# A toast to the ANU footy club

by Professor John Molony

I am singularly honoured in being asked to propose the toast to the ANU Football Club. There are many reasons I feel this way. One is that few nights can match this night. I look back and remember Bucko startling Gough Whitlam, our guest for the evening, when he leaped into the room at our annual dinner garbed as a baboon and proposed to sit on Gough’s lap. Another night Billy Snedden, then leader of the Opposition whom I had known well earlier when he was a young larrikin working for the Department of Immigration in Rome in the early 1950s, kept pestering me. He wanted me to tell him who the young man with the barbed tongue was at the next table who persisted in hurling humorous insult after insult at him. I refused to give him Damien McNamara’s name lest Damien’s career in the public service fall into disarray. I accept that you will judge me as a name dropper, but who can forget that other night when our guest, Bob Hawke, went to put pepper on his steak? The lid came off, pepper covered steak and plate and Bob, sure he was being poisoned, exclaimed ‘Shit’ with a roar of outrage while the then young Barry Cassidy tried to console him with a cigar. Confused and slightly apprehensive, I said, ‘Bob, please forgive us, but it is not shit. It is only pepper.’

I boast, but only slightly, when I say that in the whole history of sporting endeavour   no club has poured scorn and biting invective on the supporters and players of other clubs with greater wit, magnanimous acceptance of defeat and dignified but total lack of restraint in an occasional victory than the supporters, many of them academics, of ANU. That we would follow up with what must surely be the most outrageously devised, and uproariously vocalized, club song was considered unacceptable only by the purposely innocent. How we ever escaped being set upon with bayonets drawn by the Cordies, as we knew RMC in those days, is beyond my comprehension

But the main reason for my happiness tonight is very simple. In those distant days of the sixties many of us felt we were exiles in another land here in the ACT. For those of us who were then young academics battling with our careers, in many instances founding a family and trying to fit into a new society, one, indeed rich, bond with our past which helped us immeasurably was Aussie Rules. That bond, which created friendships that have endured into the present, was made real in the formation and development of the ANU Australian Rules Football Club.

A few weeks ago I was asked to speak at the Ainslie Football Club. I had just read Rod Cheatley’s excellent history of the ANU Club and I was glad to be able to thank Ainslie for its support for us in the 1960s when we were struggling for acceptance by the League. At that time ANU had no local area from which it could recruit players and some powerful clubs were determined to ensure that we would not survive. Understandably fearful lest they would lose prospective recruits they opposed us having the right to recruit players from among graduates of other universities. Ainslie supported us and I thanked them.

Incidentally, when a cashed up club offered a financial inducement to an ANU player we could not realistically oppose a transfer, while we naturally bewailed it. That was especially so for David Morgan who was an almost notoriously impoverished student. I understand that his financial situation changed somewhat for the better when he became head of Westpac. Dave was a true champion. Before the game one wet day when we were playing out at Queanbeyan I bet him a bottle of champagne that he couldn’t kick ten goals. I think he kicked nineteen. He won the bottle.

Being a university club free of the restraints that bore down upon more formal bodies, ANU was regularly in trouble with the League. Almost every time we met, the late Jack O’Dea, its secretary, would have a complaint about something. One day in the first quarter against Belconnen at Jamison, Jack addressed me as president saying, ‘This is no good John. Two of your players are out there with odd socks on.’ I replied, ‘Be grateful Jack that they have socks on at all.’ I was prompted to make that reply because the week before, when I was surreptitiously handing over the few dollars the great Les Durkin was paid as coach, I asked him when he thought we might win a game. Les replied, ‘John if you haven’t got socks on, you can’t pull them up.’ ANU players, all unpaid, had to buy their own socks. We needed players, socks or no socks.

Let me tell you one more story about ANU. Billy Whittaker, bearded with long hair flowing down past his waist, won the Mulrooney Medal. Jack almost begged me to get him to have a haircut before the presentation at half time in the Grand Final. His reason was that there would be patrons present who would cringe at the sight of such a potential hoodlum winning the coveted Medal.

But Jack did not realize how well I knew Billy. At ANU early in first term a couple of years before I was giving a lecture on Australian history in the Haydn-Allen Tank to a large mob, mob by the way is the right word in that context for first year students. At the previous two lectures I had spotted three students up the back who seemed to pass the time telling jokes, I assume they were lurid jokes, to each other. Having had enough by the third lecture I stopped and invited them to come down to the front and tell their jokes to the class while I would go back to my office and leave them to it. The whole Tank froze in silence until one of the lads stood up and said, ‘Don’t lose your shirt Prof. At least we come to your lectures.’ I laughed, everyone laughed and I went on with the lecture. That is how I first got to know Billy Whittakers. I was disinclined to bother him about his hair.

The other main reason I am honoured tonight is that in proposing this toast I thereby toast the game which we used to call, simply and with one word, footy. I affirm, strongly, but not courageously because the truth should be easily told, that, on the sporting arena, Australian Football is the unique expression of our precious nationality. I do so first because, setting aside arguments about Rugby School, Irish football and hurling, our game is essentially an Australian thing, born and shaped here among us on the Victorian goldfields. You need only think of some of its terminology – shepherding, pockets, give, show or make a lead- to realize its links with the original diggers and the goldfields. Like so much else, including the worker’s movement, the diggers took the game with them wherever they went.

Unlike in the old world we had land in immense quantities in Australia and in the early days of the squatters it was there for the taking. Thus there was no need to construct a game based on the defence of a small piece of territory which is of the essence in both Soccer and Rugby and hence the offside rule. Sometimes when I arrive a bit late at a ground I immediately ask, ‘Which way are we kicking?’ In other words I want to know which is the end of the ground where we have to attack the goals. In Aussie Rules the primary purpose is to attack rather than to defend. How good is it that we now see the development of the modern game which places an emphasis on the back line as the first line of attack?

Surely I do not need to stress the fact that our game uses every gift and quality of the whole human person, including the head to think with rather than to butt a ball. That combines with quickness, strength, courage, instinctive reactions and often breathtaking skill to give us at times a glimpse of perfection so rarely met in human endeavour. Our game is at heart always a contest, not a pretty little form of keepings off. Furthermore its fluidity demands a contest if the whole event is not to degenerate into a series of aimless stops and starts. ‘Get on with the footy’ used to be the cry at many a game. I would like to hear it more frequently.

I am reasonably confident that you will bear with me when I comment on the almost breathtakingly perverse use of the name ‘Australian Football League’ or ‘AFL’ for our game instead of Aussie Rules or Australian football. No one can play Australian Football League because it is not a game in any sense. I can think of few more effective instances of the colonization of peoples’ minds than to convince a whole nation that the finest and unique expression of its precious nationality in football bears the name of a business organization. Please, I beg of you, call it Australian Football or Aussie Rules and refuse to use the name Australian Football League or AFL except for the body that does not play it, indeed cannot play it, but that has now taken absolute control of it.

To end on a happier note, is there anyone here tonight who does not rejoice in the return of the high mark to the game? I can go back in memory to Bobby Pratt, Soapy Vallence and Ron Todd in my childhood and on through the decades since until today when the masters of the mark are still among us. In the end though the high mark must be seen to be believed and only the poets can speak to us about it.

I am sure you have read Bruce Dawe’s poem on the high mark, but in case you have forgotten it let me remind you. He has the player

tensioning for the upward leap,

hands now

eagle claws,

god’s hooks, hungering

for the leather dove, the run

among mere mortal men in time, in place, becomes

the leap into heaven,

into fame, into legend

-then the fall back to earth

(guernseyed Icarus)

to the whistle’s shrill tweet

It is not a mere form of political correctness to remind you that our thinking about the game cannot happen today unless we think also of the Aborigines. Sixty thousand years and even more have entwined them in time and space on this continent which they know and hold at the core of their being. Because Australian football was born of the same land which gave the Aborigines life, because it is open, free, full of movement and yearns for the highest expression of human capabilities it is theirs to embrace and play at its most exalted and exhilarating level. That they do it so well is as it should be. It is in their being, they belong to it as it does also to them.

Finally I cannot propose a toast to the Club, to its players, past and present, to its coaches, administrators and supporters without happily accepting that Aussie Rules is now drawing to itself more women who embrace it and do so with increasing knowledge and skill. That they do so for ANU is to their, and our, credit and benefit.

STAND PLEASE AND DRINK NOW TO THE AUSTRALIAN NATIONAL UNIVERSITY AUSTRALIAN FOOTBALL CLUB