The history of Australian rules football is claimed to have begun in Melbourne in 1858 with the earliest recorded organised football matches organised by Tom Wills and other early proponents. The earliest recorded experimental match was played at the Richmond Paddock on 31 July. The oldest surviving set of Australian football rules were drawn up the next year on 17 May 1859 three days after the formation of the Melbourne Football Club.

The Origins of Australian football before 1858 are still the subject of much debate, however the current stance of the AFL Commission's official historians is that Australian football is primarily a variant of rugby football and that the history of the Victorian game began in 1858. This game was vastly different to the Australian rules football played today, being a variant of the original Rugby Football invented in England and relabelled as Australian by Tom Wills.\(^1\)\(^2\)

The earliest governing bodies, the South Australian National Football League, at the time called the South Australian Football Association and Victorian Football Association were formed in 1877 and the first intercolonial matches shortly after in 1879. The game, known as "Victorian Rules" or "Australasian Rules", had begun its spread throughout the southern colonies of Australia.

By Federation in 1901, the game was established in Victoria, South Australia, Western Australia and Tasmania, with the Victorian Football League, South Australian National Football League and West Australian Football League operating as separate competitions.

The game suffered greatly between the wars, especially outside of its heartland states. This new code never really took hold in New South Wales and Queensland where the rugby codes were much stronger.

In the 1990s, the VFL became the Australian Football League, a national body and the premier league in Australia as well as the de facto world governing body.

Origins of the game

Tom Wills began to devise Australian rules in Melbourne in 1858. (Although H.C.A. Harrison, Wills' cousin, was also named, much later, as an official father of the game his role does not, now, seem to have been significant at this very early stage.) A letter by Wills was published in *Bell's Life in Victoria & Sporting Chronicle* on 10 July 1858,\(^3\) calling for a "foot-ball club, a rifle club, or other athletic pursuits" to keep cricketers fit during winter. An experimental match, played at the Richmond Paddock (later known as Yarra Park next to the MCG) on 31 July 1858, was a form of football. However, few details of the match have survived.
On 7 August 1858, a famous match between Melbourne Grammar School and Scotch College began, umpired by Wills and John Macadam. A second day of play took place on 21 August and a third, and final, day on 4 September. The two schools have competed annually ever since. However, the rules used by the two teams in 1858 were not official since Wills had not yet begun to write them.

The Melbourne Football Club rules of 1859 are the oldest surviving set of laws for Australian football. They were drawn up at the Parade Hotel, East Melbourne, on 17 May, by Wills, William Hammersley, J. B. Thompson and Thomas Smith (some sources erroneously include H. C. A. Harrison). The 1859 rules, drawn up three days after the Melbourne club was officially founded, did not include some elements that soon became important to the game, such as the requirement to bounce the ball while running. Melbourne's game was not immediately adopted by neighbouring clubs. Before each match the rules had to be agreed by the two teams involved. By 1866, however, several other clubs had agreed to play by an updated version of Melbourne's rules.

The original handwritten rules dated May 1859 were signed by Tom Wills, William Hammersley, J. Sewell, J. B. Thompson, Alex Bruce, T. Butterworth and Thomas Smith:

1. The distance between the goal post shall be decided upon by the captains of the sides playing.
2. The captains on each side shall toss for choice of goal. The side losing the toss has the kick-off from the centre-point between the goals.
3. A goal must be kicked fairly between the posts without touching either of them or a portion of the person of any player of either side.
4. The game shall be played within the space of not more than 200 yards wide, the same to be measured equally upon each side of the line drawn through the centre of the two goals and two posts to be called the kick-off points shall be erected at a distance of 20 yards on each side of the goal posts at both ends and in a straight line with them.
5. In case the ball is kicked behind the goals, anyone of the side behind whose goal it is kicked, may bring it back 20 yards in front of any portion of the space between the kick-off posts and shall kick it as nearly as possible in the line of the opposite goal.
6. Any player catching the ball directly from the boot may call ‘mark’. He then has a free kick. No players from the opposite side being allowed to come into the spot marked.
7. Tripping and pushing are both allowed but no hacking when any player is in rapid motion or in possession of the ball except for the case provided by rule 6.
8. The ball may be taken in hand only when caught from the boot or on the hop. In no case shall it be lifted from the ground.
9. When the ball goes out of bounds (the same being indicated by a row of posts) it shall be brought back to the point where it crossed the boundary line and thrown in right angles with that line.
10. The ball while in play may under no circumstances be thrown.
**Influences from English football codes**

The influence of British public school and university football codes, while undetermined, was clearly substantial. Wills had been educated at Rugby School in England (where Rugby football had been codified since 1845). Wills had also, like W. J. Hammersley and J. B. Thompson, been to the University of Cambridge. The Cambridge Rules, drawn up in 1848, included some elements which are important in Australian football, such as the mark. Thomas Smith had Irish ancestry and had attended Trinity College, Dublin, where an early version of the Rugby School rules were popular. These men would have been familiar with other public school and university games. They may also have been inspired by surviving forms of Medieval football and other traditional sports, played among the thousands of immigrants who poured into Victoria from the UK, Ireland and many other countries during the gold rushes of the 1850s.

There is circumstantial evidence that Sheffield Rules also had an influence. The two codes shared the unique feature of lacking the offside rule. The also similarities in the laws for kicking off, kick outs, throw-ins and the fair catch. Henry Creswick (possibly a relative of Nathaniel Creswick) was born in Sheffield but emigrated to Australia with his brother in 1840 (the town of Creswick is named after them). He moved to Melbourne in 1854 and became involved in the local cricket scene. He played first class cricket for Victoria during the 57/58 season alongside 3 of the founders of Melbourne Football Club including Tom Wills.

**Similarities to Gaelic football**

While it is clear even to casual observers that Australian rules football is similar to Gaelic football, the exact relationship is a matter of controversy among historians. The Irish game was not codified by the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) until 1887. The historian B. W. O'Dwyer points out that Australian football has always been differentiated from rugby football by having no offside limitation on ball or player movement, the need to bounce the ball or toe-kick it while running (known as a *solo* in Gaelic football) punching the ball (hand-passing) rather than throwing it, and other traditions. As O'Dwyer says:

> These are all elements of Irish football. There were several variations of Irish football in existence, normally without the benefit of rulebooks, but the central tradition in Ireland was the direction of the relatively new game [i.e. rugby]...adapted and shaped within the perimeters of the ancient Irish game of hurling... [These rules] later became embedded in Gaelic football. Their presence in Victorian football may be accounted for in terms of a formative influence being exerted by men familiar with and no doubt playing the Irish game. It is not that they were introduced into the game from that motive [i.e. emulating Irish games]; it was rather a case of particular needs being met... [B. W. O'Dwyer, March 1989, “The Shaping of Victorian Rules Football”, *Victorian Historical Journal*, v.60, no.1.]

After 1887, the two games developed in isolation from each other. A number of players, most notably Jim Stynes and Tadhg Kennelly have successfully made the transition from Gaelic football to Australian rules. (See the article Players who have converted from one football code to another, for further information.)
History of clubs and competitions

Historic clubs
The modern day Australian Football League (AFL) includes many teams that date back to the beginnings of the game. Apart from the Melbourne Football Club (1859), other early clubs still in existence in the AFL include: Geelong (1859), Carlton (1864), North Melbourne (aka Hotham) (1869), Port Adelaide (1870), Essendon, Hawthorn and St Kilda (1873), South Melbourne (now Sydney Swans) (1874), Footscray (now the Western Bulldogs) (1877). Other historic clubs, such as the Castlemaine Football Club (1859), Melbourne University Football Club (1859) also continue to exist in lesser leagues.

The first league
In 1877, the Victorian Football Association (VFA), the game's first league, was formed by 14 clubs: Albert Park, Ballarat, Barwon, Beechworth, Carlton, Castlemaine, East Melbourne, Essendon, Geelong, Hotham (later North Melbourne), Inglewood, Melbourne, Rochester and St Kilda. Six of these clubs were from the Victorian country. At the time, Essendon was regarded as a semi-junior club rather than a full member, and was allowed concessions such as fielding teams of 25 players, instead of the standard 20.

The first night football match occurred in the VFA in 1879 between Collingwood Artillery and East Melbourne.

Leagues outside Victoria
Gradually the game – known at first as "Melbourne Rules", "Victorian Rules" or sometimes as "Australasian Rules" – began to spread from Victoria into other Australian colonies in the 1860s, beginning with Tasmania (1864), Queensland (1866) and South Australia (1873). The game began to be played in New South Wales in 1877, in Western Australia in 1881 and the Australian Capital Territory in 1911. By 1916, the game was first played in the Northern Territory, establishing a permanent presence in all Australian states and mainland territories.

In Newcastle, New South Wales the Black Diamond league was founded by Victorian goldminers and the Black Diamond Challenge Cup remains Australia's oldest sporting trophy.

The first intercolonial match, between Victoria and SA, was held in 1879.

The precursors of the South Australian National Football League (SANFL) and the West Australian Football League (WAFL) were strong, separate competitions by the 1890s.

Factors such as intercolonial (and later interstate) rivalry and the denial of access to grounds in Sydney by the dominant rugby codes caused the code to struggle in New South Wales and Queensland.

Formation of the VFL
A rift in the VFA led to the formation of the Victorian Football League (VFL), which commenced play in 1897 as an eight-team breakaway of the stronger clubs in the VFA competition: Carlton, Collingwood, Essendon, Fitzroy, Geelong, Melbourne, St Kilda and South Melbourne. The first season concluded with Essendon finishing as the premiers (winners).

Another five VFA clubs joined the VFL later: Richmond and University joined the VFL in 1908, although University withdrew in 1915 due to the war. Footscray, Hawthorn and North Melbourne joined in 1925, by which time VFL had become the most prominent league in the game.
**Interstate competition**

For most of the 20th century, the absence of a national club competition – and the inability of players to compete internationally – meant that matches between state representative teams were regarded with great importance. Because VFL clubs increasingly recruited the best players in other states, Victoria dominated these games. However, State of Origin rules were introduced in 1977, and in the first such game, at Subiaco Oval in Perth, Western Australia defeated Victoria, 23.13 (151) to 8.9 (57), a huge reversal of the results in most previous games. Western Australia and South Australia began to win many of their games against Victoria. However, during the 1990s, following the emergence of the Australian Football League, state of origin games declined in importance especially after an increasing number of withdrawals by AFL players, who were under increasing pressure from clubs concerned by the risk of injuries. Australian football State of Origin matches ceased in 1999. The second-tier state and territorial leagues still contest interstate matches.

**A national league**

In 1982, in a move which heralded big changes within the sport, one of the original VFL clubs, South Melbourne Football Club, relocated to the rugby league stronghold of Sydney and became known as the Sydney Swans. In the late 1980s, strong interstate interest in the VFL led to a more national competition; two more non-Victorian clubs, the West Coast Eagles and the Brisbane Bears began playing in 1987. The league changed its name to the Australian Football League (AFL) following the 1989 season. In 1991, it gained its first South Australian team, Adelaide. West Coast's local derby rival Fremantle was admitted in 1995. Fitzroy merged with Brisbane after 1996 due to financial difficulties to form the Brisbane Lions and the proud old SANFL club, Port Adelaide joined in 1997 as Port Adelaide Power, immediately becoming fierce local rivals to Adelaide. The AFL, currently with 16 member clubs, is the sport's elite competition and the most powerful body in the world of Australian rules football.

**Today's state leagues**

For much of the 20th century the SANFL and the WAFL were considered peers of the VFL. Although the VFL was generally accepted as the strongest league, clubs from all three leagues frequently played each other on an even footing in challenge matches and occasional nationwide club competitions. With the introduction of the AFL, the SANFL, WAFL and other state leagues rapidly declined to a secondary status. Apart from these there are many semi-professional and amateur leagues around Australia, where they play a very important role in the community, and particularly so in rural areas.

The VFA, still in existence a century after the original schism, merged with the former VFL reserves competition in 1998. The new entity adopted the VFL name.
**Australian football internationally**

Almost as soon as the game was becoming established in Australia, it had spread to New Zealand in 1876. South Africa followed in the 1880s, with the help of Australian goldminers; they were augmented by soldiers during the Second Boer War.

In 1888, a touring British rugby team played 19 games of Australian rules against clubs in Tasmania, Victoria and South Australia. The tourists, who had been hastily trained in the local code, played Carlton in front of 25,000 people — a substantial crowd at the time — in their first game. They even had a win over Port Adelaide. However, the tourists returned to rugby once they left Australia and the foundation of Australian rules clubs overseas was still many years away.

As the game spread, it became known as *Australasian Football*.

In 1908, New Zealand (where proximity to Australia saw a formidable league of 115 clubs grow) defeated both New South Wales and Queensland at the Jubilee Australasian Football Carnival, an event held to celebrate 50 years of Australian Football. The game was also introduced to England, Scotland and Japan.

The profound effects of World War I caused the gradual demise in the game in countries outside Australia, including New Zealand. The sport returned to the title of *Australian Football*.

The first nation outside of Australia to take the sport up seriously was the former Australian territory of Nauru, which began playing in the 1930s. The game is now the national sport of the country.

Another former territory, Papua New Guinea began playing in the 1950s. For a time at least, it was the most popular sport in the country, and still remains popular.

New Zealand resumed a local competition in 1974.

The first ever international match involving Australia was played in 1977 at under 17 level between Australia and Papua New Guinea in Adelaide, with Australia taking the honours [5]. Since then, Australia have been peerless in the sport and seldom compete at international level.

In the late 1980s, as distance became less of an obstacle, amateur teams were established in Japan (1987) and England, Denmark and Canada (1989).

In the 1990s, amateur competition has grown in countries such as Sweden (1993), Germany (1995), USA (1996), Argentina, Spain and Samoa (1997), South Africa (1998), as well as a number of solely expatriate teams, mainly based in South East Asia.

Since 2000, fledgeling competitions have been established in countries such as Ireland (2000), Tonga (2002), Scotland, France and China (2005), Pakistan, Indonesia (2006), Catalonia, Norway and East Timor.

Many of these were initially established by Australian expatriates but collecting growing numbers of native players. In other countries, it grew out of AFL exhibition matches, cult television following or Internet communication. North American fans formed an organization, AFANA, specifically to work for improved media coverage of Australian football.

Since the 1990s, the AFL and other development bodies have contributed to the development the game overseas. There are now youth development programs in several of these countries; since 1998, the Barassi International Australian Football Youth Tournament, endorsed by the AFL as part of its International Policy, has hosted several of junior teams from other countries.

The Arafura Games, held in Darwin, Northern Territory, Australia is a Multi-sport event for South East Asia and East Asian island nations, northern Australia and the Pacific Islands which has Australian football as a permanent competition sport, rather than a demonstration sport. Papua New Guinea won the gold medal and retained it in...
subsequent games. Other teams that have competed at Australian Rules in the games include Japan, Nauru and a Northern Territory indigenous team.

The International Australian Football Council (IAFC) was formed after the 1995 Arafura Games. Following internal divisions in the IAFC, another organization, Aussie Rules International was set up in London. The AFL did not recognise the IAFC as anything more than a promotional body, and is itself considered the keeper of the code. Hence the AFL is primarily responsible for funding and governance and provides around A$500,000 annually for international development, especially junior programs. The code is not large enough outside Australia for an international governing body made up of national bodies.

Inspired by successful Arafura Games competitions, the inaugural Australian Football International Cup was held in Melbourne in 2002, an initiative of the IAFC and the AFL. With the closure of the IAFC subsequent cups are staged by the AFL. The 2002 cup was contested by 11 teams from around the world made up exclusively of non-Australians. Ireland won the 2002 cup, defeating Papua New Guinea in the final. (See also: Australian football leagues outside Australia.)

Today, Australian football is a major spectator sport in Australia and Nauru, although occasional exhibition games are staged in other countries. Some local grand final and carnival type events in Papua New Guinea, Nauru, England and the United States have occasionally drawn attendances that number in the thousands.

On July 3, 2006 the AFL announced that it had formed an International Development Committee to support overseas (non-Australian) football leagues. The AFL also hope to develop the game in other countries to the point where Australian football is played at an international level by top-quality sides from around the world. The AFL plans to host the International Cup regularly every four years, beginning in 2008, the 150th anniversary of the code.[6]

**International rules football**

Since 1967, there have been many matches between Australian and Irish teams, under various sets of hybrid, compromise rules drawn from both Australian and Gaelic football. The current rules use the round ball and the rectangular field and cross-bar posts of Gaelic football. The fierce tackling and marking of the Australian code is allowed.

In 1984, the first official representative matches of International Rules football were played, and these are now played annually each October.

In 1999, a record Australian International Rules crowd of 65,000 at the MCG attended a game that saw Ireland defeat Australia but Australia win the series. In 2002, a record Irish International Rules crowd of 71,532 at Croke Park, Dublin witnessed a draw which also saw Australia win the series.

**References**

External links

- Hammersley, Harrison (http://www.lynedochpublications.com.au/)
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