

BEVERLEY O'CONNOR



THE CITY I LOVE

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TIME FOR FOOTY ON GOOD FRIDAY

HERE you might be thinking that another Good Friday has rolled around and again we're going to be footy-free.

Well, you'd be wrong! Right around the state, suburban and country leagues have had the foresight to push ahead with local football matches for the first time.

From Geelong to Essendon to Ballarat, local clubs are using the AFL's "No footy on Good Friday" policy to create local clashes of their own, while the AFL continues to drag its feet on the issue.

This week CEO Andrew Demetriou proudly boasted about the near record figures for a gripping opening round — combined with a 34 per cent spike in television audiences.

So why not maintain the momentum?

The AFL hides behind the game's traditional and family appeal — but if it's serious about broadening the base to Asian, Islamic and African communities then it should not be favouring religious holidays observed by an increasing minority and treated by many more as just another public holiday.

Religious leaders have long argued that the significance of the day would be lost if football were played on Good Friday. Some claim using footy as a "distraction" from day-to-day lives and making it the sole objective in people's lives indicates there is an underlying social problem to address.

I think that misses the fact that football is a social currency, the glue for many communities, and there could be valuable social capital to be gained with the message the day brings.

North Melbourne championed the idea on more than one occasion.

Carlton too has tried, together with Hawthorn, proposing to appease concerns by tapping into the Royal Children's Hospital Good Friday Appeal, as a partner and benefactor. It didn't persuade AFL HQ. Exchanging Friday for an Easter Thursday night hasn't hurt the schedule or the television audience, and certainly avoids any community conflict.

For many years in Australia three days were sacrosanct: Christmas, Good Friday and Anzac Day. There'd be a strong argument that Anzac Day has seen its tradition grow far more strongly and its message spread more powerfully because of the huge cache the Anzac Day blockbuster between Collingwood and Essendon has given it.

It's become the biggest game of the year outside the Grand Final — and the day is never just about football. It is rich in emotion, tradition and learning for younger generations.

This year, I understand, the AFL toyed with the idea of beginning a fresh tradition of a rival derby between the new kids on the block Greater Western Sydney and the Sydney Swans, which you'd think would be a smart move to back its \$200 million gamble on the extension of the game.

The NRL hasn't held back — for years it has scheduled matches on Good Friday.

Some forward-thinking people in the church believe they could even find a voice



through football in a way that might bring much greater attention to the holiday than ever before.

Theos people have recognised that because television stations pay billions to broadcast it, and advertisers

pay millions to be associated with it, the church could get in on the bandwagon.

The AFL sees no reason to rock the boat, and of course we'll all survive a day without football, but I love that some in the church think it's time for us to be imaginative.

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