

25

Lake Oval, Round 13, 1909 (July 24)

IT'S FISTICUFFS AND 'FOOTBRAWL' AT SOUTH

To paraphrase the late American comedian Rodney Dangerfield: "I went to a fight the other day, and a football game broke out." And, so it was at the Lake Oval when Fitzroy visited eventual 1909 premier South Melbourne – except that the majority of fighting came not from the players but the fractious red-and-white "supporters".

The Argus's Observer provided a somewhat sanitised version of events. "There may have been some doubt as to which was the match of the day on Saturday; there was no doubt as to which proved to be the match of the day. (Sixth-placed) Fitzroy settled that point by a highly meritorious victory over (top team) South Melbourne. There was everything on the South ground to make a popular attraction – an exciting game of baseball between the Columbia Park (American school) boys and a Victorian nine to commence with, and music by the fine Saint Augustine's Band from Geelong. The great event of the day was, however, the surprise furnished in the football, though it was known that Fitzroy had prepared themselves for a great effort."

Contrast this with *The Herald's* opinion. "If the spirit of South Melbourne crowds at football matches ... does not soon undergo a change, it may be doubted whether visiting teams should venture into that suburb. The attitude of many of the people in the grandstands ... was disgraceful. Well-dressed and apparently respectable men and women, of mature years, were frequently to be heard calling out to the South Melbourne players to do violence to their opponents. 'Kick his head in,' cried a woman with a child by her side

and a baby in her arms, as a Fitzroy player fell to the ground in a crush of players. At half-time, when the visiting team came back to their dressing-rooms, a thousand men, women and children in one section of the grandstand rose and hooted the (Maroons) men, who had savage blows aimed at them as they passed through the crowd in front of the stand."

Kickero wrote in the same newspaper: "The riot at South Melbourne is especially shameful, in as much as it will tend to give the visitors from America an unfavourable impression of the crowds who follow the game." Roys captain Jim Sharp told Kickero: "There was nothing in the game to justify the disturbance that followed ... The noise started in the grandstand enclosure when we were going to our dressing-room. Cinders and stones were thrown but we dodged them pretty well. The worst we had to guard against was the kicking. We could watch for punches and ward them off, but the cowardly kicks we could not see. (Les) Millis received one and when I got into the room, he was suffering great pain. Three or four women were mixed up in the row, and one old dame punched me on the nose, while another snatched and scratched at 'Titch' Bailes' hair."

The Leader's Follower spoke in more general terms. "It has become unpleasantly evident that amongst the people who follow some of the principal suburban clubs there are a lot of objectionable blackguards, who, for the protection of decent folks, will have to be sternly and effectively suppressed." He then gave a historical perspective to the tension between Fitzroy and South. "The match was, however, the cause of trouble, which seems to be inevitable when these clubs meet. For years, there has been evinced a feeling of bitterness between them which has spread from the players to the barrackers, and on Saturday both sections offended grievously and disgracefully."

While not making specific reference, Follower perhaps had the pair's final home-and-away clash of 1904 at the Lake Oval in mind. Fitzroy won a torrid affair that included South's Billy Gent running amok and charging at players, resulting in him being reported on three striking charges. Billy was certainly no gent and was suspended for the rest of 1904 and all of the 1905 season.

A reporter from *The Age* suggested an accidental elbow from Maroons defender Jack Cooper to the Bloods' captain-coach Charlie Ricketts incensed an already uptight crowd. By all accounts, Ricketts had "indiscreetly persisted in playing, despite an injury he had received (against Melbourne) on the previous Saturday". Rover, in the usually pro-South Melbourne *The Record*, was far blunter, saying "it was bad judgment to allow him (Ricketts) to play, as he was probably the greatest invalid ever sent onto the field."

But this mattered not to the crowd who, according to *The Age*, believed that "to strike one of their own team was bad; to strike one of a beaten team was worse; but to strike an injured man on a losing side – particularly when that side happened to be their own – was a violent crime. They nursed a hot resentment until the end of the game."

Kickero observed that "when the umpire (Robert Bain) reappeared outside the entrance gates, he was again subjected to further ill-treatment by a howling mob. When the Fitzroy players, in civilian attire, were being escorted to their cabs, there was another disgraceful outbreak ... They were greeted with hooting from fully 2000 hoodlums, followed by showers of road metal, and a large boulder unfortunately struck (ruckman Herbert) Milne, inflicting a nasty wound on his head."

And the match itself, which on the surface may seem rather incidental? Fitzroy scored the first two goals through Arthur Newbound and Wally Johnson after South unexpectedly kicked against the wind. Alex Kerr replied for the Bloods, who had marginally the better of the opening term. The hosts upped the ante in the second, with maximums to Bob Deas and Jim Caldwell giving them a narrow half-time lead. Bill Dinsmore and Bill Dick goaled for the Maroons in the third quarter, either side of Bert Franks' major for the red-and-whites, who, at just six points down and with the breeze at their backs, looked good things to take the points. However, the Roys defied the odds to win comfortably, with Newbound booting his second, the only goal of the final term.

Rover, of *The Record*, rated Fitzroy wingman George Holden as the game's standout, adding "I doubt if there is a player in that position

who can high mark with him, while his turns and fast sprints prove him a champion." History shows Holden made an even greater impact in the corresponding fixture four years later, with his 120m dash part of footy folklore.

Observer contrasted the teams' attitudes. "It was do or die with Fitzroy whose players threw themselves into it with a complete disregard for the consequences. They were determined to win, and their determination was more compelling than South Melbourne's skill. It was rough and ready, neither side giving (a) quarter nor expecting it."

Indications are the deliberate-out-of-bounds rule was strictly policed 111 years ago, with Observer describing the Roys' final-quarter tactics. "And, of course, at such a critical stage of the match, Fitzroy got the ball out of bounds as often as possible, though the umpire free-kicked every palpable intention to play out."

Ironically, "Boxer" Milne, a casualty of the chaotic crowd, crossed to South Melbourne at the start of the 1911 season. It was also game No.50 (of 226) for South's Vic Belcher, who 13 years later coached the Maroons' seventh VFL premiership team.

FITZROY	2.5	2.8	4.11	5.14	44
SOUTH MELBOURNE	1.2	3.4	4.5	4.6	30

Goals: Fitzroy – A Newbound 2, B Dick 1, B Dinsmore 1, W Johnson 1. South Melbourne – J Caldwell 1, B Deas 1, B Franks 1, A Kerr 1. Attendance: Unknown