



The most commonly held misconception about Australian football is that its direct origins are in Gaelic football. This notion has been refuted by prominent historian, Professor Geoffrey Blainey in his history of Australian football, "A Game of our Own." He is convinced that although many Irish emigrated to Australia and certainly brought the primitive games that arose from Caid with them to the Victorian goldfields, Australian football started as a variation on the various football games as played in the English Public (private) schools during the 1850s. The first rules of the eventual Australian Football were to be drawn up eighteen years before any formal organisation of a Gaelic Football

At first it does appear as though there are Irish fingerprints on the game. Both Australian and Gaelic Football are the only sports that require the player to bounce the ball, lack an offside rule and force players to 'handball'. Furthermore, Australian Football's traditions such as running through a banner and singing a victory song are both Irish inspired.

The major flaw in the theory that Australian Football came from Gaelic Football however is that although evidence of football in Ireland can be traced back to 1578, the rules were not formally codified until 1884. Until formally codified, Gaelic football was in a state of flux; alternating in style somewhere between rugby and soccer.

In a chapter entitled "The Gaelic Myth", Professor Geoffrey Blainey dispels the notion that Australian football is a direct descendant of Gaelic football. In contrast to the voluminous evidence of the connections between early English football codes and Australian football, "not even one piece of positive evidence for a Gaelic origin of football has so far been found and I can see strong circumstantial evidence against such a notion."

Only one Irishman was in the original committee of seven, and he attended the Rugby stronghold of Trinity College, Dublin. None of the early football clubs wore the green of Ireland and Protestant schools rather than Catholic ones were prominent in the early decades of football. The Irishmen in strongly Irish towns in Victoria shunned football in favour of Hurling, and it seems that no one in 19th century Victoria expressed the opinion that the Australian game of football had derived from the Gaelic game.

So the early players and developers of football could have learnt little from the rules of Gaelic football because there were no written rules until 1885. By that stage Gaelic football was in danger of extinction. The ravages of the 1840s famine and the massive outflow of people to the United States had weakened the old sporting customs in rural Ireland.

In 1884, Michael Cusack founded the Gaelic Athletic Association in Dublin to prevent the traditional Gaelic sports from dying out, and particularly nurture the early form of Gaelic Football against the arrival of soccer and rugby from England. The first rules for Gaelic football were written in February 1885 and like Australian football the rules were much modified in the following years. In 1886 tackling was banned from the Gaelic game, and it did not contain the features common to Australia and English codes such as marks, punted free kicks, kick-offs and goals from kicks only. "The chief similarity between the games, the lack of an offside law arose independently, and not through imitation."

"Today's similarities tell us little about the complicated history of each game. Just as two games can grow apart over time, so they can become more alike over time. At one period, Australian football and Gaelic football grew apart; in another period they converged in spirit more than in rules. Australian football in the first years had virtually no likeness to Gaelic football as played today. It is the modern versions of Gaelic and Australian football which gives rise to the dubious belief that the two codes are first cousins or even father and son".

"The history of American football offers a similar lesson. It warns us of the hazard of assuming that a code of football alters so little in the course of a century that we can deduce its parentage and manner of birth simply by examining its present rules. Today no two codes of football are further apart than

Australian and American football, and yet both were the offspring more of Rugby than of any other code".

Furthermore, when discussing the similarities between the two codes, it is important to remember that the flow of people between Ireland and Australia was not a one-way street. Upon the expiration of their sentences and after the end of the gold rush, many Irish returned home. As the rules of Gaelic football had yet to be codified, they may have introduced Australian elements into the game. Especially in its early years, Gaelic Football bore an uncanny resemblance to the code being played in Australia. Teams were composed of up to 21 players, an oval ball was used as were behind posts. These lasted until 1910.

After the end of transportation and the gold rush, the flow of Irishmen between the two countries slowed and both codes developed independently. In Australia, subsequent evolutions came in response to conniving Coach's bending the rules to suit their purposes. As a result, the brand of football that has been displayed in each generation, has been fundamentally different from the brand exhibited in previous generations.

Englishmen had first been settled in Australia by force in 1788, when the First Fleet of "transported" English convicts arrived at what is now known as Sydney Harbour, sentenced to be exiled to the far end of the earth for life. They and those who followed, forced or not, doubtless brought their own hometown versions of football with them.

The discoveries of gold in California in 1849 were followed by strikes in central Victoria in 1851. British and Irish prospectors rushed in to join the locals, all the "diggers" bringing their own variations on the theme of football into the gold fields. Rough and ready games were then played by soldiers and miners among the mullock heaps of the Ballarat and Bendigo goldfields from the early 1800s to the 1850s.

Football had already arrived in Australia before the rules had been settled in England. British migrants, colonisers and convicts brought the traditions of mob football and public schools football to Australia along with British attitudes, class structure and culture. But twelve thousand miles from home, and without any regular communication, this transplanted microcosm of Britain evolved, like Australia's unique plants and animals (which evolved in isolation from the rest of the world), in a very individual direction.

The early arrival of the game is one reason why the nation, with its Anglophone society, invented its own version rather than adopting its metropolitan equivalent. By the early 1850s, a large-scale game was played in Melbourne based on the English public school rules of "old boys" (former pupils) against the elite. The games proved so popular that the first set of Melbourne Rules were established in 1859: four years before the FA even made up rules for soccer in London in 1863.

While there is no consensus regarding the exact origins of Australian Rules, two common theories have always predominated. The original theory that it evolved from convicts and immigrants who played a variety of unstructured folk versions of football. And a second theory that it was inspired by the Aboriginal game, Marngrook (Gunditjmara for 'game of the ball').

An early description of the Marngrook does indeed bear an uncanny resemblance to Australian Rules. "The men and boys joyfully assemble when this game is to be played. One makes a ball of possum skin, somewhat elastic, but firm and strong. The players of this game do not throw the ball as a white man might do, but drop it and at the same time kicks it with his foot. The tallest men have the best chances in this game. Some of them will leap as high as five feet from the ground to catch the ball. The person who secures the ball kicks it. This continues for hours and the natives never seem to tire of the exercise."

– *Mr. Thomas, Aboriginal Protector, 1841.*

Australian football most likely began as a compromise of games played by the diggers, incorporating features of Rugby, soccer and Irish games – influenced by Marngrook. But it took the likes of Thomas Wentworth Wills to say finally, "We shall have a game of our own."