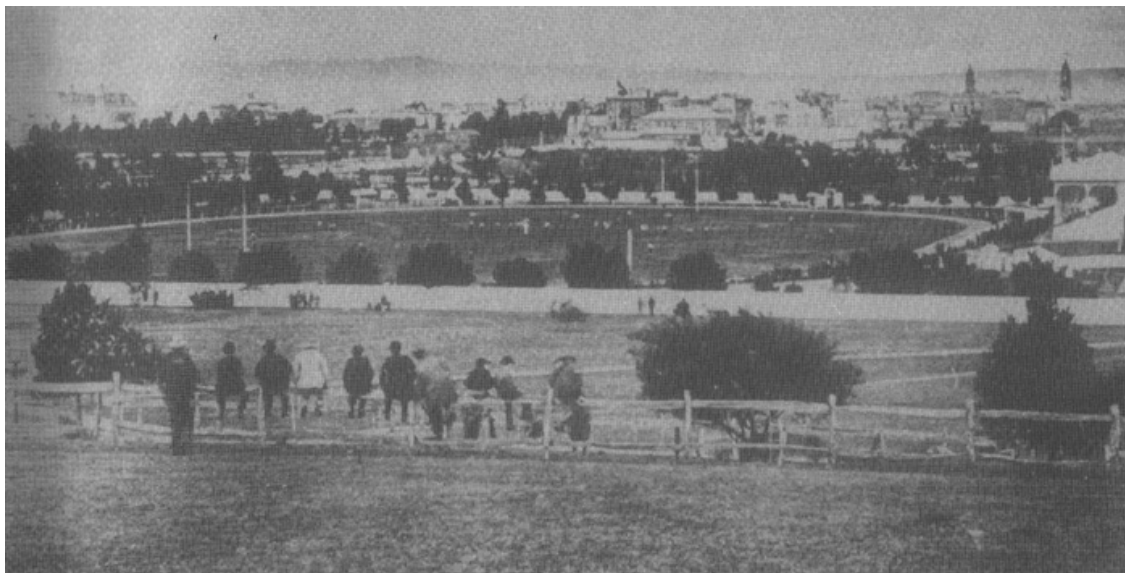


## 1889 SAFA Premiership Play-Off: Norwood vs. Port Adelaide

### *The First Grand Final*



*Adelaide Oval, pictured during the late 1880s whilst a football match is in progress.*

### The Grand Final Concept

Uniquely Australian and a quintessential element in the great Australian game, a grand final is like nothing else in sport. For the two teams involved, a whole season's commitment, aspiration and hard work is laid on the line in a 'winner takes all' finale that pays no heed whatsoever to previous form or achievement. In today's AFL it is theoretically possible, though somewhat unlikely, for a team finishing as low on the ladder as 8th after the home and away series to end up earning the right to call itself the best in the land. In the SANFL in 1984, Norwood, which qualified for the major round in 5th place with 13 wins, thereafter managed to win 4 successive finals games to annex the premiership, beating minor premier Port Adelaide, which had won 4 more minor round matches, in the premiership decider. More recently, AFL club Adelaide won the 1998 flag despite beginning its finals campaign 5 places and 3 wins below eventual grand final opponents North Melbourne; moreover, it began its finals campaign with a loss to Melbourne, while North won both its pre-grand final finals matches comfortably. Other examples of this sort of thing abound, but the point being

made is that grand finals are games apart, completely different from and much more important than any other games. To qualify for a grand final is to qualify for equal rights, in a football sense, with past performances - other than their residual, non-quantifiable impact on factors such as morale and confidence - completely irrelevant.

Yet finals football, and grand finals in particular, only became part of football's essential fabric very gradually. In major competitions like the VFA and SAFA the premiership was, for many years, awarded to the team which finished the home and away series of matches at the head of the ladder, a system which was later emulated in English soccer. In 1896, the top two teams in the VFL, Collingwood and South Melbourne, could not be separated on the basis of wins achieved, and so it was decided that the destiny of the premiership would be determined on the basis of a single, 'winner takes all', play off match. Collingwood duly defeated South Melbourne to take out the 1896 flag, but of much greater long term significance was the enormous interest, and substantial revenue, that the match generated.

Meanwhile, in the background, discussions were taking place between a number of the VFA's stronger clubs with a view to establishing an elite, breakaway competition, discussions which eventually led to the formation of the VFL the following year. This new organisation was quick to discern the potential benefits (in terms of pounds, shillings and pence) of using a play-off system to determine each year's premiers, and from its very first season of operation the VFL implemented what it called a 'final round' involving the teams which finished the home and away series occupying the top 4 places on the ladder. In 1897, this final round was conducted on an all play all, or round robin, basis, but attendances were disappointing, with an aggregate scarcely in excess of 30,000 spectators attending the 6 matches. Unfortunately, the round robin format lacked the immediacy and drama that had so appealed to fans attending the 1896 play-off between Collingwood and South Melbourne, and sensing this, in 1898 the VFL began to utilise the first in a variety of finals systems which shared the common element of culminating in a single, decisive play-off (see footnote 1). Other major competitions soon followed the VFL's lead: the SAFA implemented a finals system in 1898, for example, the VFA in 1903, and the WAFA in 1904. For well over a century therefore, the now familiar concept of a series of play-off matches, incorporating some kind of handicap system (see footnote 2), and culminating in a single, conclusive premiership-deciding match, has been as integral a feature of the Australian game as the high mark, the unique scoring system, the hand pass and the importunate bagging of umpires.

Although the VFL can, in a sense, lay claim to having 'invented' finals football, the very first premiership-deciding match in a major competition took place on Saturday 5 October 1889 in the colony of South Australia. It involved reigning Australian champions Norwood and Port Adelaide, and came about because the two clubs concerned had finished the season with identical win-loss ratios. The

match was extremely well received, and it would be hard to imagine its not having played a significant part in informing the minds of those who oversaw the implementation of the VFL's finals series less than a decade later.

The match also contributed in no small measure to the development of the intense rivalry between Port Adelaide and Norwood which exists to this day.

### Contemporary Match Preview (See footnote 3)

For the first time in the history of South Australian football it has become necessary to play off for the premiership, and today on the Adelaide Oval the Norwoods - last year's premiers - and the Ports - the second team of 1888 - meet to wrestle for the much-coveted position.

Extraordinary interest has been excited in the match, and a huge sum of money is staked, the ports being slightly the favourites, especially among the smaller backers, but the Norwoods have a host of backers.



*Norwood captain,  
Alfred 'Topsy'  
Waldron.*

The clubs have met four times.....this season, the Norwoods winning two, losing one, while the other was drawn; but no inference as to today's game can be safely drawn from these results, as it is to be admitted on all hands that the Ports have considerably improved during the last few months, while the Norwoods lately have not been in such form as they were when they won two matches.

Mr. J.J. Trait, who is acknowledged to be the best umpire in Australia, will act in the match, and as he is specially known for his strong determination to put down rough play at all costs there is very little probability of the disgraceful play which characterised the last match between these clubs.

If the weather only keeps fine the attendance should be even greater than on the last occasion.

The Norwood team is slightly different to that which did battle for them before, and it has been somewhat improved by the substitution of McGrath, O. Bertram, and Roachock for Haldane, Honner and McCarthy.

On the other hand, the only alteration in the Ports' twenty is that Lowe takes Miller's place.

The chosen teams are:

**NORWOOD:** R.M. Bertram O. Bertram, Combe, Dixon, Daly, Guster, Grayson, Jackson, McKee, McGaffin, McGrath, Rawson, Roberts, Roachock, Shaw, Slattery, J.J. Woods, C.W. Woods, Wilson, Waldron

**PORT ADELAIDE:** A. Bushby, W. Bushby, Correll, Davis, Ewers, C. Fry, J. Fry, Gardiner, Hamilton, Hills, Kempster, Le Leu, Lowe, J. McKenzie, K. McKenzie, Miers, Phillips, Stephens, Tomlin, Webb

Special trains will leave the Port at 1.55pm and 2.08pm, in addition to the ordinary trains, and a special will leave town after the match, at 5.55pm.

**Contemporary Match Report** (See footnote 4)

## **PREMIERSHIP FOOTBALL MATCH**

ADELAIDE OVAL  
TODAY  
at 2.45 pm

NORWOOD V. PORT  
FIELD UMPIRE - Mr. J. Trait  
GOAL UMPIRES - Messrs. I.A. Fisher and J. McKenzie

Note:-Port and Norwood Club Tickets admit, also S.A.C.A. Football Tickets

Grand, 6d.; Reserve, 6d. extra

### **1st Quarter**

The much talked-of match between the Norwoods and Ports for the premiership came off on the Adelaide Oval on Saturday afternoon. For weeks past both teams have been training assiduously, and they entered the field in the pink of condition. Both clubs were content to take level money, although some of the supporters - principally of the Ports - laid odds on, but when the game started the Norwoods were slightly the favourites.

The very strongest teams that could possibly be got together were selected, and the eastern club had the best combination they have had this season. Special trains from the Port brought up large numbers of spectators, and when the ball was set going there were quite 10,000 people on the ground. The official figures show that 7,227 paid, and the balance was made up of tickets. Both pavilions

were crowded to their fullest extent. The members' reserve was also filled, and the mounds in front of the buildings were packed with people.

The Norwoods entered the field first, being received with applause, and then a loud cheer greeted Mr. J.J. Trait, the crack Australian umpire. The Ports were not long following, and from the cries that assailed them it was evident that their supporters had rallied in force.

When the two teams took their places there was little to choose between them, and it is questionable whether ever before any two so evenly matched clubs had assembled on the Adelaide Ova.

The conditions for a good game could scarcely have been improved upon. The ground was in splendid trim, but a fairly strong wind blew across the ground towards the bridge. No delay was experienced in getting to work.

The Norwoods having secured the wind at six minutes past three, J. McKenzie sent the leather down towards the north goal, and from the very first both teams went into the game at a terrific pace. **QUARTER TIME: Norwood 3.1; Port Adelaide 3.1** (behinds recorded, but not counting towards a team's score)

## 2nd Quarter

All the first quarter the play had been terribly fast, every man doing good service. There was not the slightest difference between the teams, both of them giving a magnificent exhibition, the marking and kicking being perfect.

The Ports with the aid of the wind were the first to attack (during the second quarter), but Jackson warded off. Shaw and Roberts troubled the Ports' back line, and C. Woods receiving a free on the boundary from a very difficult angle made the Norwoods' goal total four.

On kicking off, some very bad attempts at marking by the Norwoods let in Gardiner, and he sent forward. Roberts, who was marking excellently, dispatched back to the centre, but K. McKenzie with a long kick sent it forward again, and the ball went over to the gate, remaining on that wing for some time.

Ewers was prominent, and Kempster met all attacks. Combe and Daly kept the goal out of danger on their end, and then the Ports tried the other wing, and worked the ball across to the pavilion, where Stevens who was working very hard in the ruck showed up, and after the sphere had traversed the ground, Hills tried a shot, and the ball passed just outside the post.

When the welcome spell came to the men, the figures on the board read - **HALF TIME: Norwood 4.1; Port Adelaide 3.3**

### 3rd Quarter

During the first half the wind had gradually shifted around, and was blowing across the gate. After the interval the Ports were the first to open aggressive tactics.

The Ports put all their power into the play, and Gardiner finished up a nice run with a good kick. Hills placed in front of Le Leu, and a loud cheer announced that the totals were again equal.

For a little the Ports prevailed, but the score was too dangerous for the Norwoods, and by a series of long marks they called upon the Ports to defend.

When the final change took place the score was - **THREE QUARTER TIME: Norwoods 5.3; Port Adelaide 4.7**

### 4th Quarter

Aroused to still greater exertions by the loud cries of their supporters the teams went into work at a great pace. The Norwoods had evidently reserved themselves for a big attempt.

Being bounced, a series of marks by Rawson, Daly and McGrath gave Shaw an opportunity, and the game looked all over as the ball went right up to the goal, but it fell short, and J. Fry secured. Taking it around the gate wing the Ports called upon the Norwoods to defend. Hamilton dispatched to Hills, who failed, and J. McKenzie had similar luck.

The Norwoods played wonderfully well together, their long marking being exceedingly good. They transferred the play to the Ports' end, where Webb defended. Sending it along the pavilion wing, Hills gave Phillips another chance, and he made amends for previous misses by equalising the score.

With time rapidly drawing on the teams were urged on by their supporters and the Norwoods made a gallant effort, while the Ports defended in equal style. The red team, however, seemed to have a little bit in hand, and by some good marking Waldron forwarded to McGaffin, and his kick put the Norwoods a goal ahead.

Hamilton just previously was partly disabled by being seized by cramp. Resuming, the Norwoods again attacked and their combined play was too good for their opponents. In a scrimmage some distance from the goal C. Woods put his foot to the sphere and sent it between the uprights. The umpire thinking a Port man had kicked it did not give a decision, and nothing was registered.

By Mr. Trait's order the ball was kicked off from behind, and then some hot play ensued in the Port's quarters. K. McKenzie got away from two Norwoods, but Roachock outwitted him. Rawson, Roberts and Guster kept the ball forward and Daly missed a running shot. Then O. Bertram also tried a running shot, and a loud cheer greeted another goal.

With everything to gain the Ports started off again, but before anything serious had eventuated, the bell pealed out, and the great contest was over, leaving the Norwood team premiers of 1889. **FINAL SCORE: Norwood 7.4; Port Adelaide 5.9**

### Postscript

There is little doubt that taking the play right through the better team won. Although the Ports had the larger number of behinds, goal kicking is a most important factor in the game, and the magenta team failed in this respect, while many of their shots were from impossible distances.

With the single exception of when Carlton beat Norwood in 1887, the game was the finest contest ever seen here.

In the first quarter the play was truly magnificent; not a mark was missed or a chance between the teams, but the Norwoods lasted a trifle better, and their last charge proved irresistible. For the first time this season the Norwoods beat their opponents in the ruck. It is impossible to say who played best, as fully fifteen men on each side were really brilliant, whilst all the others did good service.

After the match was over many of the Norwoods' supporters went to the dressing room, and Waldron, the captain, was greeted with ringing cheers. Mr. Trait was similarly complimented, and he was personally thanked by the club. Bushby, the Ports' captain, on behalf of his team thanked Mr. Trait for the admirable way he had conducted his duties.

The Norwoods then gave three cheers for the Ports and their captain.

### Analysis Of The Game

	Norwood	Port Adelaide
Kicks For Goal	11	16
Marks Made	85	79
Running Shots	4	1
Free Marks Received	19	22

Ball Ups 9, Out Of Bounds 101

## Footnotes

1. That is, with the single exception of 1924, when the round robin format was resurrected, with similarly disastrous consequences in terms of attendances.
2. Initially, this tended to consist of allowing the minor premier the 'right of challenge', whereby if it was defeated at any stage during the finals it could claim a 'second chance' in a decisive play-off against the winner of the final. The concept of the second chance, in various forms, would be retained in all future finals systems.
3. From 'The Register', 5/10/1889.
4. From 'The Register', 7/10/1889.