

ODE TO WAVERLEY PARK
by Nils von Kalm

From April 18 1970 until August 29 1999, we have either loved it or hated it. Waverley Park, VFL Park, Arctic Park, the Thunderdome. Whatever you liked to call it, it either held our affections or it received our hatred. The great stadium in the outer eastern suburbs of Melbourne was to be the AFL's crowning glory. Grand Finals would be played there forever at the ground the League could call its own. But in the end it was not to be, swallowed up by the greed and corporate visions of the AFL elite. Instead we have the Docklands, with its gold medallion club and a capacity not even three quarters that of the great eastern suburbs stadium. As a banner read at the last home and away game at the great ground - "Waverley RIP - the death of family football". And so it was. But enough of the bitterness, enough of the narcissistic self pity, for who can forget the memories of this wonderful ground, the passion and the feeling that it evoked? Let us indulge ourselves as we reminisce one last time.

I well recall my very first experience of Waverley, taken there by Mum and Dad with my two brothers – a family affair at the family ground. Hawthorn was playing Carlton in the 1977 night Grand Final and won easily. About a month earlier I had watched in awe as Peter Hudson and the Hawks demolished Essendon at Princes Park in my first live experience of VFL football. Was it any wonder then that, after my next trip to Waverley later that year, again a family affair, I was inconsolable, taken home in tears by my family after having to deal with the fact that my team could actually lose. That plus a screaming South Melbourne supporter screeching in my ear right behind me. My first memories of Waverley were both a celebration and an ordeal.

Stories of the VFL Park traffic jams and the car park mud are the stuff of legend. Memories are still vivid of my brother, in his old 1963 Holden, not giving a hoot if his car got a minor dent from some BMW or Mercedes while trying to squeeze into any available square inch of space to get out after a big game. You had to be aggressive to get out of that Mulgrave mud in less than half an hour. But while this was the case, at what ground was it not the same? Still today we hear of parts of the MCG car park being closed due to inclement weather.

Speaking of inclement weather, well, if it was going to rain anywhere it was going to rain at Waverley wasn't it? It was the true believers indeed who trudged through the mud and sat in the outer, battered by the rain and wind. This ground, built in the middle of a rainbelt in the eastern suburbs of Melbourne, tested the loyalty of many a football supporter over its short but glorious life. One such game was the Hawthorn/St Kilda game in 1992. I was sitting in the top deck of the members stand, probably about 300 metres from the action, and I could hardly see through the hail as Plugger Lockett and St Kilda destroyed the Hawks by about 10 goals. The trek back to my car after that game was as long as it was cold and bitter.

The critics say the ground lacked atmosphere. What bunkum! These people obviously weren't at the 1987 Preliminary Final when Melbourne, riding a tidal wave of emotion and kicking with the wind for three quarters, slugged it out against Hawthorn, the team of the 80s. The irresistible force against the immovable object. At three quarter time Melbourne was 22 points up and cruising. Hawthorn on the other hand was a spent force; Chris Mew with concussion and Jason Dunstall not even playing. The fairytale was set to continue. What followed though was the most exciting last quarter in the history of finals, possibly of football itself. The constant roar of the crowd, 72000 people, unable to stay in their seats as both sides tugged and pulled at each other. A gladiatorial battle for the ages. Then, at the end, the scenes that followed Gary Buckenara's winning goal after the siren are ones that will stay with me forever. Melbourne players sprawled out on the ground, unable to believe their despair; Hawthorn players in a mass embrace, celebrating a comeback from the jaws of death. The TV cameras panned to people in the crowd, many in tears, and all completely stunned. I was jumping up and down in ecstasy as my Melbourne supporter friend grabbed his two kids and walked out, leaving me to glory in the moment.

What other famous Waverley moments evoke memories in us? How about the sprinklers coming on during a night game, the lights going out during a game a few years back, Peter Hudson flying in by helicopter in 1973, the drawn final in 1972. There was the KISS concert and the Waverley Reds; U2 and World Series Cricket. And then there was the crowning glory, the moment when Waverley reached its Everest, the 1991 AFL Grand Final between Hawthorn and the West Coast Eagles. This was the way it was supposed to be. The showpiece of the AFL, beamed live via satellite around the world. This day the ground lived up to tradition - a cold, dark day, and especially so for the Eagles, as Hawthorn, too old and too slow, trounced them by 53 points.

Ah the memories! Read over it again, if you're a true supporter. Even if you're not, just try to imagine the passion and emotion that these things stir up. These were the glory days, and you can probably think of many more moments, your own pieces of drama; great moments you'll be able to tell your grandkids about years gone by - "I was there when....".

In the end though it came down to Hawthorn versus the AFL as to who would determine the future of this great arena. Unfortunately, as so often happens, the dollar and corporate greed won out and Waverley's days were numbered. But the people would not leave this ground without a fight. Even on its last day, Round 22 1999, the last home and away game ever at the ground, supporters were there with their placards and banners, telling the AFL what they thought. This was a great day though, more of a celebration than a wake. Waverley turned on the sunshine and 72000 fans paid tribute. Past champions were paraded around the ground and past dramas relived. It was a day of emotion and revelry. Hawthorn versus the Swans and Plugger's last home and away game. A day typical of our stadium in the suburbs, families with their kids and a kick on the ground after the game. This was Waverley, and no one, not even the AFL, can take the memories away from us.