



A Royboy's Lament

“W^{HAD’YA FOLLOW BLOODY FITZROY FOR YOU MUST HAVE} flamin’ rocks in your head?” people too numerous to mention have asked me over the years.

I’ll grant they had a valid point, given Fitzroy’s eighth-and-last premiership came way back in 1944, when Hitler was struggling to kick a goal for Germany and his mate Hirohito was dropping the ball with Japan. Although the once-mighty Roys kicked on longer than those two likely lads, they ultimately met the same fate.

Fitzroy last made the Victorian Football League finals in 1986, but went rapidly downhill and finished stone motherless last in 1995 and 1996 – with just three wins from their final 44 games. The Lions were promptly shown the door because they had no money and the AFL Commission wanted to introduce Port Adelaide into the competition. The AFL kicked Fitzroy firmly in the guts and out the door, one bounce into the gutter, despite them being a foundation member when the VFL-turned-AFL began in 1897 and one of only three clubs to’ve competed uninterrupted in the League’s first 100 years. It’s a cruel game – or should I say, business – is football.

No more Fitzroy; it’s bloody hard to take; *impossible* to take, if you must know. No more mighty Maroons, Gorillas (yes, Fitzroy was once a team of primates), Lions, Roys, Royboys, Easybeats. Easybeats – Fitzroy were never easybeats! Sure, they received some fearful floggings, but usually rebounded the next week with a fighting win over a more fancied opponent. Until the

AFL coldly and cruelly penned Fitzroy's obituary and the other clubs – led by Brisbane – readied themselves like vultures to swoop on the decimated Lion carcass.

The thing about following Fitzroy was that you rarely expected to win. The Royboys perfected the time-honoured art of snatching defeat from the jaws of victory, with the vast, empty spaces in the club's trophy cabinet living proof. Even former Lions president Leon Wiegard agreed when, during one of the team's many lean spells, he said: "Someone's supposed to be on the bottom of the ladder. Unfortunately, it just happens to be us at the moment."

Towards the bitter end, Fitzroy had put in a land rights claim on that bottom rung. The only consolation from the Roys' demise is that I've fared infinitely better in footy tipping competitions. A true supporter *never* sells his soul to the devil by tipping against his side in a desperate attempt to win a truckload of cash, or beer, no matter what he thinks deep down of their chances (or lack thereof) of success. I believe if your team is out of form or languishing lower than Bill Clinton's zipper, betting against them only serves to further sap the players' confidence. Not once – ever! – did I tip against Fitzroy, and have both the bank overdraft and grisly scars on my wrist to prove it.

This urge to wager on footy started as a young bloke at school – the same one attended by the great Simon "Yogi the Storm Chaser" York – in the bush. Under severe provocation, I bet the headmaster that my WA Football League team, East Perth, would whip traditional rival West Perth's arse (I didn't quite frame the bet in those terms) in the 1971 Grand Final. Because I was too young to drink or punt (legally), we didn't bet a slab of beer or a crisp, new redback on the outcome. Instead, the loser had to sweep the school's concrete cricket pitch with a toothbrush, which, in terms of practicality, surely only compares with holding a Miss Universe pageant in a Taliban cave.

Predictably, East Perth lost — ingloriously so — and the headmaster, consistent with the strict disciplinarian he prided himself on being, ensured I kept my end of the bargain. If the mighty Royals had won, I guarantee he wouldn't have swept the pitch. No, some pathetic excuse about ancient, arthritic knees would've been dragged out of mothballs. Because my toothbrush was so traumatised, I didn't clean my teeth for a year. Thereafter, I vowed never to be so cruel towards a toothbrush.

Years later, I successfully reined in the footy betting monster during a short stint in England, where there were about as many Aussie Rules fans as coppers enrolled at a non-violent, crowd-control seminar. Being pre-Internet, I kept up to date with the Roys' (mis)fortunes by dialling the former Telecom Australia sports results service on a Saturday night.

If you phoned around midnight UK-time the footy scores were usually first-up, because anybody in Australia professing to be a true believer would've read the Sunday sports pages by then and have no need for the services of the resident Telecom sports voice (as seductive as she sounded to a bloke with a dozen beers under his belt). Otherwise, brace yourself as “the voice” talked you through everything from the Bong Bong Picnic Races to the World Macrame Championships. And make sure you keep firing the pennies into the coin slot like you're feeding a poker machine with nymphomania. When she finally reached the footy results — if you hadn't run out of money or fallen asleep in the meantime — there'd always be some drunken yobbo outside the phonebox wailing at the moon or barking at the ground, making it impossible to hear a thing as the scores evaporated into the crisp night air.

Yes, you needed to be a few sprigs short of a footy boot to support Fitzroy. While the AFL certainly did not, history will judge the Royboys kindly. What true footy fan will dispute that the Roys were THE 19th-century powerhouse, winning two of the three premierships contested (1898 and 1899). And who can

forget 1916, when the Maroons were both premiers and wooden spooners.

First and last in the one year? Is this a Mensa question, or have I disengaged brain completely in my misguided fanaticism for the Roys? Well, because of the Great War, only four teams had the resources to kick the pigskin in anger. Fitzroy won just two and drew one of 12 qualifying games to be further in arrears than a one-legged marathon runner. However, because the Maroons finished fourth (of four), they automatically qualified for the finals then hit their straps big-time to take the flag. I've already mentioned 1944, the Year of the Gorilla, but after that things deviated drastically from the script.

There was actually a time in the late '70s, early '80s when Fitzroy looked genuinely capable of breaking the premiership drought. The Lions slaughtered North Melbourne by 76 points in the 1978 Night Series Grand Final, with the Kangaroos kicking their only two goals in the first five minutes of the game. The Roys were invincible in winning nine successive games next season, before booting a then-competition high of 36.22 (238) to Melbourne's 6.12 (48), a record winning margin that stands to this day. And Bernie "Superboot" Quinlan, unquestionably the *greatest* footballer ever to pull on a boot (though Kevin Murray, Johnny Murphy, Garry Wilson, Mick "The Tank" Conlan and Paul Roos – all Royboys, of course – weren't far behind), shared the 1981 Brownlow Medal and kicked a century of goals in 1983 and 1984.

Ouch! 1983 really hurts. Not even the rapid passing of time and more rapid passing of neurons will lessen my conviction – and that of every Roys supporter – that WE WUZ ROBBED (again!) by the men in white, who gift-wrapped Hawthorn a four-point "win" in the qualifying final and a gold-lined invitation into the Grand Final. Superboot booted five goals in the last quarter alone, but no way known did pip-squeak Loveridge and old man Tuck deserved those late free kicks – greater acts of charity I've never seen – that resulted in match-winning goals to the Hawks.

Onto more pleasant things – what about The Tank's moment of glory to eliminate the Essendon Gliders in 1986? In pouring rain, Conlan, who with Doug Barwick formed the Biceps Brothers (thanks to "Louie the Lip" Richards), kicked a match-winning goal at the death, from an angle so acute the ball had to deflate itself to squeeze between the posts (with apologies to the late Jack "Captain Blood" Dyer). Next victims were the Sydney Swans, but trust the 'Orrible 'Awks to again gatecrash the party a week later when the Lions had the flag at their mercy.

However, the game that stands out above all others – both on and off the field – was the 1981 first semi-final against the hated Collingwood Magpies. Traditionally, most footy fans have two teams: their own and whoever's playing the Pies.

My dislike of Collingwood goes way back to when I took a shortcut home from school and was swooped by a flock of magpies. They left me with a bald patch so pronounced that more than one person in the street has addressed me as Your Holiness. And each and every spring (coincidentally, footy finals time), some do-gooder lady from the Save the Magpies Society – 75 not out in the shade, high-pitched voice, silver-rimmed specs, dark Matron Sloan-like uniform covering a figure like a beach ball, and a head like a chewed-up Mintie – will publicly say what lovely creatures magpies are and suggest nothing less than the death penalty for any person even remotely wishing them harm. Now, I'm a great nature lover bordering on greenie and have the utmost respect for those who do volunteer work, but it's pretty damn obvious the dear lady has never been swooped by a magpie. You don't need to be a shrink to understand why I despise Magpies, especially those wearing black-and-white-striped guernseys.

I'm no longer paranoid about friggin' magpies ... I think. Because of these feathered meglomaniacs, I don't trudge through the bush in spring. That'd be about as smart as playing hopscotch in a German minefield. Sorry, I didn't mean to get back to Hitler – he'd be "fuhrerious" at me for doing so! Instead, I prefer to spend

September watching Collingwood lose grand finals, although things haven't gone entirely to plan in recent years with their premiership wins in 1990 and 2010 (admittedly, both occurred in early October). I've nothing against the (very) average Magpies player who, for the most part, has the coordination of an elephant on roller-skates and the personality of a squashed duck. But it's the common garden Pies supporter I hate – a real Jekyll and Hyde – particularly the big, fat bastard who stood behind me on that heart-breaking day, September 12, 1981, at the MCG.

The '81 first semi at the home of footy in front of 85,133 people; the second-largest crowd to attend a Fitzroy game, behind the corresponding game (also a loss) against the Magpies two years earlier. Had the big, fat bastard not been there, they could've squeezed in another couple of thousand people – and three more beer tents and an extra hot dog stand. I'll be the first to admit I carry a few extra kilos, but compared to the big, fat bastard I looked like an emaciated knitting needle. In keeping with his fair-sized-roof-over-the-toolshed physique, he was pretty vocal, especially when he saw me decked out in my Fitzroy gear. I didn't care what the big, fat bastard said, as long as he didn't fall on me.

Unfortunately, the manly Lions played like dandelions in the first half and trailed by 38 points at the long break. The big, fat bastard was carrying on like a pork chop and, if you believed his ranting and raving, each Collingwood player made Batman look as threatening as a boy scout with gout. He was paying out on the Royboys big-time.

"Ehhhh ... Lorenzo Serafini ... you're about as much use as last week's spaghetti! A-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

"Oi ... Matty Rendell ... why don't ya stand in the one spot and be a goalpost? You'd be movin' more than what ya are now! A-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

"So theys tip yous for the Brownlow, Quinlan? That's a joke! Me mother-in-law's a better footballer than you. And she's been dead for five years. A-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

The big, fat bastard was as funny as a fart in a church confessional. And each time he unloaded that fearful laugh I copped a spray of warm Foster's to the back of the head. Well, I think it was Fossies. What could I do? Deck him, maybe. But Mike Tyson and Evander Holyfield in tandem couldn't have managed that, so what chance little old me? Fingers crossed Fitzroy kicked a few goals to at least make the scoreboard look respectable.

Not bloody likely, sunshine. When the Magpies booted the first goal of the third quarter to extend their lead to 45 points, the big, fat bastard pulled my Lions scarf even tighter around my neck.

"You'd rather hang than watch this massacre, eh, Royboy? A-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

No disagreement there. But before I could further consider his suggestion, a miracle occurred: Fitzroy kicked a goal. A few cynics — the big, fat bastard included — claimed it was the first goal the Roys had kicked since their 1944 triumph. But then the boys went into overdrive and piled on goal after goal, trimming the deficit to just 14 points at three-quarter-time. Geez, Fitzroy could win this!

Certainly the Pies fans believed so. Conditioned to being prophets of doom, they were already ranking this among the black-and-whites' best, or worst, fadeouts, depending on which way you look at it. The big, fat bastard was pretty quiet, aside from bagging the umpires — but I'll never criticise anyone for that. He was quieter still when the vastly underrated David McMahon — now he was a player-and-a-half — goaled midway through the last quarter to put the Lions four points up. Magnificent!

I was pretty tanked by that stage — initially from drowning my sorrows and then from celebrating — and thrust my hand skywards in jubilation ... the same hand gripping a freshly opened Foster's can. The contents poured out like Niagara Falls — all over the big, fat bastard. Despite the fact I'd "worn" gallons of his beer earlier in proceedings, this was not a clever

move on my behalf considering the delicate state of the game. I turned around slowly, and braced myself for a clip around the ears. But ... far canal ... none came. Instead, the big, fat bastard made a speech that would've done old Freddy Nile proud at the Get On Board Sinners Make A Choice Keep Evil Down (GOBSMACKED) Society's AGM. And I quote, because I remember every friggin' word!

"You're truly the vilest and most disgusting individual I've ever encountered at the football. Is it any wonder that a man puts his son on the MCG membership waiting list the moment the boy is born? Makes a lot of sense; both father and son can watch the cricket and football in peace without cultural heathens like you ruining their appreciation of the game. How many girls do you see here in the crowd? Very few. I'd lock up my own daughter to protect her from your unsavoury attitude, excessive drinking, deplorable language and all-round loutish behaviour."

Thanks for the sermon, mate. To say I was flabbergasted was an understatement. It only proved a severe personality disorder *is* a prerequisite for following Collingwood. When McMahon steered another one through to extend the Lions' lead to 10 points with just three minutes remaining, I forgot about the big, fat bastard. The Roys had the game all parcelled up – as sure as night follows day; as sure as taxes will go up this year; as sure as Kylie Minogue will see the light and have her wicked way with me.

The only problem was the Fitzroy players believed this. No, not that Kylie Minogue was going to have her wicked way with me (unfortunately), but that they had the game won. Foolish boys! In the worst 60 seconds of my life, bar none, the Pies goaled twice to restore their lead. Despite a last-ditch counter-attack, the Royboys failed to kick one last goal before the siren sounded to signal defeat by a single, solitary, measly, miserable, pathetic, piddling, bloody point. Tragedy! No team – unless it's Collingwood – deserves to lose such an important game by one point. But Fitzroy just had.

There is a God; the Magpies lost the Grand Final to Carlton a fortnight later. As for the big, fat bastard behind me, I didn't hear him against the screeching chainsaw playing over the PA system, which I presumed was the Collingwood theme song. It should've been Fitzroy's song to the tune of the French national anthem, *La Marseillaise* playing:

*"We are the boys from old Fitzroy;
We wear the colours maroon and blue.
We will always fight for victory;
We will always see it through.
Win or lose, we do or die;
In defeat, we'll always try.
Fitzroy; Fitzroy; the club we hold so dear;
Premiers we'll be this year."*

Sheer poetry! But "this year" and that elusive premiership will *never* come for Fitzroy. The shell-shocked remains of players wearing the famed maroon and blue (and gold in later years) and the theme song, logo, cheer girls and bank overdraft were shunted off to the hybrid Brisbane Lions. Some players moved to other clubs, but they've all finished up now. Just like the paltry number of people who ever supported the Maroons, Gorillas, Lions, Roys, Royboys many of whom were given the last rites soon after the club was.

I'm yet to receive the dreaded visit from the priest, but may as well take up marbles on the weekend rather than try to select winners in games that I don't have my heart in. The AFL's decision to shaft Fitzroy must rank as Australia's biggest sporting blunder since Channel 9 sacked Keith Stackpole (coincidentally, the son of 1944 Roys' premiership player Keith Stackpole Senior) from its international cricket commentary team. But that, my friends, is another story.