

1908 SAFL Challenge Final: West Adelaide vs. Norwood

'Oxygen Versus Beer' - Westies Break The Ice



The West Adelaide team that won everything on offer in 1908.

SA Football's Cinderella Club

After being admitted to the South Australian Football Association in 1897, West Adelaide endured eleven seasons of misery and under-achievement, managing just 23 wins and 1 draw from 145 games for a paltry overall success rate of 13.9%. The improvement managed in 1908 would be dramatic. For the first time in its history, the club had a nucleus of strong players, including the Leahy brothers, Bernie (shown left), Tom and Vin, veteran Jack 'Sorry' Tierney, eventual 1909 Magarey Medallist 'Dick' Head, known for much of his career as 'the king of centreman', wingman Johnny McCarthy, and rover 'Shrimp' Dowling (pictured below, right). These players had enabled West to perform creditably in 1907 to secure 4 solid wins whilst avoiding the heavy defeats that had littered previous seasons.



In 1908, the arrival as coach of former South Adelaide and North Adelaide ruck champion Jack 'Dinny' Reedman proved to be the catalyst needed for the team to transform its undoubted potential into full-blown success. Reedman was the first coach to be employed by the club in a non-playing capacity, and he oversaw some important developments, notably the recruitment of half a

dozen highly promising players from country clubs. These players were D.Horgan (Mintaro), Alby Klose (Blumberg), J.F.McCarthy (Tarlee), B.Moy (Saddleworth), W.Price (Gawler South) and V.Stephens (Jamestown). All six were constantly to the fore as West overcame a tentative start to claim second position on the ladder and a first ever finals berth at the conclusion of the home and away rounds.

Redlegs Favoured To Win

West's main opposition for the 1908 premiership would come from reigning premiers and champions of Australia, Norwood. The Redlegs boasted a highly accomplished all round team which a month before the start of the finals had inflicted a hefty, for the era, 44 point defeat on the red and blacks, largely as a result of which it had finished half a game clear at the head of the premiership ladder going into the finals:

1908 SAFL Premiership Ladder

	W	L	D	For	Ag	%	Pts
Norwood	10	1	1	792	498	61.39	21
West Adelaide	10	2	0	676	529	56.09	20
Port Adelaide	8	4	0	716	522	57.83	16
North Adelaide	6	5	1	697	632	52.44	13
West Torrens	4	8	0	605	739	45.01	8
South Adelaide	3	9	0	665	768	46.40	6
Sturt	0	12	0	449	912	32.99	0

Both semi finals went to form, with Norwood comfortably overcoming Port Adelaide, 11.12 (78) to 6.4 (40), and West scratching out a hard fought if scarcely convincing 15 point win over North Adelaide. In view of these results most people expected Norwood to secure the flag with some ease without recourse to the right of challenge, but Westies put in easily their best performance since entering the competition to win with something to spare, 6.15 (51) to 3.6 (24). The scene was thus set for what would be a classic challenge final, with the result in doubt right down to the wire.

'Oxygen Versus Beer'

A crowd of approximately 22,000 attended the decisive match at the Adelaide Oval, many of them lured there by the prospect of seeing the competition's Cinderella side break its duck. At quarter time, however, this looked distinctly unlikely as the Redlegs, having admittedly enjoyed the advantage of a firm breeze, had accumulated 3.7 (25) - more than they had managed in the entire previous week's game - whilst keeping West completely scoreless. Reedman managed to motivate his charges during the brief interval, however, and West fought back strongly in the 2nd term to be only 9 points in arrears at the long break.



The third quarter, by common consent, brought some of the finest football seen in South Australia for many years, with no quarter given nor asked, and Norwood adding 1.2 to 1.0 by West to head into the final change 11 points to the good. West, however, would be finishing the match with the aid of the breeze.

The final term was similarly hard fought, as West fought desperately to get back on terms and then, as time-on commenced, to hit the front for the first time.

To thousands probably, (the) closing minutes were as a lifetime. With less than two to go West Adelaide were leading by four points and were attacking strongly. The game looked a dead certainty for them. Then the red-and-blues broke away on the left wing and forwarded. Like a flash the ball sped to the other end. The crowd went wild. In their anxiety men jostled each other roughly, and women screamed. Some were too excited to speak. Others turned their backs upon the scene; they could not bear to see the result of that kick.



At last a tremendous cheer burst forth, a cheer which crashed thunder-like upon the air, and reverberated away into the distance - a cheer, however, which only partially eclipsed the accompanying groin, for only a behind had been recorded. As the ball was gain carried forward by the red-and-blacks, there arose a murmuring sound, such as that made by the washing of the waves upon the seashore, which swelled and swelled until the tinkling of the bell released the floodgates and the noise became pandemonium. (See footnote 1)

West had remained just that bit steadier when it counted,

*Norwood centreman,
Phil Robin*

and had made history. Norwood was left ruing its slight slight inaccuracy, as well as bemoaning the fact that its forward L.Chamberlain was denied a 'blatant' late free kick that could have enabled it to secure a victory most observers felt it did not deserve.

After the match was over there were reports that Norwood had administered oxygen to its players both before and during the match in a bid to raise their levels of aerobic fitness; gleeful West Adelaide fans quickly seized on this intelligence and could be seen, on the night of the match, touring the city in a handsome cab bearing a poster which read 'Oxygen vs. Beer' - somewhat misleading, in point of fact, as the strongest thing the West Adelaide players had got their hands on during the course of the match was lime juice. (For months after the game, Norwood's grand final team of 1908 was popularly referred to as 'the Oxygens'.)

Match Summary

	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	Pts
West Adelaide	0.0	3.4	4.4	7.10	52
Norwood	3.7	4.7	5.9	6.13	49

BEST - West Adelaide: P.Bruce, T.Leahy, Tierney, Horgan, Stephens, J.Bruce, B.Leahy **Norwood:** Robin, H.Miller, Gwynne, Hill, Bahr, J.Chamberlain, W.Miller

GOALS - West Adelaide: Moy 4; P.Bruce 2; Price 3; L.Chamberlain, Gibbons, Plunkett **Norwood:** J.Chamberlain 3

ATTENDANCE: 22,000 approx. at the Adelaide Oval

Postscript

West Adelaide went on to emulate Norwood's 1907 achievement by defeating Carlton to secure the championship of Australia so that:

If ever a club had reason to be proud of its record it is West Adelaide. Bottom of the list of the SA Football League for years the red and blacks have been able in a single season to win not only the premiership of the state but the championship of the Commonwealth.

It is a marvellous achievement and one which is unparalleled in the history of the game in Australia. Every match they carried off during the season was a result of good

combined play, remarkable handball, a wonderful ruck and a capital defence and, above all, there was an esprit de corps amongst the players that made the team a brotherhood.

Saturday after Saturday they mowed down teams who, prior to this season, used to try their juniors against them, so obscure they thought, and finally they wrested the premiership from the redoubtable Norwoods, the champions of the Commonwealth last year, in a game that will live long in the memories of those who saw it. (See footnote 2)

Moreover, following the 12.9 (81) to 7.10 (52) championship of Australia win, and highlighting the enormous importance to the club of its having secured the services of an experienced, non-playing coach:

The success of West Adelaide can be summed up in one word - system. The men kept their places, the shepherding was excellent, the ruck first class, and the kicking was good. In only one department of the game did Carlton excel, and that was in high marking..... West Adelaide worked like a piece of well-oiled machinery, and they achieved a victory of which not only the club and their thousands of loyal supporters but the whole state feel justly proud. Carlton themselves freely admit that they were beaten by a better team, and they heartily congratulated the red-and-blacks on becoming the champions of the Commonwealth. (See footnote 3)

To the immense satisfaction of the club's supporters, West Adelaide's hard-won pre-eminence was not something that was about to disappear overnight. Indeed, the period between 1908 and 1912 remains the halcyon era in the history of the West Adelaide Football Club, with further premierships following in 1909 and 1911-12, as well as a second championship of Australia title, courtesy of a hard fought win over Essendon, in 1911.

Norwood, by contrast, was about to embark on a prolonged period of the 'outs', and would not again contest the season's premiership deciding match for another twelve years, nor return to the winners' enclosure until 1922.

Footnotes

1. From a report in 'The Adelaide Observer', cited in 'The SA Football Budget', 1/10/83, page 55.
2. An unnamed contemporary source quoted in *Blood, Sweat And Tears* by Merv Agars, page 6.
3. Ibid., pages 6-7.

Courtesy of John Devaney at www.fullpointsfooty.net