

Upstarts:

HOW THE ADELAIDE CROWS AND BRISBANE LIONS PUT THE AFLW ON THE MAP¹

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ABSTRACT: Women played Australian Rules football for more than 100 years but could not do so at the elite level until the Australian Football League Women's (AFLW) began in 2017. Football started as a primarily Victorian competition that evolved into the Australian Football League (AFL) in 1990, but the women's league was designed to be a national product from the outset. It stamped its point of difference in the inaugural season, when two non-Victorian teams played off for the premiership. The Adelaide Crows and Brisbane Lions reached the first AFLW grand final through innovation, team cohesion and some remarkable individuals, sparking fan investment Australia-wide. Interviews with key decision-makers, players, coaches and administrators show how a focus beyond the AFL's traditional heartland in Victoria shaped the AFLW into a truly national enterprise.

KEYWORDS: Australian Rules Football Women's (AFLW), Australian Rules Football, Adelaide Crows, Brisbane Lions, women's sport

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Women's Australian Rules football has been imagined over the past 110 years as a multipurpose tool for patriotism, novelty, fundraising enterprises, structured sport and feminist ambitions.² Along the journey from the first games in Perth in 1915, when players ran onto the field in silk skirts and hats, the game also drew fierce critics keen to demarcate what women should not do with their bodies.³ Playing football was 'unmaidenly and immodest', showed 'a cheap attitude to womanhood', 'would rob [women] of their femininity' and violated 'the sanctity of womanhood...and the home'.⁴ However, by the time the Australian Football League (AFL) announced it was setting up an elite women's league in 2015, supporters were eager to celebrate what women could do with their bodies. Australia's Governor-General and former AFL Commissioner, Her Excellency the Honourable Sam Mostyn AC, who was interviewed for this project, says that footballing women, along with other elite female athletes, are 'authentically honest' in spaces 'where there's been a history of [women's] absence'. They embody 'diversity and belonging...a real equality', both physically as well as in their understanding of the game.⁵

This article examines momentum towards the launch of the Australian Football League Women's (AFLW) in 2017, based on almost 24 hours of recorded interviews, conducted online, via phone and in person. A journalistic approach combines first-person accounts from those who designed and oversaw the competition and many who coached, administered and played in season one. The focus is on teasing out the factors that propelled the Adelaide Crows and Brisbane Lions — teams which had been expected to do poorly — to the inaugural grand final.

Running ahead of the ball

Chelsea Randall's crazy-brave contested marking was on full display at Docklands Stadium in 2014, as she crashed packs or competed at times against three opponents (Figure 1).⁶ Of her 14 marks for the game, one aerial collision against a tough-bodied opponent sent both players sprawling. Randall bounced



Figure 1: Chelsea Randall, playing for Melbourne, marks strongly ahead of Lauren Morecroft (Western Bulldogs) in the second women's exhibition game on 29 June 2014. Randall took 14 marks for the match
CREDIT: Sean Garnsworthy/AFL Media. Image supplied courtesy of the AFL for editorial use.

up and not long afterwards, took advantage of chaos deep forward to back-heel the football for a goal. In years to come, her attack on the ball would win her six Most Courageous Player awards and she would be a five-time All-Australian. She would also captain the Adelaide Crows to three premierships, including the first.

Randall won the medal for best afield in that match, the second of an exhibition series featuring 48 top female football players. They were playing in the colours of the Melbourne and Western Bulldogs football clubs. A casual observer would have assumed they were all Victorians but, in fact, they had been drafted from existing state leagues across Australia. Randall was a West Australian. Her eye-catching teenage teammate who kicked three goals for the game, Tayla Harris, was a Queenslander. Both would become household names during the first AFLW season, alongside Victorians like Daisy Pearce, Moana Hope, Darcy Vescio and Ellie Blackburn. They would all, however, be eclipsed by a South Australian wildcard, Erin Phillips, not on the field that day. Phillips, a professional basketballer whose father had been a champion footballer, would have an AFLW career filled with cinematic moments.

Among the spectators at the 2014 exhibition game was the AFL's first female commissioner, Sam Mostyn, a long-time supporter of the push for top-tier women's football. Another keen observer was the AFL's newly minted chief executive officer (CEO), Gillon McLachlan. McLachlan sensed an opportunity.

2 Peter Burke, 'Patriot games: women's football during the First World War in Australia', *Football Studies* 8, no. 2 (2005): 5–19; Rob Hess, 'Playing with 'patriotic fire': women and football in the Antipodes during the Great War', *The International Journal of the History of Sport* 28 (2011): 1388–1408; Brunette Lenkić and Rob Hess, *Play On! The Hidden History of Women's Australian Rules Football* (Melbourne: Echo Publishing, 2016), see for example 18, 49, 66–67, 94–95; Kathryn Sinclair, 'The debate about women playing Australian Rules football in Melbourne in 1947', *Sporting Traditions* 23 (2011): 85–99.

3 Debbie Hindley, *In the Outer, Not on the Outer: The Importance of Women to Australian Rules Football* (Saarbrücken: VDM Publishing, 2008), 123–24; Brunette Lenkić, 'The physical is feminine', in Justin Wolfers and Erin Riley (eds.), *Balancing Acts: Women in Sport: Essays on Power, Performance, Bodies & Love* (Sydney: Brow Books, 2018), 13–23.

4 Lenkić and Hess, *Play On!*, see for example 56, 122, 130, 147.

5 Hon Sam Mostyn AC, interviewed by Brunette Lenkić, 14 February 2025.

6 The AFL's women's exhibition series was played from 2013–2016 with players selected by a draft. The 2014 match was played on 29 June and resulted in a 10.12 (72) to 4.2 (26) win to Melbourne.

Excited by the spectacle and the quality of play, the man who had taken over the top job just three weeks earlier, declared after the game that the AFL would be setting up a women's league. Reflecting on his impetuous announcement to the small gathering in the function room with him, McLachlan says it was 'an error a young CEO makes, to be running ahead of the ball'. 'There wasn't a plan to do that, there wasn't a business case established. It was grounded in a deep commitment or instinct that it was the right thing to do.'⁷

McLachlan says there was a 'top-down, bottom-up push from people all over the country' for a national women's league. He flagged his interest in developing better pathways and opportunities for women 'in every part' of the AFL when he interviewed for the CEO position. McLachlan knew that AFL crowds were 48 per cent female. 'It was my view that we weren't having an authentic or legitimate conversation with half of the population around their deep relationship with football'.

McLachlan's instinct aligned with what socio-cultural and sport historian, Stephen Alomes, identifies as the sport arousing 'more powerful emotions for [female] players than other sports' due to 'the game's powerful social-cultural role and from the denial of opportunities for women over many years'.⁸

The AFL sometimes believed that it was helping to change Australian society. Perhaps AFLW and the hundreds of thousands of girls and women playing footy would change the culture.⁹

In committing one of Australia's most traditional male bastions to change, McLachlan had chosen the seek-forgiveness-not-permission model. The next year, he suggested in an interview with journalist, Caroline Wilson, that he wanted to fast-track the competition's start date, which was widely expected to be 2020. A few months later, McLachlan cemented his aspiration by announcing a 2017 start date, unequivocally and before it had been approved by the AFL Commission, to more than 700 people attending an AFL Women's Industry Lunch at Docklands.¹⁰ The AFL's chairman, Mike Fitzpatrick, was not amused.

In early 2025, recalling McLachlan's breach of protocol, Fitzpatrick is sanguine. He admits he was 'annoyed' at the time and had a 'chat to [McLachlan] about process' but says he was also 'pleased in some ways because it meant that we were finally kicking it off':

Gill put it to the Commission that this was what he wanted to do, we had a lot of debate about it and we were sort of edging towards the competition. We just got a surprise (laughs) when he announced it ... in

7 Gillon McLachlan, interviewed by Brunette Lenkić, 15 February 2025.

8 Stephen Alomes, 'AFLW and the Australian football revolutions of 2017–19: A study in the contemporary war of the sports', *Sporting Traditions* 36 (2019): 1–21.

9 Alomes, 'AFLW and the Australian football revolutions', 2.

10 The lunch was held on 12 May 2015.

between board meetings. He knew he already had the numbers. He had the support of the whole Commission.

We were reasonably open, I think, as a group, so there was a bit of disappointment when he got out ahead of the game. But that said, the launch went so well, everyone forgave him, basically.¹¹

Without McLachlan's impatience, the onset of the COVID pandemic in 2020 may well have killed off the idea. Indefinitely suspending a women's competition that had barely started would have been an easy solution in a year which shut down communal human activity, including sport. It would also have allowed the AFL to focus solely on the disruptions and financial pain that beset the men's program that year.

Fitzpatrick says that Sam Mostyn was also significant in pushing for women's football at Commission level:

Sam made it a task that she was not going to let go of, to educate the commissioners on women's football, as it was and where it could go. She made sure it was on the agenda and if it wasn't, she gave us a 10-minute diatribe. In general, it was on the agenda and the progress was monitored and decisions were made to set up some clubs and be serious.¹²

Mostyn had joined the AFL Commission in 2005 and began attending women's football matches soon after. She also attended biennial national carnivals from 2008, at the invitation of Jan Cooper, the AFL's indefatigable female football development manager. Cooper was a unifying agent, connecting players, coaches, administrators and volunteers across the country.

Mostyn pressed for a strategic plan 'for a national women's competition that would rise to be the equivalent of the men's' at AFL Commission meetings.¹³ Although there was strong support throughout the AFL and within clubs and boards, there was also 'reluctance and hesitation' among some decision-makers.

Originally, the pushbacks were just disbelief that you could actually create a league around women players. There was a bit of a thematic early that it wouldn't be good for the brand. They were nervous about women turning up in their full sexuality, their full selves. I guess it was [because] you couldn't control it the way men's football had been, so there was concern that there'd be a lot of gay women, [there] might be a lot of women from different cultural backgrounds. I'm not sure they had confidence about how to manage that. There was cultural pushback, sexist pushback. There was, I'd say, a little bit of homophobia... but we had to keep pushing through all those barriers that were raised by people who just didn't have confidence in the product and in the women

11 Mike Fitzpatrick, interviewed by Brunette Lenkić, 15 February 2025.

12 Fitzpatrick interview.

13 Mostyn interview, 14 February 2025.

themselves. What took the longest was to get them to believe, actually, that this brand of footy would work and that people would come, that it could be broadcast and there was a product here.¹⁴

Once the Commission had formally agreed to a 2017 start, others scrambled to make it happen. Chief among the architects were Josh Vanderloo and Madeline Penny, at AFL House in Melbourne. Vanderloo, now a self-employed strategic advisor, was then head of women's football and junior development, while Penny was working in the strategy department (and is now AFL general manager of game development). 'The two of us got to work on scoping out everything that was required from a competition lens,' says Vanderloo.¹⁵ They engaged with each department of the AFL to create a blueprint. The primary objective was 'to inspire and increase female interest and participation in Australian Football through an elite national women's football competition'.¹⁶ All 18 AFL clubs were invited to apply to have a women's team.

McLachlan recalls the AFL 'had to work very hard' to get clubs to bid for licences. 'And even within clubs there were those who supported [it] and there were people almost trying to run interference to stop the clubs bidding.'¹⁷ Of the clubs that were interested, some were frustrated by the lack of information on which to base a far-reaching business decision. Former Richmond president, Peggy O'Neal, says her club found the process opaque.

I remember the board saying to [Richmond CEO] Brendon Gale, 'Well you put the business plan together. How much is it going to cost us? What's it look like for additional staff? Additional coaches? What's the season going to look like? What do we have to pay for? What's the AFL going to pay for?'

And he came back and he said, 'I can't put a business case together. They won't give me any details.'¹⁸

The *See What We Create* branding around season one was an invitation to witness the competition's evolution. Fitzpatrick says the AFLW start-up was easier than setting up new franchises from scratch, as had been the case when the Gold Coast Suns and Greater Western Sydney (GWS) joined the men's competition in 2011 and 2012.

The women's competition was somewhat bigger but, in other ways, not bigger because the clubs already existed and it was a matter of tacking the

14 Hon Sam Mostyn AC, interviewed by Brunette Lenkić, 20 February 2025.

15 Josh Vanderloo, interviewed by Brunette Lenkić, 29 January 2025.

16 Australian Football League, Melbourne, 2016, *Female Football Media Briefing* (electronic: 2016). Copy in the possession of the author.

17 McLachlan interview.

18 Peggy O'Neal AO, interviewed by Brunette Lenkić, 9 January 2025.

women's [team] onto the club. A lot of the resources were already there.¹⁹

According to its annual report, the AFL spent an extra \$5.3m in 2017 'primarily due to the launch of AFLW and investing in the growth of female participation'.²⁰ No breakdown was given but the AFL Players Association reported that the total player payments were \$2.275m for the 218 AFLW athletes contracted in the first year.²¹

McLachlan credits former AFL executive, the late Ray Gunston, with kicking off decisions around the competition, starting with its name. It was kept simple, adding a 'W' for 'Women's' onto 'AFL'. Another key consideration was the number of teams. 'How wide we would go with the depth of talent available was obviously a huge decision,' says McLachlan.

A lot of people — particularly, as I recall, the women who'd been the champions for years, who were very invested in playing a great quality product — wanted to keep it at a standard. We concluded [we had] to go wider than that to be as inclusive as we could. So then to get enough teams to bid, it was a bit of working the phones.²²

The AFL's primary strategic consideration was to have a national competition with a team in every major market.²³ This would include the rugby heartland states of New South Wales and Queensland. Part of the impetus for the AFLW came, says Fitzpatrick, because rugby was setting up women's programs and working hard on increasing the female fan base. 'To some extent, the AFL's in a do-or-die struggle with the other codes. It made sense to have a product in the women's space.'²⁴

South Australia: formidable women kickstart momentum

There had to be sufficient talent for the plan to be viable. Victoria, Western Australia and Queensland had established talent pathways but early on, South Australia, a strong men's football state, looked like it might miss out on a women's team. Women's football in Adelaide had been in a slump, riven by internal disputes and barely surviving with low, stagnant numbers until Cheryl and Peter Cates stepped in. Cheryl became the South Australian Women's Football League (SAWFL) president in 2009 and Peter was a coach and coach mentor. They connected junior and senior pathways, lifted standards and ran the SAWFL at a

19 Fitzpatrick interview.

20 Australian Football League, Melbourne, Annual Report 2017, (electronic: 2018). https://resources.afl.com.au/afl/document/2019/12/05/b06c0343-543e-408d-945e-89ce08d8d294/AFL_Annual_Report_2017-min.pdf, accessed on 23 April 2025.

21 Kav di Pietro, AFL Players' Association Limited, 'Women's footy: everything you need to know', <https://www.aflplayers.com.au/news-feed/stories/womens-footy-everything-you-need-to-know>, accessed on 23 April 2025.

22 McLachlan interview.

23 Australian Football League, *Female Football Media Briefing*.

24 Fitzpatrick interview.

profit. By the time Cates left the presidency in 2013, there were 10 local teams, up from the four she had inherited. However, a gap still remained when the AFLW beckoned. The head of women's football at the Adelaide Crows, Phil Harper, says it became clear the state would not get a standalone team 'because, according to the AFL, there was not enough talent'.²⁵ The alternative was to submit a combined bid with the Northern Territory.

In the end, eight licences were granted: four to Victorian teams — Carlton, Collingwood, Melbourne and the Western Bulldogs — and one each to New South Wales (GWS Giants), Queensland (Brisbane Lions), South Australia (Adelaide Crows), and Western Australia (Fremantle Dockers).

List builds of 27 per squad comprised: two marquee players who would be paid \$27,000 each, which included \$10,000 for promotional work for their teams; one highly-ranked priority pick, preferably with existing club connections (Adelaide and Brisbane were given two and GWS four), earning \$12,000; state-based draftees, free agents who missed out on draft selection and up to two rookies from other sports who had not played Australian Rules football for the preceding three years, would all earn \$8,500.²⁶ The payments were more an allowance than a living wage, so players continued working full-time or part-time and playing as semi-professional athletes. When squads were finalised, it seemed to captains, sports journalists and gambling sites that the Western Bulldogs and Fremantle would be the ones to beat in season one.²⁷

But lists on paper did not reflect what happened once games were underway in the seven-week home-and-away season. Upstarts emerged. In the race for the top two to contest the final, the Western Bulldogs and Fremantle finished sixth and seventh. Almost no one at the start of the season picked Brisbane or Adelaide to be the contenders and even fewer picked Adelaide to be the first premier. And yet the two clubs have gone on to be the most successful in the AFLW, with Adelaide winning three flags and Brisbane two (Figure 2). Additionally, one or both teams have featured in all eight grand finals to date.

The success of the Adelaide Crows in season one was heavily influenced by its two captains and the head coach — formidable, competitive women who would ignite a latent passion in the footballing public. South Australia was progressive. It had been the first state to allow women equal access to university and to the vote, both in the 1890s. It was also the first state, in 1975, to legalise homosexuality. In

25 Phil Harper, interviewed by Brunette Lenkić, 16 January 2025.

26 Fremantle and GWS were given an extra priority pick because each had lost a marquee player to an ACL injury before the season started.

27 Fox Sports, 'Your ultimate guide to the inaugural AFL Women's competition including predictions, full fixture', www.foxsports.com.au/afl/your-ultimate-guide-to-the-inaugural-afl-womens-competition-including-predictions-full-fixture/news-story/daa82cc47006c7a9f6835e7d82927a53, accessed on 23 April 2025; Drop Punta, Before You Bet, '2017 AFL Women's (AFLW) season preview & tips', www.beforeyoubet.com.au/2017-afl-womens-aflw-season-preview-tips, accessed on 23 April 2025.



Figure 2: Adelaide Crows co-captains Chelsea Randall (left) and Erin Phillips (right), with coach Bec Goddard (centre), hoist the 2017 AFLW premiership trophy
CREDIT: Michael Willson/AFL Media. Image supplied courtesy of the AFL for editorial use.

a state proud of its firsts, it seemed as if the South Australian entry into the AFLW would be second-rate.

Phil Harper says he sought a first-up match against GWS when he was told that the Sydney team and the Crows would be the two weakest sides.²⁸ The AFL agreed to his request. The Crows inaugural coach, Bec Goddard, didn't let on to her players that she was 'incredibly ill' before the game, locked in the portable toilets at the ground, trying to control her anxiety. Initially she thought the team would finish 'dead last' but hope flickered in the pre-season and she aimed for one win in 2017.²⁹ Coming from Canberra, Goddard knew most players on the GWS list and thought the Crows could beat them.

Goddard hadn't expected to get the Adelaide job. Although she was approached to interview, she assumed the role would go to Rell Smith, a South Australian whose résumé spanned playing, administrative and coaching roles over a sparkling 25-year career. Smith knew the South Australian talent. She had helped develop players like the 2017 Rising Star, Ebony Marinoff, who

28 Harper interview.

29 Bec Goddard, interviewed by Brunette Lenkić, 28 January 2025.

played in Smith's 2016 Morphettsville Park senior women's team, alongside eight others who would form the local nucleus of the Adelaide Crows.³⁰ Smith thinks she missed out on becoming head coach because her partner, Courtney Cramey, was under consideration to (and indeed did) become one of the Crows' inaugural players.³¹ Goddard, though, feels that she 'ultimately got the job' because she had been coaching in the men's system after she transferred to South Australia with the Australian Federal Police; she'd stopped coaching women because 'I didn't think there'd be a future in it'.³² She told Adelaide's interview panel how she'd overcome barriers both as a woman in the sport and 'as a leader in a man's world of law enforcement'. Also working in her favour was her previous experience coaching female representative team players from the Riverina and Canberra who would meet half-way at Gundagai to train at night, using car headlights to light the oval. It typified the creativity needed for the Adelaide Crows' composite team to succeed.

Team cohesion became a Crows signature. It is hard to overstate how extraordinary that was. The club stitched together an inaugural list which included nine Territory players who would be living and training in Darwin; over the course of the season and including the grand final, they would fly more than 39,000 km — virtually the circumference of the Earth — to play. Of the 18 Adelaide-based players, almost half were recalled to South Australia or drafted from interstate.³³ Coaches and players built online connections first, via Skype or FaceTime. Goddard rang her senior assistant in Darwin, Andrew Hodges, 'two or three times a day' to discuss all aspects of the program.³⁴ Training sessions, workloads and running schedules in both locales were the same, though adjusted for Darwin's weather. The leadership group of Chelsea Randall and Erin Phillips in Adelaide, and Ange Foley and Sally Riley in Darwin, also spoke regularly. Everything was used as motivation. If Randall heard that the Darwin women had just finished training in '90-something per cent humidity...and 38 degrees', she would relay that to her teammates in Adelaide and warn them, 'I don't want to hear anyone complaining about the heat'.³⁵

Randall was a natural leader. When the whole squad first met up in Melbourne for its AFL induction, there was an awkward silence on the team bus from the airport. Randall impulsively began playing charades with topics

30 Marinoff also won the AFLW best and fairest medal in 2024 and thanked Rell Smith in her speech.

31 Rell Smith, interviewed by Brunette Lenkić, 17 January 2025.

32 Goddard interview.

33 Chelsea Randall and Kellie Gibson (WA), Talia Radan and Rhiannon Metcalfe (Canberra), Sarah Perkins (Victoria), Jenna McCormick (recalled from Iceland where she had been playing soccer), Erin Phillips (recalled from the US where she had been playing basketball).

34 Goddard interview.

35 Chelsea Randall, interviewed by Brunette Lenkić, 16 January 2025.

prompted by a phone app. Players' competitive spirits were roused as they began miming actions such as making a snowball or kung fu fighting. The group disembarked with a sense that what lay ahead would be fun.

It was Randall's character that Phil Harper and [then head of football] David Noble prized as highly as her highlights' reel when they sought to recruit her to the Adelaide Football Club (AFC) as a marquee player. Noble flew to Newman, a mining town 1200km north of Perth, where Randall was working in community development, and shadowed her for the day. He later told Harper that she had a 'magnetic personality that brings people together'.³⁶ Randall was taken with Noble's pitch that the club wanted to 'bring good people to make great things'. She chose Adelaide from among a number of options, she says, as the best way for her to 'help put female footy on the map in another state'.³⁷

Another factor in the Crows' success in 2017 was the coach's insistence on co-captains. Bec Goddard had to justify the break with club tradition to the AFC board and why 'football head' Chelsea Randall and champion basketballer Erin Phillips were both needed. Goddard says the co-captaincy model 'wasn't an easy sell' but she was adamant that a single captain would feel 'unnecessary pressure because of the enormity of the situation', given that the AFLW was new and with Phillips flying in from United States with her family.³⁸

The Phillips name was famous in South Australian footballing circles. Erin was the daughter of Greg, a highly respected former Port Adelaide captain and Collingwood footballer who had played 427 senior games. Despite her pedigree, almost no one knew whether Erin would be more than a novelty signing; she was an Olympian, coming from a career in the American Women's National Basketball League, and hadn't played football since she was a teenager. Phil Harper rang Phillips in the United States, where she was playing for the Dallas Wings and offered her the chance to play in the AFLW during basketball's off-season. After 'months and months' of planning, she signed as a rookie, with Adelaide undertaking to pay out her basketball contract if she got injured playing football.³⁹

Adelaide was the only team with co-captains in the first season. Harper says that Randall and Phillips had complementary leadership qualities; 'Erin was the more hardcore', modelling elite training standards, while Randall was a 'star player' with a strong work ethic who 'treated everyone with respect, from the cleaner to the chairman of the board'.⁴⁰ He also acknowledges the input of the Darwin leaders, Foley and Riley, 'and, in fairness, we had a coach who was terrific at bringing the group together.'

36 Harper interview.

37 Chelsea Randall, interviewed by Brunette Lenkić, 6 December 2025.

38 Goddard interview.

39 Harper interview.

40 Harper interview.



Figure 3: Brisbane Lions marquee players, Tayla Harris (left) and Sabrina Frederick (centre), were up-and-coming key position players. CREDIT: Jason O'Brien/Getty Images. Image supplied courtesy of the AFL for editorial use.

Bec Goddard built her list around the one-on-one contest, thinking that the AFL was bringing in anti-density rules. In doing so, she launched the AFLW career of an overlooked Victorian player, Sarah Perkins, who became a crowd and media favourite.

We wanted to see a big full forward come out of the goal square and just be in a one-on-one marking contest. We didn't want anyone to be folding back, so Perkins was brought in specifically for that. We wanted our wings to be the best runners in the competition, we wanted to have midfielders that would just grunt, just dirty hard workers that may not be clean but were going to win their one-on-one contest and that was what the game style was about. It was really hard to play against because the ball would just keep moving.⁴¹

Perkins kicked a goal in the first game and two in the second. It wasn't long before she was being stopped in public for selfies.

Queensland: alchemy, fun and 'secret sauce'

The Brisbane Lions had the two youngest of the 16 marquee players, Tayla Harris (from Queensland) and Sabrina Frederick (from Western Australia), who were also two of the most marketable (Figure 3). Both were up-and-coming key position players

⁴¹ Goddard interview.

— tall, telegenic crowd-pleasers who could take strong, contested marks. Harris, particularly, would attract sponsors and transcend provincial fandom, with young girls around the country trying to copy her distinctive scissor-kick action.

The Lions pushed the idea of state pride. Most of the 2017 squad were Queenslanders who had gone through talent pathways together and played with or against each other for years. Brisbane was virtually born with an underdog tag that head coach, Craig Starcevich, says came from 'how the punters rated our chances because of their lack of knowledge of who we had in the team'.⁴² Right from the beginning and without a player 'who could put the team on her back' — something Starcevich says he is still chasing — the team relied on an even spread of talent.

The long reach of rugby, which had been a major obstacle in trying to grow men's AFL in Queensland, barely needed to be sidestepped in the women's space. In 2016, there were just 3,862 females playing in the state's rugby league clubs.⁴³ Queensland had tracked the growth of its female football participation closely, recording a 72 per cent increase between 2013 and 2015. Numbers across club, Auskick and school competitions had reached 71,293 by 2015.⁴⁴ Those emphatic statistics were included immediately after the executive summary in the Brisbane Lions pitch document, *Game Changer*, when it applied for an inaugural AFLW licence. The design of the document mirrored the dynamic, vibrant and go-ahead nature of those heading women's football.

Bree Brock had overseen the growth of Queensland's female football since 2014, crediting her predecessor, Julia Price, with having done much of the thankless legwork to build participation numbers to 42,000. Brock then also drew on her own experience of having grown the Northern Territory women's competition from a single league to five, including creating an eight-team league on tiny Groote Eylandt, population 2,500. Football was 'a religion' in the manganese mining settlement and 'cranking' the competition was 'relatively easy' compared to the situation in Queensland.⁴⁵ Brock subconsciously cracked the code, adopting the gospel according to 1980s pop icon, Cyndi Lauper: *Girls just wanna have fun*. Attracting girls to the sport was done through leveraging lively teenage energy. Carnivals were festive, guernseys were flamboyant and players came from around the State.

Brock and Starcevich began working together in 2014 and were given a 'blank canvas' with the talent pathway. The two reminisce about the girls' Under-17 Cup

⁴² Craig Starcevich, interviewed by Brunette Lenkić, 10 December 2024.

⁴³ Queensland Rugby League, Brisbane, 2024, *Infrastructure Strategy 2022–2030*, (electronic: 2024). <https://www.qrl.com.au/contentassets/d80a9a744d654284b3285a4ef697e29a/qrl-infrastructure-strategy---final.pdf>, accessed on 24 April 2025.

⁴⁴ Brisbane Lions Football Club, Brisbane, 2016, *Game Changer: Brisbane Lions National Womens League Licence Application 2016*. Copy in the possession of the author.

⁴⁵ Bree Brock, interviewed by Brunette Lenkić, 10 December 2024.

weekends, played at the AFL Queensland facility at Yeronga. 'The whole precinct was buzzing,' says Starceвич, 'game after game after game. I had a DJ there. It was the fun vibe but, at the core of it, the footy was still good. And we had kids from all over Queensland.' Brock adds that it 'was full of life, music going, singing'.⁴⁶

The alchemy between Starceвич and Brock is a primary reason for Brisbane's early, and ongoing, success despite the team losing multiple players to expansion sides as the AFLW has grown. They provide continuity and stability, creating a culture that draws on Starceвич's restless drive towards excellence and Brock's desire to replicate the 'sisterhood' she found in club footy. Both were committed to women's football well before the advent of the AFLW.

Brock's upbringing was nomadic, with the family following her diplomat father to postings in England, Greece and Pakistan. It was a childhood that made her adaptable, she says, 'a bit of a chameleon' who spent time observing people before deciding who to befriend at the 13 schools she attended. She credits her early lifestyle with creating 'a skillset that you can read body language, read the room, read what's happening. That certainly helps in the working environment'.⁴⁷ Starceвич, who grew up in Perth, played 177 senior football games in a career that took him from East Perth Football Club to Collingwood's 1990 premiership side and a subsequent trade to the Brisbane Bears. Along the way, he gained a sports science degree and, after he finished playing in 1995, he worked in fitness before moving into coaching.

The players jokingly call them 'Mum and Dad', says Brock, 'but I think we're more like brother and sister'. She says the sibling-type relationship means that they constantly challenge one another over ways to improve the program. Highly competitive, both 'want to win all the time' but strong, sometimes heated conversations, are quickly forgotten in the quest for success.⁴⁸

Starceвич had the highest profile of the AFLW's eight original head coaches. He chose assistants with high-level footballing nous to build credibility for the program. Brent Staker and Daniel Merrett had name recognition, having recently retired from the AFL, and could also model professional habits, while David Lake had long local coaching experience. Brisbane's Brownlow medallist and triple premiership player, Simon Black, also volunteered his expertise in the early years. That male footballers of such calibre chose to be involved with women's football would have puzzled detractors, who became more circumspect in their criticisms. They were no longer game enough, as former South Australian player Graham Cornes had been in a newspaper article in 2015, to say publicly that women playing football 'just didn't look right'. Cornes acknowledged in his opinion piece that the men's game would 'wither' without women's support but

46 Bree Brock and Craig Starceвич, interviewed by Brunette Lenkić, 10 December 2024.

47 Bree Brock, interviewed by Brunette Lenkić, 12 December 2025.

48 Brock interview, 10 December 2025.

suggested that, while the AFL should facilitate junior and community footy for females, it 'can't fill their heads with a false expectation that they can become professional footballers'.⁴⁹

When Brock joined local club Zillmere with her sisters, in 2004, she quickly understood why women were passionate about playing a collision sport where protecting a teammate required instant trust. Women also thrived on being 'loud and aggressive and dirty and muddy'.⁵⁰ She has no doubt that her club experience of making '25 new friends', informed her vision for what she wanted the Brisbane Lions team to become:

We have rules and we have standards, but it's not rigid, it's not soulless, it's a place where girls can come and be themselves, no matter how exuberant or shy they might be. Everyone has a place and is accepted for who they are and they're having a whole lot of fun. That's absolutely paramount.⁵¹

Brock says the banter between players and her 'partner in crime', Starceвич, builds good connections but there is a clear line between fun and when 'it's game on'.

Brock names strength and conditioning coach, Matt Green, as the 'secret sauce' to Brisbane's consistency. Green is an innovator, among the first at AFLW clubs to investigate and explain to players how their menstrual cycles affected their energy levels and performance. That focus began jointly with a dietician towards the end of season one. It was framed as 'a physiological superpower' that helped players pinpoint their bodies' energy needs. As 'a 25-year-old male amongst 18- to 30-year-old females', Green was pleased he could have open conversations around periods.⁵² His approach, which he attributes to his curiosity and interest in finding an edge, was uncommon at the time. Anna Kessel's 2016 book, *Eat Sweat Play*, notes the lack of coach interest and scientific research into how menstruation affects sporting women. Even the most famous of Kessel's examples, tennis champion Serena Williams, revealed she had been told by a doctor that her menstrual migraines were purely a mental issue.⁵³

Green says Brisbane aimed to 'push the boundaries' on training and playing standards from the beginning. He constantly questions whether he has provided a healthy list that allows Starceвич 'to play the game technically and tactically the way that he wants'.⁵⁴ The answers have been affirmative since 2017, when the Lions became the minor premiers, after six wins and a draw, and in the five grand finals they have contested since, two successfully.

49 Graham Cornes, 'Will a national women's league really get the support to thrive?', *Advertiser* (Adelaide), 22 August 2015.

50 Brock interview, 10 December 2024.

51 Brock interview.

52 Matt Green, interviewed by Brunette Lenkić, 14 January 2025.

53 Anna Kessel, *Eat Sweat Play: How Sport Can Change Our Lives* (London: Pan MacMillan, 2016).

54 Green interview.

The front-runners stumble

The teams touted as the likely grand finalists in season one, Western Bulldogs and Fremantle Dockers, both had disappointing seasons. For the Bulldogs, the problem could be summed up in three words: wrong game plan. The inaugural coach, Paul Groves, freely admits that he made a mistake when he tried to superimpose a men's game plan onto his fledgling women's side, copied after he had spent time with the men's side in its premiership year. His focus on getting the ball forward through handball and keeping possession worked in game one, when the Bulldogs comfortably beat what he thought was a strong opponent in Fremantle. However, physical sides like Adelaide exposed his team's inability 'to execute our skills under pressure'. Groves humbly accepted end-of-season player and assistant coach feedback that he had focused too much on game plan and not enough on basics in the pre-season. Switching priorities in 2018 saw the team win the next premiership.⁵⁵

The Dockers could also pinpoint a major season one deficit: no Kiara Bowers. The marquee player, who would go on to win the 2021 AFLW best and fairest medal, was sitting on the sidelines recovering from a pre-season anterior cruciate ligament (ACL) injury. Bowers was a 'massive out' in a year when the loss of a top player was hard to cover, says Fremantle's inaugural coach, Michelle Cowan. The team had just one win for the season but may well have overturned three close results had Bowers been playing. Finishing seventh was unfamiliar territory for the coach who 'didn't know how to lose', based on her unbeaten record in charge of the Melbourne team during the exhibition series and as a state coach while Western Australia was surging nationally.⁵⁶

In the years leading up to the AFLW, Western Australia had become the serious challenger Victoria needed for a national women's competition to be viable. In 2016, Josh Vanderloo had ranked the top women's football players in the country, drawing on exposed form in state games and the exhibition series. What was obvious was that Western Australia had become a powerhouse, matching Victoria by having 40 players of the top 100 listed. Victoria's talent would be split four ways but Western Australia, with just one licence to the Fremantle Dockers in the start-up, would essentially be fielding the country's strongest state team. Moving talent away from the West became a priority to help balance the competition.

Jan Cooper would look at Vanderloo's talent equalisation whiteboard and tell him, her line manager, that he was taking too many players from her home state. Although Cooper understood the need for an even competition 'that would bring TV and live audiences to it', she worried that it would be at Western

Australia's expense.⁵⁷ In the end, eight of the 16 inaugural marquee players were from Western Australia, with six moving across the country to take up the roles. A handful of other talented players also joined interstate clubs. Thinking back on decisions to incentivise players to leave Perth, Vanderloo says he had to be 'opportunistic' and disagrees that too many moved. 'The mandate, absolutely, was to spread talent,' he says.⁵⁸

Western Australia's footballing strength had been building for years. Motivated women locally were aided by a small, but highly significant, Victorian influence that began not long after Joanne Huggins set up the Western Australian Women's Football League (WAWFL) in 1987. The league attracted Dhara Kerr, a talented, uncompromising player from Warrnambool who'd joined the Western Australia Police Force. She won numerous footballing awards between 1992 and 1995 before her untimely death; her name is now on the annual medal awarded to the state league's top female footballer. Another handy Victorian playing in the WAWFL at the time, Barb 'Bob' Hampson, joined forces with Lisa Hardeman in Melbourne to launch the first women's national carnival in 1998.⁵⁹ Perhaps the greatest Victorian driver of footballing excellence in Western Australia was Nicole Graves, who had been the first Australian Rules football female talent manager in the country in 2004. Fresh from setting up junior pathways while at Football Victoria, in 2007 she relocated to the West Australian Football Commission where she began pooling expertise with Jan Cooper. Graves also began coaching the senior women's WAWFL team at Swan Districts. Her duels with fellow coaches, Martene Pearman (Coastal Titans) and Nikki Harwood (East Fremantle), pushed up the standard.

Local players, too, had been quietly building their résumés. Emma King, who would join Collingwood as a marquee, played in the 2009 under-16 West Australia team that won an unofficial tri-state invitational football tournament against Queensland and Victoria. By 2013, Western Australia's State Schoolgirls' Under-16 team won the national carnival in Darwin, beating a Vic Metro side whose players included Monique Conti (the 2023 AFLW best player). In 2014, Western Australia won the final of the under-18 AFL Youth Girls national championships in Canberra, also against Vic Metro. The most significant win came in 2015, when Western Australia became the first open women's football team to beat Victoria, in a state game played at Subiaco Oval. Western Australia was captained by Victorian-born Kara Antonio (néé Donnellan). Like so many female players at the time, she started footy as a girl among the boys (at Langwarrin Junior Football Club), eventually joining women's teams. She began

⁵⁷ Jan Cooper OAM, interviewed by Brunette Lenkić, 30 January 2025.

⁵⁸ Vanderloo interview, 29 January 2025.

⁵⁹ The AFLW-forerunner exhibition series played for the Hampson-Hardeman Cup. The trophy is now presented to the winner of AFLW matches between Melbourne Demons and Western Bulldogs.

⁵⁵ Paul Groves, interviewed by Brunette Lenkić, 26 February 2025.

⁵⁶ Michelle Cowan, interviewed by Brunette Lenkić, 6 February 2025.

playing for Swan Districts when she moved to Perth in 2013. Antonio became Fremantle's inaugural captain and one of its marquee players. To widespread surprise, the club stumbled in 2017 even with a highly credentialled coach.

Melbourne Football Club had expected to make Michelle Cowan its inaugural AFLW head coach, offering her a full-time position and a salary of \$120,000. She was already commuting from Perth for her job as part-time development coach at the club. However, she had two young children and a husband whose job was Perth-based. She wanted to be home.

Cowan was a staunch West Coast fan. Despite that, when she was head-hunted by Fremantle, she accepted its offer of a part-time (0.5) head coach position, knowing she would be absorbing a financial blow. 'I took a pay cut of \$80,000,' Cowan says.⁶⁰ The job was challenging in more basic ways, too. While the club transitioned to its new facility at Cockburn, she was working in a demountable office, there were no female changerooms and no lights around the oval. 'We could only train at night and, by the time it was 7.30, we could only train in the forward pocket.'⁶¹ She eventually hired lights that her husband sourced from the mining industry.

2017: Kicking off the firsts

The first official match of the AFLW was a night game between two traditional male rival clubs, Carlton and Collingwood, on 3 February 2017. The euphoric, charged and emotional atmosphere is captured in Kirby Fenwick's 2020 award-winning oral history documentary, 'The First Friday in February', where more than two dozen women at Princes Park for the historic game spoke about what they witnessed and how they felt.

The overall impression was of intensity, of 'bodies flying everywhere and big collisions', according to Paul Groves, who was spectating while wondering if the old stand he was in would hold as the crowd swelled.⁶² Carlton captain Lauren Arnell also remembers the physicality, as well as her celebration when she kicked one of Carlton's goals in the 7.4 (46) to 1.5 (11) victory. She 'carried on like a pork chop', as if she'd spontaneously returned to childhood, playing imaginary games of footy by herself on the family farm.⁶³ At game's end, a jubilant Arnell would be in the history books as the captain of the first winning team. Meanwhile, the opposition's ruck, Emma King, was grateful for the 'surreal' experience and 'the happiest loss I've been a part of'. Her team still ran a lap around the oval after the game to greet family, friends and spectators, absorbing their excitement.⁶⁴

More than 50,000 people attended the four matches of the opening round.

⁶⁰ Cowan interview.

⁶¹ Cowan interview.

⁶² Groves interview.

⁶³ Lauren Arnell, interviewed by Brunette Lenkić, 4 February 2025.

⁶⁴ Emma King, interviewed by Brunette Lenkić, 13 February 2025.

Unfortunately, the games were lopsided, with all the losing sides each only kicking a single goal. Those designing the competition wanted an attractive product. They had analysed and compared the six women's exhibition matches played in 2016 to averages from the previous men's AFL season (adjusted for match duration).⁶⁵ Heat maps showed much more congestion by the women. As well, scoring was down 21 per cent, there were 31 per cent fewer marks and 17 per cent fewer handballs. The rules for AFLW were changed to encourage a flowing game, more goals and better ball handling — teams would have 16 players on field instead of 18, with six on the interchange bench, use a smaller ball and play 15-minute quarters. 'Last touch' would also apply, with a free kick awarded against a player who kicked or handballed out of bounds between the 50m arcs without the ball being touched by another player.

Winning game styles

Inaugural premiership coach Goddard says some coaches tried, prematurely, to mimic men's game styles. 'They overcooked it,' she says bluntly. She, conversely, opted for a 'really simple' game plan that all players could follow. She and her senior assistant, Andrew Hodges, decided to 'try to build the fittest, fastest and most aggressive team', even if they weren't 'as skilled as say, the Victorians'. Win or lose, she wanted other teams to feel the Crows' physicality.⁶⁶

Goddard watched her players deploy the plan successfully in their first game, a victory over GWS in front of more than 9,000 spectators who'd caused traffic jams heading to suburban Thebarton Oval. The GWS captain, Amanda Farrugia, says her side had no idea how far behind the rest of the competition it was before the six-goal loss. Additionally, Farrugia's first opponent was a breakout player. 'She could out-reach me, she was stronger than me, her bodywork was better. To say I was outplayed was an understatement.'⁶⁷ The answer to her silent question, 'Who the hell's this girl?', was one that players, fans and the football world were also asking of the number 13 who kicked three goals on debut. It was, of course, Erin Phillips. At the first AFLW awards night, Phillips would win Goal of the Year for a 60-metre bomb, as well as the inaugural best and fairest award. On hearing her name called, she kissed her wife, Tracy Gahan. The couple had married a few years earlier in the US. Without aiming to be the flag-bearer for gay players within AFLW, her public display of affection was widely reported, and supported, in Australia.⁶⁸

At Brisbane, Craig Starcevich had emphasised footballing fundamentals, as well as ball movement and retaining possession. His simple measure of how his

⁶⁵ Australian Football League, Melbourne, no date, *AFL Women's League Update: Briefing Notes* (electronic: n.d.). Copy in possession of the author.

⁶⁶ Goddard interview.

⁶⁷ Amanda Farrugia, interviewed by Brunette Lenkić, 7 January 2025.

⁶⁸ Same-sex marriage was legalised in Australia later that year.

team would perform in season one was to count how many players in each of the AFLW squads had played in exhibition matches. Starcevich was satisfied that he had enough quality players to be competitive. He was right to be optimistic.

The Melbourne Demons hosted the Brisbane Lions at Casey Fields in round one, on a summer night with heavy rain, thunder and lightning. Play was halted for 20 minutes in the second quarter. The Melbourne team — captained by the player considered the best in the AFLW, Daisy Pearce — had the same number of scoring shots as its opponent but kicked 1.4 (10) to Brisbane's 4.1 (25).

Melbourne's then head of women's football was Debbie Lee, who had advocated for women's football during and after her 302-game senior playing career. She recalls the Melbourne team was 'shocked' and 'disappointed', having immediately faced 'the reality of playing in this elite competition'. Lee, though, understood that a 'favourite' getting beaten was a 'good start for the League'.⁶⁹ Her counterpart, Bree Brock, recalls how Brisbane players' self-belief began to grow during the game. Early on, defender Breanna Koenen tackled Daisy Pearce, 'the mythological creature who no one was ever going to beat' and won a free kick. Other match-ups were also working.

And then we had the lightning strike and we had to go in a bit earlier [for half time]. I remember just looking around the room and the looks in [players'] eyes and their faces are like, 'We're on here. We're competing with these guys'.⁷⁰

Brisbane continued to win, week after week, with its only hiccup a draw against Carlton before it finished on top of the ladder and won the right to host the grand final in its home state.

For all the elation of season one, there was matching disappointment. When Fremantle failed to live up to pre-season hype, winning just one game and drawing with GWS, the reality hit Kara Antonio hard. She struggled to stay positive as the captain and face of the footy club.

You had to put that mask on and put that cape on to protect the rest of the team. But it was tough. I'd get into the car after most games and break down because I didn't know what else I could have done.⁷¹

Fremantle had the dubious distinction of finishing the season with both the smallest losing margin (one point against Collingwood) and the biggest losing margin (54 points against Melbourne). The team's sole win came in round six against Carlton, with Antonio starring while playing through an injury sustained in the third quarter but only confirmed a few days later. It was not one of the two most common major injuries the women suffered that year, torn ACLs or

⁶⁹ Debbie Lee, interviewed by Brunette Lenkić, 26 February 2025.

⁷⁰ Brock interview, 12 December 2024.

⁷¹ Kara Antonio, interviewed by Brunette Lenkić, 7 March 2025.

concussion.⁷² It was an avulsion fracture; the tendon had been torn away from her femur with a fragment of bone still attached. She says she played out the match 'on adrenalin', so desperate was she for a win.

After 28 AFLW games had been played in the regular season, there had been two draws and 10 games where the margin was one goal or less. The average margin was 17 points. Such results were both a win for equalisation and due to defensive tactics by some coaches to minimise losses. Supporters had to adjust their expectations during the short quarters, with winning teams generally only kicking six or seven goals.

Player fandoms had built organically, including for GWS, which took out the wooden spoon. Memorably, supporters of the team's hard-working captain, Amanda 'Fridge' Farrugia, came to home games dressed as whitegoods in a playful nod to her nickname. As entry to games was free, attending an AFLW game was often a family event. All clubs had ardent child fans. Western Bulldogs' marquee, Ellie Blackburn, recalls 'kids sitting on top of the cage...and just screaming' as she ran out for her first game.⁷³ Fans turned out in the heat (and occasional storms) of late summer and early autumn to cheer on their teams at suburban venues with limited cover. Players acclimatised to the conditions. The hottest game had been during Collingwood's one-point defeat of the Dockers in Mandurah, south of Perth, when the temperature reached 38 degrees.

The 2017 grand final

The Brisbane Lions and the Adelaide Crows reached the 2017 AFLW grand final having started the season as rank outsiders. Curiously, they were also the teams that had clocked up the most air travel during the seven-week regular season. The Darwin contingent of Crows' players had flown about 33,500 km (and another 5,700 km return trip to Queensland for the final), more than doubling the 15,000 km that their Adelaide-based teammates had travelled by season's end. Brisbane, also frequent flyers, had flown 16,000 km, an experience their coach says helped them bond.⁷⁴ 'I think being at the airport a lot and flying interstate actually did us a favour early on because that was a new thing for female footy, to be on the road, flying, going interstate to play,' says Starcevich. 'There was a lot of shared adversity which actually helped us come together and be competitive and strong.'⁷⁵

One of Bec Goddard's most effective ways to bond her team had been through storytelling. 'Because of the pressure of season one, and especially as we started to win,' she says, 'I felt if I could tell a story which had an element of

⁷² Sarah Black, Australian Football League, 'AFLW: concussion, ACL injuries highlighted', <https://www.afl.com.au/news/54206/aflw-concussion-acl-injuries-highlighted>, accessed on 13 March 2025.

⁷³ Ellie Blackburn, interviewed by Brunette Lenkić, 27 February 2025.

⁷⁴ Distances calculated using <https://airmilescalculator.com>.

⁷⁵ Starcevich interview.



Figure 4: The 2017 AFLW grand final was intense and closely fought. Here Brisbane's Breanna Koenen gets the handball away despite attention from Adelaide opponents Erin Phillips (left) and Jess Sedunary (centre), while Sharni Webb and Emma Zielke watch on.

CREDIT: Sean Garnsworthy/AFL Media. Image supplied courtesy of the AFL for editorial use.

women succeeding, that was an easy way for players to latch on, instead of getting caught up in the technical elements.⁷⁶ Come grand final week, however, a new story emerged. The Hawthorn men's coach, Alastair Clarkson, who Goddard says was 'like a coaching god to me', rang her unexpectedly to suggest she use a slingshot defence, in which an intercepting defender cleared the ball as quickly as possible.⁷⁷ He reasoned that as AFLW games were often decided by a goal or less, saving even one could win the match. A few days out from the final, the coach who had opted for a 'really simple' game plan, took a big risk. Goddard drew up the play on a whiteboard and talked the players through it, using Chelsea Randall as the anchor, with Ange Foley as back-up. To their credit, they were able to apply their last-minute lesson.

There was plenty of drama in the high-pressure, low-scoring game played in front of more than 15,500 fans at Metricon Stadium on the Gold Coast (Figure

⁷⁶ Goddard interview.

⁷⁷ She later found out that Erin Phillips had spoken to her brother-in-law, Hawthorn player Shaun Burgoyne, to arrange the pep talk from Clarkson.

4). Kellie Gibson kicked the Crows' opening goal within the first 20 seconds of the match. Minutes later, Jess Wuetschner, a recruit from Tasmania, equalised for Brisbane. Certain goals turned into points as the ball bounced the wrong way. Momentum seesawed and players began cramping in the hot and humid conditions. Injuries began to mount. Adelaide's Heather Anderson dislocated her shoulder in the third quarter, while Brisbane defender Bre Koenen rolled her ankle. Erin Phillips kicked two goals on her way to 28 touches and the best-on-ground medal. The Brisbane Lions fought desperately to the end but, when the final siren sounded, the Crows had clinched a 4.11 (35) to 4.5 (29) victory. Phillips famously sat her twins inside the premiership cup.

Playing for the country

Josh Vanderloo says that, at season's end, the on-field play was 'exactly how I thought it would go when you basically drop 200 players from community football into an elite environment.' However, he hadn't been expecting the 'remarkable' off-field impact, both 'growing that future [player] pipeline' and engaging fans.⁷⁸ Almost 200,000 supporters attended the eight rounds of games in 2017, while the television audience reached a cumulative 5.6m on free-to-air and pay TV.⁷⁹

Season one left no doubt that female footballing excellence could be located anywhere in the country and that the appetite to play the game was national. Participation jumped from 463,364 players across club, school and Auskick competitions in 2017 to 530,166 in 2018.⁸⁰ Club football increased by an average of 31 per cent across the country between 2017 and 2018, exploding in South Australia by 92 per cent, 45 per cent in Tasmania and 40 per cent in New South Wales/Australian Capital Territory. Girls playing Auskick also increased in that 12-month period, most strongly in New South Wales/Australian Capital Territory, Tasmania and Western Australia, to reach 66,180 participants.⁸¹ The epicentre of men's AFL football was, and remains, Victoria, whereas the women's game drew the football gaze in every direction and created spinoffs for the sport.⁸² Sponsors and advertisers were attracted by data showing that 30 per cent of attendees at AFLW games had never attended a men's match nor followed a men's team.⁸³

Adelaide's premiership co-captain, Chelsea Randall, notes a big difference

⁷⁸ Josh Vanderloo, interviewed by Brunette Lenkić, 6 December 2024.

⁷⁹ Australian Football League, *Annual Report 2017*.

⁸⁰ Australian Football League, Melbourne, *Annual Report 2018*, (electronic: 2019). https://resources.afl.com.au/afl/document/2019/12/05/aad564ee-58ac-4f16-97de-8d930a5237ef/2018_Digital_AR_Book-min.pdf, accessed on 23 April 2025.

⁸¹ Australian Football League, *Annual Report 2018*.

⁸² Hindley, *In the Outer, Not on the Outer*, 3-5.

⁸³ Danielle Long, 'Why advertisers and sponsors are flocking to the Australian Football League women's competition', *The Drum*. <https://www.thedrum.com/news/2019/03/04/why-advertisers-and-sponsors-are-flocking-the-australian-football-league-women-s>, accessed on 15 April 2025.

between male and female draftees, especially when the AFLW started. Success for male footballers was personal; they aimed to play well for themselves and their families and to get another game. But female footballers ‘were playing for the whole country’.

We were playing for every girl that wasn’t even born yet. We were playing for the ones that played [but] who never got the opportunity to play AFLW, the real pioneers who set up female footy teams and competitions ... in states and territories. We were playing for all of them. We were playing for every single person that maybe felt they didn’t belong somewhere and trying to change the story.⁸⁴

Conclusion

In designing a national women’s football competition, the architects of the AFLW promoted the untapped potential of a start-up where anything was possible. The Adelaide Crows and Brisbane Lions ignored their lowly standings in pre-season punditry and played with a passion, commitment and physicality that took them to the grand final and thrilled fans around the country. They showed in season one that the template for success included bespoke combinations of team cohesion, a suitable game plan, innovation and remarkable individuals.

From its inception, the ‘Australian’ in the Australian Football League Women’s has been justified. Gillon McLachlan is satisfied that the AFLW has been a game changer, which has helped the AFL evolve. ‘Footy clubs look different,’ he says, citing improved sustainability at community level, where whole families are now involved with clubs and both girls and boys play. He also points out that – allowing for dips in the Covid-affected years – the five highest season attendances in AFL men’s history ‘are since the AFLW came in. Nobody really talks about that.’⁸⁵ The AFLW does not have fixed ‘heartland’ states but, as the Adelaide Crows and Brisbane Lions demonstrated, its network of players, fans and supporting infrastructure can flourish when mapped onto almost any part of the country. The next AFLW frontier is within sight as founding members flock to support both men’s and women’s teams in the AFL’s newest franchise, the Tasmania Football Club.

84 Randall interview. 16 January 2025.

85 McLachlan interview.