

DERBY



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DERBY

WA FOOTY FANS ON THE
GAME'S GREATEST RIVALRY

DAVID WHISH-WILSON & SEAN GORMAN



FREMANTLE PRESS

*to our footballing fathers –
Peter Gorman and Tony Whish-Wilson*

Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people are respectfully advised that deceased people may be referenced in this publication.

FOREWORD – DENNIS COMETTI

A faded poster hangs on the wall of my gym at home. It features rival captains John Worsfold and Ben Allan (predominantly in green) competing for a mark under a boldly typed message: THE STATE IS DIVIDED. IT'S NOT LIFE OR DEATH, IT'S MORE IMPORTANT. In retrospect, that poster seems like a battle cry of hype and hope. Hype to whip up interest, and the hope that somehow a real rivalry could rise out of such lopsided beginnings. Through the summer of 1994–95, I'd never seen two clubs less likely to fan a rivalry than West Coast and Fremantle.

Geography aside, in competitive terms it was a mismatch of massive proportions. The Eagles under Michael Malthouse were coming off their third grand final in four years and a second premiership. They were the benchmark of the AFL. By stark contrast the Dockers had been cobbled together over a few months. Their coach, Gerard Neesham, was untried beyond the WAFL. West Coast was laden with stars. Names like Jakovich, Matera, Kemp, Mainwaring, McKenna, Heady, Sumich, Worsfold and Turley were the stuff of legend. In 1995, the Eagles read like a *Who's Who* of the competition. By contrast, Fremantle fans could only look at their list and ask, 'Who's he?' Of all the new clubs before or since, none were given fewer player concessions than the Dockers. The only blessing the rookie club had was that it could look across the river at the reigning premier. There could be no mistaking the height of the bar!

The two clubs met for the first time on May 14 in round seven. And against all the odds, Fremantle arrived at that match in remarkable shape. Picked by most experts to go through the season winless, they had won three of their first six games. More to the point, their three losses were by a combined total of just sixteen points. But it was a record that stood for nought. On that warm Sunday afternoon, Malthouse's men ruthlessly marked out their turf. Brett Heady put on a clinic as Fremantle was in turn outmuscled then outhustled. The old adage that a great team still 'put their pants on one leg at a time' was put to rest very early. Within minutes it was abundantly clear to every Docker that their opposition wore considerably bigger pants and that they put them on a good deal faster. The Eagles won that first derby by eighty-five points. They went on to win the next eight.

The magic of this rivalry is not that it survived such domination but that it thrived. In time, the Eagles lost many of their champions and then in round ten, 1999, they finally lost to Fremantle. In the seasons to the end of 2016, the Dockers have won twenty of the forty-four games played. During this impressive run, the Dockers produced their own legends – players like Matthew Pavlich, Peter Bell, Aaron Sandilands, Nathan Fyfe and David Mundy. Nowadays the mere mention of a Western Derby raises a smile anywhere around Australia. A smile that acknowledges an edge that few games have. So much so that, in 2015, the prospect of a Western Derby AFL grand final was eagerly anticipated by many people outside Western Australia. Given the decline of Victorian powerhouse clubs like Essendon, Carlton and Collingwood, the Eagles–Dockers rivalry is the best in the AFL. It is testimony that rivalries are more about what they become than how they begin.

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INTRODUCTION - DAVID WHISH-WILSON & SEAN GORMAN

Football, it has been said many times, is more than a game. Perhaps the reason for this is that it intersects, overlaps and pervades so many different sectors of society. Those who follow the code enter into a broad church where the language of the game, its myths, its long narrative arcs, its champions, its villains and its seasonal rhythms bind us together regardless of who we follow. Here we stand around the water cooler, talking about footy tipping or the latest footy scandal; then there's Facebook footy chat, emails, texts, posts ... it goes on ad infinitum.

Our football allegiances define us and, in turn, they determine the types of interactions we have with others. You know what we are talking about: the taxi driver who goes for Freo and doesn't mind telling you about it all the way from Midland to Mandurah; the crazy neighbour who lives in Fremantle but goes for the Eagles; the butcher who has the Eagles premiership teams framed and hanging on the shop wall beside a shrine to the Madonna; the pesky kid over the fence who goes for Freo and whose purple ball ends up in your yard; and the lady at reception who has a lolly jar on her desk full of yellow and blue Smarties that she delights in offering Dockers fans. One-eyed, hard-boiled, rusted-on, staunch. Why? The psychic space that football has in our lives can be reduced to a few potent drivers, especially when it comes to the teams we follow: love, loyalty, admiration. The genesis of these drivers can come from all manner of

things: a grainy game on TV on a cold afternoon; listening to a memorable match in your high-school dorm; having a favourite uncle or aunt foist a guernsey on you as a child; or the chance encounter with a football star down at the local deli or bottle shop. They are moments where fate steps in and, before you know it, you are riding the bumps with a grin.

Once we don the colours and the totem of our team, we go deeper into the age-old notion of what being in a tribe must have been like. We define who we are by what we are not. We dispense with the tool of reason and all of the justifications and arguments that are important to everyday life, and instead fall back on ancient human traits that don't need to be tested, such as loyalty and stubborn belief: footy as a secular religion. We become absorbed in the always-developing human drama and sometimes comic theatre of our team and the game that we love. We become experts and pundits and sages and disciples of the inexact and mysterious forces that guide the fate of our club, and therefore our lives. Because we live it week to week, and game to game, we understand in our bones the words of French philosopher Albert Camus, when he claimed that what he knew most surely about morality he learned from playing and watching sport – the ethics of sticking up for your friends, your team, your community, and valuing courage and perseverance and fair play and respect for those who oppose you. This latter feature as it applies to football rivalry is understandably the most difficult to sustain – in this case the difficulty many Dockers and Eagles fans have comprehending and articulating why others follow the 'mob up (or down) the road'. Time and again we've all heard it: 'How could they?', 'Why do they?', 'What's wrong with them?' And yet, despite this natural confusion – which in its turn shines a light on the complexities of human behaviour – we all place others and judge them by who they follow. This notion becomes

acute when the rivalry boils down further to the best football rivalry in the land – that between the Fremantle Dockers and the West Coast Eagles. This gives rise to the Western Derby, and just about every Western Australian has an opinion on that.

We initially saw the idea of writing this book about the Western Derby as a chance to have some fun delving into the weird and wonderful thoughts of fans who could not stand the thought of the opposition. It would be a bit of a ‘kick and a giggle’, we thought. But what soon became apparent through the interviews was that this book was much more. It opened us to deep insights about what football means, and has meant, to Western Australians for decades. It is about social memory and local heritage, about deep passion for family and community forged on cold windy flanks at Leederville, Bassendean and Fremantle ovals. Of country footy, amateurs, school footy and backyard kick-to-kick, to wagging school for classic 1980s State of Origin football, to the Sunday night ritual of watching *The Winners* straight after *Countdown*. It is about great speccies and goals, and biffs, bombs and bullshit. It’s about what attracts us to our teams and our favourite players. It’s about what keeps our loyalty and (clubs, take note) what diminishes it. It was from this primordial football soup that the modern derby rivalry has emerged, and the antipathy between Dockers and Eagles fans seeps its way into each of these stories, with biting humour, begrudging respect, pathos and, in some cases, voodoo. As a broad story, this book contains some key themes, namely the importance of the many great Indigenous players who have shaped the game, and earned our respect and admiration. Another common theme is the importance of the WAFL to Western Australian cultural life, in terms of instilling the virtues and the tribalism that would later become focused on the two AFL derby rivals.

As well, the importance of a strongly felt sense of place, and of belonging, based around the suburbs and schools and landmarks of our city and state, and in turn how that sense of place and loyalty is purified by competitive feelings towards the perceived arrogance and dismissiveness encapsulated in the word ‘Victorian’.

Derby rivalry is the bridging subject of this book, but its method lies in communicating the stories of the individuals who generously agreed to participate. We looked for a broad cross-section of our society – people from all walks of life who have something interesting to say. Sporting celebrities for their insights into the game and the power of their personal stories. Politicians and schoolteachers. Crayfishermen and nurses. Small-business owners and musicians. Artists and academics. Lawyers and farmers. Two teams of fans who have nominated their field positions based on their personalities and favourite numbers, each team with a captain (Shaun McManus and David Wirrpanda, whose physical clash in derby number thirteen has gone down in the annals of folklore as being perhaps the epitome of the derby rivalry – it even had Clive Waterhouse in it.) We thank our captains and all those who agreed to be interviewed, those who facilitated introductions and those who spent time with us.

For us, the derby is a social phenomenon that allows us to unpack so much about what it means to be Western Australian and why we follow the teams we do. It provides us with a starting point for a conversation so that other conversations may be had. Despite who we may go for, and the tribe we have chosen, or has chosen us, we can be assured that the game in Western Australia is alive and well, and regardless of who we go for, Western Australia really is the home of football.

DERBY TEAMS

Captains David Wirrpanda (13), Shaun McManus (8)

FB Julie & Adrian Hoffman (27, 18), Janet Peters (24), Bill Sutherland (28)

FF Les Everett (22), Alison Fan (7), Lesley the Voodoo Lady (6)

HB Ron Elliott, Jeff Newman (13), Mark Greenwood (7)

HF Ross McLean (7), Kevin Croon (7), Maria Camporeale (13)

M Greig Johnston (13), Justin Langer (9), Glen Stasiuk (2),

M Glenis Freemantle (7), Kim Scott (13), Alsy Macdonald (4)

HF Carla Mackesey (9), Julie Bishop (9), Ian McRae (6)

HB Fedele Camarda (4), Melissa Parke (29), Clive Mercer (10)

FF Matt Quinn (19), James Baker (9), Gaby Haddow (3)

FB Maria Giglia, Luc Longley (13), Jesse Dart (1)

Followers Bevan Taylor (30), Dennis Lillee (10), Parsi (2)

John Prior (3), Peter Mudie (33), Deanne Lewis (28)

Supersub Gillian O'Shaughnessy

Coach Kia Mippy

DAVID WIRRPANDA – EAGLES

For David Selwyn Buralung Merringwuy Galarrwuy Wyal Wirrpanda, football has been good. Having played 227 AFL games for the West Coast Eagles, culminating in the one-point grand final win over Sydney in 2006, Wirrpanda – or ‘Wirra’ as he is more commonly known – has worked hard to establish the foundation that bears his name. In 2007 he was named by *The Bulletin* as one of Australia’s most influential Aboriginal people, and in 2009 he was awarded the Young Western Australian of the Year. Such was the power of his brand that he was a contestant on *Dancing With the Stars*, and he even had a tilt in the 2013 federal election as the National Party’s senate candidate for Western Australia. At his North Perth home we are not only greeted by Wirra but two employees and old Dockers adversaries in Dale Kickett and Troy Cook. The banter ensues about derby rivalry and games won and lost, but Wirrapanda focuses on what he first thought of the derby, having come from Victoria where he had witnessed hundred-year-old hostilities firsthand.

‘Well, as a young bloke I didn’t really understand the Western Derby because, being a Victorian, we had a derby every week in Melbourne. You know, the great rivalry between Carlton and Collingwood, Essendon and Richmond. I was a mad Hawthorn supporter so there were some pretty hot contests. That’s why I wore 44 – because I was a Johnny Platten fan. I played on him when I was sixteen and didn’t know whether to tackle him or kiss him. So when I heard about this *derby*, and the rivalry, it didn’t

really click until I was here. I started in '96 and I was pretty keen to see the Fremantle Dockers because they were the new franchise and they had a lot of Indigenous players. I remember watching Scotty Chisholm in the warm-up one day and thought he was pretty good. Then in round one in 1996, I got a little bit of an understanding of it, straight up.'

It didn't take Wirrpanda long to understand the importance of the derby game in the context of local football. 'I've got a really good understanding of the derby rivalry. I think the passion is huge, considering for a long time the majority of supporters were West Coast and now after more than twenty years I think it's almost fifty-fifty. That's exciting for Western Australian footy because Fremantle are now a serious contender. They're not there to be pushed around anymore by the so-called big brother. To their credit they have clawed their way back, and football in this state has been the winner.'

Wirrpanda had an intimate insight into the inner workings of the Eagles and he is refreshingly honest about what a derby means from a player's point of view. 'We used to be very diplomatic when it came to the derby, and we were gently instructed to make sure that we used the old clichés. But to be honest, it's a rivalry, you don't want them to win regardless of where you are on the ladder. It's as simple as that. There's nothing better than making sure that you're number one in the state. If we lose, we feel the heat. Like when you go up North, the majority of Kimberley people are all mad West Coast, and after a derby loss you get: "What's wrong with you? What happened?" You feel terrible because you've just let everyone down. The players all shake hands afterward but we couldn't stand each other, and that's the truth.'

Having taken some time to ease himself into the demands of the elite AFL competition, Wirrpanda recalls his first derby. 'I think my first real derby was in '99, and from there

I played a fair bit of them, but I got a real taste for it when John Worsfold was our captain. He made it very clear he did not want to lose to those blokes down the road and that was the rule of thumb.' Wirrpanda recalls that his first derby coincided with the first Dockers win, and it's not a pleasant memory. 'I just remember how gutted I was. I was playing on Brad Wira. He was tagging me for the day, and he got on top of me by kicking three goals. It was massive, like a final. To their credit they just kept clawing and clawing and eventually it was going to happen because it's just part and parcel of footy. It took me more than a week or two to get over it.'

Wirrpanda is quick to point out that there were times when the boot was on the other foot. 'If you really want to be successful you have to have a little bit of arrogance about you. Don't get me wrong. I'm a respectful person. My mum used to tell me to be fair and play the ball. I don't know if that makes sense, but that's what we tried to do – to keep the lid on things and not blow them out of proportion. The wins were great and felt good, because I wanted their players to remember me for next time. But you can't relax. They are tough games.'

Asked to describe how Wirrpanda and his team mates prepared for a big derby game, he replies, 'I know people like Dean Kemp really set himself for a big day with the derby. Brett Heady was another one. Glen Jakovich used to really fire up. Non-stop talking, geeing us up. Some blokes would spend the entire morning spewing up. I was relaxed, if anything too relaxed. Sometimes it used to annoy Woosha that I was a little bit too laidback. But I'd try to avoid that pressure of thinking about it a lot. I'd sit in the spa just before the game, have a yarn and a laugh. I wanted to make sure I was not wasting any energy and could come in fresh. But as soon as the siren went I'd go one hundred miles an hour.' Apart from trying to calm himself before a big match,

Wirrpanda's other concern before a big game was 'making sure my family had tickets. A few times in the warm-up, our boot-studder at the Eagles would walk in and say we have got your family here, and they want tickets, and I was literally just about to run through the banner. That was the thing that I used to stress over more. So I would make sure there was always a few spares at the door, because I didn't want them coming in to the change rooms humbugging me just as I was running out.'

During the week in the lead-up to a derby game, Wirrpanda often spent time training with Phil Matera as he prepared for playing on his toughest Fremantle opponent – The Wiz. 'Mate, Jeff Farmer was the toughest to play on by a country mile. I mean he was one of those players that I used to prepare myself for, and I didn't get a lot of sleep the night before. He knew the way I played, and I knew the way he played. We had really good battles and I think he's probably the best Docker I've played on. I would train really hard with Phil Matera in small spaces especially in the goal square. The only thing that The Wiz probably had over Phil is he could jump on your head. You'd keep him quiet all game and in two minutes he'd kick four on you. I'd yarn with him and have a bit of a laugh and ask about his family. We used to rotate different players on him. Drew Banfield was unbelievable as far as locking down on players, and Daniel Chick was good because he would get Jeff Farmer upset. I'd kind of take over from there and hold on because it was always a wild ride with The Wiz.'

The conversation shifts from that contest to perhaps the most bone-jarring incident to have occurred in derby history – the clash between Shaun McManus and Wirra in derby thirteen, 2001. Wirrpanda takes a sip of his coffee and looks off into the distance. He breathes in slowly and lets out a thoughtful sigh. 'That clash with Shauny Mac

is probably my favourite memory in footy. It's up there with the grand final. Fremantle were breaking in the play and my mate Andrew Shipp, had the ball. I knew his kicks are not that accurate. He lobbed this kick and I saw Shauny Mac probably about ten metres behind me over my right shoulder, and I just remember thinking, "I'm quick enough to get to where the footy will be." I left my man and the footy was in the air. I was confident I was going to get there, mark it and take off. We were both watching the footy and running full lick and then I felt his jaw on my shoulder and the way I hit him it jolted my neck and I felt a bit unwell. I just remember getting up, and Peter Matera saying it's not a mark, and then Cookie had me by the throat. I was immediately concerned. I thought, "Jeez, he's seriously hurt," because Shauny's eyes were at the back of his head. He got the free, and was probably the worst kick in that team, and he's had a shot at goal and kicked it. Great memories, of a hard contest with one of Freo's favourite sons.'

Despite the derby ledger being so in favour of the Eagles for so many years, the outcome of having regular highly competitive games has seen the win-loss ratio even up and both teams have benefitted. 'Once we played regular derbies you could see players really develop from Freo's end, as well as ours. I mean there was myself, Ben Cousins, Chad Morrison, Michael Braun and Rowan Jones. Then you saw players like Paul Haselby and Matthew Pavlich really start to push and make a name for themselves, not just for Fremantle but in the AFL. And that's where the respect starts to grow, because the rivalry grows too. Now these retired players are some of the most popular, and it's important for me and for the boys as well to keep that relationship, because they were pretty big servants for the footy club. I encourage all the Aboriginal players that work for me to keep up relationships with their old clubs.'

Wirrpanda, Cook and Kickett have to head off to the airport where they have a scheduled meeting. We ask Wirra whether there will ever be a derby grand final. 'Well, we almost had one in 2006. I think that was probably the closest we've been, but the potential between both the football clubs now to play in the GF is a lot closer than we think, whether it's this year, or maybe another year or two down the track. But I'm worried about the changeover of the squads. That's probably to Freo's detriment that they're going to have a big changeover in the next couple of years. We all saw what happened when the Eagles lost Matera, Kemp, Jakovich, McKenna, Worsfold, and we had that big dip down the bottom. It's a process that Freo are dealing with now. But both footy clubs are really well managed with fresh blood, new ideas, different coaches, different structures, and I think they're going to be a lot more successful, but I would love to see a derby grand final.'