

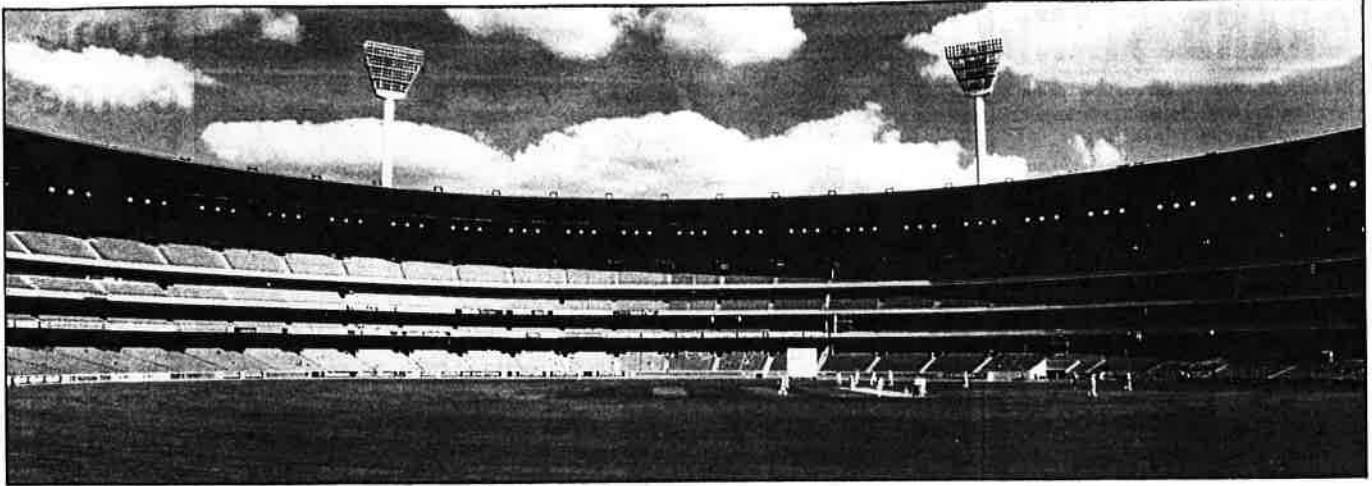
Herald-Sun

The new home of
FOOTBALL



THE GREAT SOUTHERN STAND

SOUVENIR GUIDE AND TEAM LISTS FOR 1992



● Full house in May . . . the Great Southern Stand should be filled by football fans for the first time for the Collingwood centenary game.

FOOTY'S HOME

By **RON REED**,
chief sports writer

LIKE the prodigal son, football has come home — and a party has been planned to celebrate the happy event.

So prepare to bring on the dancing girls, roll out the red carpet, kill the fatted calf and pop the champagne corks!

Or you can simply settle for a pie and a beer.

Either way, the clash between Collingwood and Carlton on Thursday night, May 7, will be invested with a sense of occasion like few other football games, grand-finals aside.

The Australian Football League has chosen this milestone match — it marks the 100th anniversary of the first meeting between these two enormously famous clubs, with the Magpies celebrating their centenary year — as the launching pad for the sport's foreseeable future.

It will be played at the Melbourne Cricket Ground with the crowd expected to reach 100,000.

And that means, of course, that the new Great Southern Stand will be filled by football fans for the first time. The symbolism of that will be lost on nobody.

This vast and awesome edifice, already a major part of Melbourne's culture, personality and physique even though it is not yet fully operational, represents nothing so much as the end of decades of futile, frustrating and wasteful in-fighting between Victoria's two most popular sports, football and cricket.

Happily, peace has arrived in our time.

The MCG is now the official home of football for at least the next 40 years, and the debate about the relative merits and status of it and the "other" stadium, now named Waverley Park, is over forever.

And so it should be. Like most sports fans, I was never able to comprehend how anybody could suggest that the soulless, remote, cold

and unatmospheric concrete pile on the fringes of the urban sprawl was a preferable venue for anything other than synchronised shivering.

But relations between the then VFL and the Melbourne Cricket Club, with John Cain's Government becoming a major player, had plummeted so far that at one stage there was every possibility of the grand final being shifted away from its traditional home.

In hindsight, nothing could be more ridiculous. Indeed, even at the time it was absurd. Fortunately, petty politics rarely triumph over the voice of the masses, and in this case, the people certainly made themselves heard.

The chairman of the league Commission, Ross Oakley, recalled this week: "All our research was telling us that the MCG was the major stadium preferred by those who had followed footy all their lives.

"You can't fly in the face of that. We knew we had to make a decision if we could only reach agreement with the MCC."

At the commission table throughout the middle eighties, the matter was constantly on the agenda. One commissioner, high-profile businessman Peter Scanlon, was especially insistent that a way had to be



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● RIGHT: Venue for synchronised shivering . . . Waverley's one and only One Day in September.



● LEFT: The old stand on Grand Final day 1989 . . . architects reported major problems with concrete fatigue.

found to get football back to where it belonged.

Meanwhile, at the Melbourne Cricket Club's committee table, another problem had surfaced. The famous Southern Stand, home to generations of "outer" sports fans since it was built in the 1930s, was the subject of an architect's report that said major problems were developing with concrete fatigue, and that sooner or later it would have to be demolished.

Around the corner at the league, that news

soon filtered through.

So Oakley called on the cricket club president, Dr Don Cordner, an old league footballer himself, and the secretary, Dr John Lill, with a proposal that shocked them both, given all the cool and sometimes bitter dealings that had transpired between the two bodies over the years.

In essence, Oakley said: "We know you're considering replacing the stand. If you do, and we can negotiate suitable terms, we are prepared to centralise football there, and

bring our members there."

It was an offer too good to refuse.

In a tribute to the flexibility, common sense, financial acumen and sheer ability to get things done, the project was on the drawing boards within months.

An agreement was drawn up with the builders, John Holland Constructions Pty Ltd., in November, 1988 — and only four years later, the stand has been built.

More astonishingly still, it has been com-

pleted on schedule and in time to host the World Cup cricket final, and significantly below budget.

According to Lill, the original figure was a massive \$164 million, but a combination of greatly reduced interest rates and a determination to avoid expensive design changes has trimmed that by about \$30 million.

Although it has been cricket that has focused the world's attention on the stand so far, it will be putting it to most use. The league will shortly move its administrative headquarters from nearby AFL House into luxurious new offices in the stand, for which it will pay nearly \$1 million rent per year. That is the league's only ongoing financial commitment to the project.

The league has guaranteed to play 45 matches there each season, 40 of which will be home and away

games, plus four finals, including the preliminary final and grand final, and a state-of-origin match. Victoria will meet Western Australia on May 26.

While the Magpies-Blues blockbuster will constitute the real housewarming, it is the ground's original club, Melbourne, which fittingly will have the honor of christening the stand when it plays Geelong on March 28, three days after the cricketers take the first bow before a full house.

Essendon has joined Melbourne, Richmond and North Melbourne in playing their home games there, and Collingwood will host three matches. All 15 clubs will be seen there, with Essendon playing 12 matches in all, the other three tenants 11 each, Collingwood five, Fitzroy, Geelong, Hawthorn, St Kilda and Sydney all four, West Coast three, Brisbane, Carlton and Footscray two and Adelaide one.

The league will have its own members area, which will comprise 12 bays during the season and 14 during the finals, when it will be able to seat 24,000 people.

New members have been offered a variety of packages offering access to matches not only at the MCG, but to some at Waverley and Princes Park, with restricted members entitled to go to all but the last two finals.

According to Oakley, full membership has risen from 33,000 to 40,000, and 15,000 new restricted members have joined. The revenue from this will benefit the clubs by "several hundreds of thousands of dollars each," he says.

Waverley, meanwhile, will revert to being a "home" stadium, and a key part of the on-going ground rationalisation program.