



Video Transcript

CHRIS TAYLOR:

Walk into ten different pubs for a game of a pool and chances are you'll find ten different sets of rules, which can lead to anything from a robust discussion to an all out pub brawl.

Every game or sport is defined by its own set of rules, but one of our favourite national pastimes is actually named after them.

This National Treasure is on display in the National Sports Museum in Victoria.

These pieces of paper date back to 1859. They're a lot younger than the Dead Sea Scrolls, but just as important to footy fanatics.

These are the original rules of the Melbourne Football Club.

If Australian Rules is a religion, then these would be its Bible.

The bloke behind them was Tom Wills – champion sportsman, administrator and occasional footy umpire. Oh well, two out of three isn't bad. In 1858, Wills wrote to a sporting newspaper advocating a football code to help cricketers keep fit in the off season. He said 'it would keep those inclined to become stout from having their joints encased in superabundant flesh.' A year later, he chaired a meeting of the Melbourne Football Club where the game's rules were officially written down. They became the basis of modern day AFL.

Back in 1859 the Melbourne Football Club had just ten rules of footy. Now most of them dealt with things like size of the field, the distances between the goal posts, which team got to kick off first, which haven't really changed all that much since then. There are two surprises though. According to Rule 8 you couldn't pick the ball up directly off the ground, and Rule 7, defenders were allowed to trip the man in possession. One less thing for the Tribunal to deal with I suppose.

From those modest beginnings Australian Rules has grown into one of our biggest and most popular sports. Its high church is the National Heritage listed, Melbourne Cricket Ground. Madonna – the pop singer, not the religious icon, once referred to this place as 'The G Spot' which just proves she doesn't know her centre square from her behind. Melburnians of course call it The G, and even interstate fans will admit that it's the spiritual home of Aussie Rules. But in its first two decades, footy barely got a look in here.

The G was originally home to the Melbourne Cricket Club. It staged the inaugural New South Wales/Victoria cricket game in 1856 and 21 years later, the first Test Match between Australia and England. In footy's first 18 years, just 9 games were played here. Back then the flannelled fools ruled. Preparations for each cricket season began in July, so the hallowed turf here was off limits. The footy players had to take their ball and goal posts and play on Yarra Park, just outside the grounds.

But that all changed in 1877, thanks to an unusual piece of technology.

This is a model of the Reversible Stand. 'Reversible' because in summer the seats faced this way onto the MCG, then for the winter footy season they flipped over to face Yarra Park. It took about half a day to do it, but still it's pretty ingenious. The stand also held 2,000 fans and that's what made the MCC see Australian Rules in a different light.

Instead of being scattered around the field, now the fans were all concentrated in one place, so all the chairs, the booze, the collective groans created an unprecedented atmosphere. Crowds started to build and at two shillings a

ticket, which was big money in those days, the MCC knew it was onto a winner. Footy was welcomed with open arms and the game had found its traditional home.

Now Australian Rules is a multi million dollar business and its players are household names. And in winter ovals across the country are full of fanatical supporters who are convinced the only people in the grounds who don't understand the rules are the umpires.

It all started with these pieces of paper – the Ten Rules of Footy. And that makes them a National Treasure.