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Tom McNeil and the 1955 Australian Football Players' Union

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ABSTRACT: In 1955, former St Kilda player Tom McNeil attempted to form a union of players of the Victorian Football League (VFL) and the Victorian Football Association (VFA). It was called the Australian Football Players' Union. The attempt proved to be unsuccessful. This article places this in the context of other attempts to form player unions/associations in Australian Rules football and other team sports. It provides an account of Tom McNeil's background and arrival in Australia, his brief career with St Kilda, his meeting on a return to his homeland with John Hughes of the Scottish Soccer Players' Union who provided him with the idea to unionise Australian footballers. The article explores the machinations associated with this failed attempt, and details of McNeil's subsequent life as a player, coach, administrator, and member of the Upper House of the Parliament of Western Australia.

KEYWORDS: Australian football, players' union, Scottish Football Players' Union, Tom McNeil, Western Australian Parliament.

I would like to thank Tom McNeil for granting me extensive interviews and providing me with his records of events associated with the Australian Football Players' Union; the Australian Football League Players' Association, especially Brendan Gale and Matt Finnis, the AFLPA's former and current Chief Executive Officers respectively, for financing my research and to the Australian Football League, especially its statisticians Col Hutchinson and Cameron Sinclair for their help and granting me permission to examine the minutes and other records of the Victorian Football League (VFL). I would also like to thank two anonymous referees for their helpful comments.

In 1955, former St Kilda player Tom McNeil attempted to form a union of players of the Victorian Football League (VFL) and the Victorian Football Association (VFA). It was called the Australian Football Players’ Union. The attempt proved unsuccessful. The union disbanded following an unsuccessful attempt to gain registration before the Commonwealth Court of Conciliation and Arbitration, under the Conciliation and Arbitration Act 1904 (Cth).²

In mid-2008 Tom McNeil was in Melbourne and turned up at the offices of the Australian Football League Players’ Association (AFLPA) in Albert Park, to join as an associate member (past player) of the AFLPA. He asked to see Brendon Gale, the AFLPA’s Chief Executive Officer. McNeil told Gale that he had tried to establish a players’ union in 1955, and provided him with documents and newspaper cuttings concerning its activities. The AFLPA approached me to interview Tom McNeil, gather information on his background and provide an account of this failed attempt to form a players’ union more than half a century ago. I had interviewed Pat Cash senior and Ted Henrys, the President and Treasurer, respectively, of the union, while researching for a Master’s thesis in 1973, but had not been able to make contact with Tom McNeil, the union’s Secretary.³ Neither Cash nor Henrys knew his whereabouts other than he was living in Perth. Nor did I know his whereabouts in 1990, when I wrote an article on the attempt to form a union that was confined to the events of 1955 and 1956.⁴ This article did not include material on Tom McNeil’s background, the Glasgow and John Hughes connections, the minutes of the Union and documents from the VFL, access which was obtained through the AFLPA, McNeil’s subsequent career and information concerning attempts to form unions in 1913 and 1927.

Interviews were conducted with Tom McNeil at Parliament House, Western Australia on 11–12 November 2008. The interviews were not recorded. I took notes. It is unsurprising to report that he experienced difficulty remembering names and events (at the time of the interview he was 79). This did not prove to be a major problem. He had maintained records of his career as a player, before playing in the VFL, his days with St Kilda, his post-VFL footballing career as player, coach and administrator and his subsequent career as a politician and member of the Upper House in the Parliament of Western

² Application by the Australian Football Players’ Union for registration as an organisation of employees, 84 Commonwealth Arbitration Reports, 675, Industrial Register J. R. Taylor, 10 February 1956.
Australia, from 1977 to 1989. When his memory failed him he would point to information in his Scrap Book. When there was a ‘dispute’ between his memory and the written record I opted for the latter.

**An Historical Introduction**

Tom McNeil’s Scrap Book contains a letter by W. S. Sharland of Esplanade, St Kilda. This was presumably Wally ‘Jumbo’ Sharland, who played with Geelong in the first half of the 1920s and became a football writer and one of the game’s early broadcasters. The date of and which paper this letter was published is unclear. In all likelihood, it was published in May 1955:

> “Apathy of most League and Association players is terribly disappointing” states Mr. Tom McNeil, convener of the Victorian Football Players’ Union.

That is nothing new. Convenors and workers for something similar knew apathy in 1913 and again in 1927. In 1913 a footballers’ council was established to protect players and act in the best interests of the game.

The late Mr J. L. Dow, ex-Minister of Agriculture was president, and the executive officers included J. McHale (Collingwood); first secretary, J. Smith (St. Kilda), D. McNamara (Essendon Town), J. Wells (Carlton), G. Roberts, J McIntyre and other noted men. World War I dealt a lethal blow to the organisation.

In 1927, at the instance of the late Jim McHale, Ray Brew (Carlton), W. Cubbins (St. Kilda), D. McNamara, the late Con Hickey (then secretary of the Australian Football Council), and others, I convened meetings which were held in Tattersall’s Club. Brew drafted a constitution.

Players have every right to foster a well run organisation of their own. In Sydney, the N.S.W. Rugby League Club is a well known and powerful organisation. Something similar should be quite possible for this State.

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5 This will be referred to as Tom McNeil’s Scrap Book. Most of his newspaper cuttings do not indicate the paper in which they were published, or the date of publication.


This letter reveals that the attempt by Tom McNeil to form a players' union was not the first time that players had turned to collective action in attempting to enhance their employment rights and conditions. Beside these examples, there have been eight other unsuccessful attempts to establish player unions/associations in Australian football. They occurred in 1931 (Victoria), 1960 (Victoria and South Australia), 1973 (South Australia), 1979-1986 (Western Australia), 1988 (Western Australia), 1990-1992 (Western Australia), 1993 (Sydney) and 2007-2008 (South Australia).

Background

Thomas McNeil was born on 9 June 1929 in Glasgow, Scotland. His father, who had the same name, worked as a dispatcher with D C Thompson, Newspaper Distributors. He had a sister Jessie, who was approximately one year older than him. She had died aged 80, a short time before I conducted my interviews. Football/soccer is a large part of the life of Glasgow and is divided into two halves, based on sectarianism: the Blue (Protestants) and the Green (Catholics). Tom McNeil’s family were Presbyterians, hence he was a Rangers supporter. He played soccer at school.

On 5 August 1940, McNeil and his sister were evacuated, with 475 other children, to Australia on the Polish ship Batory (It also carried 100 airmen who disembarked at Cape Town and 700 troops who disembarked in Singapore). They were two of several thousand children who were evacuated by the Children’s Overseas Reception Board (CORB) at the height of hostilities and Nazi bombing raids on Britain during War II. McNeil does not have any memory of being afraid during the trip to Australia. It is only when he reflects on what could have happened, knowledge that has been sharpened following publication of information on CORB evacuees, that he realises how fortunate he was. The Batory docked in Perth and arrived in Melbourne in October 1940.

Tom and Jessie were fostered out and he remembers going to a variety of schools in his first two years in Melbourne. He originally lived with the Cheetham family in Mont Albert. He later moved in with the Horne family at Crisp Street, Hampton. One of Crisp Street’s residents was the Test cricketer and subsequent Australian Captain, Lindsay Hassett. Tom remembers being invited by the father of school chum Bruce Church to see Melbourne play Fitzroy at the Melbourne Cricket Ground in 1941. It was this game of League Footballers, pp. 87, 179, 520, 522, 534–35, 740, 835; there are no details on the other names mentioned in the letter.


that kindled McNeil’s interest in Australian Rules football and he became a devoted Demons’ fan. Bruce Church later served as the President of the Melbourne Cricket Club from 1997 to 2003. McNeil learnt to play Aussie Rules at Hampton High School and remembers being fascinated by the oddly shaped ball and ‘comprehending’ a scoring system based on ‘posts’ of clothes and schoolbags hidden in long grass. McNeil left school after he obtained his Intermediate Certificate, at the end of Form Four, or what would now be called Year 10, in 1946. In 1946 he began playing with Hampton Scouts in the Metropolitan Football League. The Scouts were coached by Bruce Adamson, who players referred to as ‘Mr Addie’. There is no record of a Bruce Adamson having played football with a VFL club.

Tom’s parents immigrated to Australia in 1947. They initially lived in Footscray, then Heidelberg and settled in Kew. McNeil moved in with his parents. Despite whatever travelling problems he may have experienced, he continued to play with Hampton Scouts and was a member of their Under 19 teams which won premierships in 1946, 1947 and 1948. He was 5 feet 8 inches, weighed 10 stone ‘wringing wet’, fleet of foot and developed a reputation as a classy centre player or wingman.

On leaving school McNeil had a series of jobs. One was as an office boy with TNG Insurance Company, located in Collins Street. Also in the employ of TNG were Rendell (Mac) Holten and Ben Barnett. Mac Holten played 82 games with Collingwood, from 1942 to 1948, and was an accomplished cricketer with Melbourne. Like McNeil, he became a politician. He represented the Federal seat of Indi on behalf of the Country Party from 1958 to 1977 and was a Minister from 1969 to 1972. Ben Barnett was a


12 In both The Labour Market for Australian Rules Footballers and 'Out of Bounds' I incorrectly identified him as having played as a full back with St. Kilda. He played on the wing.

wicket keeper who represented Australia in four Tests in the 1930s.\footnote{Cricinfo-Players and Officials-Ben Barnett, http://www.espncricinfo.com/australia/content/player/4100.html, accessed 15 November 2008.} Given the freedom afforded to an office boy to wander the building, McNeil soon discovered both Mac Holten and Ben Barnett and spent a good part of most days discussing various sporting issues with them. More importantly, as a friend of Mac Holten, he was able to obtain entry into Collingwood’s dressing rooms after games.

At the end of 1948, aged nineteen, McNeil wanted to ‘return to his roots’ and see Scotland again. He obtained a job as an able seaman on the *Tacoma City*, a vessel registered in Wales. He returned to Australia in 1949. He took up employment in the garment/apparel industry as a trainee salesman and traveller. He resumed his football career with Hampton Scouts. He broke his collar bone in the first minute of his first game back. In 1950 he played with the Bellfield Amateurs, in a league adjoining Heidelberg, close to his parents’ residence. McNeil hit his straps in 1950 and attracted the attention of clubs from both the VFL and VFA. In 1950 he received an invitation from Carlton. He trained with Carlton, at least on one occasion. His Scrap Book contains a photo from an undated newspaper cutting of players being addressed by Coach Percy Bentley. Nothing came of this venture. In March 1951, he received invitations to commence training with Prahran and St Kilda. The letter from St Kilda’s Honorary Secretary, Sam Ramsay, dated 8 March 1951, begins with the statement that ‘Your Football ability has been brought under the notice of my committee and, on their behalf, I desire to extend to you a most cordial invitation to participate in our Training operations with a view to inclusion in the Team’.\footnote{The letters from both clubs are not addressed to Tom McNeil, or anyone, for that matter. They are more in the form of a circular. The dates of their sending are both handwritten. The one from St. Kilda was sent on 8 March 1951 and from Prahran on 15 March 1951.} He took up this offer.

**Playing With St. Kilda**

McNeil could not remember how much money he was paid while playing for St Kilda. The only thing he can remember is that it was not much. During 1951, he spent most of his time in the seconds. The only senior game he played was the second last game of the regular season, Round 17, against Richmond at Punt Road. The income of VFL players of this era was strictly regulated by the Coulter Law which placed restrictions on the earnings of players. It was brought into effect on 7 March 1930, at the beginning of the Great Depression. It was named after its architect Gordon Coulter of the Melbourne club. Penalties for players and clubs who breached the Coulter law were harsh, with fines and the forfeiture of premiership points for clubs,
with the threat of expulsion from the league for a second offence; and the disqualification of players.\textsuperscript{16}

In 1951, such payments, which were also operative in McNeil’s second and last season with St. Kilda in 1952, were increased from £4 to £5 a game for first team games, and to £6 in 1955.\textsuperscript{17} It should also be noted that in 1946 the VFL introduced provident fund payments of £1 per game, to be paid to first team players, who had played 50 games or more when they retired. In 1951 these payments were increased to £2 per game.\textsuperscript{18} At a meeting on 22 April 1955, the VFL increased payments for emergency players from £2.10 shillings to £3, for list players from £1.10 shillings to £2, for injured players from £5 to £6 and disqualified players from £1.10 shillings to £2.\textsuperscript{19} On the assumption that a ‘listed’ or second team player received approximately one-third of the income of a first team player; McNeil in 1951 would have received income in the range of £1 to £1.10 shillings each time he played for St. Kilda’s reserves. By way of comparison, the basic or minimum weekly wage for an adult skilled male labourer rose from £8.2 shillings in 1950 to £11.16 shillings in 1953.\textsuperscript{20}

In 1952, McNeil forced his way into St. Kilda’s senior side. Two major incidents occurred in those games. The first occurred in the Round Seven match against Fitzroy at Brunswick Street. He was king hit behind play around the eye region, suffered a loss of blood and a major gash which required stitching. He was taken back to the Junction Oval to have the area around his eye stitched by the club doctor. After the doctor had attended to his gash he was placed in the ladies cloak room to enable him to recover from the anaesthetic. He was then told to go home, before he had recovered, because of a pending dance that night. Still decked out in his St.Kilda colours, which were blood stained, he collapsed in Punt Road. He was rescued by a resident who contacted the club. Club officials advised McNeil to catch a taxi home and he returned the next day to pick up his car.

The second occurred in the Round Ten match against North Melbourne at Arden Street. McNeil and North Melbourne’s centre half forward, John


\textsuperscript{17} Decimal currency was adopted by Australia on 14 February 1966. One pound was equal to/exchanged for two dollars.

\textsuperscript{18} See Dabscheck, ‘Out of Bounds’, p. 34. The latter figure is derived from Minutes of the Victorian Football League, 25 March 1955.

\textsuperscript{19} Minutes of VFL, 22 April 1955.

\textsuperscript{20} 1949–50 Basic Wage Inquiry, 68 Commonwealth Arbitration Reports 698; and 1952–53 Basic Wage and Standard Hours Inquiry 77 Commonwealth Arbitration Reports 477.
Brady, who was also a Victorian representative, were reported. Newspaper accounts of the tribunal's hearings are contained in his Scrap Book. According to my interview with him, Arden Street was a mud heap, a melee formed in front of the grand stand, Brady thumped him twice and he attempted to retaliate by tripping him up, but missed as play moved on. The incident was seen by a boundary umpire and both were reported.

Prior to the tribunal hearing, both players were counselled by the Player's Advocate Danny Minogue, a former long standing player and coach. In the way these things are done, the two decided not to snitch on each other and concocted a story that it was the muddy conditions that had caused the problem. Brady said that he had been trying to shepherd a fellow player, had slipped and put out his hand to steady himself. He added, 'If I hit him at all it was purely accidental, and with the palm of my hand only'. For his part McNeil said that he had shot out his foot to avoid slipping and had not attempted to kick Brady.

McNeil remembers that club officials from North Melbourne accompanied Brady during the hearing of his charges; something St Kilda officials didn't afford him. Brady was exonerated and McNeil received a two week suspension. He believes that Brady escaped suspension because of his stature in the game, in comparison to himself who was a fringe player, yet to establish himself and the presence of club officials in Brady's case, and not his had contributed to the respective decisions of the tribunal. More significantly, he perceived that there was a conflict of interest in the same person representing/advocating on behalf of players who had been reported for inappropriate behaviour against each other. On 19 November 1954 the VFL considered a recommendation to appoint an assistant to the player advocate to handle situations when more than two players appear before the tribunal on any night 'or where two players are charged with offending against each other'. On 22 April 1955 this recommendation was formerly adopted by the VFL.

Both incidents left McNeil feeling that St Kilda was indifferent towards him. He had verbal exchanges with St Kilda's Secretary, Sam Ramsay, especially concerning the club not standing beside him in the tribunal.

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21 For details of John Brady's career see Holmesby & Main, The Encyclopedia of League Footballers, p. 83.
22 There is a report 'Tribunal Clears Brady-McNeil Out', Argus dated 2 July 1952, p. 9, and an unidentified report from either the Age or the Sun-Herald, probably of the same day.
23 For details of Danny Minogue's career see Holmesby & Main, The Encyclopedia of League Footballers, p. 550.
24 This is derived from reports in Argus, 2 July 1952.
hearing. Suspended, he and team mate Jack McDonald,26 who was suffering from an ankle injury, decided to head off to Marysville for a holiday. McNeil, who had not trained, was not selected for the reserves on his return. Following this he and St Kilda went their separate ways. In all, he played eight senior games with St Kilda.

After leaving St Kilda McNeil was appointed as the playing coach of a suburbian league team, East St Kilda, in 1953. In 1954 he moved to and became the playing coach with Alexandra, in what is now known as the Yarra Valley Mountain District Football League. Besides working as a salesman of men's clothes, he slung beer at the hotel where he resided and was paid as the playing coach of the town's football team. He cannot remember how much income he obtained from his two coaching stints; other than what was the custom for playing coaches in suburbian and country teams of that era, it was more than he received from St Kilda under the Coulter Law. He used his time in Alexandra to save money for a trip back to his homeland and Europe. After watching Footscray defeat Melbourne in the 1954 Grand Final he set sail for Europe.

Europe and Meeting John Hughes of a Scottish Football Players' Union

The Glasgow paper, The Weekly News, of Saturday 20 November 1954 carries a story of Tom McNeil, a 24- year old sun-tanned Australian, turning up at Rangers home ground, Ibrox Park. He told Rangers boss, Scott Symon, 'I'm here to study your training, your coaching, and your discipline'. The Weekly News told readers that McNeil had been evacuated from Scotland 14 years earlier, and was a full time professional coach of a strange game called Australian Rules football. The paper goes on to report the various countries he proposed to visit on his European sojourn. It also contains the following quotation from him:

> By the time I go home I hope to have learned enough to permit me to offer some suggestions for the betterment of our brand of football. I'm particularly interested in your transfer system, and think something similar would improve the position of pros Down Under.27

Players of English and Scottish soccer were employed on a fulltime basis; the players of Australian Rules football were part time, as had been Tom McNeil when he played with St. Kilda, if for no other reason than the low

26 For details of Jack McDonald's career see Main and Holmesby, The Encyclopedia of League Footballers, p.513.
27 '10,000 Miles to Study Rangers', The Weekly News (Glasgow), 20 November 1954.
payments they received under the Coulter Law, and when he had been a playing coach in 1953 and 1954. Another newspaper cutting in his Scrap Book, which does not indicate where and when it was published, quotes him as saying, 'Our game back home is not nearly as professional as your football here. But I think the players definitely train much harder and are fitter than many footballers'.

Following the publication of these articles, McNeil came into contact with John Hughes of a Scottish Football Players' Union. Little information is available on this organisation at that time. In all probability it was called the Scottish Association Football Players and Trainers' Union, which was modelled on the Association Football Players and Trainers' Union, which had formed in English football in 1907. In 1958, the latter changed its name to the Professional Footballers' Association (PFA) (from now on this English union will be referred to as the PFA). The minutes of a committee meeting of the PFA, held on 18 March 1946 at Manchester, report on the formation of a Scottish players' union and a motion was passed pledging support. The minutes of PFA Annual General Meetings of 1952, 1953 and 1954 contain reports of a Mr. Hughes, of a Scottish players' body, being in attendance and delivering speeches in support of an international federation of football (soccer) player unions.

McNeil remembers that John Hughes was aged approximately 40 when they meet in late 1954. The older man took McNeil under his wing. The two used to meet up for lunch and for a few pints after Hughes had finished work for the day. On a couple of occasions McNeil remembers meeting up with


Jimmy Guthrie, who was Chairman of the (English) PFA from 1946 to 1957. Hughes impressed on Tom McNeil the positive role a players' union could provide for players in their dealings with clubs and leagues. It was from these numerous conversations with Hughes that he developed the idea of forming a similar organisation back home in Australia.

In due course, McNeil left Scotland for his tour of Europe. He received news that his sister Jessie was to be married and headed back to Australia for the wedding.

**The Australian Football Players' Union**

The *Iberia*, the ship on which Tom McNeil returned to Australia, initially docked in Perth. Immigration officials handed out forms to passengers asking them what they had done on their overseas trip and what they found most interesting. McNeil told them of the information he had obtained concerning player unions in Scotland and England, and his intention to establish a similar body on his return to Melbourne. Somehow this information found its way to newspapers. On arriving in Melbourne in early April 1955 he was greeted by a swarm of sporting journalists who wanted copy on his attempt to establish a players' union.

McNeil sought to use this publicity to generate interest in and support for his proposed union. A number of players contacted McNeil, though he has difficulties recalling how many and whom more than 50 years after the event. One such player was Pat Cash senior, the father of Pat Cash who won the Wimbledon crown in 1987, and the Australian Open in 1987 and 1988, a full forward with Hawthorn who was a lawyer by profession. Another was Preston's Ted Henrys. Cash subsequently became the union's President; Henrys its Treasurer. McNeil also made contact with players from other clubs in trying to develop a delegate structure in the building of the union. He remembers having a positive meeting with Ted Whitten, a member of Footscray's 1954 premiership team and a legend of the game, at his parents' home.

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31 McNeil made no attempt to receive support from the broader union movement. This attempt at unionisation by players, as has usually been the case with all attempts by players in different sports across the globe, emerged from within the sport itself. In 1955, 59 per cent of the workforce and 66 per cent of males belonged to unions, Australian Bureau of Statistics, Labour Reports, Canberra.

32 For details of Pat Cash senior's football career see Holmesby & Main, *The Encyclopedia of League Footballers*, p. 126.
fruit and vegetable market in Footscray.\(^33\)

McNeil also wrote to club secretaries, seeking their permission to address players, after training. A newspaper cutting in his Scrap Book, dated 12 May 1955, but which does not indicate in which paper it was published, reports that he had addressed players at Collingwood and St.Kilda, but had been denied permission at Hawthorn. Another undated cutting, says that Essendon players decided to have nothing to do with the union.

Cuttings in the Scrap Book provide a fairly clear idea of the arguments that McNeil employed in trying to drum up support for the union. On one occasion he said:

I don't mean that players should dominate clubs. I just believe that the players — the men who provide the entertainment and keep the turnstiles revolving — will be properly recompensed for their work.

Another issue which was of concern to McNeil, and something he stressed several times in interviews, was the way in which clubs engaged players from year to year, coupled with the use of the clearance system. The latter is akin to a retain-and-transfer system where players could only move (be 'cleared') to another club, in either their league or another league, with the permission of the club they had previously been with. In the era in which he played, clubs would announce their squads for each season a couple of weeks before its commencement. He proposed that such ‘lists’ should be finalised at the end of the previous season. In this way, players who were not included on such ‘lists’ would be able to seek employment as a player, coach, or both, with suburban, country or interstate clubs. Finding out they were not required a couple of weeks before the season commenced made it difficult for ‘delisted’ players to find employment, with most clubs having made their decisions, especially with respect to coaches, well before this time.

The Scrap Book also contains a lengthy article by an anonymous author entitled ‘A Trades Union For Footballers’, from Sporting Life in December 1955.\(^34\) Besides providing information on this attempt to unionise players, it is noteworthy for the information it contains on star players from the VFL and the New South Wales Rugby League (NSWRL) being unable to take up lucrative offers from other clubs; in the case of rugby league players from English clubs, because of the two codes’ respective clearance rules. The two most prominent rugby league examples were Clive Churchill, who had received an offer of £10,000 and Keith Holman,

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\(^33\) For details of Ted Whitten's football career see Main and Holmesby, The Encyclopedia of League Footballers, pp. 845-46.

\(^34\) Anon., 'A Trades Union For Footballers', Sporting Life, December 1955, pp. 34-47.
neither of which they were able to take up because of the refusal of the NSWRL to grant them a clearance. The VFL examples were Fitzroy’s Alan Ruthven, who, in 1949, had received an offer of £20 a week to coach a Broken Hill team, plus earnings of £16 in secular employment as a miner; South Melbourne’s Ron Clegg, who aged 21 in 1949 received a coaching offer from Preston in the VFA of £500, plus £12 a week, and at the end of the 1950 season, New Norfolk, in Tasmania, offered him a coaching job of £25 a week plus secular employment for him and his wife; and Essendon’s Bill Hutchinson who had been offered a ‘large sum’ to coach North Melbourne in 1953.³⁶

In the early 1950s the VFL had introduced a rule to enable players, who were aged more than 28 and had played more than 100 games, to take up coaching jobs with country clubs. The clubs maintained that players ‘owed’ them ten years service. The author of the article’s response to this was that such a player would be ‘nearing the end of the football road before he could cash in on his football ability’.³⁷

Other benefits that McNeil indicated the union could provide were free legal representation in disputes with clubs, an employment bureau, a benefit fund for veteran players and premium (non standing) tickets for all players to attend finals’ matches.

Mr E. O. McCutcheon, the VFL’s assistant secretary, responded that McNeil was not up-to-date with developments in the VFL. McCutcheon maintained that there was a happy relationship between players and clubs. He said that McNeil’s references to English and European soccer players ‘have no bearing on the scene here ... English players are straight-out professionals who rely entirely on football for their livelihood in winter. Our football is only a sideline for players. There is no necessity for a footballers’ union in Victoria’. VFA secretary, Mr F. J. Hill agreed with these sentiments. He added that most VFA clubs could not afford to look after players better than they do now.³⁸

McNeil hoped the ‘delegates’ he had made contact with would spread the cause of unionism amongst fellow players. In the interviews he recalled that many players were frightened to show an interest, fearing the response of their respective clubs. Despite numerous phone calls and assurances of support, McNeil and fellow leading figures of the union found it difficult to

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³⁵ For details of their rugby league careers see Alan Whiticker and Glen Hudson, *The Encyclopedia of Rugby League Players*, Gary Allen, Sydney, 1993, pp. 56 (Churchill); and 156 (Holman).

³⁶ For details of their careers see Main and Holmesby, *The Encyclopedia of League Footballers*, pp. 143, 622–23, 694.

³⁷ Anon., ‘A Trades Union For Footballers’, p. 37

³⁸ ‘Union for football “on way”’, *Argus*, 15 April 1955, p.23.
attract players to attend meetings. The first meeting of the union was held
at Scots Church Hall, on 13 May 1955. 26 players, plus Tom McNeil, were in
attendance. They were:39

J. Clarke, 263 games (Essendon)
R. Giles, 67 games; W. Gunn, 104 games; J. Garrick, 118 games;
J. Dorgan, 105 games; I. Gillett, 135 games; D. Barry, 8 games; R.
Taylor, 22 games (South Melbourne)
A. Ongarello, 132 games; A. Gale, 213 games (Fitzroy)
T. Merrett, 180 games (Collingwood)
L. Icke, 57 games; P. Kelly, 100 games (North Melbourne)
S. Spencer, 122 games; J. Baumgartner, 48 games; F. Adams, 164
games; R. Barassi, 253 games; K. Carroll, 58 games (Melbourne)
C. Powell (Northcote)
L. Pollard (Brunswick)
I. Alexander (Brighton)

Information has been included on the total number of games played by the
VFL players during their careers who attended this meeting as an indicator of
their standing in the game. I was unable to obtain such information for VFA
players. Of the 18 VFL players in attendance, nine had played 100 or more
games and three, 200 plus games. This would serve to indicate that, initially
at least (and note McNeil’s comments on this issue in the paragraph above),
leading players, in some cases stars, such as Clarke, Ongarello, Gale, Merrett,
Adams and Barassi, were interested in the potential benefits of unionism.

At this first meeting a constitution was ratified and a motion was passed
‘that when members return to their clubs that they get their team-mates
to elect a delegate to represent their club on the Union, and from these
delegates, a management committee be elected at the next meeting’.40
McNeil expressed dismay at the meeting’s low attendance. He said, ‘Apathy
of most League and Association players is terribly disappointing...All the top
men in every league club have told me that they want to be in this union but
are too lazy to do anything about it’.41

39 Minutes, Meeting [Australian Football Players’ Union], Scots Church Hall,
13 May 1955. All minutes of meetings are contained in Tom McNeil’s
Scrap Book.
40 Minutes, Meeting [Australian Football Players’ Union], Scots Church Hall,
13 May 1955.
41 This is from Tom McNeil’s Scrap Book. It is unclear in which newspaper
this was published. It was probably the Argus, the day after the meeting,
14 May 1955.
At approximately the same time that this meeting was held, the VFL established a sub-committee comprising club delegates W. G. Brew (Essendon), H. J. Dyke (Richmond), Dr A. S. Ferguson (Hawthorn), R. F. Russell (Footscray) and L. J. Phelan (Fitzroy) to co-ordinate its response to the union.42 ‘Sandy’ Ferguson was Hawthorn’s medical officer and club president, but I have been unable to find any information on the backgrounds or histories of the other delegates.43 None of them appear to have had careers as VFL players. On 10 June it recommended that copies of the Trust Deed of the Players Provident Fund (see above) be distributed to players and that legal advice be sought to amend the Players Registration Form to ensure that players agree to accept these rules.44

Harry Dyke described the players attempt to form a union as ‘Too silly for words’. He said that players had been well treated over the years and there was no obligation on clubs to pay players £6 a game, provide provident fund payments or pay thousands of pounds on end of season interstate trips. He rejected claims that players ‘had been unduly held up’ when seeking country jobs. He also said that most VFL delegates felt that players were ‘generously treated’ and the rule enabling players over 28 who had played 100 games to change clubs ‘had received’ much support.45 The Moorabbin club of the VFA, in its fifth Annual Report, warned that the establishment of a players’ union would seriously affect the future of the game. It pointed to club officials who gave up their leisure time and worked in an honorary capacity. If a union was formed ‘Club officials would soon find other channels through which to derive enjoyment from administration of sport’.46

At one stage the union claimed that it had 400 members.47 This was an exaggeration. In 1972, Ted Henrys, the union’s Treasurer provided me with information on its membership.48 The table below shows that the union only had 178 members, the majority of whom played in the VFA. Players from four of 12 VFL and five of 14 VFA clubs signed up. If it can be assumed that clubs had senior training lists in the low thirties, approximately 21 per cent of players joined the union. If the training lists were higher than this the unionisation rate was less than 20 per cent. Only North Melbourne of the VFL, with 33 members, and Preston of the VFA with 32, were clubs which

42 Minutes of VFL, 13 May 1955.
44 Minutes of VFL, 10 June 1955.
45 Tom McNeil’s Scrap Book.
46 Tom McNeil’s Scrap Book.
47 Tom McNeil’s Scrap Book.
48 Dabscheck, Out of Bounds, p. 36.
could be said to approach full membership.

**Membership of The Australian Football Players’ Union**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Victorian Football League</th>
<th>Victorian Football Association</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Footscray 20</td>
<td>Brunswick 22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>North Melbourne 33</td>
<td>Preston 32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hawthorn 11</td>
<td>Williamstown 12</td>
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<tr>
<td>Fitzroy 12</td>
<td>Brighton 18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sandringham 18</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**TOTAL 76**  
**TOTAL 102**

Source: Information supplied by union treasurer, Ted Henrys.

The second meeting of the union was held on 27 June, at the YMCA, with only twelve players in attendance. The minutes record ‘the extreme disappointment at the very poor attendance’. It was decided to defer the election of a management committee until more support for the union was achieved. Membership fees were set at 5 shillings and thought was given to inviting league coaches to joining the union.  

Seven subsequent meetings were held, all of which attracted a small number of attendees. At the third meeting, held at the YMCA on the 11 July, a management committee was elected. It comprised:

President: Pat Cash, 58 games (Hawthorn)  
Vice Presidents: Ian Alexander (Brighton), Arthur Edwards, 124 games (Footscray)  
Trustees: Brian Gilmore, 21 games (Footscray), Len Pollard (Brunswick)  
Committee Members: John Martin (Williamstown), Jack Edwards, 115 games (North Melbourne), Bob Shearer (Sandringham)  
Treasurer: Ted Henrys (Preston)  
Secretary: Ton McNeil, 8 games

49 Minutes, Meeting (Australian Football Players’ Union), YMCA, 27 June 1955.

50 11 July 1955, 25 July 1955, 8 August 1955, 22 August 1955, 12 September 1955, 28 November 1955 and 20 February 1956. There are no minutes of this meeting, where it was decided to disband the union.

51 Minutes, Meeting (Australian Football Players’ Union), YMCA, 11 July 1955.
Assistant Secretary: Jim Chapman, 14 games (Fitzroy).\footnote{52}

Information has been included on the total number of games played by the VFL players who became members of the union's management committee. Of these, only Arthur and Jack Edwards had careers which spanned more than 100 games. This serves to highlight the problems the union experienced in attracting leading players to its ranks. The other meetings were taken up with providing help to Laurie Icke and Mick Grambeau, after they had been sacked by North Melbourne following a 'shock' loss to St. Kilda, organising a function to raise funds for the family of Sandringham full forward Bruce Harper, who died aged only 28, and initiating action to seek registration as a union before the Commonwealth Court of Conciliation and Arbitration.\footnote{53}

A letter from Bill Brew, one of the members of the VFL sub-committee formed to respond to the formation of the players' union, objecting to the union's application for registration, was published in the Argus on 12 October 1955. He said he did not object to the formation of a union to bring players 'together in social contact, and to correct any alleged grievances'. He maintained, however, that football was a sport and that 'material advantages' were unimportant to most players. The creation of a union, registered before the Arbitration Court 'suggests that the intention is to lay down by the process of law the obligations of club officials to players as employees'. He then pointed to the honorary work done by club officials — 'their labor of love' — and that they would discontinue their good works 'if their control of club finances and the embarrassment attached thereto is to be governed by a direction from the Court'.\footnote{54}

Pat Cash responded to this in a letter he sent to The Argus, which was probably published on the following day. He said that Mr Brew's 'outburst is remarkable. He apparently reasons on the basis that the players, who after all make football possible, should have no say in determining the conditions and terms under which they play'. He added that the union 'is not trying to take control of football or dictate to the VFL, and there is no evidence to support such allegations. The union is an organisation formed in an endeavor to improve the conditions of players and to speak for the players generally'.\footnote{55}

The union's application for registration was heard by the Commonwealth
Court of Conciliation and Arbitration's Industrial Registrar Mr J. E. Taylor on 12 December 1955. It was opposed by the VFL, VFA and the Essendon Football Club. Two preliminary points were raised by the objectors. They were whether the union was an association of employees pursuant to the Act, and that the application did not specify the industry in connection with which the union was formed.

The union's membership rule was defined broadly to include 'any persons who are registered as players under the rules of the Victorian Football League and the Victorian Football Association'. A small number of players played as amateurs. The objectors maintained that the union's membership rule included amateurs, who by definition could not be regarded as employees. Industrial Registrar Taylor agreed with the objectors and refused to register the union. The union in its application had indicated that the appropriate industry was that of 'playing Australian Rules football'. During the hearing of the application it sought, in light of the problem concerning 'amateurs' to change the industry to 'playing Australian Rules football for remuneration'. Industrial Registrar Taylor found against the union. He said 'the applicant is asking for registration in an industry which is different from the industry in connection with which it is formed ... I do not think that an association formed in one industry can be registered in or in connection with some other industry'.

The application was denied on technical grounds and could have been conceivably overcome by redrafting. This was the view that was expressed by Pat Cash after the decision. He said 'This is by no means a major setback to our plans ... the decision did not get to the merits of the case...It should be possible to amend the Association's constitution to get around them...The committee meets next week and it will certainly consider the possibilities of applying again.' He made a final comment, however, that suggested that something was rotten in the State of Denmark. He said, 'But of course that does not mean that we will reapply'.

There are no minutes of this meeting, which probably occurred on 20 February 1956. In my interviews Tom McNeil could not remember the mechanics of the union's final moments. He clearly recalled, however, that there was a lack of funds to sustain its continued operation. The newspapers

56 84 CAR 675, at pp. 657 + 659. Hayden Opie and Graham Smith, 'The Withering of Individualism: Professional Team Sports and Employment Law', University of New South Wales Law Journal, 25 (2) 1992, p. 316 have erred in their interpretation of this dispute. They maintain the tribunal regarded 'that the playing of sport — even for remuneration — was in itself an industrial activity'.

57 'Football union rejected but may try again', The Sun, 11 February 1956, p. 31.
reported that McNeil and others in attendance decided to dissolve the union. There would be no fresh application for registration before the Arbitration Court. In announcing the union's disbandment, Tom McNeil said it was doing so not because of the opposition of the VFL, VFA and the clubs:

We did so because of apathy and lack of support from the players in general. We want to thank those players who gave the union their full support, but we feel that attention should be drawn to the fact that players of some clubs [Essendon, Collingwood, St. Kilda and South Melbourne were especially identified by McNeil following the handing down of the failed registration application58] promised earnest support, but owing to pressure put on them most went back on their words.

Our committee feels disgusted and disappointed, because although year after year we read of complaints from these players about the treatment they receive from clubs, most of them still have ignored the chance to support an organisation which was prepared to back their claims.59

This final sentence explains why he did not have the heart to pen a minute to the demise of the organisation he had brought into being nine months earlier.

**Moving On**

Following the demise of the Australian Football Players' Union, Tom McNeil had a variety of jobs, ranging from semi-skilled labouring to managerial, in country Victoria, New South Wales, Queensland and Western Australia. He ultimately settled in the west in 1969. To the extent that employment and personal circumstances allowed, he maintained contact with football as a player, coach or administrator. In 1956 he was captain coach of Lake Boga in the Mid Murray Football League. The following year saw him help Sandgate, of the Queensland Australian (National) Football League, win a premiership. He coached Walla Walla in the Hume Football League in Southern New South Wales in 1958. It was defeated in the grand final. He was a member of a combined team, representing the Hume League, which won the country championship. In 1959 he played with South Bunbury's premiership team in the South West (National) Football League in Western Australia.

McNeil returned to Queensland in 1960 and resumed playing with Sandgate. At the end of that year he hung up his boots. He became the Secretary Manager of Sandgate, a position he held for a couple of years.

58 Tom McNeil's Scrap Book.

59 'Footballers' union is dissolved, but ... officials fight on', Argus, 21 February 1956.
Sandgate were the host club for Tasmania which participated in the interstate carnival of 1961, which saw Western Australia defeat Victoria. He remembers seeing a young Darrel Baldock, who would later become famous as the captain of St Kilda's premiership team of 1966, play for the Islanders. Employment and family commitments reduced McNeil's involvement in football in the 1960s. At the end of the decade he coached a representative team from the Townsville Australian Football League, before moving to Western Australia. In 1973, he coached Geraldton Rovers in the Great North National Football League. In the following year, he became the Secretary of the League and coached representative teams from 1974 to 1976. He gave up coaching at the end of 1976, and became the chairman of selectors in 1977.

Over the years, McNeil coached a number of notable players who found their way into the Western Australian (National) Football League (WANFL) or the VFL/AFL. The four most famous players he coached were Syd Jackson, an indigenous Australian who played with Carlton in the 1970s, Jimmy Sewell who played with Footscray in the 1980s, and Andrew Lockyer and Chris Mainwaring, West Coast Eagles' players of late 1980s and 1990s.60

A Politician

In 1977, Tom McNeil was elected to the Legislative Council of the Western Australian Parliament as a representative of the Country/National Party for the Upper West Province, which covered the area from Kalbarri to Wanneroo, and east to Toodyay. During his period in office he was the Chairman of a Parliamentary Select Committee on Sport and Recreation (the McNeil Report) which, in November 1984, offered a wide range of recommendations for the reform of community and local sport in Western Australia.61

He offered other comments on sport generally, and football in particular during his period as a politician. On 4 August 1977, in his maiden speech in the Legislative Council, he spoke out, in an echo of his attempt to establish the Australian Football Player's Union more than twenty years earlier, against the WANFL's transfer system's harmful effects on players. He said that 'players are entitled to a far greater share of the proceeds of the game than they are getting. It is a completely restricted area. As long as his club stands in the way a player has no chance of a transfer to another club.' In the same speech he criticized the WANFL over a proposed seven year ban of any player who used legal means to secure his transfer to a club in another league.62

60 For details of their careers see Holmesby & Main, The Encyclopedia of League Footballers, pp. 386, 468, 487, 717.
61 Final Report, Sport and Recreation Activities in Western Australia, Legislative Council, Western Australia, 20 November 1984 (The McNeil Report).
62 Hansard, Legislative Council, Western Australia, 4 August 1977, pp.
Two months later McNeil introduced a private member's bill to reduce the ability of the WANFL to stop players in country leagues transferring to clubs in Eastern states. Under the rules of the WANFL, players from country teams were bound to clubs of the WANFL. McNeil wished to stop this practice:

The purpose of the Bill is to establish the rights of the individual Australian rules footballer and to remove those restrictions currently placed on his freedom to play football with the club of his choice...it seeks to uphold what we consider to be a God-given right – namely, the freedom of a player to negotiate his own contract...there is an important human rights issue involved. I do not believe any group of men sitting down in Perth can possibly know the merits or demerits of a boy who wishes to pack his bags and go to Melbourne.63

The Bill was not passed. In 1984 he asked a question in the Legislative Council concerning a proposal of the now named Western Australian Football League (WAFL) requiring players, from 1985 on, to sign contracts that bound them to their clubs for five years or 110 games. He was concerned of the effect that such a contract would have 'on the freedom of country footballers to join any club of their choice.' The Minister, Peter Dowding, told McNeil that he should direct his question to the WAFL itself.64

On several occasions he spoke out against decisions of the WAFL banning the live televising of VFL finals matches in Western Australia, particularly to country areas.65 On 30 May 1980, he issued a press release criticising the inconsistency of the Fraser Coalition government placing pressure on athletes to boycott the Moscow Olympic Games, while maintaining, if not seeking to enhance, trade relationships with the Soviet Union.66

Retirement

Tom McNeil retired from politics in 1989. He was appointed Chairman of

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63 Hansard, Legislative Council, Western Australia, 6 October 1977, pp. 1874-75. Also see 8 November 1977, pp. 3072-4; and 9 November 1977, pp. 3210-12.

64 Hansard, Legislative Council, Western Australia, 16 August 1984.


the Racecourse Development Trust in 1989; a position he held until 2004. The responsibility of the Trust was to allocate unclaimed TAB winnings, something in the order of $2 million a year, back to the industry. Under his watch, such income was allocated to upgrading track safety, in both racing and trotting. He also served as a Deputy Chairman on the Healthway Advisory Committee on Racing and Gaming and was a member of several committees concerned with aiding the fishing industry in Western Australia.

In the early 1990s, McNeil coached his son's (who is also named Thomas) school football team. He is a country/interstate member of St. Kilda. He attends functions of the Western Saints and regularly turns up to games when the Saints take on the West Coast Eagles and Fremantle Dockers at Subiaco.

A Players’ Association Postscript: Looking Backward, Looking Forward

Tom McNeil failed in his attempt to form a players’ union for Australian Rules footballers in 1955. It was one of 11 such attempts by different generations of players in different parts of the country which failed to bear fruit. The AFLPA was formed in 1973, under a different name. It is one of many such player bodies which have been formed, more recently, in Australian sport.

The Rugby League Players’ Association was formed in 1979, the National Basketball League Players’ Association in 1989. In 2005 the latter merged with the Media, Entertainment and Arts Alliance. The Australian Professional Footballers’ Association (PFA) (soccer) formed in 1993, both the Rugby Union Players’ Association and the Australian Cricketers’ Association (ACA) in 1995, the Australian Netball Players’ Association (female players) in 2002 (it became a branch of the Australian Workers’ Union in 2005) and the Australian Swimmers Association (both men and women) in 2003. Both the ACA and PFA organises female players who represent Australia and, in the case of the latter, play in the W-League. The Australian Women’s Basketball Player Association formed in 2009. In 2007, all of the Australian player associations, other than the basketballers, created the Australian Athletes’ Alliance to pursue issues of mutual concern. Its most significant achievement has been a case before the High Court of Australia which found that agent fees, and hence other expenses, were a legitimate taxation deduction.

Tom McNeil failed in his attempt to establish a players’ union for Australian football players in 1955. His was one of many in a long stream of

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67 Information concerning these player associations can be obtained from their respective websites. Also see Dabscheck, ‘Playing the Team Game’.

68 Spriggs and Riddell v Commissioner of Taxation [2009] HCA 22 (18 June 2009). Information concerning the Australian Athletes’ Alliance can be obtained from its website.
such attempts. As a politician he found himself expounding on the human rights of players in criticising the employment rules of the WAFL. Later generations of players, across the broad gamut of Australian sport, discovered the means to overcome the problems McNeil experienced in trying to form the Australian Football Players' Union. Player associations have become an important feature of the landscape of Australian sport. Tom McNeil was one who helped to pioneer this process.