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1961 SANFL Grand Final: West Adelaide vs. Norwood

The Turkish Bath Grand Final



Norwood's 'Big Bill' Wedding wins a clean tap against Neil Kerley during the course of the 1961 SANFL grand final.

Apart from the spectacular fall from grace of 1960 premier North Adelaide, the 1961 SANFL minor round spawned few surprises, and gave rise to the following ladder:

1961 SANFL Premiership Ladder

	W	L	D	For	Ag	%	Pts
Port Adelaide	15	4	-	1,638	1,161	58.52	30
West Adelaide	14	5	-	1,827	1,287	58.67	28
West Torrens	14	5	-	1,782	1,410	55.82	28
Norwood	11	8	-	1,611	1,382	53.82	22
North Adelaide	10	9	-	1,537	1,465	51.19	20
South Adelaide	5	14	-	1,250	1,970	38.81	10
Glenelg	4	15	-	1,481	1,996	42.59	8
Sturt	3	16	-	1,330	1,785	42.69	6

Port Adelaide, which had just claimed its eighth minor premiership in nine seasons, was warmly favoured to 'come of age' by capturing its twenty-first senior flag. Coached by Geof Motley, the Magpies were aggressive to the point of ruthlessness, and were far and away the best defensive side in the competition.

In stark contrast, West Adelaide, which was being coached for the first time this year by Neil Kerley, played an open, vibrant, attacking brand of football in which handball featured prominently (by the standards of the era, at any rate). The Blood 'n Tars had scored some hefty wins during the minor round, including a 106 point trouncing of South Adelaide in round 10, and a 126 point annihilation of Glenelg in round 18. They had lost two of their three clashes with Port Adelaide, however, and the Magpies had had the wood on them in finals matches for most of the previous decade.



Ron Benton

Some of the 'smart money' for the premiership was on West Torrens, which had won its last half a dozen home and away games of the season to go into the finals as the competition's form team. Included in that six match winning run were convincing victories over both of the top two teams: in round 14, the Eagles had defeated West 16.12 (108) to 12.14 (86), while the final minor round game of the season had seen them comfortably account for Port, 12.19 (91) to 9.13 (67). Both matches had been played at Thebarton Oval.

Norwood had not clinched a place in the finals until round 18, when a 19.14 (128) to 7.9 (51) thrashing of Sturt coincided with a 4 goal loss by North Adelaide

against Torrens. In round 19, the Demons as they were then known, scratched out an unconvincing 24 point win over Glenelg, and few people expected them to challenge seriously for the flag. However, in football's renowned 'hot gosseller' Alan Killigrew they had arguably the most inspirational coach in the business, and finals, as everyone knows, are a different matter entirely from the 'bread and butter' routine of ordinary league games.

If the 1961 minor round had been predominantly humdrum and predictable, the same could not be said for the finals series, in which upsets came thick and fast. In the 1st semi final, unfancied Norwood had no trouble whatsoever in dispatching West Torrens from finals contention. The Eagles simply never got going, and although the Demons were not particularly impressive themselves, they did not really need to be, given the weakness of the opposition, and won comfortably by 21 points, 11.15 (81) to 7.18 (60).

The surprises continued in the 2nd semi final as West Adelaide scored a rare major round win over Port Adelaide. The Blood 'n Tars were too good all over the ground, and should have won by considerably more than their final margin of 17 points. The Magpies had bounced back before, however, and most people, other than perhaps Norwood supporters, expected them to do so again in their preliminary final clash with the Redlegs.



Stan Costello

It was not to be. Despite enjoying the lion's share of the possession, Port simply could not kick straight. The Redlegs meanwhile defended heroically, and made the most of their attacking opportunities to sneak home by 2 points, 13.13 (91) to 11.23 (89). The 1961 finals series had witnessed three matches, and three upsets. Would the grand final, which pitted hot favourite West Adelaide against rank outsider Norwood, produce another turn-up for the books?

Both sides had many fine players, and plenty of finals experience. West captain-coach Neil Kerley was the archetypal football strong man, capable of turning the course of a match single-handedly. He had many noteworthy cohorts, including 1957 Magarey Medallist Ron Benton, tenacious and talented wingman Ken Eustice, who would win the Medal in 1962, resolute centre half back back Jeff Bray, steely defender Jeff Bennetts, and the flamboyantly skilled and fleet-footed indigenous footballer Bert Johnson. Nevertheless, the team was not devoid of problems, with Stan Costello and Don Roach, both All Australians, failing fitness tests on the morning of the match.

If Norwood was considered to have a major advantage over Westies anywhere it was in the ruck. Bill Wedding, who had achieved All Australian selection earlier in the year at the Brisbane carnival, was in the view of some the finest tap ruckman in the land, and he was ably aided and abetted by two fine rovers in

Peter Minervini and Bob Oatey. In a bid to counter this strength, Neil Kerley opted to lead the West rucks himself, intending to use his trademark strength, aggression and tenacity to undermine Wedding's impact.

The two sides had met on three occasions during the home and away series. In round 2 at the Parade the Blood 'n Tars had enjoyed consummate superiority in winning by 34 points, 11.22 (88) to 7.12 (54). They had won comfortably again at Richmond in round 9, scoring 11.16 (82) to the Demons' 9.8 (62), but perhaps significantly - or so some hopeful Norwood supporters imagined - when the teams had met at the grand final venue of Adelaide Oval in round 16 it had been the Demons who emerged triumphant, by 14 points. A major reason for their victory had been Killigrew's ploy of getting George Dellar to sacrifice his own game completely in the interests of nullifying Kerley. Dellar undertook these prototype tagging duties impeccably, and without Kerley's impact the Blood 'n Tars were effectively hamstrung.

Grand final day, Saturday 30 September, dawned extremely hot and dry, with an intermittently very strong northerly breeze blowing. The sauna-like temperatures - it rose to roughly 35°C at one stage - had an inimical impact on the attendance, which at just 40,909 was the smallest for a grand final since 1947 - which, it so happened, had featured the same two teams. Dubbed 'the Turkish Bath grand final', it would not be a close match, but a host of other factors would combine to make it extremely memorable. As the teams lined up to listen to the national anthem prior to the start of play, Neil Kerley's round 16 nemesis, George Dellar, ignoring protocol, wandered over and nudged Kerley in the side, remarking "Got you again today, Kerley! You're mine, all day!" (see footnote 1) Kerley's response, if indeed he made one, is unknown.



Ron Kneebone

The toss was won by Norwood captain Peter Aish, who elected to kick to the River Torrens end of the ground, which was favoured by a 3 to 4 goal breeze.

1st Quarter

There was drama right from the opening bounce as Neil Kerley made a wholly unambiguous statement of intent by running right through his 'shadow', George Dellar, and sending him crashing to the turf. The crowd roared in mingled fury and approbation, but umpire Sweeney waved play on.

Courtesy of John Devaney at www.fullpointsfooty.net

Despite the heat, the opening minutes of the grand final were played at breakneck pace, with no quarter asked or given. West looked the more cohesive side early on, but it was Norwood which broke through to register the game's first goal, courtesy of a free kick awarded to Peter Minervini in the goal square after eight minutes. Buoyed by this success, the Demons poured forward in numbers, and further goals to Bob Kite and a second to Minervini pushed the margin out to 21 points.



Denis Modra

Norwood wingman Denis Modra was the game's dominant player at this stage, but Kerley successfully reduced his impact by the simple expedient of moving Ken Eustice onto him. Eustice, who was much more defensively astute than Modra's previous opponent, Bert Johnson, not only curtailed the Norwood man's influence, he began to exert more of an influence himself. In one key incident, Eustice hit Demon rover Bob Oatey with a perfect hip and shoulder just as Oatey was lining up the goals from near point blank range; Eustice then gathered the ball and cleared.

Despite Norwood's healthy lead on the scoreboard, Westies were still enjoying territorial parity, and when Brian De Broughe's long hopeful kick bounced through for a somewhat fortuitous goal it was no more than they deserved. Shortly afterwards, West full forward Doug Thomas, under intense pressure and with nowhere to go, found De Broughe with an inch perfect handball and the lanky ruckman goaled again to reduce the margin to 9 points.

The Blood 'n Tars were now looking quicker and more decisive than their opponents, and another prolonged period of attacking pressure culminated in rover Jim Wright snapping truly under extreme duress to make it a 3 point ball game.

Shortly before the siren, Norwood ruckman Bill Wedding found Bob Oatey near goal, and the Demon rover made no mistake to restore his side's 9 point advantage. Nevertheless, on balance, given the strength of the breeze, it had clearly been West Adelaide's quarter. **QUARTER TIME: Norwood 4.5 (29); West Adelaide 3.2 (20)**

2nd Quarter

Early in the 2nd quarter West centre half back Jeff Bray was injured and had to be replaced by 20th man Peter Phipps. Kerley then re-arranged affairs so that half back flanker Trevor Reu went to centre half back to stand the dangerous John Lill, while Phipps went to Reu's back flank. Moments later Lill goaled to put Norwood 15 points in front, but overall his impact would be diminished thanks to an energetically confident display from Reu.

With West centreman Johnny Ryan on top of Lester Ross, and Kerley in everything virtually all over the ground, the red and blacks slowly began to seize the initiative. Two goals to Frank Hogan followed, together with a succession of behinds, and suddenly the margin was a bare point.

Players all over the ground were now flagging because of the intense heat, and umpire Sweeney briefly stopped the play in order to banish about ten trainers from the field. The trainers had been ferrying wet towels to the worst afflicted players, but apparently such solicitude was contrary to Sweeney's concept of the 'spirit of the game'.

West was now winning decisively across centre and on the ball, but the Demons, showing great pluck, snatched an invaluable breakaway goal through Bob Oatey. Westies replied through Ron Benton, only for Norwood to hit back almost immediately courtesy of John Vickers. With time running out, Brian De Broughe, who was playing the game of his life, both on the ball and while resting in a forward pocket, goaled to reduce the margin to a solitary point once more. This time Norwood's resistance crumbled, and a couple more goals to West before the break made the margin 11 points, and the signs ominous. **HALF TIME: West Adelaide 9.5 (59); Norwood 7.6 (48)**



Jeff Bennetts

3rd Quarter



Bob Oatey

John Lill managed to elude Trevor Reu briefly early in the 3rd term to goal and put Norwood back to within a straight kick. The game was now entering a key phase, with the Demons needing to take maximum advantage of the still powerful breeze if they were to have a chance. West responded almost immediately, however, as a long handpass by Peter Phipps released Ron Benton who was able to score the Blood 'n Tars' 10th goal.

Despite the heat, both teams were now battling ferociously, aware that the next goal could be vital. It went Norwood's way, off the

Courtesy of John Devaney at www.fullpointsfooty.net

boot of Bob Kite, and once more there was less than a straight kick between the two sides.

Norwood continued to attack frantically for the next few minutes, but West's defence was equal to the challenge. The Demons desperately needed to get a lift from their ruckmen, Bill Wedding and Geoff Feehan, but Kerley and De Broughe were well on top in this department. Moreover, since Kerley's opening term ploy of swapping his wingmen, West had been comprehensively on top across centre.

After absorbing plenty of Norwood pressure, the Blood 'n Tars broke away, and two goals in quick succession during time-on from Wright and Hogan gave them a potentially match-winning lead of 19 points at the final change. **THREE QUARTER TIME: West Adelaide 12.8 (80); Norwood 9.6 (60)**

4th Quarter

Norwood coach Alan Killigrew rang the changes at three quarter time in a bid to manufacture an improbable comeback. Players of both sides were utterly fatigued by this stage, however, and although the Demons managed to stay within striking distance for the first fifteen minutes or so of the quarter, ultimately their resistance crumbled, and West ran away with the game.

On one occasion during the term Norwood defender Ron Kneebone collapsed to his knees as he chased the ball towards the boundary, while umpire Sweeney's policy of preventing trainers from attending to dehydrated players was to have some pretty devastating, and potentially dangerous, effects. Neil Kerley, for example, who had arguably covered more kilometres during the game than any other player, lost about 3kg in weight, and was taken ill while being interviewed at a TV studio later that evening.

Key contributors to Westies' late surge in this quarter were rover Frank Hogan, who ended the match with 4 goals, ruckman Brian De Broughe, who kicked 5, centreman John Ryan, whose use of the ball was impeccable, and of course Kerley. For Norwood, full back and skipper Peter Aish, who managed to keep his opponent Doug Thomas goalless, gave perhaps the most even performance of any player on either side, while rover Bob Oatey, who played with great fervour and skill, made it obvious that he was a champion performer in the making.



Doug Thomas

West's 36 point win gave the club its first premiership in fourteen years, and was popularly received. The Blood 'n Tars had been on the wrong end of some close

grand final defeats in recent years, and few neutral fans begrudged them this success. **FINAL SCORE: West Adelaide 16.13 (109); Norwood 11.7 (73)**

Match Summary

	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	Pts
West Adelaide	3.2	9.5	12.8	16.13	109
Norwood	4.5	7.6	9.7	11.7	73

BEST - West Adelaide: Kerley, Ryan, Hogan, Reu, Eustice, Benton, De Broughe, Johnson **Norwood:** Aish, Oatey, Lill, Johnson, Kneebone, Modra, Kite, Minervini

SCORERS - West Adelaide: De Broughe 5; Hogan 4; Benton, Garnet, Wright 2; Ryan **Norwood:** Kite, Lill, Minervini, Oatey 2; Feehan, Modra, Vickers

ATTENDANCE: 40,909 at the Adelaide Oval

Statistics

West Adelaide (kicking ↑) vs. Norwood (kicking ↓)

KEY: K = Kicks; H = Handballs; M = Marks

		K	H	M		K	H	M		K	H	M
F	Hogan	19	4	3	Thomas	5	5	2	De Broughe	10	0	3
B	Kite	12	0	3	Aish	10	3	1	Johnson	18	2	4
HF	Garnett	9	0	3	Wallace	9	6	4	Benton	21	2	4
HB	Inglis	13	0	4	Kneebone	12	2	1	Dellar	8	0	1
C	Eustice	26	0	4	Ryan	14	6	4	Johnson (off 4th)	20	4	6
C	Fosdike	10	2	1	Ross (off 4th)	11	1	2	Modra	15	0	6
HB	Reu	17	5	0	Bray (off 2nd)	1	0	0	Bennetts	11	1	2
HF	Vickers (off 4th)	5	2	2	Lill	12	2	5	Sawley	12	1	4

B	Lovegrove	9	1	2	Tregenza	13	1	0	Barker	11	0	3
F	Oatey	14	3	4	Harrison	15	2	3	Feehan	6	2	4

1R	Kerley	23	3	6	O'Driscoll	4	2	0	Wright	13	3	3
1R	Wedding	7	3	1	McMahon	15	0	4	Minervini	18	3	2

19th	Shrubsole (on 4th)	2	0	0
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19th	Cousins (on 4th)	4	0	1
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20th	Phipps (on 2nd)	10	4	2
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20th	Ashby (on 4th)	3	1	2
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Team Totals:-

West Adelaide	247	42	57
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Norwood	220	29	55
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Postscript

West Adelaide continued as a force in 1962, reaching the grand final once more, but losing on this occasion to Port Adelaide. The margin was only 3 points, and West were felt by many to have been somewhat unfortunate to lose, but the club committee inexplicably responded by sacking Neil Kerley as coach. Given what happened subsequently, it is hard to avoid the conclusion that this decision by the committee was a major factor in consigning the West Adelaide Football Club to two decades of mediocrity. Its next premiership would not occur until 1983, when, significantly, Neil Kerley had again assumed the coaching reins.



Neil Kerley in action for South Australia against the VFL.

Norwood's fortunes dipped sharply after the 1961 grand final. The club would not again play off for the premiership until 1975, but from that time onwards it would be at or near the forefront of the game in South Australia.

Several of the players involved in the 1961 grand final achieved further notoriety during their football careers. Ken Eustice, as was mentioned above, went on to win the 1962 Magarey Medal, and later played with distinction for both Central District and Glenelg. However, he never again played in a premiership team.

Robert Oatey was a great performer for Norwood in 232 games between 1961 and 1973. He also captain-coached the club during his last half a dozen seasons, and was largely responsible for introducing the structures and implementing the procedures that would eventually make the Redlegs - as they were known by this time - great again. He ended his career with Sturt, and was a member of that club's 1974 premiership team. Ron Kneebone went on to win the 1966 Magarey Medal, the culmination of a great, eleven season, 201 game league career. Bill Wedding further enhanced his reputation as one of Australia's premier knock ruckmen with fine performances in winning South Australian state sides against the 'Big V' in Melbourne in 1963 and in Adelaide two years later. Jeff Bray was, for a time, one of the finest key position defenders in Australia, but his career was cruelly undermined by injuries sustained after he transferred to South Melbourne in 1964.

Neil Kerley went on to enhance his coaching pedigree at South Adelaide, Glenelg and West Torrens, before returning to Westies in 1981. He also coached South Australia. Donald Neil Kerley is without doubt one of the all time great personalities in the history of South Australian, indeed Australian, football.

Alan Killigrew coached Norwood for one further season, and in 1963 he moved to North Melbourne. In four seasons with the Kangaroos he failed to achieve anything of note, but he did coach the VFL interstate team to a carnival win at Hobart in 1966.

Footnotes

1. Reported in *Knuckles: The Neil Kerley Story* by Jim Rosevear, page 72.