

THE NFL DOWN UNDER

By Stanley Grosshandler

The N.F.L. is doing very well in Australia. No, the American N.F.L. has not expanded again. The National Football League of South Australia had already been around for a long time when George Halas, Jim Thorpe and the others met in Ralph Hay's automobile showroom to organize a U.S. pro football league.

Various kinds of "football" were played in Australia until 1858 when Tom Willis, grandson of a convict deported from England, drew up a uniform set of rules. From those evolved one of the most thrilling, action-packed, and popular games seen in the world. Bearing some similarities to Rugby, Soccer, and North American Football, the Australian game is unique.

It's played on an oval field that may differ from 220 yards by 134 yards down to 175 by 125 yards. The ball is about three inches fatter and two inches longer than our ball, with a rounded end. Four 25-minute periods compose a game.

There are 18 men on a team with only two extra men allowed on the roster. Once a player leaves a game, he may not return. This often causes a team hit by injuries to play short-handed. Knee injuries are common.

At each end of the playing field are four goal posts. If the ball is kicked between the center posts, a goal (six points) is scored. If it is run or passed between the center posts or kicked between a center and a side post, a "behind" is scored. A behind is worth only one point. Obviously, the kicking game is emphasized.

Score is kept in a cumulative manner as in bowling. A line score for a team might look like this -- 3.5 7.9 11.12 16.15 for a total of 111 points. In the first period, the team scored three goals and five behinds for a total of 23 points. In the second period, it added four goals and four behinds for a total of 51 points. At the end of the last period, it had 16 goals and 15 behinds. Games are often high-scoring, free-wheeling affairs.

The game commences when one of the five officials bounces the ball between two players called "ruck men" who try to tip it to a teammate as in basketball. The player gaining possession has three options to advance the ball. He may kick it, pass it, or run with it.

The usual choice is a kick, and there are three kinds. The drop kick sends the ball end over end, and good kicker can get it 70-80 yards. The stab punt and screw punt, similar to our punts, will send a spiral 50-60 yards.

To hand off or pass to a teammate, a player must punch the ball. This is called "handballing." A caught pass is called "marking" and the player is then awarded a kick for successfully catching the ball.

A player who elects to run with the ball must bounce it every ten yards. He is allowed interference, called "shepherding," if he is within five yards of his blocker. The runner may only be tackled from the waist down. A penalty of a free kick is assessed if he is tackled high.

Play is continuous and furious, with no time outs other than between periods. After a goal is scored, the ball is again bounced in the center of the field, but when a behind is made, the defending team kicks the ball out.

While there are no preconceived plays, strategy is involved. Against a tall opponent, a player tries to keep the ball out of the air, resorting to shorter kicks.

A team is composed of a centre, flanked by right and left centres, often called wingmen. Immediately behind the centre are two rucks and a rover. The rover is usually a small, wiry player who can dig out of the ball and get it to a larger teammate. In offensive territory are three half forwards and three full

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forwards. In defensive territory are three halfbacks and three fullbacks. The center-full forward is usually the best offensive man, which means he is the strongest kicker and best marker on the team.

Australia has determined a national champion since 1878. League play started in 1907.

Each Australian state has its own sub-league with circuits in South Australia, Tasmania, Western Australia, and Victoria. The latter is usually thought of as the strongest league.

The season runs from April to October, teams playing one game a week. In October, the leaders of the leagues come together in what is called a Carnival and determine the National Champion. As in baseball, there is no interleague play prior to the Carnival. So popular is the game that it is often played in 90 degree temperatures in the Northern Territories.

The same city may have several teams in the same league. These teams have territorial boundaries within the city, and a player living within the limits is automatically on option to that team unless they elect not to sign him. Talent scouts tour the country looking for likely prospects and every club has a number two and a number three team which play the curtain raisers before the main events.

While the Australian star player enjoys popularity similar to his American counterpart, he makes far less money. Most players need off-season jobs. However, as in America, stardom leads to product endorsements and public relations jobs with large companies.

Scoring 100 goals is considered an excellent season -- like rushing for 1,000 yards in the U.S. The all-time Australian super star was in the legendary Ken Farmer who topped the NFL in scoring for eleven consecutive seasons. It is said that Farmer's hands were so big he could hold the oversized football between his thumb and forefinger.

The Australian N.F.L. has had its dynasties. Port Adelaide took the crown six straight years, and later Sturt took it five times in a row.

Although crowds of 50,000 or more are common, our N.F.L. has no plans to expand to the Great Outback. Likewise, the Australian game has never caught on in America.

Too bad. It might be fun to see Toni Fritsch kick a few behinds.