

*WHERE THE SUPPORT LIES*

Gordon Kalton Williams

*Football Hour* sputtered on Len Caxton's car radio. Len's ears pricked up when a fan rang in to ask if there was any truth in the rumours that clubs would disappear from the competition next year.

"They're saying clubs might fold if we don't go national," said the caller.

As the commentators confirmed the caller's worst fears, explaining the reasons for expansion and the relocation of State League clubs, the caller re-phrased his questions in the hope of obtaining answers that might satisfy him. Len switched off. He didn't like the way this man with the whiney voice appealed to the heartstrings.

As he turned into his parents' narrow street and negotiated the familiar pot-holes, Len experienced a familiar sensation of panic. The lines of squashed-up cottages looked set to close in on him, and he imagined them emblazoned with what he always called the slogans of working-class despair: hopelessness, parochialism, inertia, and fear.

He parked adroitly and, as he got out, saw old Mr Taffy stooped and supporting himself between gate-post and walking stick.

"Goodday young Leonard," said Mr Taffy, as Len hopped out, "Off to the game?"

Len sprang over the gutter. "Yes, Mr Taff."

"Ah, I'll bet you wish you was still playing with the Panthers? They could make the finals this year."

"I wouldn't be much good to them on the field now," suggested Len.

"You'd still have the legs of a full-back. Look at Dimmock. He's thirty-six."

Laughing, Len squeaked open his parents' gate and disappeared through.

He found his father standing at the stove, warming his hands by the flame under the kettle. Len clicked his tongue in annoyance and bent down and pulled the radiator out from under the kitchen table. As he switched it on he looked at his father disapprovingly, only to find his father narrowing his eyes at him.

"I saw Mr Taffy just now," said Len, breaking eye-contact. "God, he's looking decrepit."

"He is getting old," said Howard, his father, slowly and with emphasis.

"Well, yes, he is getting old," said Len. "I mean, if he got around a bit more he might ease that arthritis."

“Perhaps he should just pull himself together, throw away his sticks and walk,” said Howard sarcastically.

So that’s it, thought Len. It was never very far beneath the surface: his father’s desire to satirise Len’s political philosophy. Len backed up and sat down.

In the armchair with collapsed springs he sat with his knees jutting up and surveyed the room rather than face his father’s glare. The photographs, the predominant articles of furniture, were a strange testimony to his father’s hostility. On the television cabinet smiled the young Len, seventeen years old, holding his HW White Scholarship at the desk in the study Howard had partitioned off from the laundry. Next to it was the young footballer pictured in his maroon and navy Ferguson guernsey: the club’s Best and Fairest, 1978. Len remembered that his father had taught him to be proudest of that part of the citation which read ‘fairest’. How strange that this image of a proud younger version of himself now joined the images he held in his mind of a Ferguson of the past, of single-fronted houses, dark, tram-lined streets, the houses where the Commission flats now stand, the yellowing photographs of little turn-of-the-century street urchins whose faces, under peaked caps, stared in wonderment at a hooded photographer, and the criss-crossed pair of boots and prune-y old pigskin footy which stood in a glass case in The Ferguson Arms commemorating ‘Rolly’ Burton’s last game; a Ferguson his father celebrated, but which he now associated with the hated concepts of union pressure, social welfare and the eight-hour day.

Len’s mother’s footsteps could be heard coming across the backyard from the outside laundry. Father, standing between stove and sink, faced Len, arms crossed, jaw clamped shut. Mother, seeing him standing there like that, and not seeing Len, was surprised. “Oh, I heard voices. I thought Lenny was here.”

She came fully into the room and saw Len. Both men were obviously not speaking to each other. Mother opened her mouth to protest, but before she could say anything, Len walked over and embraced her. “Hello mum,” he said, smoothing her hair and kissing the worried crinkle between her eyebrows.

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Len knew his father hated being driven to the footy. Howard would rather have gotten there by tram, hanging by a strap and bouncing against fellow fans. The two sat in silence. Len was aware of Howard’s shifting nose out of the corner of his eye. Then the grandstands came into view and Howard moved in his seat and started rubbing the door handle. Len parked and the pair got out and walked. Howard’s pace quickened at the sight of the queues forming at the ticket-windows. Once Howard had caught his breath he started chattering rapidly, emitting breathy puffs into the chilly air.

“Jeez, this season’s starting to shape up well. If we win today we’ll be two games clear of any other team outside the Five.”

“Yes, that’s true,” said Len, as if he hadn’t thought of it.

“We’re a dead ‘cert’ for the finals I reckon. Christ my feet are cold. How about yours?”

“They’re alright.”

“You know what’s interesting?” said Howard, almost solicitously. “The size of the crowd Ferguson can draw once they start to get a bit of success.”

Len turned to look at the people massing around the other gates.

“It certainly makes shit of the League’s claim that Ferguson isn’t a viable side,” continued Howard.

“Yes, but what they mean by viable is financially viable,” said Len.

“Bah, they’re obsessed by bloody money,” said Howard.

Len turned away so he could raise his eyebrows unseen.

Three roaring surges from the crowd indicated excitement in the last quarter of the Reserves match. Howard and Len strained to interpret the subsiding murmurs. They shuffled forwards in the queue and after emerging from the turnstile, ran up the steps to the seating area. At the top they stopped and their bodies relaxed at the sight of the vivid green turf and the players forming intricate patterns on the field. Ferguson Reserves led easily.

While keeping their necks screwed towards the field, Len and his father managed to find two seats, united in their efforts to get settled and enjoy the game.

Howard spread a rug out on the seat while Len manoeuvred their thermos of tea under it. They stopped what they were doing when the crowd around them roared. Focussing quickly on the other side of the field, they saw Kelly pick himself up off the ground still clutching the ball to his chest with his left hand.

“What happened then mate?” Howard asked the fellow next to him. Len looked past Howard and saw this fellow resume his seat. He spoke with pie crust in his mouth.

“Just came from nowhere. Must have been 20 metres away and came flying over the top of Barrett.” Len knew that Howard and this bloke would share observations for the rest of the afternoon though they had never met before.

Len watched as Kelly skipped back from the mark, sprinted forward and booted the ball. He felt a sympathetic twinge in his own foot at the sound of the ‘boof’ from Kelly’s kick and followed the trajectory of the ball keenly.

“Jeez it’s flaming cold,” growled Howard, stamping his feet. “Mind you, I’d rather be shivering here in the stand than be one of those arse-licking bastards up there.”

Len turned to look at Howard and then, finding Howard staring over his shoulder, turned to see where, Howard fixed his gaze. Above the adjacent stand, men in suits sat in glassed-in boxes drinking champagne.

“Isn’t it incredible?” said Howard. “They simply pamper themselves, and everybody ends up thinking the bastards were actually born superior. Why don’t they fix the facilities for the ordinary fan instead of building superboxes for those elitist mongrels?”

Len maintained his silence. He fancied he knew the economic realities of modern football. The clubs have got to chase the corporate dollar, he thought.

“This is a working man’s game. All the support that got the game off the ground in the first place...” Howard whined.

Len was exasperated. God I get sick of the droning tone in your voice, you envious old Commo whinger, he thought. It’s survival that counts.

He was interrupted by a young supporter. “Can I have your autograph, Mr Caxton?” asked the lad. Len covered a blank page with a flourish and then turned to see why Howard had stopped in mid-sentence. He caught the gleam of pride in his father’s eyes.

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The Reserves match finished and the ground cleared in readiness for the big game. The sight of the vacant playing space thrust Len’s attention on the mounting noise of the thousands around the ground. Len smiled indulgently as the members of the opposing fan clubs raised three-metre high run-throughs, yet he too felt part of the surge of enthusiasm that greeted the Ferguson players.

Len remained with his thoughts through the opening bounce, struck by the enthusiasm of the locals. Local support may be inadequate to support the financial needs of the clubs, he thought, but it is strong nevertheless, and therefore, perhaps, worthy of respect.

A build-up of cries around him suddenly alerted him to a player sprinting downfield bouncing the ball. Oaths of encouragement were shouted out as the little rover continued his dream run.

The rover sidestepped as Nugget Thompson leapt desperately at him, niftily punched the ball over Warren Burke’s head to teammate Hansen, received the ball back from a stationary Hansen and ran into the open goal-square. Inevitably, the ball dropped vertically on to his right foot and, with a perfectly pointed toe and arched instep, he put the first six points on the home side’s score.

Len’s heart beat fast. To him, this sort of excitement, of a determined player thrashing well-

matched opponents, was what football was all about.

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Len lifted the receiver and began to press the digits of his parents' phone number. He stopped one short and held the phone halfway between his head and the console for an instant before replacing the receiver. Weighing up the pros and cons of confronting his father directly, he once more looked at the newspaper flung upside down on the corner of his glass-topped desk. Still the back page headlines blared at him: *State League Club to Play Interstate: Private Group Purchase Bid*, and (the troublesome single-column story) *Former Club Great Part of Interstate Move*.

He stared out at the dockside view and the meandering signature of the river. In the distance peeped the shapely cones of the eroded volcanic mountains seventy kilometres south-west of the city. Between here and there, he contemplated the flatness of a plain lying dully under a gloomy southern sky and wondered whether the ship pointing towards the mouth of the river was actually moving or not. At the moment, the scene said everything to him of the drabness of his home town.

How he hated this drabness. He knew that if he had an office on the other side of this building, his view would take in the inner industrial suburbs, the view which, to him, represented the drabest drabness of all.

Much as he wasn't looking forward to the trouble the newspaper revelations would cause with his parents, the thickness and height of the back page headlines proclaimed a basic truth about this town: football was about the only thing it had going for it.

The friction created by the weekly contests between the twelve teams attracted the attention of nearly a third of the city's population, inspired the production of millions of words of newsprint and engaged dozens of hours of radio and TV time per week.

It was the ice-breaking topic between strangers at parties, drama and catharsis for people who were oblivious to thousands of years of Culture. Football was the highlight of the week for people like his father who had few other pleasures in life and now Len feared the consequences of ringing a 'dispossessed' man.

Finally he thought of the earful his mother would be getting, and decided, quickly, to dial. His father answered.

"Gooday," said Len.

"What the hell do you want?"

"Thought I'd better ring," said Len.

"Well I don't want to speak to you," said his father.

Len visualised his father slamming the phone down on the hook. "I can understand how

you feel,” he said quickly.

Hearing his son, the rat, protesting his understanding was an unfathomable complication to Howard. Cutting Len short, he snapped, “What’s your caper? You sit next to me barracking for the club one day, and then, today, I find out you’re in some operation with a pack of smart-suited bastards to rip me bloody team away.”

“I was going to explain,” said Len, conceding the need for explanation rather soon.

“When?” snapped Howard.

Len sighed. He had little room to manoeuvre. “It was the wrong time on Saturday.”

“I think it would have been perfect timing,” said Howard. “You could have disappointed me so much more bitterly after such a magnificent win.”

“I’m not trying to disappoint you,” said Len. “I’m simply trying to do the right thing by the club.”

“Right thing by the club?” snarled his father. “What would you know about doing the right thing by the club – “

Len started to explain: “The club is in financial shit - ”

But Howard had heard the spiel before: past decades of failure have taken their toll. The spiralling cost of players and the quest for quick on-field success have meant that the club, like other clubs, has spent more than it can afford. Selling League clubs off to private owners offers salvation but private owners want to make money through sponsorship, and twelve clubs in one city clogs the market, so the logical thing to do is for some clubs to move to non-football states and allow the competition to tempt would-be sponsors by the opportunity for national exposure.

“Football’s problems began when businessmen like your type got involved in it,” interrupted Howard.

“Look,” said Len, “businessmen are in football because football has become a business.”

“It wouldn’t have become a business if money hadn’t come into it,” said Howard. “Once upon a time, blokes played for the honour of representing their suburb. What’s with you lot? Aren’t there enough areas to suck a profit out of?”

“I’m not doing this for profit,” said Len. “I’m doing this to save the club.”

“Save the club? Who for?” snapped Howard. “The supporters? The people who go every week? Well they won’t be able to go every week when their team’s up north will they?”

“Look, Dad,” said Len. He paused. “Please don’t think that this is a bunch of businessmen playing around with the game just for the sake of playing around with it. We are all genuinely

concerned. We're trying to come up with decent solutions.”

“Why don't you ask the supporters what they want?”

“What good will that do?”

“Because if you don't do what the supporters want, you'll destroy the game.”

Len sighed.

“They'll stop coming,” exclaimed Howard.

Len thought for a second.

“What makes you think that the businessmen aren't supporters too - supporters with the power to ensure the competition's financial survival?”

“You know what disappoints me most, boy?” said his father. “That you've become so much one of them.” Howard's tongue flopped distastefully on the ‘them’.

Howard had almost become reconciled to Len's defection from the Labor Party, but becoming part of a consortium to shift the footy team he barracked for interstate was beyond the pale.

“Dad,” he said. “I haven't changed.”

“The hell you haven't,” Howard cut in.

“They say that you can only improve your lot by working hard – “

“I've worked hard,” said Howard, the life-long factory worker.

“And making use of opportunities,” continued Len. “You begin to see that the only way to make life better for yourself is to work for it yourself. You can't wait for governments to improve things for you. And . . .” Len hadn't meant to get into this debate, “the only effective means of spurring people on is competition - trying to outdo the other guy.”

“Kicking the bloke who's down.”

“Not so.”

“Being selfish.”

“It's up to the other guy to compete,” snapped Len.

“And if he can't?”

“Well naturally you cater for the really defenceless,” muttered Len, waving his hand as if that was the stupid objection that people always raised.

“But then who’s defenceless, unless they think they are?” quipped Howard. He knew Len felt vulnerable. “You’re a disgrace to the colours you wore when you represented this suburb,” he said. “You’re a disgrace to the supporters.”

Len was stung by the accusation – ‘class traitor’.

“The philosophy I’ve developed seeped into me from playing the game,” he said.

Howard sniggered.

“It’s true,” said Len, his voice getting louder. “Whether you’ve realised it or not, this Great Working-Class game is all about competition.”

There is nothing inherently unjust in a society whose progress is founded on competition as long as the players abide by the rules.

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The lift slowed to an imperceptible stop at the ground floor. The doors opened and Len headed for the bar. He walked into the deep red plushness and picked out his colleagues - Roger Hart, Tony Westmore and Mark Delahay.

Two of them had settled for coffees he noted. Thank God! Tonight they had to present their proposal to the chiefs at Football House and, although Len had only to report on the amenability of the existing club committee to the project, he was nervous about the others’ presentation of financial and administrative details, particularly to the mooted public listing of shares.

As he walked in, there had been an explosion of laughter from the trio. He saw Mark Delahay, the only one who’d been drinking, wiping the foam of ale from his smirking mouth.

“How about you Len? Have you received much comment on today’s news?” Mark asked.

“Oh, only the expected blow-up with my father,” sighed Len, wondering for a minute whether such a reply indicated too much of a concern for personal attachments

“Collins from *The Centurion* rang me,” said Hart. “Boy was he hot under the collar!”

The others started laughing again. Hart explained. “He said, ‘What football needs is for the government to take it over under some sort of National Treasure legislation.’”

Mark turned to Len. “Well you’ve got your ears open Len. What do you think the football public would think of that?”

Len started to think of something to say when Hart added, “Is he a fool, this Collins? Do you know him Len?”

“I played against him. He was a good player.”

Westmore waved his hand in a dismissive manner. “Can you imagine what it would be like if the government took over football?” he said. “An army of bureaucrats doling out equal allowances to twelve submissive clubs that had to take turns at the premiership.”

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Len’s mother rang on Wednesday. She said, “I know he could have rung you if he’d wanted to go to the game this week, but you know what he’s like.”

“Blow him if he’s going to sulk,” said Len.

“Try to thaw him out. Just be patient,” said his mother.

Len didn’t wish to be seen to be grovelling.

“He does so like to go to the football with you,” she added. “I know he can be difficult to get along with, but it does give him a thrill.”

It was really going to stick in Len’s gullet to call his father, but what could he do?

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All week, stories of the machinations inside Football House had appeared on the newspaper hoardings. For Len, who had completed his ‘mission’, the ups and downs of negotiations were now as surprising as for the public. While the ‘trio’ manipulated their package to create the most financially attractive offer, they had not contacted Len with explanation of every minor amendment. For Len, now, it was simply a matter of waiting for the phone to ring and Mark Delahay to offer him the coaching position at the Capricornia Panthers.

Len himself had resisted the proddings of guilt and stopped himself a couple of times as his over-sized fingers dialled the Ferguson suburb code. The fuss his father had made had hurt him and he had, at first, experienced self-doubt and then a surging resentment.

During the week, while wandering around the cavernous rooms of his house, he had found himself insisting aloud that his actions were within the spirit of the game. Why, people win all the time by performing the unexpected, he told himself. Why should I apologise?

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Winter sunshine streamed through Len’s bedroom window and he blinked his eyes open. He wondered if he could simply roll up at his parents’ place and whisk his father off to the footy as if nothing had happened.

He showered and ate, and crossed the road to the park. Elm-lined paths criss-crossed downhill to the oval where a junior match was under way. Len descended the hill and watched.

He groaned as a tiny ruckman tried to pull away from two tacklers, and clenched his fists in support as the ruck sprang away from the tackler’s grip. He found a bench near the goal-posts, ignored the dew on the slats and leaned against the back support. Minutes passed, and he chuckled sympathetically as the bounce of the pointy ball had tiny players changing direction every few steps.

“I thought I’d find you here,” said Mark from behind.

Len felt an exhilarating ‘woosh’ in his stomach.

“Congratulations, Len Caxton” said Mark, smiling and extending his hand, “founding coach of the Capricornia Panthers.”

Len was brought to his feet. He took Mark’s hand. He couldn’t speak. His mouth was open but the most eloquent sound that came out was a noisy exhalation.

“They finally agreed to our fourth option. We can’t offer more than fifteen per cent as our maximum holding, but I spoke to Tony this morning and he says APCO is prepared to waive a large share in return for more generous sponsorship rights.”

Len saw himself on a flood-lit field in the balmy sub-tropical twilight, with the prickly wool of his old guernsey on his sweaty back, yelling instructions to his side as they practised a handball drill.

“God, it’ll be great being back in the competition again,” he said. “Who’d have thought I’d ever be back with the Panthers?”

The ball bounced over the boundary line and rolled towards Mark and Len. Mark picked it up and threw it back awkwardly, with both hands.

“And they’re a side with potential too - Kelly, Jencks, Hansen...Those guys were just starting out when I hung up my boots,” Len said, fascinated by the cyclical nature of good fortune.

“Well, actually, there’s something I need to explain to you,” said Mark. “I know I told you we were prepared to weather losses for a couple of years, but we aim to make this operation a winning proposition from the word go. We won’t be taking a few of those blokes.”

“What do you mean we won’t be taking them?” asked Len, knowing that they were among the better players.

“Wait on. Hear me out,” said Mark, “we’re taking a premiership team up there with us.”

Len was annoyed. Was an amateur trying to tell him that Hansen and Jencks couldn’t make it in a premiership team?

“You remember how the Victorville players agreed to a salary cut earlier in the season?” Len nodded. “Well, no-one ever got around to rewriting their contracts.”

“Huh?”

“They only agreed verbally. Their contracts are still void.”

“What, all of them?”

“They’ve left the door wide open. We’re going to sign up the whole bloody side.”

“But,” asked Len. “What will happen to Victorville?”

Mark shrugged his shoulders and thrust out his lower lip. No idea, said his ‘Cappo’ eyes.

Gordon Kalton Williams

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