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## **'Hard as nails', Jack Conway and the early days of football**

**Mark Pennings**

There is no doubt that J.J.A. "Jack" Conway (1842-1909) is one of the forgotten heroes of the early days of football in Melbourne. Accounts of this period have been dominated by the mighty deeds of T.W. Wills and H.C.A. Harrison, but when reading newspaper reports of the time one realises that Conway was in fact a household name. He was not a rule maker, like Wills, or an influential administrator like Harrison, but his importance as a player during an era of football "warriors" should not be underestimated. He was the first great captain of the Carlton Football Club and was one of Harrison's most formidable foes in those glorious football battles of bygone days.

Conway's association with Australian football began at the game's genesis. He was one of the first generation of Victorian-born Europeans (at Fyansford, near Geelong on February 3, 1842), and was locally educated, being a foundation pupil at the Melbourne Church of England Grammar School in 1858. Conway maintained a great pride in his nationality and while managing the first Australian Test cricket tour of England in 1878 he tossed an Englishman, who had the temerity to enter the Australians' enclosure speaking pidgin English, over the pickets.<sup>i</sup> By this tour, Conway had established a long career as an active participant in Melbourne's sporting life. He had been a successful footballer and cricketer and was also a respected sports' journalist.

Conway's love of sport was inculcated during his teens when he resided in Melbourne during the late 1850s, the very time when football first organised in the colony. By 1858 Melbourne had a large population of young British educated gentlemen and English style public schools were being founded in the colony for native-born elites who had the time and inclination to play sport on the weekend. These men and boys, including Conway, were the first to play football regularly in Melbourne throughout the winter. Melbourne Grammar played an important role in the development of the local football code. This was due in no small part to Conway's headmaster at the school, Dr. J.E. Bromby, who was an enthusiast, advocate and organiser of early football matches. Given his place at

Melbourne Grammar it is likely that Conway participated in the historic first games between the school and Scotch College in 1858.

Melbourne Grammar also played a game against St. Kilda Grammar on June 5, 1858, one month before Wills' famous letter, in which he advocated the formation of a football club and the drawing up of a code of laws.<sup>ii</sup> On July 31 of that year, when cricketers like Wills, W.J. Hammersley and J.B. Thompson were participating in scratch football games in parkland next to the MCG, a group of St. Kilda men were playing Dr. Bromby's schoolboys (that probably included a young Jack Conway) in parkland near St. Kilda. These St. Kilda men were apparently organised as a team early in that season, but unfortunately there are few details about the nature of this "club". Although cricketers had by now begun organising matches in the Richmond Paddock the games played by the schools seemed to have a greater degree of organization about them. The celebrated games between Melbourne Grammar and Scotch College that were played on August 7, 14 and September 4, were adjudicated by umpires (one of whom was T.W. Wills). Melbourne Grammar also probably played more games than any other football team or group in 1858 and as a pupil of the school, with an outstanding career ahead of him, it is likely that Jack Conway was actively involved in these contests.

In September 1858 twenty-seven gentlemen from South Yarra challenged a like number of "Melbourne" players to a football contest. As the grammar school was located in the South Yarra district (near Fawkner Park) the team probably contained some of its schoolboys. These gentlemen played at Richmond Park and it was reported that the South Yarra players brought a set of written rules. These rules were "... generally agreed to, but, due to the different laws to which the players had been accustomed in their school days, and the long-forgotten excitement of the sport, they were 'more interested in the breach than the observance'."<sup>iii</sup> This game was played before the Melbourne Football club was formed, and although Melbourne cricketers were among the first to actively promote football in Melbourne, the contribution of Melbourne Grammar (and its South Yarra connections) to the development of the game also deserves recognition.

By the age of 17, Conway like others from Melbourne Grammar (such as Bromby's sons, Christopher and Ernest) was playing for the South Yarra side. There were many famous early footballers that represented South Yarra at that time, including George O'Mullane, Henry Hale Budd and W.J. Greig.<sup>iv</sup> From 1860 to 1862 Conway played with South Yarra, St. Kilda, Richmond and Melbourne. In those days it was not unusual for players to represent several clubs during the season. However, from 1863 he seems to have played exclusively for Melbourne and in 1865 was often mentioned among the best

players in games against clubs like South Yarra, Royal Park and Geelong. By 1866 he was playing for Melbourne and the new Carlton club (which was formed in 1864, and began playing games in 1865). In 1866 and 1867 he was one of a number of captains for Carlton, but became its sole leader from 1868 to 1871. He also played the odd game for Emerald Hill and Albert Park during this time. He lived in Albert Park and captained the South Melbourne Cricket Club so he was occasionally “roped in” to these clubs when Carlton was not otherwise engaged.

It was at Carlton that Conway achieved his greatest fame. He took his captaincy very seriously and was an “ever-active” leader of fine teams that included legendary players like Tom and Billy Gorman, “Lanty” O’Brien, Jack Donovan and Harry Guy.<sup>v</sup> Conway’s significance can be measured by the work he did above and beyond his role as captain, for he was the pivotal figure who established the proud character of the Carlton football club that exists today. In the 1876 edition of *The Footballer*, “Old ‘Un” claimed that Conway was “... the man who made Carlton what it is, though they never properly acknowledged it.”<sup>vi</sup> Indeed, Conway grafted his life long motto of “The Game first, self last” to the team spirit of this club, and was also described as the embodiment of Carlton’s club motto “Mens sana in corpore sano” (A healthy mind in a healthy body: a classic ethic for muscular Christianity). He was thus the ideal Victorian athlete who displayed the discipline and selflessness that highlighted the best instincts of the sons of the British Empire where individual needs were sacrificed to the larger interests of club or country.

During the 1868 and 1869 seasons Conway reached the peak of his football career and was acknowledged as the driving force behind Carlton’s rise to power. He was invariably reported as one of that team’s best players, and his goal kicking ability placed him at the forefront of goal scorers in the Victorian colony. As captain, he was always prepared to defend Carlton’s reputation. For instance, after a tough victory over Melbourne in late 1869, H.C.A. Harrison used the end of game ritual of “three cheers” for the opposing team as an opportunity to proudly boast that Carlton were the “second” best team in the colony. Conway responded to this mischievous act in a letter to *The Australasian*.

I have been requested by members of the Carlton FC to contradict a statement made by Mr. Harrison, the Melbourne Captain, at the termination of the recent match between Carlton and Melbourne, in reference to the much-vexed question as to which club is to be awarded the palm of superiority in the football field. Mr. Harrison ... took occasion to state that the Carlton club was, after Melbourne, the best club in the colony. This statement naturally gave rise to a deal of surprise and dissatisfaction in the minds of the Carlton players, who justly think themselves, by their previous performances, when pitted against

Melbourne and other clubs, if not superior, quite equal to their rivals ... In conclusion, I beg to state, on behalf of the Carlton club, that they are both willing and ready to meet the MFC when and where they please, before the season expires.<sup>vii</sup>

Conway was said to possess a "lustiness of personality" and was of a "frank and generous disposition". As an athlete he was a man of exceptionally fine physique and vitality, with great strength and powers of endurance. In 1909, the writer of Conway's obituary in the *Australasian* provided a colourful description of his physical build: "Conway was as strong as a house. Forty-three in the chest, with thighs, calves, biceps and forearms to match, he was a formidable opponent to shoulder in a football field". So proud was Conway of these blessings from nature that in his later years, when coming across old friends he would "...close his hardened fist and, beating a great chest, would make the proud declaration, 'Hard as nails, no embonpoint, no adipose tissue, all sinew and strength'."<sup>viii</sup>

H.C.A. Harrison and Conway had a great rivalry on the football field and their battles were important elements in the hard fought games that occurred between these two clubs. This competitive spirit also helped to push football to the forefront of the Melbourne sporting public's attention. Harrison once acknowledged Conway as the "brilliant captain of one of our greatest rivals", and the contests between these two and their clubs were the cause of great interest and admiration.<sup>ix</sup> This much is attested to by a spectator who recalled those times: "It was something to be remembered when that grand and fearless footballer, the great old skipper of the reds, H.C.A. Harrison - lithe, sinewy, well conditioned, strong and hard as nails - sprang panther-like bound against the Herculean captain of the blues, solid as a rock, waiting for the charge. The impact was so tremendous that the very ground seemed to tremble with the shock."<sup>x</sup> Of course in 1860s and 1870s football was a lot different to how it is today. Few people realise how rare goals were in those days and final results resembled today's soccer scores. This was primarily because the game was contested by a group of heavyweight "followers" who were generally engaged in congested scrums. The whole exercise was based on rushing the ball forward and spilling it out into the open spaces where it was hoped that the "goalsneak" would kick that much-coveted goal. The game was also known for its "purlers" in which great fun was derived from knocking a player onto the earth in a way that made them slide along a muddy ground.

*The Leader* provided a detailed report of Conway and Harrison's feats on the football field in a game between Carlton and Melbourne at the Richmond Paddock, just north of the MCG, in June 1870. This is a highly entertaining and vivid account that portrays these men as warriors on a battlefield. The article also reveals that Conway had a certain sartorial flair in his adoption of a costume that

befitted his station as the captain of the Carlton club. The reporter also describes the manner in which the teams entered the playing arena in those days: "The contending forces file out of the gate behind the pavilion, mingling for the time in noisy fraternity ... The captains are not on the field yet, but make their appearance in a moment or two amidst more cheering. Harrison is known by his red jacket, and Jack Conway by his zebra-striped cap".<sup>xi</sup> Unfortunately, all is not as it should be for the Carlton playing list, and the captain uses his powers of authority to rectify the situation:

Conway, upon whom rests the honor of Carlton, looks anxious as he surveys his squad, for some carpet knights of the first twenty would not venture abroad today... Only fifteen yellow caps stand around. Jack shades his eyes with his hand, and casts a rapid glance along the crowd to spot out some recruits who will make up his weight, at all events. Suddenly he shouts out first to one, then to another, and the appeal is not in vain. After a little hesitation, two of the spectators leap into the arena, and rush across to the pavilion, where they divest themselves of uppers, and come up prepared for the fray. Ready!<sup>xii</sup>

The game then proceeds and players run hither and thither in order to gain whatever advantage may come their way, but there are many scrimmages. At one of these, the reporter states "The players are all in a heap, with Harrison and Conway in the middle, gallantly singling out each other as the only worthy foe". On another occasion when the pace of the game picks up a Melbourne player grabs the ball and runs for dear life towards the Melbourne scoring end, until

The Carlton captain happens to be raging in the neighbourhood, and renders good service by placing himself in front of one of the best Melbourne runners, who is so intent on the game that Jack is able to bring him up with a buster three or four times, by simply standing in his road.

After Melbourne scored a much-treasured goal, an intense struggle was undertaken and the players worked hard, straining every muscle to ensure victory or the chance to even the score. The journalist noted the epic nature of this conflict and explained that

If the battle field lacked the neighing of steeds, the shouting of the captains was not wanting at all events, and the vigour of the troops seems unabated... The strife waged until the shades of evening began to draw in, and the pale radiance of the moon, visible by glimpses through the masses of clouds overhead, gave token that it was past sundown.

Coincidentally, Conway and Harrison's last games were played in a bruising encounter at Albert Park on October 7, 1871. This was the final and most important game of the season, for the winner would claim the South Yarra Challenge Cup and the premiership for that year. Conway played his part in a victorious encounter (2-0) that heralded Carlton's first premiership and also marked the most successful year in the club's short history. Conway played in some Carlton scratch matches at the beginning of 1872, but was "incapacitated by an accident" and subsequently retired at the age of 28.

He therefore finished a football career at the top after he had helped to make Carlton the strongest team in the colony of Victoria. He also played a major role in shaping its attitudes and ideals. Conway's heroic deeds were not forgotten and he was fondly remembered in 1876 by "Old-Un" who wrote this poetic tribute to Conway and his famous playing days:

There's gladness in remembrance, John, of rivals you had few,  
When o'er the Melbourne's rugged ground you led the famed Dark Blue,  
You've joined in many a gallant charge after the flying leather,  
And I often think of the good old days when we were boys together.<sup>xiii</sup>

#### I.J.A. "Jack" Conway

\*Football career: Melbourne Grammar 1858-62; South Yarra 1859-61 (likely); Richmond 1861; St. Kilda 1861; Melbourne 1862-66; Carlton 1866-71; Emerald Hill 1868; Albert Park 1869.

\*Captain of Carlton 1866-71, (1866 & 1867 joint captain).

\*Kicked 8 goals in his career with senior football clubs, and was equal leading goalkicker in Victoria in 1869 (from available information).

\*Conway was also a very successful cricketer and fast bowler. He played for Victoria v. England 1/1/1862 when he took 4/60. He played first class cricket for St. Kilda, Melbourne, East Melbourne and South Melbourne (1862 and 1875).

\*Conway's greatest claim to fame occurred after the end of his football career when he became the first manager and promoter of the Australian Cricket Team that toured England in 1877-1878. As one commentator noted after his death: "His name should live forever in the annals of Australian cricket, by reason of the splendid work he did in organising the pioneer Australian team for England."

\*Conway worked as a sports journalist for *The Australasian* (Melbourne), the *Sydney Mail* and *The Morning Herald* (Sydney).

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<sup>i</sup> The Herald, August 23, 1909, p. 1.

<sup>ii</sup> Bell's Sporting Life in Victoria, July 10, 1858, p. 3.

<sup>iii</sup> The Melbourne Morning Herald, September 27, 1858, p. 5.

<sup>iv</sup> George O'Mullane was Conway's Melbourne Grammar teammate in 1858 and won fame as the captain of South Yarra's 1865 and 1866 Challenge Cup winning teams. Tragically, he died of tuberculosis in 1867. Henry Hale Budd was a successful cricketer and footballer that was reported to have kicked a goal from 70 yards in a game. W.J. Greig captained the South Yarra sides from 1860 to 1862, and was a true football pioneer having played the game in paddocks along the Yarra as early as 1857.

<sup>v</sup> All of these players were early Carlton legends. Jack Donovan played 1869-77 and replaced Conway as Carlton captain in 1872. Tom Gorman, a burly follower played 1865-68, 71, and his brother Billy was a goalsneak and played 1865-71. "Lanty" O'Brien was fast and tough and was generally a defender during the period 1865-79. Harry Guy also played from 1865 to 1879.

<sup>vi</sup> Thomas P. Power (ed), *The Footballer* (Melbourne: Henriques & Co., 1876), p. 16.

<sup>vii</sup> *Australasian*, September 4, 1869.

<sup>viii</sup> *The Herald*, August 23, 1909, p. 1.

<sup>ix</sup> A. Mancini & G. Hibbins, *Running with the Ball: Football's Foster Father* (Melbourne: Lyndoch Publications, 1987), p. 126.

<sup>x</sup> *Australasian* August 28, 1909, p. 535.

<sup>xi</sup> The Leader, June 18, 1870, p. 10.

<sup>xii</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>xiii</sup> *The Footballer* 1876, Op. Cit., p. 16.