paid at the gate. The club announced that it needed some £200 to finance the remaining matches, and, unless it received better support from the community it would have to seriously consider withdrawing from the VFA, leaving the PMCRR open to soccer.¹²⁹ Southward was even more pessimistic, claiming that he was prepared to vote to make the ground available to Rugby after becoming aware that the gate for the Oakleigh game amounted to a mere £4.9.9. In a hint of what was to come he added that the VFA had become nothing more than feeding ground for the VFL.¹³⁰

The PMFC was under great pressure to lift its performance, as rumours circulated that the PMC was seeking a more lucrative tenant for the ground. The club was pinning its hopes on Griffin, still its president, putting up a fight for the club at the council table.¹³¹ Southward, a former treasurer of the club, seems at this stage to have placed the interests of the ratepayers above those of the club. When the council received an application from the South Melbourne United Soccer club to use the ground, an application that demonstrated that the jackals were circling the troubled PMFC, Southward seconded the motion to refer the application to the COM for the ground. He then called for the COM to provide it with a full statement of receipts and expenditure for the ground for the previous five years. Jim Crichton, aware of what such a statement would reveal about the drain by the PMFC's occupancy of the ground on the council's finances observed that if the motion was carried 'it would be the end of the PMFC'.¹³² The future of the club was now balanced on a knife edge and it only survived this crisis by the good grace of the council. The crisis passed and the finals were played at Prahran, with the exception of the preliminary final which was played at Brunswick.

The final act of this long running dispute was played out in season 1937. For some time prior to this Tom Griffin had been a leading figure in the push to seek ways to increase the gates at VFA games by improving its product. Such an outcome would have eased the plight of the GMA councils and possibly shortened the dispute. At the height of the tension between the GMA and the VFA, when the GMA decided to withdraw its grounds from use by the various VFA clubs the VFA fashioned an agreement that, while giving the VFA a counter to the loss of seven of its grounds tied the VFA's hands in other ways. The biggest concession obtained by the VFL was a commitment that the VFA would recognise the rules of the ANFC, a concession that limited the freedom of the VFA to make rules to suit itself.

While the VFA and VFL had continued to recognise each other's transfer rules, the fact was that the VFA suffered a significant player drain to the VFL during the depression years, as it did not feel able to stand in the way of its players as they sought transfers to other clubs, often VFL clubs, when the club was offering some form of employment for an unemployed man. This movement was at the heart of Griffin's push to improve the VFA's product, and Southward's comment that the VFA had become nothing more than a feeder to the VFL. It is not surprising that there was resentment among the GMA clubs to the concessions made by the VFA in its deal with the VFL.

The issue of transfer fees for players moving between the VFL and the VFA had therefore become a thorny issue. In a meeting between the VFA and the VFL, chaired by Griffin, a complaint was made by Brew, a VFL delegate, that some VFA clubs were encouraging VFL clubs to break the Coulter Law by demanding transfer fees. Griffin sympathised with the complaint, agreeing that the VFA clubs concerned should be disciplined.¹³³ The secretary of the VFL, Like McBrien tried to smooth the matter over, saying that the VFL was not out to 'batter' the VFA over the issue of transfer fees.¹³⁴

Liston took Griffin to task after the meeting, complaining that no VFA club should be punished for breaking the rules of another body. Griffin's response was that he had told the meeting that VFA clubs would not act in a way that threatened the good relationship between the two bodies. Notwithstanding the niceties of this difference of opinion, the Coburg club, concerned at the drain of players to the VFL, resurrected the previous calls for municipal control of football, calling a conference of Brunswick, Northcote, Port Melbourne and Coburg to discuss the matter.¹³⁵

The VFL made its position known, saying that it was strongly opposed to scrapping the Coulter Law and introducing transfer fees.¹³⁶ This announcement prompted the VFA to express its concern about the future of the agreement it had signed with the VFL in March 1931, as a result of recent actions by the VFL – basically a complaint about the practice of the wholesale signing of juniors by VFL clubs.¹³⁷

Meanwhile Griffin, noting that the revenue to mid-July from the PMCRR amounted to a mere £2.3.9, while the annual cost to the council for maintenance and debt servicing was £1,400, proposed to the PMC that a sub-committee consider the future position of the PMCRR. He pointed out that the VFA had failed to attract crowds to its matches, and as a consequence the PMC should not be expected to carry such a heavy loss. He added that the VFL had done nothing to assist the VFA and the councils that provided the grounds. He concluded by saying that if the VFA cannot pay its way then some other code of football that can should be selected. Cr. Walter seconded the motion with support from Cr. Southward. Cr. Rogers congratulated Griffin, a life member and vice president of the VFA for acting so strongly in the interests of the ratepayers in view of the substantial offers received for the use of the ground.¹³⁸

An indication of the depths to which the VFA had sunk can be gained by a comparison of the gate for a match between Port and Footscray at Port in 1923, when 20,000 spectators paid £280 at the gate whereas a game at Port against Brighton had attracted 100 spectators who paid £9 at the gate.¹³⁹ The VFA receipts were down £826 in 1936 alone and the call was made for the VFL to co-operate in order to save the code and keep twelve football grounds safe for Australian Rules football.¹⁴⁰

Griffin's statement provoked some discussion in the metropolitan press and it is hard to see, in the face of the figures produced how *The Age* could have taken such a strong stand against the GMA. Other councils supported Griffin, the general thrust being that if the VFL and the VFA can't or won't co-operate there was no reason why ratepayers should foot the bill and turn down offers from 'foreign codes'.¹⁴¹ The VFL, with its palatial headquarters and huge gates was under great pressure to come to the party, particularly given that its attendance had just exceeded one million for the season with a weekly average of 90,000 spectators.¹⁴²

At the conclusion of the season Cr. Edwards and the Town Clerk Syd Anderson were appointed to attend a conference called by the Brunswick council to consider again the question of forming an independent football association.¹⁴³ As it turned out the push for a breakaway group, as always, was based in the northern suburbs. The PMC was the only council south of the river to receive an invitation and only then after asking for one. The Brunswick, Coburg and Footscray councils (ground controller for the Yarraville oval) were represented, while apologies were received from a number of other councils. There was little support among the representatives for a breakaway body and the discussion centred mainly on how to lift the popularity and financial position of the VFA.

The Port Melbourne delegates reported to the PMC that the Brunswick council was only interested in a breakaway body that excluded municipalities south of the Yarra, as it believed that the supporters objected to travelling to places like Sandringham. Cr. Edwards' remarks that he was not interested in attending any further meetings of a group that 'wanted to smash the VFA' and form a new body based in the northern suburbs, received a sympathetic response from the council, and it was agreed that it would be better if pressure could be brought to bear to bring the VFL and VFA together.¹⁴⁴

Direct Action

In the face of continued inaction by the VFL the VFA met and decided to terminate its agreement with the VFL. The motion was moved by Griffin, who said that there had been an undertaking by both bodies to work in the interests of each other, a principle that Griffin himself had honoured when he suggested, to his own president's disapproval, that VFA clubs should not induce VFL clubs to break the Coulter Law, but that in the last two years the VFA had received no assistance from the VFL despite its obviously parlous state.

In a prophetic statement, Griffin said that it was time that the VFA 'took the sword in hand' and fought its own battles. The Camberwell president Dr. Frank Hartnett seconded the motion, observing that the VFL's progress seemed to indicate that it was determined to crush the Association. The freedom for players to move between the two bodies sounded an ominous warning to the VFL. Wake, the Brunswick delegate observed that there were now very few VFA players up to VFL standard but the VFA was now free to attract VFL players to its cause. It could also introduce other innovations like the throw pass.¹⁴⁵

An all out war was about to break out and few would say that the VFL had not brought the consequences upon itself by being unable to resist the temptation to tie the hands of the VFA when it sought assistance from it over the question of VFA grounds under threat. The VFL had eyes for nothing more than keeping the VFA in its place, or even denying it any place in football and it is hard to resist the feeling that its autocratic attitude was brought about over a lingering feeling of guilt over the way it had firstly broke way from the VFA taking eight of its best teams with it in 1896, then taken another strong VFA team in Richmond in 1908 and three more VFA teams in Footscray, North Melbourne and Hawthorn in 1925. It no doubt believed that it was acting in the best interests of football. The problem was that it confused the best interests of football with the best interests of the VFL and it was about to pay the price for its indifference and its arrogance.

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- ¹ Terry Keenan, *A Family Feud*, Eucalyptus Press, Albert Park, 2004.
- ² *Port Melbourne Standard* (hereafter *Standard*), 9 November 1912.
- ³ *Standard*, 24 August 1912.
- ⁴ The grandstand had been removed from the Warehouseman's Ground (now the Albert Ground) in 1890, when it was purchased by John Grut, a younger brother of Peter, the original secretary of the Alma Football Club. Grut secured the stand at what was described as a bargain price of £230, which included the cost of its removal and re-erection. *Standard*, 14 December 1918 and 1 March 1919.
- ⁵ *Standard*, 14 December 1918. The insured amount was shown as £350 in subsequent editions of the paper. See the *Standard*, 4 January and 22 March 1919.
- ⁶ *Standard*, 1 February 1919.
- ⁷ *Standard*, 4 January 1919.
- ⁸ *Standard*, 25 January 1919.
- ⁹ *Standard*, 1 March 1919.
- ¹⁰ *Standard*, 1 March 1919.
- ¹¹ *Standard*, 22 March 1919.
- ¹² These rooms, with the open-seated 'Testro Stand' in front, were built in 1919 at a cost of £320.¹² The rooms existed for those purposes until the year 2000 when the new VFL, believing that the rooms were not good enough for the AFL players that were part of its reconstituted competition, paid for their conversion into dressing room facilities for the visiting teams. New coaching rooms were also built on top of the existing renovated rooms.
- ¹³ *Standard*, 13 September and 14 October 1919.
- ¹⁴ *South Melbourne Record*, hereafter *Record*, 2 June 1923.
- ¹⁵ *Record*, 9 June 1923.
- ¹⁶ *Record*, 9 June 1923.
- ¹⁷ *Record*, 9 June 1923.
- ¹⁸ New grandstands were erected at Brunswick, Coburg and Preston in 1925, while a stand was built at Northcote in 1933.
- ¹⁹ *Record*, 11 April 1925.
- ²⁰ *Victoria Government Gazette*, No.97, 8 July 1925, p.2378.
- ²¹ *Victoria Government Gazette*, No.67 26 May 1926, p.1685.
- ²² *Record*, 17 April 1926.
- ²³ *Record*, 1 May 1926.
- ²⁴ *Record*, 5 June 1926.
- ²⁵ *Record*, 11 September 1926.
- ²⁶ *Record*, 24 August 1929.
- ²⁷ *Record*, 23 August and 4 October 1930.
- ²⁸ *Record*, 25 June 1927.
- ²⁹ *Record*, 12 November 1927.
- ³⁰ *Victoria Government Gazette*, 26 May 1926, p.1685.
- ³¹ *Victoria Government Gazette*, 23 December 1947 and 25 February 1948.
- ³² *Victoria Government Gazette*, 13 November 1963 p.3413.
- ³³ J. Ross (ed.), *100 Years of Australian Football, 1897-1996*, Penguin Books, Ringwood, p.107
- ³⁴ The North Melbourne Football Club was disqualified by the VFA after round 8 in season 1921 following news that it was negotiating to merge with the Essendon Football Club and play its home games at the NMCG. At the beginning of season 1922 players from the former Essendon Association club amalgamated with the remnants of the NMFC under the NMFC banner. See *Age* 7, 8, 12, 23 July 1921 and 5 April 1922.
- ³⁵ *Argus*, 5 and 19 May 1925.
- ³⁶ *Argus*, 21 and 31 August 1925.
- ³⁷ *Argus*, 21 August 1925. The attendance at the 1924 grand final at the NMCG was 18,000. The attendance at the 1925 and 26 grand finals at the Motordrome was 15,000 and 16,000 respectively.
- ³⁸ *Record*, 29 October 1927.
- ³⁹ *Record*, 18 February 1982.
- ⁴⁰ PMC Minute Book 1928.
- ⁴¹ In 1929 the team that finished the season on top of the ladder had the right to challenge the winning team if it lost the grand final. As it transpired, Port defeated top team Northcote in the grand final but lost to Northcote when that team exercised its right of challenge. Both finals were played at the MCG.
- ⁴² *Age*, 28 August 1929.
- ⁴³ *Age*, 21 March 1930.

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- ⁴⁴ *Age* 1 July 1930.
- ⁴⁵ PMC Minute Book 1 July 1930.
- ⁴⁶ *Record*, 5 July 1930.
- ⁴⁷ *Record*, 12 December 1931.
- ⁴⁸ *Record*, 19 July 1930.
- ⁴⁹ *Record*, 26 July 1930.
- ⁵⁰ PMC Minute Book, 2 December 1930.
- ⁵¹ PMC Minute Book, 19 May 1931.
- ⁵² Of the six finals played at VFA venues in 1928 and 29, three were played at Coburg, two at Brunswick and one at Port Melbourne. Brunswick had hosted the 1928 grand final; the 1929 grand final and right of challenge game had both been played at the MCG.
- ⁵³ PMC Minute Book, 28 July 1931.
- ⁵⁴ *Age*, 2 September 1931.
- ⁵⁵ *Record*, 14 November 1931.
- ⁵⁶ PMC Minute Book, 1 March and *Record*, 5 March 1932.
- ⁵⁷ *Age* 4 July 1932.
- ⁵⁸ *Age*, 9 and 11 July 1932.
- ⁵⁹ *Age*, 11 and 13 July 1932.
- ⁶⁰ *Age*, 18 July 1932.
- ⁶¹ *Age*, 18 July 1932.
- ⁶² *Record*, 23 July 1932.
- ⁶³ *Age*, 26 July 1932.
- ⁶⁴ *Age*, 26 and 30 July 1932.
- ⁶⁵ PMC Minute Book, 2 August 1932.
- ⁶⁶ *Record*, 6 August 1932.
- ⁶⁷ *Age*, 8 August 1932.
- ⁶⁸ *Age*, 19 August 1932.
- ⁶⁹ *Age* 27 August and *Record*, 3 September 1932.
- ⁷⁰ *Record*, 14 November 1931.
- ⁷¹ *Age*, 14 September 1932.
- ⁷² *Record* 17 September and PMC Minute Book, 13 September 1932.
- ⁷³ *Sporting Globe*, 14 September 1932.
- ⁷⁴ *Record*, 17 September 1932.
- ⁷⁵ *Age*, 20 September 1932.
- ⁷⁶ *Age*, 18 October and 8 November 1932.
- ⁷⁷ N. U'Ren & N. Turnbull, *A History of Port Melbourne*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, p. 274.
- ⁷⁸ *Record*, 1 April 1933.
- ⁷⁹ *Sporting Globe*, 12 April 1933.
- ⁸⁰ In July 1931 there was uproar at a meeting of the PMC as a deputation of unemployed men hurled abuse at members of the Council over what they perceived to be a lack of support in their dispute with the ship owners who were refusing to employ local men. It was claimed at the meeting that about £14,000 a week was not being spent in the suburb as a result of the dispute. *Record*, 18 July 1931.
- ⁸¹ *Record*, 6 June and *Age* 27 July 1931.
- ⁸² *Age*, 10 April 1933.
- ⁸³ *Record*, 15 April 1933.
- ⁸⁴ *Record*, 15 April 1933.
- ⁸⁵ *Age*, 20 April 1933.
- ⁸⁶ *Age*, 28 April 1933.
- ⁸⁷ *Age*, 9 and 10 May 1933.
- ⁸⁸ *Record*, 3 March 1934.
- ⁸⁹ *Record*, 13 May 1933.
- ⁹⁰ *Sporting Globe*, 26 May 1933.
- ⁹¹ *Age*, 13 April 1933.
- ⁹² *Age*, 24 May and 9 June 1933.
- ⁹³ *Age*, 10 June 1933.
- ⁹⁴ *Record*, 17 June and PMC Minute Book, 20 June 1933.
- ⁹⁵ *Age*, 20, 21 and 22 June, and *Record*, 24 June 1933.
- ⁹⁶ *Age*, 24 June and *Record*, 1 July 1933.

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- ⁹⁷ *Sporting Globe*, 28 June 1933.
⁹⁸ *Age*, 26 June 1933.
⁹⁹ *Age*, 28 June 1933.
¹⁰⁰ *Record*, 25 November 1933.
¹⁰¹ *Age*, 1 December 1933.
¹⁰² *Age*, 30 August 1933.
¹⁰³ *Record*, 16 December 1933.
¹⁰⁴ *Age*, 21 December and *Record*, 23 December 1933.
¹⁰⁵ *Record*, 6 January 1934.
¹⁰⁶ *Record*, 6 January 1934.
¹⁰⁷ *Record*, 3 February 1934.
¹⁰⁸ *Record*, 17 February 1934.
¹⁰⁹ PMC Minute Book, 13 February 1934.
¹¹⁰ PMC Minute Book, 27 February 1934.
¹¹¹ *Record*, 24 February 1934.
¹¹² *Age*, 3 March 1934.
¹¹³ *Age*, 7 March 1934.
¹¹⁴ *Age*, 9 March 1934.
¹¹⁵ *Age*, 10 and 13 March 1934.
¹¹⁶ *Record*, 17 March 1934.
¹¹⁷ *Age*, 27 March and *Record*, 31 March 1934.
¹¹⁸ *Age*, 29 March 1934.
¹¹⁹ *Age*, 9 June 1934.
¹²⁰ *Record*, 28 July 1934.
¹²¹ *Sporting Globe*, 25 August 1934.
¹²² *Record*, 16 February 1935.
¹²³ *Age*, 14 March 1935.
¹²⁴ *Age*, 19 March 1935.
¹²⁵ PMC Minute Book, 7 May 1935.
¹²⁶ PMC Minute Book, 24 March 1936.
¹²⁷ *Age*, 25 March 1936.
¹²⁸ PMC Minute Book, 21 April 1936.
¹²⁹ *Record*, 4 July 1936.
¹³⁰ *Age*, 29 June 1936.
¹³¹ *Record*, 11 July 1936.
¹³² *Record*, 18 July 1936.
¹³³ *Age*, 20 April 1937. The Coulter Law was introduced by the VFL in 1931. It set a cap on the amount of money that a VFL club could pay each player.
¹³⁴ *Sporting Globe*, 17 April 1937.
¹³⁵ *Age*, 4 May 1937.
¹³⁶ *Age*, 7 May 1937.
¹³⁷ *Age*, 23 June 1937.
¹³⁸ *Record*, 17 July 1937.
¹³⁹ *Age*, 2 July 1937.
¹⁴⁰ *Age*, 26 July 1937.
¹⁴¹ *Record*, 24 July 1937.
¹⁴² *Age* 30 July 1937.
¹⁴³ *Record*, 9 October 1937.
¹⁴⁴ *Record*, 23 October 1937.
¹⁴⁵ *Record*. 20 November 1937.

The Victorian Football Association's decision was a body blow to the six councils that had led the battle on behalf of their residents. The Port Melbourne Council persuaded the Ground Managers Association to defer any action for a month, as it was concerned that the PMFC could become a scapegoat within the VFA. However, it took its own unilateral action, causing something of a sensation by denying the club the use of the ground for practice. The club practiced on Fisherman's Bend while the council threatened to close the ground.

