

18

Brunswick Street, Round 11, 1958 (June 21)

THE SMITH FAMILY EXORCISES THEIR DEMONS

Ben Collins' massive *The Red Fox: The Biography of Norm Smith: Legendary Melbourne Coach* details the extraordinary football lives of Norm Smith and older brother Len. While Norm is perhaps the most famous identity in the history of the Melbourne Football Club, it's often forgotten that Len – almost three years older – began his playing career at the MCG before Norm. Len made just 19 appearances for the Demons and never played in the same team as Norm before his Fitzroy move. They were on opposing sides nine times between 1938 and 1945, with the Roys winning three and the Dees six games. By the time Norm joined Fitzroy as captain-coach in 1949, Len had long since hung up his boots and was coaching the Gorillas' Under-19s.

Collins' book includes a marvellous photo of the pair flanking their mother, Ethel, leading up to the first time they coached against each other midway through the 1958 season. Ethel's palms were upturned like balancing scales, with Collins suggesting she was saying "Who will win? Who will I support? I can't decide." Ethel diplomatically told *The Herald* reporter of the day: "I can only hope it's a draw." When former Demons champion Jack Mueller, writing in the *Football Record*, told the brothers although one would be a loser in that day's Fitzroy-Melbourne game, the family picture was a real winner, they replied: "We were glad for Mum's sake that it was such a good photo."

The odds were heavily stacked in favour of Norm's reigning triple-premier Demons, with *Kevin Murray: Heart of the Lion* saying their line-up "contained 17 hardened premiers players". Another two – Dennis

Jones and Alan Rowarth – would also play in grand final-winning teams, with only Bob Turner missing out. Conversely, just half a dozen Roys had finals experience, during the Maroons' most recent campaign in 1952. This was arguably Fitzroy's most important match since that year's preliminary final, and although the Lions had a 7-3 win-loss record, they were coming off a 51-point belting at Essendon. In contrast, the Dees were 9-1, their sole defeat being by a solitary point against St Kilda in Round 6.

But reputations counted for nothing in "Battle of the Brothers I", as Collins referred to the clashes between the sibling-coached sides. Melbourne received its worst beating since a 51-point thumping from Footscray in the 1954 Grand Final. The Demons were slow to start after having first use of the breeze and were outscored 10.12 to 3.9 after quarter-time. Indeed, their one second-half goal came in time-on of the last quarter.

"This wasn't just a victory, it was a massacre," Chatterer said in the *Football Record*. "Melbourne never had a clue to the vigorous, fast-moving, play-on game of the dashing Lions. They were outpaced, out-thought, out-rucked and beaten at every stage of the game. There wasn't one department in which they won, not one position in which they had a winner. This was the greatest upset for years and years ... no explanation can obliterate the fact that Melbourne met their masters in Fitzroy. The Lions went into this game the underdogs. They emerged on top of the world."

The Roys' brains trust had done its homework, according to *The Age's* Percy Beames. "Before (the) Melbourne players walked triumphantly off the ground (MCG) from their premiership-boosting (11-point) win over Collingwood last Monday, Fitzroy selectors, led by coach Len Smith, had worked out moves that brilliantly stymied the Demons ... Carried out perfectly by (the) players, the moves brought the Maroons their greatest victory for the season and gave Melbourne its heaviest and blackest defeat in five years (sic)."

Beames said Len's tactics included the mobile Owen Abrahams running slow-moving centre-half-back John Lord off his feet, big

Eddie Goodger tagging the considerably bigger Bob Johnson, first-year player Keith Wiegard staying close to star ruck-rover Ron Barassi, and centreman Don Furness getting on top of Melbourne counterpart Laurie Mithen early. Len also placed Kevin Murray on the windy side of the Brunswick Street ground. No wonder Beames' colleague Trevor Davis observed: "The Demons could've been excused on many occasions for thinking they were playing a team of Kevin Murrays."

The *Football Record* wrote: "Fitzroy had three heroes. Kevin Murray gave one of the finest exhibitions of back play ever seen. He seemed to have the ball on a string. He outmarked all opponents, showed uncanny anticipation and invariably relieved with long, telling kicks. Don Furness dominated the centre, clearly outpointing interstater Mithen, while Owen Abrahams was far too clever and pacey for his opponent, and but for poor kicking could've finished ... with seven or eight goals (he kicked just three)."

Beames thought "it was obvious long before the finish that Melbourne was a beaten and dejected side ... The Demons did not like the idea of playing Fitzroy, as their obvious lack of appetite for the game – there was even a suggestion of timidity by many players – clearly showed."

Ethel Smith may've diplomatically wished for a draw, and two of the eight Fitzroy-Melbourne Battles of the Brothers did indeed finish all square. To further indicate the evenness of the rivalry, the other six matches resulted in three victories apiece, with the Lions winning the teams' first encounter of 1959. In the lead-up to that clash, Ben Collins described how Len seemingly received a bad omen. Younger sister Marj invited him to meet her pet budgerigar who'd just learned to talk. Apparently, the budgie's first words to Len were: "Come on the Demons!"

On the subject of talking, Norm was known to be the fiercer of the two when it came to addressing his players. Revisiting the 1958 game, Collins related how the quietly spoken Len had to address his side in the Fitzroy boardroom because there was only a temporary partition separating the two changerooms. Given the Demons' capitulation, Norm was pretty agitated and berated his players. When Len came out

of the boardroom, he said: “Listen to this, boys. How would you like to be coached like that?”

FITZROY	2.4	7.8	9.11	12.16	88
MELBOURNE	3.2	5.5	5.8	6.11	47

Goals: Fitzroy – O Abrahams 3, W Clark 2, D Furness 2, T Ongarello 2, G Campbell 1, K Jones 1, K Wright 1. Melbourne – I Ridley 2, R Barassi 1, B Johnson 1, C Laidlaw 1, A Webb 1.
Attendance: 22,000

17

Junction Oval, Round 4, 1978 (April 22)

LIONS' GOAL-FEST WAS MURPHY'S LAW FOR SWANS

“South (Melbourne) and Fitzroy are at war.”

So said Brian Hansen in *Inside Football*, as the protracted battle by former Lions skipper and five-time best-and-fairest winner John Murphy to move to the Swans intensified. Murphy didn't play in the first Fitzroy-South Melbourne qualifying game of 1978 as his clearance request – ultimately upheld the following week – was still to go before the VFL Appeals Board. Adding spice to this Battle of the (Albert Park) Lake, the Lions had knocked off the Swans by four goals in a midweek Night Series match at Waverley four days earlier.

The game was very similar to Round 14, 1976, against Geelong at the Junction Oval, when Murphy kicked five goals as Fitzroy stormed home in the final term after looking a beaten team all day. In the Swans