



AFL FANS ASSOCIATION (AFLFA)

INAUGURAL FAN FORUM

REPORT

JULY 2018

What The Fans Said



AFLFA FAN FORUM REPORT

The AFLFA held its first Fan Forum on 24 June 2018 at the Richmond Football Club. About 250 people of all ages participated, with 100 physically present at the Forum, and another 150 participating by email.

The Forum allowed the AFLFA to ask fans about their experiences at the football, what they thought football's strengths were and what they would like to see improved.

This report captures the wonderful Forum contributions made by fans via small group round-table discussions and online participation. A note-taker was placed at each table to transcribe the discussion.

In drawing this report together, we have observed three important principles – ensuring the coverage is comprehensive, showing participants that their contributions were heard and accounted for, and summarising the content in a way that is an accurate and meaningful.

Note: The comments in bold indicate a more frequent response across the discussion groups. The comments in blue under each set of responses represent our summaries of the contributions.

'Fans are the largest stakeholder in our great game. It is vital for the health of AFL football that they are listened to and feel heard. Providing an authentic voice for fans was the genesis behind the AFLFA being formed in the first place and this remains our core commitment.'

Gerry Eeman, AFL Fans Association President

What The Fans Said

WHAT DO YOU LOVE MOST ABOUT FOOTY?

connectedness with my club • family gets together to attend games • **the friendly banter** • make a lot of new friends and those friends become like part of your family • **it's a tradition in my family** • I like the **uniqueness** of the game • it's being able to build friendships and relationships with people that I wouldn't usually build relationships with • it intoxicates me and **takes me away from my everyday problems** • having a drink at the game beforehand • socialising with like-minded people • love the game of football • easily **mix with opponents at the same game** • seeing women play footy has changed my life. I loved the game itself, but seeing people who looked like me (when I was young) playing, being rough, being skilful and passionate, has awoken my footy passion • we love the atmosphere at a live game, all that surrounds the sport, such as footy tipping, Supercoach, *AFL Record*, AFLX • noisy and exciting and can give an adrenaline rush • being able to sit together without fear of confrontation • watching an Australian rules football match live in the stadium is obviously the most rewarding way to consume the sport • the anticipation in the air as a big crowd descends en masse to the stadium before a big match • shared experience • **supporters from opposing teams are not segregated** • attending is affordable, it's good value for money • **it's Australia's game** • safe to take kids to the footy • **game day presents the opportunity for people to connect** • Pride Games do good work to make footy an inclusive game • cheer squads create the infectious atmosphere that makes the game such an enjoyable day out • kicking the footy in the park with my daughter • **I love the atmosphere of the crowd** • Anzac Day match at the 'G • kick to kick after the match • nothing beats watching the game live • very passionate supporters •

Many fans repeatedly expressed their pleasure at the inclusiveness of attending live games. They felt that fans from opposing teams could sit side-by-side, barrack for their respective teams and still be friends afterwards. This collective feeling of inclusiveness at games was noted to extend to people who supported other sporting codes, people who identify as LGBTIQ and people from other countries. 'Family' was mentioned in several ways: 1) a 'footy family' that described anyone who loved the sport, 2) 'club family' that encompassed a specific club's fans, and 3) generational family members following the same team. In all respects, fans felt connected and supported in their 'footy family'. The cheer squad was praised for playing an important role in creating the joyous atmosphere. Fans expressed a special love of the anticipation of a game, of arriving at the stadium and of participating in the passion that other fans displayed. The physicality of the game, and its uniqueness were important to fans including the game's ability to evolve. Women's football was also mentioned by many as inspirational, affirming for women, and creating new relationships between parents and their daughters. Lastly, many fans expressed pleasure in the peripheral elements of the game such as Supercoach, the *AFL Record*, and to a lesser extent, AFLX.

What The Fans Said

HOW IMPORTANT IS FOOTY IN YOUR LIFE?

it is a habit that can only be switched off in the off-season • **football is an outlet where we can forget about life's problems** • it provides an avenue for social change • footy is a huge part of my entire family • I've missed lots of birthdays • I plan on having my children so that they're born in the off-season • **great leveller of different people and classes** • can't imagine life without going to the football, rain hail or shine • met my wife from going to the footy, most of my friends through going to the football • keeps families together • Football is also important in people's personal lives as it provides a platform for the education and acceptance of social issues such racial, sexual and gender matters • makes the winter months pass quicker • uses footy to meet new people and make friends • **it's a social glue for people** • atmosphere at the game is much better than TV • footy can create friendships • women are a very big part of footy • sense of togetherness • non-discriminatory nature of the game • love the theme songs • opportunity for men/women to be involved in the game • social life at times is arranged around the games • the footy season is all about attending games, talking about footy with like-minded fans and watching other games on TV • meeting up with friends on a Saturday afternoon and exchanging news of the past week, how the kids are doing at school, and where we are holidaying the next year • it's a social thing • it has become important very quickly to my daughter after the advent of AFLW • social events are organised around the fixture • the game is uniquely Australian • I go to the footy with my family and friends • love the feeling of being part of the footy club •

Many fans expressed how important the football was to them, even stating that they organised their children's births so that they would fall in the off-season, so they wouldn't miss celebrating their birthdays. Many fans repeatedly mentioned missing family occasions because they preferred to go to the football and that they arranged their social lives around football fixtures. Again, fans mentioned the uniqueness and Australianness of the football and that it was the 'social glue' that held community together. Many fans reiterated the idea that women were now integral to football both as fans and as players and that the AFL needed to adjust its attitude to this development. Positive attributes included singing the football song, meeting a partner for the first time at a match, keeping families together and providing a place to discuss day-to-day issues such as holiday plans and school reports. Many fans also stated that the AFL was good at addressing social issues.

What The Fans Said

WHAT IS YOUR IDEAL MATCH DAY EXPERIENCE – BEFORE, DURING AND AFTER THE GAME?

be organised and arrive early • footy tipping and Supercoach done • buy an *AFL Record* • a very loud crowd • big fundraising total for cheer squad activities • cheer squad banners are not too commercial or corporate • lots of information on the scoreboard • **quieter times during the quarter-time breaks** • a safe and speedy exit • well-lit and safe public transport platform • easy access to public transport • **no silliness like Kiss Cam** • singing the song • **curtain raiser VFL or AFLW or TAC game** • make our way to the ground listening to footy talkback on the radio • simple and no frills • Game Day, listen to Coodabeens on ABC Radio • I like the Port Adelaide fans singing 'Never Tear us Apart' • our game is unique and it doesn't need much extra entertainment • Dreamtime at the G is always a great spectacle • getting ready, donning jumper, meeting cheer squad, seeing players run through the banner • **drinks with friends before game**, cheer my team for a win and sometimes socialise with fellow fans • meeting people, usually friends • talking to my friends and enjoying the excitement leading up to a game • I hate when the signage tells us to cheer • sponsor messages during the game are too much of a distraction • start times and weekday games clash with family commitments and children's sports • arriving at the MCG for the first time in a new season and catching your first glimpse of the pristine green playing surface • **curtain-raiser before the AFL game to encourage fans to come earlier** • minimal loud music • less ground announcer noise at breaks—can't talk to friends, or on the phone, or listen to the radio • less advertising, especially after goals in a match • less video and other games • enjoy a meal and a few drinks before the game at a venue outside of the ground • watching the Reserves before the game • **Auskick at half time** • play AFLW games in the winter • **rotating banners on the boundary fences should be still during playing time** • **we don't need loud music or gimmicky US-style glitz**. We are there for the game, not fireworks • cheering every good play and goal, and comparing the good and bad during the half time break • listening to Australian artists on Grand Final Day • kick to kick after all games • kids getting to meet their footy idols • gameday experiences should be focused on ALL fans, not just kids • love to watch at home and yell at the tv • watching the replay for things I may have missed • getting to high-five our players • buying and eating a hot jam donut! • having a safe and easy trip home on the train • The MOST IMPORTANT experience is that the game is competitive for as long as possible • cheer squads would like to watch pre-game activities rather than being stuck in the race •

What The Fans Said

The strongest suggestions for an ideal match day were 1) to limit or remove the moving advertisements around the ground, especially during play, 2) to turn down the volume or remove music and announcements during the breaks so fans can chat and discuss the game, and 3) to get rid of the Americanised glitz and glam and 'silly' features like Kiss Cam. **There were no positive sentiments for these three features.** Fans wanted the day to be about football, not entertainment or gambling. A common sentiment was that fans enjoyed the ritual around the game of preparing to attend, gathering information about the game, of meeting friends or family and sharing food and drinks, of arriving at the stadium, of watching a good physical contest, and of being able to get away safely and in good time. Pre-match activities featured in some fans' comments. They expressed a desire for any pre-match activities to occur closer to the start time of the game so that they could attend both without a long wait in between the two. Many fans expressed a desire to watch VFL, AFLW or Reserves games as curtain-raisers. However, cheer squads noted they were prevented from watching curtain raisers because stadium staff make them wait in the stadium race with the run-through (banner) before the game. Again, there was strong distaste for spectacular entertainment and loud music and a call for Auskick at half-time to continue because it was good entertainment. High food prices were criticised, and fans wished that there was flexibility in the ticket sales system to allow friends to sit together.



Steve Hocking, AFL General Manager Football Operations, Susan Alberti AC, AFLFA Patron and Gerry Eeman, President AFLFA, at the Fan Forum

What The Fans Said



Peggy O'Neal, President of the Richmond Football Club, welcoming participants at the Fan Forum



Steve Hocking, AFL General Manager Football Operations, addressing the Fan Forum

What The Fans Said



Gerry Eeman, President AFLFA addressing the Fan Forum



Mary Crooks AO from the Victorian Women's Trust giving her 'wrap up address' at the Fan Forum

What The Fans Said

WHAT ARE THE SORTS OF THINGS THAT MIGHT STOP YOU GOING TO THE FOOTY?

an uncompetitive, boring match such as 1 v 18 or 17 v 18 • ticket prices • weather conditions • floating fixture • disabled access and disabled car parking • **Thursday night and Sunday evening football are difficult to get to with work and school for kids** • seating issues are enough to avoid a weekend at the game • the footy is too focused on providing for the TV audience • more walk-up seating needed • variable ticket pricing is unfair • lack of healthy food options • illness • **Dynamic Pricing (an excuse for price gauging)** • playing a team for the second time before playing a team for the first time • umpires not paying the first free kick • living in Tassie and being unable to fly • **the increase in gambling advertising at the grounds is turning families away from the AFL** • paying to travel to interstate games • clashes with junior sporting fixtures • better empty seats that I am not allowed to sit in • my club merging with another, or relocating, or changing club colours would stop me going • if the game becomes boring e.g. Ross Lyon-style flooding, stoppages, very sterile game style other coaches are doing the same, should be more free flowing • heavy handed security • **security can be very poor at looking after away fans, especially in a different state** • poor sportsmanship of players • losing the ability to bring fans' own refreshments into the ground would result in fans not attending games live • extreme levels of foul language and intimidating behaviour • unable to sit with friends at the game • ridiculous guest prices for ordinary matches • being forced to sit in zones can be off-putting • elderly access – safe, pleasant experience away from drinking, loud mouth supporters • public transport availability • drunken behaviour in the seating areas • unclean and over-crowded toilets • shouty, mean and rude people – offensive and derogatory language (including slurs relating to gender, race and disability) can be incredibly harmful • umpires not being consistent • drunken fans can be an issue • lack of disability access and facilities • disabled toilets not maintained • the prices of food and tickets combined is often too much and turns families away from the footy •

Practical issues such as illness, work, family commitments and transport were mentioned as deterrents to attendance. Many fans made comments about ticket prices, especially the unfairness of variable ticket prices depending on where the game was played i.e. interstate or away games. Where fans could sit also formed a barrier to attendance. Many fans wanted to be allowed to move into higher value seats if they were empty. Some didn't like uncomfortable plastic seats and they wanted to be able to sit together. Bad language, drunkenness and discriminatory language were cited as deterrents, especially for parents with young children, specifically mothers and daughters. Comments about fans' treatment at away games (especially when travelling to different states) and the cost of travelling to interstate games all featured as reasons not to attend. Some fans focused on the umpiring and the way the game is played as reasons to stay away. And, regional fans noted that game times affected their ability to either attend or if they did attend they had to leave before the end of the game to catch the last train home. Thursday and Sunday night games were unpopular to attend, especially when people had school or work the next day. The loud music and gambling advertising were disliked, especially for families who did not appreciate fielding questions about gambling from their children.

What The Fans Said

WHAT DO YOU THINK NEEDS TO BE IMPROVED ABOUT THE GAME?

constant over-umpiring, football should be more free flowing • stop changing the game rules • MRO decisions should be more consistent • if you expect the women to play in terrible conditions, at least pay them well • work with public transport authorities to have enough public transport available after games • shade and access to water and seats • **establish a team in Tasmania** • **the proliferation of gambling has damaged the joy and integrity of our great game** • more responsible serving of alcohol • **umpiring consistency** • score review is holding up the game • public transport needs improvement, compared to NRL games in Sydney • shouldn't need to nominate a ruckman • fewer rotations with players staying on the ground longer • the Americanisation of our game in terms of language, commentary, and match day experiences needs to be stopped • Kiss Cam is a disgrace and embarrasses people • the AFL is too reactive when it comes to issues confronting the game (in particular the chopping and changing of the rules) and needs to become more proactive • call to increase free-to-air TV access • make the fixture fairer • **stop changing the rules every year** • get rid of the 10-metre protected zone • **prefer the current Grand Final day timeslot** • none of the intrusive music, voiceovers and ridiculous activities. Just the Auskick at half-time thanks • more dry areas at games • car-parking returned to Yarra Park • **50 metre penalty needs to be shortened – too great a penalty** • improve food value and healthier options • more access to Grand Final tickets for competing club members • the AFL as the custodian of the game needs to pay more attention to lower tiers below the national competition • use the scoreboard for information like scores, interchange bench, the time clock, replays, not advertising • get rid of noisy ridiculous entertainment breaks. We go for the football • pre-game warm up to return to how it was • **elderly fans cannot manage the stairs** • kids access to the field after games is too short – by the time they walk down from the higher levels, time is up! • more torps (torpedo punt kicks) • find a way to let everyday fans sit in the best seats when no-one else is • **congestion is an issue** • cheer squads should have more autonomy to organise the run-through (banner). We shouldn't have to put sponsors on them • look after the women playing, give them fair pay, give them great coaches • name awards in the AFLW after the great pioneers... 'W' awards...what's that? All the names of great pioneers of women's footy have been taken off awards and trophies in the VFLW. This is a terrible eradication of women's footy history • **hard to sit together as a family, particularly large groups** • **ensure interchanges are decreased to 10 per quarter** • more should have been done to keep the only two female AFLW coaches • stop experimenting with absurdities like the AFLX in the middle of the AFLW season • improve baby change facilities • the big games need to be shared around a bit more • transport on matchday is insufficient • **the advertising has become obnoxious and is distracting** • **get rid of the loud music; we are not the USA** • food prices inside of the stadiums like the G and Etihad are extremely expensive but often bland, whereas in Geelong, a whole range of foods are available, like Asian food • too many on-screen adverts • recent changes to the theme songs are unnecessary and diminish their meaning and experience after a win •

What The Fans Said

A large proportion of fans expressed that they were “fed up” with rule changes and what they perceived as umpires interfering with the rules. Some fans linked rule changes to causing congestion and too many stoppages. They also wanted consistency in umpiring decisions, less umpires on the ground, and interchange rotations decreased to prevent players constantly having ‘fresh legs’. There were some calls for more torpedo kicks, high marks, long kicks and run-and-bouncing which fans saw as skills unique to the game. Again, the Americanisation of the game is strongly disliked, and fans want loud music and gambling ads on the scoreboard banned. Some wanted full-strength alcohol banned or more dry areas and responsibility applied to alcohol sales. Some fans questioned the way the female game was treated, including the lack of support for female coaches in comparison to male coaches. There was comment about the poor grounds where women’s games are played and the random introduction of AFLX in the middle of the women’s season. Many fans called for a Tasmanian team. Public transport was an issue and comparisons were made with the NRL in Sydney as a much better system. Many fans questioned why the AFL can’t foster a better relationship with public transport authorities, so they provide dedicated public transport after matches. The score-review system, lack of free-to-air matches, and car parking all came in for criticism. Fans also want the AFL to pay more attention to the lower tiers of the game and to have consistent rules across all levels of the game. Most fans called for the Grand Final to remain a day game and not become a night game, and wanted more tickets made available to competing club members. There was a desire for better disability access, cleaner toilets, easier access for the elderly, more time for children to reach the field after games when they are moving from the upper levels and an improvement in online ticketing sales.

What The Fans Said

THE AFL FANS ASSOCIATION, WHICH ORGANISED THIS FORUM, IS KEEN TO MAKE SURE IT IS REPRESENTING FANS. WHAT THE THREE ISSUES YOU WOULD LIKE THE AFLFA TO BE WORKING ON FOR YOU?

fix the fixture! • pay AFLW due respect and don't schedule its Grand Final for Round 1 of the AFL season • security is employed at every ground but how it handles situations can be quite different • **allow cheer squads to sit behind the goals at all grounds** • price of reserved seating to be lower and more affordable • AFL needs to demonstrate it is serious about including minority groups • more free to air TV coverage • **no night Grand Finals** • **Thursday night games are problematic to attend** • no Monday night games • fan friendly match times • more tickets for away fans and cheer squads • appoint a fan representative to the Commission • **apply pressure on the AFL to address the issue regarding football in Tasmania** • return football as much as possible to the traditional timeslots of Saturday and Sunday afternoons • too many corporate tickets and not enough tickets for the fans • more fan forums such as this one • **greater participation by women at Clubs** • every club should get to play their finals at their home ground regardless of capacity • AFLW needs more promotion by the AFL and media • teams should play each other at least once during the home and away season • **no rule changes through the season** • **less Grand Final tickets allocated to non-competing clubs for corporate packages** • more Grand Final tickets for competing club members • reduce the volume of all the American type hype before and during the quarter and half time breaks • consult with fans on the direction of the game • better access for the disabled in good areas to view the game • bring back the torpedo and drop kick by making these kicks more valuable •

Fans' concerns were spread across many areas, with no strong focus on one particular theme. There was a deep appreciation for the AFLFA Fan Forum and the consultation process. Many of the concerns that were mentioned in the previous questions were addressed in this one. These included fans wanting the Americanisation of entertainment to stop. They also wanted the gambling, the ads on the score board, and the loud music removed. These were seen as distractions during the game and impediments to relationships during the breaks in play. Many want more family friendly game times to return, for the Grand Final to remain a day game, and for a Tasmanian team to be established. Ticket pricing and allocation are of concern. Many fans felt the AFL valued corporate attendees at footy matches more than other attendees. There was a displeasure that corporate seats, which tend to offer better views, are often empty, and that fans could not sit in these seats even when empty. Fans also want a higher ticket allocation to competing club members in the Grand Final. Most fans would like rule changes to be stopped and features of the 'old game' returned. They would like more positive AFL stories in the media, and club representation on the AFL Commission. Many fans expressed concern about safety at grounds, especially when visiting away grounds. Some noted that travelling cheer squads are bullied, and security is not good at protecting them. Ticket availability and ticket prices are also inconsistent between grounds. Some fans asked that the game be given back to the fans without specifically stating in what way this might happen, or how the game was out of their hands. On the other hand, fans were very specific about only having Sunday twilight games in the school holidays, and that Thursday night games favour TV audiences rather than attending fans. For this reason, many didn't like them. Congestion in the game, food prices, and the fixture were all criticised. Fans want to ensure that the AFL listens to their concerns. They want the games to be accessible to everyone, to be physical and the outcome unpredictable, to be family friendly, and for the hype to be removed.

What The Fans Said

Next steps

This report will be shared with the AFL, Fan Forum participants, the media and all AFLFA members. In addressing the Fan Forum, AFL General Manager Football Operations Steve Hocking noted that he would ensure the report ended up “on the right desks”. It will also be freely available on the AFLFA website.

We hope that this report will help shape the football narrative and provide a real voice for fans. It will certainly be considered in the development of AFLFA policy.

Thank you

The AFLFA wishes to thank all fans who gave up their time to share their views. Special thanks to Mary Crooks AO from the Victorian Women’s Trust, for her generous assistance in helping to organise the Forum, her valuable advice and her contribution on the day. We thank Claire Duffy for assisting Mary to bring the report together in a detailed and timely manner. Thank you to Richmond Football Club President Peggy O’Neal and Richmond staff for enabling us to hold the Forum in the Maurice Rioli Room at the Club’s Swinburne Centre, and to Peggy for attending and speaking at the Forum. Additionally, thanks to AFLFA Patron Susan Alberti AC and the AFL’s Steve Hocking, who also attended the Forum and addressed the fans.