

FOOTY 50 YEARS NOT OUT – ACKNOWLEDGE THE PAST AND CONTINUING THE TRADITION

By Rod Gillett

When the ball was bounced to commence this season in the Tamworth AFL it heralded the start the fiftieth year of Australian Football in the area.

The first match in the area was played between the University of New England and Moree in Armidale in 1962.

Buoyed by the success and interest in the game the grandly named ‘Northern Districts Australian Football League’ was formed for the 1963 season with three teams – Moree and Robb and Wright Colleges from UNE. Robb won the first of their many premierships.

However, the distance between Armidale and Moree proved to be arduous, and forfeits saw Moree finish bottom.

For the 1964 season, Moree withdrew, and the establishment of Earle Page College at the university provided for a three team UNE competition. It remained a UNE-run competition with the addition of college teams and an Armidale City team until Tamworth entered in 1975.

The formation of an Australian Football club at Tamworth in 1975 was a pivotal moment for the game in northern NSW. It opened up the possibility for more teams in the area to come into the university competition.

A number of players who travelled from Gunnedah to play with Tamworth in 1975 formed a club for the 1976 season. Known as the Bulldogs, the Gunnedah club bought the number of teams up to six.

In 1978 the Tamworth and Gunnedah clubs left the New England AFL to form the North West Australian Football Association along with new clubs from Moree, Wee Waa and Coonabarabran. Tamworth beat Gunnedah in the first grand final played at No 2 Oval in Tamworth.

Initially the enthusiasm for the game sustained the North West competition and a team from Inverell and a second team from Moree joined. The tyranny of distance proved to be a real bug-bear for the competition with various clubs coming and going over the years including UNE college team Robb College in 1985 after the New England AFL folded in 1983.

The North West competition then became the only AFL competition on the northern tablelands, but then after Robb United withdrew in 1991, the competition was then reduced to teams from Tamworth and Gunnedah, and folded in 1993.

Australian football in the region was revived in 1997 with the creation in Tamworth of a competition based on twelve players per team that initially comprised of four local teams. These teams eventually morphed into the Tamworth Swans and the Tamworth Kangaroos in 2002 after the New England Nomads joined in 1999 and the Gunnedah Bulldogs in 2002 to again make it an inter-town competition.

These teams were joined soon after by Muswellbrook (2003), Narrabri (2004) and Inverell (2005). Alas, the Narrabri Eagles are in recess for the upcoming season.

The New England Nomads have embraced its antecedent club, the UNE Australian National Football Club, and this year will celebrate “50 years Footy at UNE”. The team will wear a commemorative guernseys that will honour the UNE ANFC that have been donated by the club’s Old Boys.

As so many of the clubs in the currently constituted Tamworth AFL have previously played in the North West Association it would be appropriate for these clubs to honour their predecessors who worked so hard to establish football in their towns and adopt the year in which footy began as the starting point for their history just as the Nomads have done.

The same case can be made for the Tamworth AFL to acknowledge the North West Association.

Australian Football in the region has a rich history and proud tradition in the area that needs to be appropriately acknowledged and properly recorded. The heritage continues through the good work of the Tamworth AFL to promote and grow the game in the region. Long may it live!

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