



# Football Down Under

Something happens to the game of football in the southern hemisphere. The ball changes shape, the field gets bigger and the rules change. Here's the lowdown on Australian Rules Football.

The crowd roars as a lanky young man wearing short white shorts and a blue and yellow v-necked jersey leaps into the air, placing one knee squarely in the back of a rival player to boost his height. He plucks an oblong-shaped ball from the air with both hands before gravity remembers to exert its pull, bringing him back to earth. Play stops across the field and the crowd falls silent.

After a collective intake of breath the lad kicks the ball towards four evenly-spaced poles at one end of the field. It flies through the centre poles and the crowd goes wild. This is Australian Rules at its best.

The origins of Australian rules football, or "Aussie Rules" as it's colloquially known, are obscure and still the subject of much debate. The rules were

formulated during the mid to late 19th Century, spurred on by the advent of the lawnmower. As odd as it sounds, this allowed for the preparation of ovals for game play. Historians generally agree that the first match identifiable as Aussie Rules was organised in Melbourne in 1858, but evidence suggests informal matches occurred much earlier than this. So where did it come from?

There are several prevailing theories. The first suggests that the sport originated from early Irish games, the ancestors of Gaelic football, brought to Australia by migrants. It does share some common characteristics of play. Then again, there are elements of rugby



minute quarters and time on, with few stops. "The average is 15 kilometres of running per game, so we have to reach peak fitness," says Dean Cox of the West Coast Eagles as he guides me through the training schedule. Pre-season training runs from November with strength work. "We build up with weight training and work on ball handling and skills, usually three or four times a week," explains Cox. The training also helps the team to bond, as new players are recruited each year. "We build team chemistry at training," confirms Cox. "Each year we get players from other sides, so we can pick their brains for the strengths and weaknesses of both our team and theirs."

From January full match training begins, focusing on stamina and speed. "Every player wears a GPS to monitor speed and distance throughout the session,"

Cox says. "If the training staff aren't happy we have to do top up running. Closer to the games we do more accelerated running, moving from light to medium, then maximum loading." He confesses the top up running is the least enjoyable part of training. Training reduces to two sessions a week during the season so the players have recovery time after the demanding matches.

The 2013 AFL season kicks off on March 22, although technically it bounces off as the umpire bounces the ball between the two ruckmen, who battle for possession. This centre bounce starts each quarter of the game and restarts play after each goal is scored. For the untrained observer, from here on out all hell breaks loose.

There are 18 players on the field for each side (plus three interchange



in the game, so perhaps it originated from English public school football games. There is a traditional indigenous Australian ball game called *marn grook* that bears some familiarity. Whether the sport was influenced by one, some, or all of the above, it is now watched by millions – 4.2 million tuned in to the Australian Football League (AFL) Grand Final in 2012. Australia doesn't have an official national sport, but if it did, Aussie Rules would be battling cricket for the title.

Australian Rules players are elite athletes; they have to be, to keep up with the fast paced game which runs for about 120 minutes including 4 x 25

players and a substitute), there is no offside rule, and there are no set player positions in the rules. Players can scatter across the elliptical field, measuring up to 150 metres or more long (goal to goal) and 135 metres or more wide. Despite this freedom, most teams favour a standard structure of six forwards, six defenders and six midfielders.

The ball can be propelled in any direction by way of a foot, an open-handed tap, or a clenched fist, called a handball. It cannot be thrown. A player can run with the ball but it has to be bounced at least once every 15 metres. Bear in mind the ball is not round. Bouncing is a risk as the ball needs to meet the ground at the perfect geometric angle to bounce back. "As it's not a round ball it bounces in every way, making it really challenging," admits Cox. This is what makes ball handling skills so necessary.

Players can tackle for the ball and when tackled, a player has to dispose of the ball cleanly or risk being penalised for holding. The ball carrier can be tackled almost anywhere between the shoulders and knees and a full body slam is not out of the question. There is no American Football style protective padding in this game. That would be un-Australian.

So the ball is being kicked, tapped and handballed around the field and players are tackling for possession. There's just one more verb required. If a player catches a ball from a kick, as long as it has travelled at least 15 metres, it is claimed as a "mark". One of two things happens; either the game stops while the player prepares to kick from the point at which he marked, or the player "plays on", forfeiting the free kick for forward momentum, and not allowing the opposition to reposition during the kick.

A goal, worth six points, is scored when the football is kicked through the two inner goal posts at any height, without



being touched by a player from either team. A "behind", worth only one point, is scored if the ball passes between a goal post and a behind post (the outer two posts). A behind is also the result of the ball hitting a goal post, or being touched on the way through the posts. Spectators new to the game take great delight at the goal umpire's hand movements to confirm a goal or behind, which resembles ground crew guiding a plane to the hangar.

As with most major spectator sports, it's the buzz of the crowd that generates the atmosphere and heat in the game. Cox says: "You only hear the crowd when a big play happens. The rest of the time you are so focused on what you're doing that you don't hear it. When you do it's a great feeling... It's really enjoyable to know you've had an impact on the game."

Cox has undeniably had an impact on the West Coast Eagles. Recruited into

the AFL in 2001 as a fresh-faced 18 year old, he has been a dominant player in the game over a long period and is considered one of the best. Now he is learning to balance family life, with the December addition of a daughter: "I think you have to give the game your all," Cox claims, "...even when you're away you're still preparing, but family comes first." He gives the AFL credit for encouraging players to consider their future after football. "They tell the younger guys to keep an interest outside the game," he explains. "The guys are recruited at 17-18, straight from school. On average they play four and a half years. They finish in their mid 20's and have to start again."

Cox claims it is "mateship" that got him hooked into the sport. Even from an external perspective, there's no denying the camaraderie within the game. 707,621 people are members of an AFL club. That many people can't be wrong.

