

AFL

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MIKE SHEAHAN



Let's not stand as still as statues

AT the risk of re-opening old wounds, the Melbourne Cricket Ground is the world's premier sports stadium because of the money generated by football.

Just as certainly as it was born a cricket ground and remains a cricket ground, it has matured and flourished because of football.

Why, then, isn't there a stronger football flavour at the venue?

Of the 10 statues of sporting greats that ring the stadium, four represent football — Haydn Bunton, Dick Reynolds, Ron Barassi and Leigh Matthews.

There are four cricketers — Sir Donald Bradman, Bill Ponsford, Keith Miller, Dennis Lillee — and two Olympians — Betty Cuthbert and Shirley Strickland.

No complaints there. Not enough, that's all.

What was planned as a "Parade of Champions" is on hold because of, yep, money, for the existing statues cost \$110,000 a piece, and the next lot obviously will be more expensive.

Tattersall's funded the original lot, which were commissioned and completed from 2003-06, but that was a one-off sponsorship.

The statues add so much to the precinct that it's no longer acceptable to see the plan on hold longer than the current four years simply because of money.

The MCG is a Melbourne icon, a magnet for Victorians, Australians and visitors from overseas. It should continue to immortalise those who have played a major part in building the history, broad appeal and aura of the stadium.

Ten statues should be 15 or even 20 by now, with an addition annually.

Cricket and the Olympic movement can look after their own, I'm here to argue the case for football.

The late Norm Smith, for example. The Melbourne Football Club legend played 210 of his 227 VFL games for the Demons when they played all their home games at the 'G, then coached them from 1952-67. He played in or coached 10 premiership teams.

It's a staggering record, particularly in terms of one man's contribution to a venue.

The problem, though, is the perceived need for a contemporary flavour, one I support.

Richmond has proposed Kevin Bartlett to the Melbourne Cricket Club.

Not only is there the geographic symmetry with Richmond also housed in Yarra Park, but the Tigers moved their home games to the MCG in 1965, Bartlett's first year.

He played in five winning Grand Final teams at the 'G on the way to a then record 403 games. Surely he has played more games on the ground than anyone.

Yet Bartlett has been retired since 1983, though he has coached and served the AFL in various honorary roles since and remains a prominent media figure.

Tribute: Ron Barassi's statue outside the MCG. Barassi's statue is one of four dedicated to footballers. Picture: BEN SWINNERTON

SEARCH FOR NEXT BRONZE AUSSIE

THE MCG PARADE OF CHAMPIONS

Donald Bradman	(outside Gate 5)
Betty Cuthbert	(Gate 3)
Haydn Bunton	(Gate 6)
Leigh Matthews	(Gate 4)
Ron Barassi	(Gate 4)
Shirley Strickland	(Gate 3)
Dick Reynolds	(Gate 6)
Keith Miller	(Gate 5)
Bill Ponsford	(Gate 1)
Dennis Lillee	(Gate 1)

HAVE YOUR SAY

Which footballer from the past 30 years should be immortalised with a bronze statue at the MCG's Parade of Champions?

Mike's top picks: Tony Lockett, Gary Ablett, Jason Dunstall, Wayne Carey, Kevin Bartlett

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Should the authorities fast forward 10 years to Gary Ablett or 20 years to Tony Lockett and Jason Dunstall? Or to the best player I have seen, Wayne Carey, who has been retired six years?

The MCC's history suggests it may be a trifle sensitive to the history of Ablett and Carey, and maybe Lockett.

Yet the next cricket great to be elevated to statuehood surely has to be Shane Warne, and his off-field behaviour might have prompted a bit of tut-tutting in the committee room once or twice.

Unlike the AFL Hall of Fame, the MCC's selection guidelines do not have a "character" clause. The closest thing is the requirement "that they be renowned for their sportsmanship".

The selection guidelines also say "the candidate may be selected from any era of the MCG, including the present".

While it's true Barassi and Matthews cover the period 1953 to 2008, that takes in their coaching careers, too, with Matthews finishing as a player in 1985.

Given the added require-

ment of a strong connection with the ground, the case for Ablett becomes compelling.

He played in four Grand Finals for Geelong, won a Norm Smith medal (1989), twice kicked a record-equalling 14 goals at the MCG and represented Victoria there with distinction. He kicked 291 goals at the MCG at an average of 5.3.

He seems to have the measure of the others post-Bartlett.

Ablett also played until the mid-1990s, which means that football supporters as young

as 25 have their own memories of him and his deeds.

Wouldn't it be a hot topic if the MCC chose to elevate him to its "Parade of Champions" before the AFL endowed legend status?

Quite feasible, too, provided, of course, the MCC can come up with the necessary funding.

Hopefully, it won't wait for another accommodating commercial entity to come forward. This is an exercise that should be funded by the MCC and the relevant body, be it the AFL, Cricket Australia or the Olympic movement.

The MCC's Stephen Gough was encouraging yesterday. He said the club remained keen to recognise those who had contributed significantly to the stadium's revered status.

"We'd like to do more," he said.

The MCC also is understood to be keen to acknowledge indigenous sport in an expanded parade. Cathy Freeman would seem a reasonable starting point in that debate.

The sooner the better for a significant increase in statue numbers, we say.