

# HISTORY OF THE VICTORIAN RUGBY UNION



## ABOUT THE VRU

*Rugby in Victoria is in great shape. We are currently witnessing an exciting and unprecedented growth period. This position and our vibrant future is built on a strong and proud heritage since 1888. During this time we have firmly established Victoria as one of the most prominent rugby provinces in Australia.*

## HISTORY OF VICTORIAN RUGBY UNION

Rugby in Victoria is built on a strong and proud heritage of more than 127 years with Melbourne Rugby Union being founded in 1888. In that year, the first two Clubs were founded and provided the players selected as a Victorian side to play a match against a team of British tourists, now known as the first British & Irish Lions; the visitors won 9-3.

Although formal competition ceased in 1890, a new Union was formed in 1893 and inter-colonial matches resumed. In 1894, New South Wales was beaten 3-0 by Victoria at the East Melbourne Cricket Ground.

Competition lapsed after the Victorians were defeated 30-0 at the MCG by the second Lions in 1899, but the Victorian Rugby Union was again reformed in 1908. In August of that year, Victoria went down 26-6 at the MCG against what were soon to be known as the first Wallabies, then en route to Great Britain.

Of the seven clubs comprising the new Union in 1909, Melbourne, East Melbourne, South Melbourne and University were the first to compete for the Dewar Shield, a trophy that is still awarded to the premier first grade team today.

Competition ceased during WW1 and recommenced under the present Union in 1926, ushering in what were later to be known as the Golden Years of Victorian Rugby. These years included the selection of the first Victorian born player to represent Australia, Sir Edward "Weary" Dunlop, in 1932.

In 1939-1940, four Victorian players (Andy Barr, Max Carpenter, Stan Bissett and George Pearson) were selected in the Wallaby side to tour England. Unfortunately they never got to play as the tour was cancelled due to the war.

In 1958, the first test match in Victoria was staged at Olympic Park, with the New Zealand Maoris defeating Australia 13-6.

Nowadays, Victoria boasts 25 affiliated clubs and three Associations (VRRRA, VSRU and WRDA).

In 2014 there were 102 Junior teams, 71 senior teams, 61 VSRU schools teams and 7 women's teams, 2100 junior registered players, 2560 senior registered players and 210 women's players participating in the game of Rugby in Victoria.

Teams in the competition have grown from 4 in 1909 to over 140 in 2006 and in the past five years, Junior and Senior Rugby Competition has grown significantly increased.

Rugby is now played in over 150 Primary and Secondary Schools throughout the state, participating in developments programs, including Rebel Rugby, Walla Rugby, Super Rugby Week, National Rugby week, Cross Field Sevens and Full Field Sevens, with over 15,000 children sampling the game in a school Development program during 2014.

In other important facts, Victoria was invited to play in the (now-defunct) Australian Rugby Championships in 2007 under the name Melbourne Rebels, with Rebels awarded a Super Rugby license for the 2011 season onwards under then Chairman and Foundation Shareholder, Harold Mitchell.

To date, Dave Cowper is the only Victorian to have captained the Wallabies, while the likes of Ewen McKenzie, Christian Lealiifano, Digby Ioane and Rocky Elsom are among notable Victorian Wallabies.

## **COLONIAL RUGBY**

### **1878-1889**

The first recorded game in Melbourne played according to rugby rules was between Carlton Football Club and the Waratah Club (Sydney) who in 1878 were visiting Melbourne to complete the first exchange between the two teams which had played both codes in Sydney the previous year. The game ended in a (disputed) draw. Then, in 1881 a game was arranged at the MCG between the Wanderers (MCC) and officers of the detached RN squadron then visiting Melbourne, the visitors winning by one goal and one try.

In the following years there were several attempts to form a Melbourne Rugby club but it wasn't until the commencement of the 1888 tour to New Zealand and Australia by what are now known as the First British Lions that there was sufficient interest to do so, and indeed to form a second club, North Melbourne, who on 9 June played and lost 8-2 to Melbourne in the first Rugby club match ever held in Victoria.

This was all part of the lead up to the 1st August match against the British tourists which had only been agreed a couple of months earlier while they were still in New Zealand. The match was held at the East Melbourne Cricket Ground, the tourists winning 9-3. Only two weeks later the Victorians took on the NZ Natives (later to be the NZ Maoris) soon after the start of their major tour and again on their return from Britain in

the following year. By that time another Victorian club, the Pakehas, had been founded; members from all three clubs being selected for the Victorian team which unsuccessfully contested NSW twice in Sydney in July.

For some reason, after that burst of enthusiastic activity, it wasn't until 1893 that a new Union was formed and four club teams, the Pioneers, the Rovers, the Crusaders and the Pirates, competed over the next few seasons. Victoria also playing inter-colonial matches against NSW in 1894 and 1895, memorably defeating NSW 3-0 in the first of these.

By the second half of the decade the code had once more slipped into the background, surfacing only in 1899 in the form of a team to face the Great Britain tourists (retrospectively named the fourth Lions) at the MCG. Their defeat by 30-0 was sufficient to force Victorian Colonial rugby back into the shadows and apart from notice of a practice match at Middle Park in May 1900 there are no further reports of Rugby in Victoria for almost a decade, long after the Colony had been proclaimed a State in 1901

## **A STATE OF UNION**

### **1907-1914**

Students at the Training College (Teachers College from 1913) anticipated a year ahead of the reintroduction of the code by a new Victorian Rugby Union (VRU), when in 1907 they played their Sydney counterparts in the return of an annual tournament which included playing 'Rules' in Sydney and Rugby in Melbourne, a contest which continued until 1914.

The Union's revival in 1908 was prompted by a letter from the Secretary of the NSWRU, to J.Allan, of the University Sports Union, which led to an agreement for Victoria to play what were soon to be dubbed the first Wallabies at the MCG when they stopped in Melbourne on 10 August 1908 en route to Great Britain. The proposed visit helped to revive interest in the code and the new VRU was soon formed and urgent preparations made for practice matches and the selection of a team.

With the generous assistance of the VFL, arrangements had been made for the match and for an earlier reception of the visitors at the Orion Hotel. Later that day the Victorian team, resplendent in blue and gold hooped jerseys, were not entirely disgraced by their 26-6 loss, although it should be acknowledged that the visitors had only arrived on the morning of the match; they were to re-embark on RMS *Omrah* to continue their journey to England later the next day.

While seven clubs formed the new Union only four contested the Dewar Shield in the first 1909 season but, as in the following six seasons, there were also a number of 'friendly' and practice games between the various clubs, some of which later disappeared from the scene while others were formed and affiliated. In each of the first four years a Victorian State side played teams from New Zealand or NSW and for the first three years Melbourne University engaged in the annual Inter- Varsity match with Sydney University.

A feature of the 1912 season was a game on the MCG on 6 July between East Melbourne and Melbourne, '*One of the finest exhibitions of the Rugby game ever seen in Victoria...*' with the latter winning 9-5. Played before a large crowd as a curtain raiser to an inter-State 'Rules' match v South Australia it is probably the one and only time club Rugby has been seen there.

In the last match of the competition on 8 August 1914 South Melbourne went down to East Melbourne 14-8 but still took possession of the Shield by virtue of points gained during their run of wins earlier in the season. (There was then no 'final four' or 'final six' series to decide the winner, that peculiarly Australian feature only being introduced in Victoria in 1932). By the time of that last match Australia had entered the war and by early September newspapers in all States were carrying stories of Rugby players volunteering to join the colours, soon to be followed by the first reports of a seemingly endless stream of casualties.

## **THE GOLDEN YEARS**

### **1926-1939**

The First World War had made a significant impact on the Victorian community, not least on those supporting the Union code, and it was only in 1921 that there was a brief revival of the Shield competition, consisting mainly of RAN personnel, and when the South Africans, en route to New Zealand for their first tour of that country, took on a Victorian team, almost entirely composed of Navy men, defeating them 51-0 at the MCG.

It was only after the formation of a Rugby League in 1923 and the later decision, in 1926, by the six member clubs; RAAF, St Kilda, Melbourne University, Kiwis, Melbourne and Navy, to convert to Union that led to the establishment of the present VRU. A number of factors would have influenced that decision; one would have been University's inability to compete with Sydney University in the Inter-Varsity games, another that all League players had remained amateurs. But by far the most important would have been the offer of the New Zealand Union to include Melbourne in the next All Blacks tour of Australia and an undertaking of administrative and financial support from both the New Zealand and New South Wales Unions.

Barely one month later Tom Fletcher, NZRU Management Committee member and President of the Wellington Rugby Referees Association, left New Zealand for Melbourne, where he assisted with the organisation of the new competition and prepared for the All Blacks visit and, in addition, for the matches against the NZ Maoris en route to Europe. The announcement of the new Union attracted a number of other influential supporters and it proved a satisfactory first year; rudimentary though it was, with two grades of club competition completed, two overseas teams hosted, a Referees' Association formed, University resuming Inter-Varsity rugby and granting a Rugby Full Blue, affiliation with the Rugby Football Union (RFU) confirmed and \$244 (over \$12,000 by 2013) in the Bank.

Within a couple of years the Union was firmly established and went from strength to strength whilst recording a number of innovations, not least the introduction of the 'Final Four' series in 1932. In 1933, due mainly to the enthusiasm of Scotch headmaster, Dr Littlejohn, there was a first in public school Rugby history when the Scots' College (Sydney) accepted an invitation to play Scotch College in Melbourne in August and although the visitors won it, was surprisingly a closely contested game. In the same year a new VRU sub-committee was convened to advance the introduction of rugby to State schools, and for the first time Rugby was played between two of them (Oakleigh and Footscray). This was the forerunner of the Victorian Junior Rugby Union established the following year, initially as an Under 14 Grade, composed of State and Catholic school teams.

In the twenty-four years from 1926 up until 1939 the State team took the field thirty-three times against overseas and interstate opponents; of the fifteen Victorian players selected for Australia twelve had represented their country on forty-two occasions. By 1937 the number of clubs had risen to thirteen and there were thirty senior teams competing in four grades.

Some of the grounds for most club matches were much the same as those used pre-war; Flinders Naval Depot and University Oval, and for representative matches, enclosed grounds such as Carlton, the MCG and the MotorDrome. One ground no longer used for post-war rugby was the East Melbourne Cricket Ground at Jolimont but an additional venue which became available in 1928 was the Exhibition Oval. For the first few years the VRU struggled to secure two pitches at Middle Park and in 1928 were successful in securing another at Glen Iris, obtaining others elsewhere over time. It took until 1931 to secure six pitches at Middle Park, where the VRU in 1934 acquired a building in what had by then become a centre for the Union and a virtual home for several of the clubs.

All this progress was to come to a halt with the commencement of the war. Power House requested a week's postponement of the Final to arrange leave from military service for a dozen members of their team. Their disputed loss to Kiwis was the last but one Premiership to be awarded until 1946, the honour of the last, in 1940, being awarded to competition leaders RAAF as it was too impractical to proceed with a Finals series.

Apart from inter-service and charity matches the only Rugby which continued during the war was at Junior level and although the Junior Union were unable to revive their competition, Footscray and Essendon Technical Schools, Scotch College and the RANC arranged games between themselves during the winter terms in an inter-school contest which was in fact to continue until 1944. Although Essendon Technical College dropped out in 1944, while in 1941 a YMCA team had joined, as did a team from Melbourne High, who also fronted in 1942.

## **THE POST WAR REVIVAL**

### **1945-1996**

After only twenty-five years the sport had again been totally disrupted by war but this time, mainly through the good offices of Dr.W.H.Ward, President from 1938 to 1947, the Union itself had remained intact. That made it much easier for competition to resume as conditions gradually returned to normal, although for the 1945 season Footscray was the only non-service club in competition and for the next couple of decades the various Army, Navy and RAAF teams were to make a significant contribution to the various grade competitions.

By 1946 most of the leading pre-war clubs had returned to the field in the form of eight first grade and four second grade teams and over the next few years a number of smaller clubs made a brief appearance. By the mid-'fifties the first of a number of more substantial clubs were formed in what had previously been regarded as the outer metropolitan area, now characterised by a rapidly growing population. The settlement of these new suburbs also helped generate involvement in Junior Rugby in both schools and clubs and although the Junior Union had continued to function as an arm of the VRU the Victorian Junior Rugby Union (VJRU) was reconstituted in its own right in 1956 and affiliated with the VRU. In the same year the Associated Public Schools played their first match against Combined High Schools and in 1959 the first Colts (Under 19) competition commenced. Much of the credit for leading the VRU during this period of

rapid expansion and for stoutly representing Victoria's interests at meetings of the Australian Rugby Union (ARU), established in 1949, must go to two Presidents, M.G.W.(Warwick ) Ramsden 1957-1964 and G.G.(Griff) Hunt 1965-1975.

During the 'seventies there was a significant increase in the number of both metropolitan and provincial clubs while several the new tertiary institutions joined Melbourne University and Monash (1964) in putting teams on the field. Some of these clubs had their own grounds but most were rented from local councils while the VRU, in addition to securing a lease on Olympic Park from 1962 to 1987, also rented a number of grounds for Saturday afternoon matches, notably on adjacent Yarra Park and Gosch's Paddock. Meanwhile, in an Australia wide move initiated by the ARU, the Victorian Schools Rugby Union (VSRU) was formed in late 1972 and despite a number of establishment problems had, in its first year, (1973) engaged in several interstate tours. This became a feature of their programme over the coming decades and was to provide for selection in Australian schoolboys teams playing at home and abroad. At the same time an improved administration encouraged a steady increase in the numbers of independent schools participating in the annual competitions.

In 1975 Doug Osborne was the last Victorian player to be selected for the Wallabies. He was one of fifteen selected for Australia since the end of the war who between them had been awarded 41 caps, notably 19 times for John Meadows, most of those after he left Victoria. It was a cause of some concern that since 1975 no player registered with the VRU had been chosen to join the Wallabies and that talented players such as Ewan McKenzie and Lloyd Johansson first had to register interstate before coming to the attention of selectors.

One phenomenon of the early 'eighties was the introduction of a Special grade, primarily for veterans and complete with special playing conditions and no final series. From 1981 it was renamed the Social grade but in 1993 ceased to be formally recognised by the VRU until restored to grade status in 2005 only to disappear again from Annual Reports a few years later. In the intervening years the veterans teams from the various clubs involved continue to administer their own competition, renamed the Masters in 2002.

Over the next fifteen years the ARU and VRU responded to other social and economic changes and to the significant improvements in travel and communication. Since 1985, clubs were first allowed strictly controlled sponsorships, which has become an important source of revenue and products for both the clubs and the VRU.

It was also in the eighties that migration controls were relaxed and by the end of this period there was a substantial increase in the number of new players coming from New Zealand and the Pacific Islands.

Strangely, given that the first RWC Sevens had been held two years earlier and were to increase in popularity by leaps and bounds, 1994 was the last time the VRU could afford to arrange the event. It had been revived in 1953 after a gap of eighteen years and this version of the game was not to appear again under VRU auspices during this period.

## HONOUR BOARD OF VICTORIAN WALLABIES

NAME	TEST DEBUT	CAPS
Gordon Sturtridge	1929 v New Zealand, Brisbane	9
Owen Bridle	1931 v New Zealand Maoris, Palmerston North	12
Dave Cowper	1931 v New Zealand, Auckland	9
Edward 'Weary' Dunlop	1932 v New Zealand, Sydney	2
Evan Jessep	1934 v New Zealand, Sydney	2
Ru Dorr	1936 v New Zealand Maoris, Palmerston North	2
John Hammon	1937 v South Africa, Sydney	1
Gordon 'Max' Carpenter	1938 v New Zealand, Sydney	2
Freddie Kerr	1938 v New Zealand, Sydney	1
Clifford Lang	1938 v New Zealand, Brisbane	2
Andrew Barr	1939 Wallabies UK Tour Abandoned	
Stan Bissett	1939 Wallabies UK Tour Abandoned	
George Pearson	1939 Wallabies UK Tour Abandoned	
G Gourlay	1946 Wallabies NZ Tour Abandoned	
Eric Davis	1947 v Scotland, Edinburgh	4
Ernest Hills	1950 v British Isles, Brisbane	2

Geoffrey Vaughan	1958 v England, Twickenham	6
Robert Kay	1958 v New Zealand	2
J Cocks	1958 Wallabies NZ Tour	
Adrian 'Art' Turnbull	1961 v Fiji, Melbourne	1
Jim Douglas	1962 v New Zealand, Wellington	3
David Shepherd	1964 v New Zealand, Wellington	5
Paul Gibbs	1966 v Scotland, Edinburgh	1
Russ Tulloch		
Richard 'Dick' Webb		
John Meadows	1974 v New Zealand, Sydney	22
Doug Osborne	1975 v England, Sydney	3
Ewen McKenzie Andrew Heath	1990 v France, Sydney 1996 v Canada, Canada	51 8
Nick Stiles	2001 v British & Irish Lions	12
David Fitter	2005 v Ireland, Dublin	2
Lloyd Johansson	2005 v New Zealand, Auckland	5
Rocky Elsom	2005 v Samoa, Sydney	75



## SIR EDWARD 'WEARY' DUNLOP



Colonel Sir Ernest Edward "Weary" Dunlop, AC, CMG, OBE (12 July 1907 - 2 July 1993) was not only a nationally recognised hero in regards to his service for the Australian Army, but was also the first Victorian to play Rugby for the Wallabies (having been born in Wangaratta).

Weary's rapid rise, from inexperienced 4th Grade Melbourne University Rugby Club player to Wallaby backrower within the space of twelve months, takes pride of place in Australian Rugby history.

Following his selection he was asked by a reporter why, as a Victorian, he had chosen to pursue Rugby as his preferred football code. "The whole team gets into action at one time, and moves like one man in great dashes down the field, striving to defeat the opposing side and put the ball over the line," he replied. "(And) tackling is more thrilling than anything in the Australian game."

Wallaby number 280, Dunlop played twice for the Wallabies and remains the only Victorian to be immortalised in the Australian Rugby Hall of Fame, an honour he received in 2008.



Outside of Rugby, Dunlop was an Army surgeon who was renowned for his leadership while being held prisoner by the Japanese during World War Two. After 1945, Dunlop forgave his captors and devoted himself to the health and welfare of former prisoners-of-war and their families, and worked to promote better relations between Australia and Asia.

He was active in many spheres of endeavour. He became closely involved with a wide range of health and educational organisations, and served on the board of Cancer Council Victoria. His tireless community work had a profound influence on Australians and on the people of Asia, and he received many honours both within Australia and from abroad.

Dunlop's State funeral in 1993 saw 10,000 people turn out to pay their respects. The nickname "Weary" was a reference to his last name - "tired", like a Dunlop tyre.