

The MCC
Library Record

Vol.10, No.1.
September 30, 2023.



ESSENDON V FITZROY
1923 GRAND FINAL RETROSPECTIVE

ABOUT THE MCC LIBRARY RECORD

The MCC Library Record is an extension of the MCC Library's tradition of providing MCC Members' Reserve patrons with complimentary reading material such as the *MCC Library Fact Sheet*. A retrospective *MCC Library Record* was distributed at AFL grand finals from 2013 to 2019 and in 2022. Each looked at the grand final played 100 years previously. Due to the COVID-19 outbreaks in Melbourne and the removal of the 2020 and 2021 grand finals interstate, this practice was interrupted. Your Library instead produced retrospectives of the 1920 and 1921 grand finals for the opening rounds of 2021 and 2022. The MCC Library was glad to resume publishing an *MCC Library Record* for the 2022 AFL grand final. We hope you enjoy reading about the 1923 match between Fitzroy and Essendon of a century ago. When in the Members' Reserve you are invited to visit the MCC Library on Level 3 of the Reserve or look for the *MCC Library's Fact Sheets* on the MCC website at <http://tinyurl.com/mcclcatalogue>.

THE STATE OF FOOTBALL 100 YEARS AGO

In 1923 the Victorian Football League (VFL) was in its 27th season. The competition consisted of nine clubs, necessitating a bye each round. The season began in the first week of May and clubs played each other twice (16 matches in total). The top four clubs at the end of the home and away season then competed in the finals series for the premiership. Teams consisted of 18 players and there was no substitution for injured players. Footballers not selected for their VFL team played in the Victorian Junior Football League (VJFL). Geelong's second XVIII, having joined the VJFL in 1922, won the premiership when it defeated Richmond Juniors 9.12 (66) to 5.10 (40) in the curtain raiser to the Essendon v Fitzroy VFL grand final at the MCG.

The Victorian Football Association (VFA), the state's other senior competition entered into a transfer arrangement with the VFL necessitating players to be cleared from their former club prior to switching competitions. Footscray won the VFA grand final 7.10 (52) to Port Melbourne's 5.8 (38) in a spiteful match (11 reports) before a crowd of 18,000 at Arden Street.

The VFL played two matches against South Australia. The Croweaters defeated Victoria 13.14 (92) to 6.9 (45) on June 30 before a 35,200 strong crowd at the Adelaide Oval, but on August 18 the Vics won 9.15 (69) to 4.5 (29) before 44,641 at the MCG. On June 9 South Australia 10.13 (73) defeated Western Australia 3.5 (23) at the Adelaide Oval but on July 21 WA defeated the Croweaters at Perth Oval 13.13 (91) to 4.3 (27). Victoria won the Interstate State Schoolboys Carnival by defeating South Australia in the final match at the MCG on July 28.

In interstate club football, the Darwin competition held its grand final for the 1922/23 season on March 24 with Wanderers 13.14 (92) defeating Waratahs 6.10 (46). The 1923 Western Australian grand final was won by East Perth 9.9 (63) over East Fremantle 7.4 (46) at Subiaco Oval on October 6. It was the Royals' fifth consecutive premiership. Norwood won its 16th South Australian premiership when it defeated North Adelaide, 9.12 (66) to 6.4 (40) at the Adelaide Oval before 37,000 spectators. Tasmania's state premiership match was played on October 20 at the North Hobart Oval where North Hobart, the south premiers, 20.13 (133) defeated North Launceston, the north premiers, 18.8 (116).

Internationally, the sport was introduced to Nauru in 1923, and the first competition started there in February 1924 (see page 10).

THE 1923 LEAGUE SEASON

The VFL competition consisted of nine teams (Carlton, Collingwood, Essendon, Fitzroy, Geelong, Melbourne, Richmond, St Kilda and South Melbourne) in 1923. They played each other twice in the home-and-away matches, there being 18 rounds with each team having two byes. The top four teams then contested the finals series. Essendon finished on top of the ladder (and were minor premiers), winning 13 games and losing three during the home-and-away rounds. Fitzroy, which lost five matches, finished second. South Melbourne with nine wins and seven losses was third, ahead of the fourth-placed Geelong on percentage.

In 1923 Fitzroy defeated Geelong in the first semi final and South Melbourne defeated Essendon in the second semi final. Fitzroy then defeated South Melbourne in the final. As Essendon had been minor premiers they were able to challenge Fitzroy to a grand final match.

The 1923 grand final was scheduled to be played on Saturday October 13, but it was postponed until the following Saturday, October 20, due to the MCG being waterlogged. The *Argus* of October 15 carried the following explanation:

“Football on the Melbourne Cricket Ground was impossible on Saturday morning, when the adverse weather committee inspected the ground, and it did not take delegates long to make up their minds to postpone the grand final match, Fitzroy v. Essendon. There were pools of water everywhere, and at the best all that could be expected was a mud scramble. Later, when the sun came out, and it was known that the races at Caulfield had also been postponed, delegates may have repented their decision, for in the circumstances there would have been a tremendous attendance. The players, had they had to decide, would probably have gone on, for they have had many months of training, and are anxious to be done with football for the year. However, the decision was come to and the game postponed until next Saturday.”

The *Argus* went on to explain that there had only been four previous occasions when VFL matches had been postponed. These were: 1) On August 14, 1897, all finals matches postponed to the following week due to heavy rain; 2) May 19, 1900, all matches postponed until August 18 (after Round 14 – the scheduled final home and away round on August 11) due to heavy rain; 3) May 7, 1910, all matches postponed to the following Saturday on account of the death of King Edward VII; and 4) August 24, 1918, the second semi final between Carlton and South Melbourne postponed for one week due to heavy rain.

FITZROY AND ESSENDON IN 1923

When the clubs first met in Round 5, 1923, at Windy Hill, Essendon was undefeated with four wins from four games. Fitzroy had been defeated by Geelong two weeks earlier, but then had a week off due to a bye. After a tight first half, the well-rested Roys got on top of the Dons to win by 23 points. By their next encounter, this time at Fitzroy’s Brunswick Street Oval, Essendon and Fitzroy sat first and second on the League table respectively. Although the Roys won again, the Dons would retain top spot, a position the club had held from the first to the last game of the 1923 home-and-away season.

Rd 5	June 2	Essendon	4.13 (37)	lost to	Fitzroy	8.12 (60)	Windy Hill
Rd 14	August 11	Fitzroy	10.18 (78)	def.	Essendon	8.9 (57)	Brunswick St.

THE 1923 VFL GRAND FINAL

When the grand final did take place Essendon had only played one match in the previous six weeks due to a bye in the final home and away round, and then only a single match in the finals. They made a selection surprise by including 33 year-old George Rawle, coach of Essendon Juniors, for his first League game.

Essendon began the match well and were on top for the first 15 minutes or so. They kicked the first goal of the game when full forward Greg Stockdale posted his 67th major for the season – then a League record. A second goal in the quarter gave Stockdale 68 for the season. Fitzroy, with Jimmy Freake performing well up forward, gradually got back into the game and at quarter time they were one point ahead.

In general play, Essendon seemed to have the better of the second quarter but they missed several chances and managed only one goal and eight behinds. Fitzroy kicked two goals two and maintained their one point advantage at the long break.

In the third quarter, Essendon added two goals through Justin McCarthy and Frank Maher, while Fitzroy were held goalless. Although the Dons had dominated the quarter they still only led by 10 points at the final break and Fitzroy went into the final stanza still feeling that they had a chance to take the flag.

Soon after the final term commenced Stockdale missed a chance to boot another goal for Essendon and, soon after, Clive Fergie of Fitzroy passed to Harold Carter, who registered a goal. Fitzroy were now only five points behind. The game see-sawed for a while but with less than ten minutes remaining, and Essendon still in the lead by four points, Charlie Hardy (Essendon) made a brilliant pass to Frank Maher, who dodged the pack and goaled. Further Fitzroy attacks were repelled by the Essendon defence and a goal on the run from George Shorten eventually sealed the game for the Dons. In the *Australasian* Jack Worrall, their football correspondent who was a famous former Fitzroy player and Carlton coach, summed up the game as follows:

“... while there was not much in it, Essendon was the better and more finished band. And strange as it may appear their bye at the end of the first round and the postponement on October 13, was all in their favour. Their brilliant little men were feeling the strain when the first round ceased, and needed a spell badly. The easing of strenuous Saturday matches had been the means of restoring their old-time brilliancy, and was a great factor in winning them the premiership. With Fitzroy the case was altogether different. They are big and solid players, and require a lot of work. As, in the previous season, they had timed their run nicely, and unmistakably gave evidence in their play last Saturday that they were going off. They played with much of their old-time tenacity, yet had lost a lot of that wonderful vim which is such a marked characteristic of their play. It was noticeable all through while the spirit was willing the flesh failed to respond in the old dauntless manner, and they were beaten by a better team on the day...”



Scenes from the 1923 VFL grand final as published in the *Australasian* on October 27, 1923.
 1. Fitzroy attempts to break through Essendon's defence in the third quarter. 2. Play in front of the Essendon goal. 3. In the outer ground. 4. A Fitzroy dog and owner. 5. Tarbotton (Fitzroy) marks and relieves the pressure on goal. [MCC Library Collection]

1923 VFL Grand Final Match Summary

Saturday October 20, 1923, 2:50pm

Essendon	3.2	4.10	6.13	8.15 (63)
Fitzroy	3.3	5.5	5.9	6.10 (46)

Best: Essendon – Shorten, McCarthy, Fitzmaurice, Maher, Garden, May, Watt, Hardy.

Fitzroy – Collins, Bryant, Carter, Wigrift, Fergie, Tarbotton, Atkinson, Freake.

Goals: Essendon – Maher (2), McCarthy (2), Stockdale (2), Jenkins, Shorten.

Fitzroy – Freake (4), Carter, Rattray.

Umpire: Alex Mutch.

MCG attendance: 46,566

1923 VFL GRAND FINAL TEAMS



ESSENDON
Black and Red
Coach: Syd Barker



FITZROY
Maroon and Blue
Coach: Vic Belcher

	G	B
1.	Syd Barker (c).....	.....
2.	Clyde Donaldson.....	.....
3.	Norm Beckton .....	.....
5.	Fred Baring .....	.....
6.	Tom Fitzmaurice.....	.....
10.	Rowley Watt .....	.....
13.	Joe Harrison .....	.....
14.	Charlie May.....	.....
15.	Roy Laing.....	.....
16.	Justin McCarthy.....	1..1..
18.	Vince Irwin.....	.....
21.	Tommy Jenkins.....	1..
24.	Frank Maher.....	1.1.
25.	Greg Stockdale.....	1..1..
28.	Jack Garden.....	.....
30.	George Shorten.....	1..
31.	George Rawle.....	.....
33.	Charlie Hardy.....	.....
	Rushed.....	.....

	G	B
2.	Stan Molan.....	.....
4.	Horrie Jenkin.....	.....
5.	Ern Elliot.....	.....
7.	Gordon Rattray (c).....	1..
9.	Jimmy Freake.....	1.11.1..
10.	Len Wigrift .....	.....
11.	Harold Carter.....	1..
12.	Norm Cockram.....	.....
14.	Arthur Dickens .....	.....
15.	Clive Fergie.....	.....
17.	Jim Atkinson.....	.....
18.	Clarrie Sherry.....	.....
21.	Jim Tarbotton.....	.....
23.	Les Bryant.....	.....
24.	Gordon McCracken.....	.....
27.	Tommy Corrigan.....	.....
29.	Goldie Collins.....	.....
30.	Percy Parratt.....	.....
	Rushed.....	.....

¼	½	¾	Final
3 - 2	4 - 10	6 - 13	8 - 15 (63)

¼	½	¾	Final
3 - 3	5 - 5	5 - 9	6 - 10 (46)

Essendon Playing Positions

B:	Irwin	Baring	Donaldson
HB:	Harrison	Fitzmaurice	Laing
C:	Garden	May	Watt
HF:	Jenkins	McCarthy	Shorten
F:	Barker (c)	Stockdale	Hardy
Foll:	Beckton	Rawle	Maher

Fitzroy Playing Positions

B:	Atkinson	Jenkin	Wigrift
HB:	Tarbotton	Molan	Elliot
C:	Dickens	Corrigan	Sherry
HF:	Parratt	Cockram	Rattray (c)
F:	Bryant	Freake	Carter
Foll:	McCracken	Collins	Fergie

1923 VFL LADDER

AFTER THE HOME-AND-AWAY SEASON

	TEAM	Played	Won	Lost	Drawn	For	Against	Percent	Points
1	Essendon	16	13	3	-	1188	875	135.8	52
2	Fitzroy	16	11	5	-	1120	968	115.7	44
3	South Melbourne	16	9	7	-	1061	989	107.3	36
4	Geelong	16	9	7	-	1128	1085	104.0	36
5	Collingwood	16	8	7	1	1138	1043	109.1	34
6	St Kilda	16	8	8	-	947	959	98.7	32
7	Carlton	16	6	9	1	1000	1191	84.0	28
8	Richmond	16	4	12	-	906	1139	79.5	16
9	Melbourne	16	3	13	-	980	1219	80.4	12

THE ROAD TO THE 1923 GRAND FINAL

Under the Argus finals system, used by the VFL from 1902-23 and 1925-30, the team that finished second on the table after the home-and-away rounds played the team that finished fourth in the first semi final. The team that topped the ladder (the minor premiers) played the third-placed team in the second semi final the following week. The winners of both semi finals met in the final. Should the minor premiers win the final they were acknowledged as the premiers. Should the minor premiers lose the final or semi final they could challenge the winner of the final to a grand final. This match would decide the premiership.

First Semi Final – September 22, 1923 (MCG)

Fitzroy 14.13 (97) def. Geelong 8.14 (62) att. 56,240

Second Semi Final – September 29, 1923 (MCG)

South Melbourne 10.14 (74) def. Essendon 8.9 (57) att. 55,617

Final – October 6, 1923 (MCG)

Fitzroy 7.13 (55) def. South Melbourne 6.7 (43) att. 55,039

1923 VFL Grand Final Umpires

Field	Alex Mutch
Boundary	William Davies Hugh Heron
Goal	Charles Bell John Swift

Curtain Raiser: 1923 VJFL Grand Final

Geelong Second XVIII	9	12	66
Richmond Juniors	5	10	40

The curtain raiser for the 1923 VFL grand final was the grand final of the Victorian Junior Football League.

THE “MOSQUITO FLEET”

This was the era of Essendon’s now famous “Mosquito Fleet”. The name came about because of the large number of small, fast, players the Dons had in their line-up. These included Charlie Hardy (157cm or 5ft 1½ in), Rowley Watt (163 cm or 5ft 4in), George Shorten (163cm or 5ft 4in), Jack Garden (170cm or 5ft 7in), Frank Maher (170cm or 5ft 7in), Vince Irwin (169 cm or 5ft 6½in) and Jimmy Sullivan (168cm or 5ft 6in). All these players were members of the Dons’ 1923 grand final team, except Sullivan who missed selection. Nevertheless, Sullivan was a member of Essendon’s premierships team the following season, albeit there was no grand final because the premierships was decided by a round-robin series of finals matches. Although Essendon teams of this era had more than the usual number of short players, they also had a number of players who were over six feet (183cm) in height. The tallest player in their 1923 grand final line-up was Tom Fitzmaurice at 192 cm (6ft 3½in) and the average height of the team was about 175cm (5ft 9in).

Some facts about members of the “Mosquito Fleet” who appeared in the 1923 grand final

- George Shorten, who many judged best afield in the 1923 grand final, weighed only 51 kg (around 8 stone). He was also a member of the Dons’ 1924 premierships side, equal second in the 1924 Brownlow Medal and played three matches for Victoria in 1925.
- Charlie Hardy was 34 years old when he made his debut for Essendon in 1921 but, like some others in the 1923 team, had played many games at VFA club North Melbourne with Essendon captain-coach Syd Barker. Hardy played 36 games from 1921 to 1925 and was a member of the 1924 premierships side. He coached Essendon from 1928 to 1930.
- Rowley Watt came to Essendon from Rochester and, after a year with the Essendon VFA side, played 141 games for the Dons in the VFL from 1922 to 1931. He was also a member of the 1924 premierships side.
- Jack Garden, who had played five games for Essendon in 1915, returned to League football after serving in World War One to play a further 111 games for the Dons from 1920 to 1926. He won the club’s best and fairest award in 1920 and was also a member of the 1924 premierships side.
- Frank Maher only began playing football while serving overseas during World War One. Nevertheless, he became a very reliable player for Essendon in the VFL after the war, totalling 137 games from 1921 to 1928. He was a member of the 1924 premierships team, captain-coach from 1925 to 1927, best and fairest in 1927, and Victorian captain in 1927 and 1928.
- Vince Irwin, who came from North Melbourne, played 78 games for Essendon from 1921 to 1926, moving to the forward line in 1924 after playing in the back pocket in the 1923 grand final. He didn’t play in any of Essendon’s finals matches in 1924.



Jack Garden (Essendon)



Frank Maher (Essendon)

CELEBRATING THE VICTORY

Writing under the pen name “Old Boy” for the *Argus* on Monday October 22, Reg Wilmot, who had played for Essendon in the early 1890s, made the following comments about the Dons’ victory celebrations:

“It took the Essendon players a long while to reach their dressing room, a way having to be forced for them by a posse of police. When they did get into their room they had hardly room to dress, and there was a scene of great enthusiasm. Speeches were made by the president and other supporters, and then the president of the Fitzroy club (Mr. D. J. Chandler), the captain (Gordon Rattray), and the coach (Vic Belcher), came across to offer the congratulations of Fitzroy. When at length the room was cleared and the players were dressed there was still a crowd outside.

Subsequently the team was entertained at dinner at Carlyon’s, and after a drive round the esplanade they went to Essendon. By good stage management they reached Puckle street, Moonee Ponds, just at the interval of the picture theatre. The team were uproariously received, and after driving up and down Puckle street half a dozen times they went to their headquarters at the Essendon Cricket-ground, where they had a smoke social.”

JIMMY FREAKE (FITZROY)

Essendon full forward Greg Stockdale was the leading goalkicker in the VFL in 1923 with 68. He kicked two goals in the grand final to surpass the season record of 66 goals established by Collingwood's Dick Lee and Fitzroy's Jimmy Freake in 1915. James Henry "Jimmy" Freake played 174 games for Fitzroy from 1912 to 1924, kicking 442 goals. He was the leading goalkicker in the VFL in 1913 with 56, although University's Roy Park kicked the most goals in the home and away rounds with 53 (to Freake's 49). Freake led the VFL's goalkicking again in 1915, this time sharing the honours with Dick Lee. He was Fitzroy's leading goalkicker on seven occasions (1912, 1913, 1914, 1915, 1917, 1918 and 1923) and was also a member of their 1913 and 1922 premiership teams, winner of the club's best and fairest award in 1918, vice-captain in 1923 and a Victorian representative twice. Freake was 178cm (5ft 10in) and relied more on his pace and ball skills than his marking ability. According to John Devaney's *AustralianFootball.com* article he was "a goalsneak par excellence". "Typically, he would crouch low with his chest almost scraping the turf and hurtle straight down the ground leaving the full back in his wake". Teammates like Percy Parratt (Fitzroy 1909-23), "knew that if they kept their passes low, fast and hard then Freake's small but vice-like hands, coupled with his incomparable manoeuvrability, would do the rest." Freake was a very accurate kick for goal, using both punts and place kicks. He was able to kick with either foot so could snap goals from all angles. In the Round 15 game against Richmond in 1915 at the Brunswick Street Oval, Freake kicked ten goals, his best haul in a single match.



Jimmy Freake (Fitzroy)

AUSTRALIAN FOOTBALL IN THE SOUTH PACIFIC

In 1923 Australian football was introduced to the Pacific island of Nauru. The island was a former German colony that had been mandated by the League of Nations to Australia. William Easton, who was born in the Melbourne suburb of Kensington and from 1919 had been stationed on Nauru as a wireless operator, wrote to the VFL: "Recently Australian football was played here for the first time, and although there are not sufficient white people for full teams, we scratch along. Surprising to state, the result of the few games played has been a desire from the Nauruan natives ... practically the whole male population— wish to learn the Victorian Football League rules. With the concurrence of the Administrator I have consented to assist in every way." League secretary E.L. Wilson and Syd Sherrin, a sporting goods manufacturer and Collingwood official, sent copies of the rules and football equipment to Easton. The first Nauruan competition was inaugurated there on February 24, 1924. The Australian game soon proved more popular than soccer or rugby among indigenous Nauruans, and today it is the island nation's most popular sport.

DID YOU KNOW?

- Essendon's 1923 premiership was the club's fifth in the VFL. It had previously won premierships in 1897, 1901, 1911 and 1912. By 1923 Fitzroy had won seven premierships, Carlton and Collingwood five each, South Melbourne and Richmond two, and Melbourne one. Geelong and St Kilda, which had been VFL members since its formation in 1897, were yet to win a premiership, while University did not win a flag during their membership of the VFL (1908-14).
- While the 1923 grand final was delayed one week and was actually played on October 20, the already printed match day program, the *Football Record*, was retained and distributed for the match bearing the initial October 13 date.
- In 1923 new scoreboards were erected at each home ground (other than the MCG) by the *Football Record*. With the help of a key published in that Saturday afternoon's *Record*, spectators could decipher the coded quarter-by-quarter scores of the other three matches as they appeared on these scoreboards throughout the afternoon. While this magazine effectively served as the match day program for the VFL, it was a privately owned magazine that had secured the League's patronage through the provision of calico numbers to clubs – and could order clubs to alter the numbers of players if its rights to publish them were infringed. In fact no licensing fee was paid to the League from the program's inception in 1912 through to 1926. The League obtained ownership of the *Football Record* in 1962.
- In Round 10, 1923, Essendon went down to St Kilda by 17 points at the Junction Oval, scoring 1.12 (18) to St Kilda's 5.5 (35). This was the lowest score recorded by any team during the 1923 season.
- During the 1923 season each of the nine teams, except Carlton, which finished seventh on the ladder, occupied a place in the top four at some stage.
- The 1923 grand final attendance of 46,566 was the smallest of the VFL finals crowds that year. The first semi final between Fitzroy and Geelong drew the largest with 56,240. The second semi final between Essendon and South Melbourne drew 55,617, and the final between Fitzroy and South Melbourne drew 55,039.

The *MCC Library Record* is the match day program of the Melbourne Cricket Club Library. The views expressed are those of the editor and authors and are not necessarily those of the Melbourne Cricket Club.

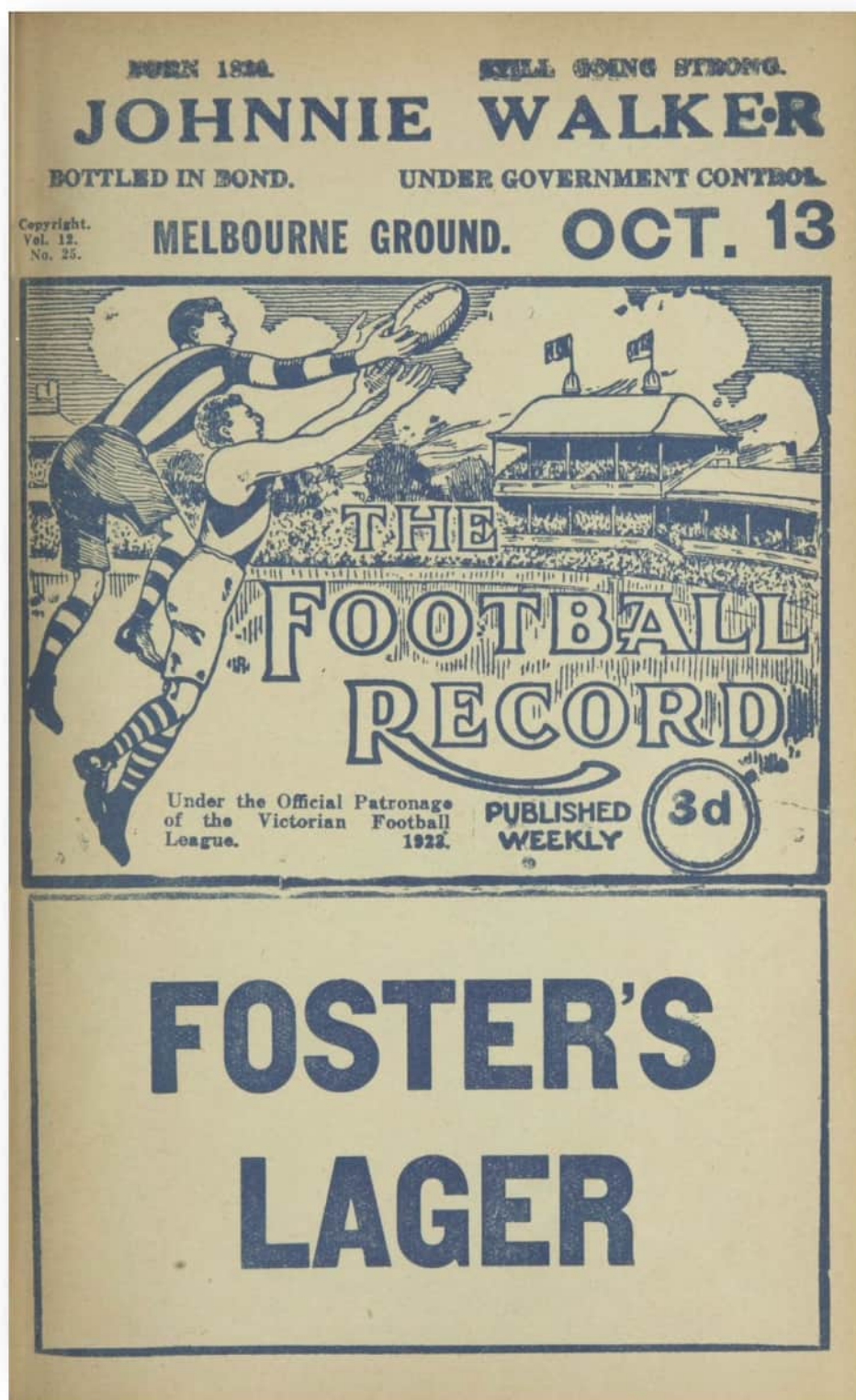
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Above: *Football Record*, Vol. 12, No. 25 [grand final], October 13, 1923.

Cover: Fitzroy's Jim Tarbotton marks during the 1923 VFL grand final. *Australasian*, October 27, 1923. [MCC Library collection].



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