



In his first season as coach, Charlie Clymo took Geelong to the 1931 premiership but never coached League football again –and no one seemed to know why. Until now. **BEN COLLINS** unravels one of football's great mysteries in a story that took on a life of its own.

“ (He) was a gentle man. He must have been different when he coached ”

NIECE JOYCE MILNE

HISTORICAL PHOTOS COURTESY
THE BOB GARTLAND COLLECTION



Metaphorically speaking, it was time-on in the last quarter and some urgency was required. When we were informed that the 101-year-old niece of one of football’s most enigmatic figures wanted to set the record straight before it was too late, we jumped on the case.

The centenarian in question, Joyce Milne, was the niece of Charlie Clymo – the only man to have won a premiership in his one and only season as a League coach.

Clymo achieved this curious feat with Geelong in 1931.

In the ’70s, Cats legend Bob Davis, also a one-flag coach at Geelong, suggested on Channel Seven that Clymo was one of the great coaches because he boasted a perfect record, and was ridiculed by his co-panellists.

“Charlie who?” Lou Richards said. Indeed, there was much curiosity about this Cat.

Just why did Clymo leave Geelong after winning that flag 87 years ago?

Precious little was known about the Cats’ second premiership coach, so when presented with the opportunity to interview someone who could potentially solve the mystery, we pounced.

We had been told Milne – a much-loved great-great-grandmother widowed 40 years ago – was a real character: forthright but lovely.

And the golden girl (who turned 102 last month) didn’t disappoint when we visited her at the house in Melbourne’s south-east she shares with her daughter Beth Cunningham.

“So you want to know why my Uncle Charlie only had one year at Geelong?” Milne chuckled. “OK, I’ll tell you.”

William Charles ‘Charlie’ Clymo – the youngest of seven children to Cornish couple John and Mary Clymo – never met his father.

Clymo snr, a miner who settled his family in Bendigo, died from bowel inflammation at just 35 – eight months before Charlie’s birth on October 30, 1884.

Charlie became an orphan at 13 after his mother succumbed to typhoid fever, so his brother Nicholas, 10 years his senior, and girlfriend Bertha married earlier than planned so they could be his guardians, and he lived with them for the next decade.

Like many in his clan, Charlie was clean-living (he didn’t drink or smoke), sporty and



PHOTO: COURTESY RUSSELL HOLMESBY



community-minded. However, his mining job caused lifelong breathing and chest issues.

Despite this, the youngster joined the Eaglehawk Fire Brigade in 1904, becoming “one of the most brilliant men ever seen on the firemen’s demonstration track in Victoria” in a distinguished 40-year association with fire brigades.

Clymo was also a star footballer for Eaglehawk, playing in premierships in 1903, 1906 and 1908.

Like many contemporaries, Clymo played in both the VFL and the Bendigo Football League simultaneously. He’d represent Eaglehawk on Wednesday afternoon

(during the half-day holiday in place at the time) and St Kilda on Saturday.

At least once a St Kilda fan drove Clymo back to Bendigo on Sunday in time for his midnight mining shift.

Clymo, who played 43 games and kicked 21 goals for St Kilda from 1907-09, was a fast, strong, left-footed (though dual-sided) forward and on-baller.

On debut at 22 against reigning premier Carlton at Princes Park, he kicked three of St Kilda’s eight goals in an upset win.

After another good showing, *Melbourne Punch* observed: “Clymo was as fresh as a Flinders Street saveloy at midnight.”

WISDOM FOR ‘WOOFA’

● Charlie Clymo made a brief coaching comeback, albeit in a caretaker capacity, with Ballarat club Golden Point at 61 in 1946, and one of his charges was future Geelong legend Bob Davis, upon whom he left a lasting impression.

After a game, Clymo took the precocious teenager aside for some advice.

“I’ve watched you play, lad. You’re all right but liable to get hurt the way you leave yourself so open,” Clymo said.

The old master then taught Davis techniques to help him protect himself, for which he was forever grateful.

Clymo’s only grandchild, Gary Clymo, recalled: “Bob Davis would often mention Charlie on *World of Sport*. One time he said, ‘If Charlie Clymo stared you down, it meant you were in big trouble.’ I copped that same stare when I played up as a boy.”



He played in St Kilda’s first final, a semi-final against Carlton in 1907, performing well in a big loss.

In 1910, Clymo and his new bride Isabella (Bella) left Bendigo, and St Kilda, and relocated to Ballarat, where he became a blacksmith and an engineer’s assistant at the Selkirk brickworks, joined the Ballarat Fire Brigade and was appointed playing coach of Golden Point.

PHOTO: COURTESY TONY MAY

It was a happy time. In 1910, the Clymos had their only child, a son Keith, and Clymo’s hard-training regime lifted the fledgling Golden Point to its first premiership.

He led Golden Point to Grand Finals in each of his six seasons there, winning three flags.

Clymo, who was such an important asset that the club took out a £300 life insurance policy on him, was sidelined for a Grand Final after he “fell on a couple of spikes” in a firemen’s competition just days earlier.

He didn’t go to war, perhaps because of his breathing issues, or because his fire service made him too valuable at home.

Toasted as “a gentleman both on and off the field” who was “respected by clubman and foe alike”, Clymo was later non-playing coach of Ballarat (1920-21), country clubs Leigh Creek (flags in 1922-24) and Moolort (a flag in 1925), Golden Point’s seniors (1926) and juniors (flags in 1926-27) and Ballarat Imperial (a flag in 1929, runner-up in 1930).

In between, he also umpired. Then the Cats came calling.

Geelong’s committee was divided over two playing-coach candidates:



Arthur ‘Bull’ Coghlan (who’d lifted the Cats to second in 1930) and Reg Hickey.

Remarkably, the club hierarchy took note of a recommendation of Clymo by young gun Jack Collins, 20, who returned the favour after his old Golden Point coach had recommended him to Geelong two years earlier.

The appointment of the little-known 46-year-old outsider was a shock, but Clymo got down to business, telling a reporter he had great talent at his disposal but that he’d stress the importance of the fast release and reinforce his plans with blackboard lectures.

Geelong’s annual report noted: “Mr Clymo devoted the whole of his time to the careful preparation of the team, and at all times was ready to devote time to special

BUSH CHAMPION: Clymo led Ballarat club Golden Point to grand finals in each of his six seasons with the club (above), winning three flags. He also had a distinguished 40-year association in the fire brigade (left).



training of players whom he considered to be in need of such work.”

The Cats were minor premiers but lost the second semi-final to a depleted Richmond by 33 points.

Clymo’s men appeared set for a straight-sets exit when they trailed Carlton 47-0 at quarter-time in the preliminary final but scraped home by six points to face Richmond again in the Grand Final.

After two hard finals, Clymo was reported to have handled his players “carefully” in Grand Final week and his team won by 20 points.

In the winners’ rooms post-match, Geelong president Morris Jacobs declared all could see what Clymo had done for the Cats.

Between rounds of cheers, Clymo expressed pride that his team hadn’t carried any passengers.

However, two days later Clymo didn’t join the players on their trip to Adelaide, where they defeated SANFL premier Port Adelaide; he wasn’t in Geelong’s premiership team photograph; and he wasn’t among those who received premiership medals at a dinner attended by League officials in December.

Clymo wasn’t among the eight applicants for the Geelong coaching job for 1932. Instead, he returned to Golden Point.

The question is: why?

A young Joyce Milne (nee Clymo) often saw her uncle, who regularly visited her parents in Bendigo.

She recalled that although he was a leader in his worldly pursuits, he was retiring in his private life, happy for his wife to do most of the talking and make most of the decisions.

“Uncle Charlie was a very gentle man, never boasted, very quiet. He preferred to listen. He must’ve been different when he coached,” she said.

Milne was “annoyed” by some of the theories about his one-off season with Geelong.

The contentions included that Clymo was homesick for Ballarat; that he accepted a lucrative offer to return to Golden Point as coach (which was disproved when we found a newspaper report revealing that, due to Point’s parlous financial position, Clymo had actually volunteered to forgo payment, as he had done previously, and his offer was “appreciatively accepted”); and that Coghlan and Hickey warned the committee they wouldn’t play if Clymo remained as coach.

We couldn’t find any record of Clymo speaking publicly about the issue, so his family was our best hope.

Milne cut to the chase.

“Uncle Charlie was only ever going to coach Geelong for one season. That was the arrangement right from the start,” she said.

“His employer, the fire brigade and the local football club – only allowed him to coach Geelong for one season.

“He had to get leave from his job. He was always returning to Ballarat at the end of the football season.”

When we suggested that had Clymo been coaching now, Geelong would have kept him by offering \$1 million a season, Milne shot back: “No, no. Uncle Charlie never cared about money. He loved the fire brigade. That was his life.”

During our visit, we met another relative – Clymo’s great-nephew Tony May, the only other family member to appear at League level, having played four games for North Melbourne and Melbourne in 1977-78.

“To have someone in the family who’s coached a premiership team is pretty special,” May, 64, said.

“I often wondered why he didn’t keep coaching Geelong. I just assumed Hickey got the job ahead of him.

“Because Charlie was there just one season, I’m not sure he’s received the recognition he deserves. He’s almost been forgotten.”

In any case, the case was closed ... or so we thought, until Milne said: “You’d better speak to my young brother.”

Her “young” brother, Cyril Clymo, is 98 and has lived in Sydney since 1945. They say he resembles Charlie in appearance, nature and voice.

Cyril was the last to leave the family home and listened intently when his mother spoke about Charlie. She gave the impression he had wanted to stay at Geelong.

“There was a rumour that Geelong officials told him, ‘You’ve got the job for next year.’ Then it was awarded to Hickey,” Cyril Clymo said.

“He’s a mystery coach – he never told people much about his coaching days – so it’s hard to get to the bottom of it.”

And so the plot started to thicken.

Milne’s daughter Beth spread the word and soon we got a call from Ruth Branson (nee Clymo), a 90-year-old grand-niece of Charlie Clymo who had a different story.

“He couldn’t afford to keep coaching Geelong,” Branson said.

“He lived and worked in Ballarat, so he’d catch the train to and from Geelong. But it was the height of the Depression and the train fare became too expensive.”

To recap, three closely-related family members had differing views.

They hadn’t had any contact with Clymo’s direct descendants, so that was our next line of inquiry.



INSPIRED BY CHARLIE

● Brent Taylor dreams of emulating his great-great-uncle Charlie Clymo.

The 29-year-old PE teacher at Buckley Park College in Essendon was an assistant coach with TAC Cup team Calder Cannons this season.

Taylor is almost an accidental coach.

He played for Bendigo at TAC Cup and VFL level but was forced to retire at just 24 after suffering a brain haemorrhage.

After recovering, Taylor took up coaching and quickly built a strong reputation in local junior ranks.

He was in charge of the Cannons' defence and was often assisted by St Kilda star Jake Carlisle.

“Charlie’s an inspiration, absolutely,” Taylor said. “I want to chase the dream, and that’s to follow in his footsteps and one day become a head coach myself.”

Clymo’s son Keith, who died some 30 years ago, had a son Gary, who was happy to talk.

Gary, 76, revealed football ability stopped with his grandfather. None of the subsequent generations have played the game competitively.

Raised in Melbourne, Gary was just 13 when his grandfather died in 1955, but had visited his grandparents regularly in Ballarat.

His father and grandfather were close and often talked footy.

The youngster was amazed by the old man’s skills and athleticism.

“Charlie would do a little dance where he’d kick the footy to himself like a soccer ball, using both feet,” he said.

“And I was with him in his backyard when he said, ‘We’ll have that chook for dinner’. Chooks aren’t easy to catch but, quick as a flash, he caught it and chopped its head off. It was remarkable.

“He’d say, ‘Most footballers can’t read the flight of the ball’. That was a frustration of his.

“He also used his engineering skills in his coaching. He was very methodical and everyone had a responsibility.

“He told me he’d tell players, ‘Fully commit yourself to the job I’ve given you, and don’t deviate from it, because we’re counting on your contribution’. He had it all mapped out.”

Gary Clymo gleaned that, as a coach, his grandfather hadn’t been “one of the boys”.

And to further cloud the issue, he had yet another theory – the fourth! – about the brief Geelong stay.

“I think Charlie liked to tick the boxes. After he’d won a premiership

“

He’s almost been forgotten

GREAT-NEPHEW TONY MAY

or two and set a club up, he’d move on to the next challenge, and I reckon that happened at Geelong,” he said.

“He really wanted to go back to St Kilda as coach. They approached him at one point, but it didn’t eventuate.”

Meanwhile, we came across a damning assessment of Clymo’s coaching from Geelong’s 1931 premiership half-forward flanker Bob Troughton in the September 14, 1982, edition of *The Age*.

“He couldn’t coach a grasshopper to jump. That’s God’s own truth,” Troughton recalled 50 years later.

“We had fun with it. We’d go in from training when we’d had enough. Charlie would say, ‘I didn’t send you in.’ That’s the control he had.”

This raised the question of whether player power got Clymo sacked.

Premiership back pocket Milton Lamb provided a counter view, though hinted at some discontent, telling author Russell Stephens for the 1996 book *The Road To Kardinia*: “I feel that he was underestimated by a number of people of his coaching ability.

“To me, he brought out the best of individual players. He would

CHARLIE'S ANGELS

● Women's football is booming, so we were excited to discover that Geelong's 1931 premiership coach Charlie Clymo was one of its pioneers.

This week marks 100 years since Clymo coached the Lucas Girls (representing Ballarat's Lucas clothing factory) against the Khaki Girls (from Melbourne's Federal Khaki Clothing factory) in a fundraiser for the war effort at Ballarat's Eastern Oval.

The game on Saturday, September 28, 1918, was the first organised clash between two women's teams in Victoria.

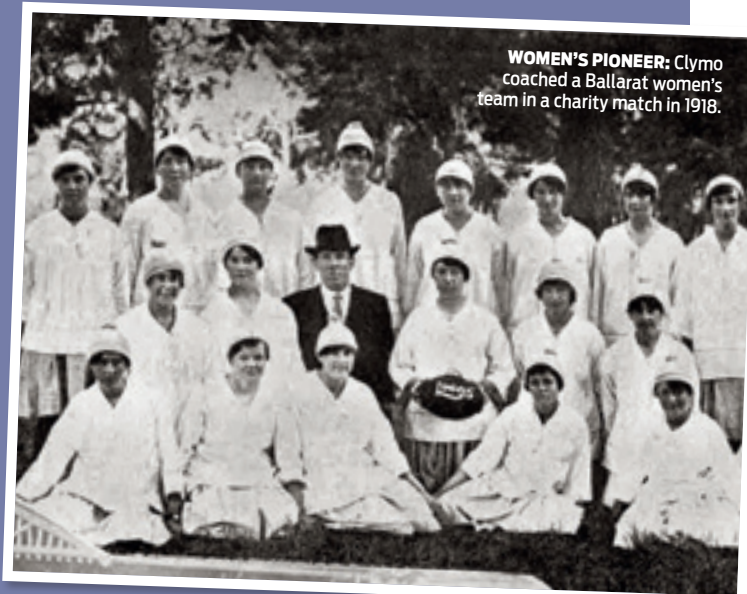
Clymo's Lucas Girls donned loose-fitting pink and white

uniforms while Khaki Girls wore khaki and white.

The Ballarat League, in which Clymo coached, had been in recess for three years due to World War I, so the one-off contest attracted 7000 patriotic, sport-starved spectators – then the biggest crowd to attend a game in Ballarat – and raised a massive £330 for an avenue of honour.

Both coaches were allowed on the field during play and Clymo, then 33, “kept a keen eye for directing the home team”.

After the Lucas Girls won – scoring 3.6 (24) to 1.2 (8) – they thanked Clymo for his “untiring efforts”.



WOMEN'S PIONEER: Clymo coached a Ballarat women's team in a charity match in 1918.

talk to them to try to improve their skills. I had a high opinion of him as a coach.”

We cast the net wider, hoping descendants of key 1931 Cats might prove useful – and they did.

Coghlan's daughter Norma Russell didn't know about the end of Clymo's tenure, but revealed her father “wasn't very pleased” to have been replaced by him as coach.

“They were all surprised and thought it was a strange decision to appoint him. I don't think they'd even heard of Charlie Clymo,” she said.

Hickey's daughter Jenny Maishman couldn't shed any light on the subject either, but said she had a friend who was linked to Clymo.

Amazingly, her friend, Brenda Matthews, was a grand-niece of Clymo, who married Maishman's father's Aunt Bella.

Matthews, 80, strengthened the one-year deal notion.

“My father and Aunt Bella were very close and he told me Geelong approached Uncle Charlie because they were in a quandary about a coach,” the lifelong Geelong fan said.

“Uncle Charlie told them, ‘I can help you out for one season but that's it, because my life is in Ballarat.’

“As far as we knew, there was never any ill-feeling between him and Geelong. In fact, I was told the club gave Aunt Bella an expensive silk dress as a farewell gift.”

The single-season thesis was virtually confirmed by Col Hutchinson – the AFL's statistics and history consultant and an ardent Cats fan himself – who found the needle in the haystack on archived microfiche: a long-forgotten, apparently never-sourced ‘Letter to the Editor’ penned by Clymo in the *Geelong Advertiser* just 19 days after the Grand Final.

Sir,

Now that the football season has ended and I am about to return to my home in Ballarat, I desire to publicly thank the people of Geelong for the manner in which I was supported in my work as coach to the Geelong team.

I came to Geelong a comparative stranger, and I go away after making many friends.

I shall never forget the manner in which a large number of the residents of Geelong have striven to make my stay in this city enjoyable to myself and my wife and to bring success to my efforts with the team.

The committee of the Geelong Football Club, from the president and secretary down, have given me every support and encouragement, and the work with the general and sub-committees was of a most harmonious nature.

The players proved to be a fine lot of young men to work amongst, and the excellent team spirit that they showed was the main thing in the winning of the Premiership.

I also desire to pay tribute to the work of the trainers.

Would you also convey to the members of your staff who during the year handled the football matters, my thanks for their able reports, and the courteous manner in which they sought information.

*Yours, etc.
C. Clymo*

“
There was never any ill-feeling between him and Geelong

**GRAND-NIECE
BRENDA MATTHEWS**


IN GOOD SPIRITS:
The Herald's coverage of the Cats' build-up to the big game in 1931, featuring a beaming Clymo.

It appeared the clincher. If Clymo had been sacked or there had been untenable disharmony, it's unlikely he would have been so complimentary of all at the club. He was clearly farewelling the Cats after fulfilling a short-term contract.

Our initial informant, Joyce Milne, was right after all.

If Clymo was simply a stop-gap coach to give the Cats time to decide on his replacement, it seems they still couldn't make up their mind, awarding the job to Hickey the next season (and missing the finals) before returning to Coghlan the year after.

A group of Geelong fans lobbied for a Clymo comeback in mid-1936, and it seems he remained well regarded by the Cats given he was in the winners' rooms after Hickey led them to their 1937 Grand Final triumph over Collingwood.

Clymo remained heavily involved in the Ballarat community until shortly before his death from a mining-related illness at 70 on October 8, 1955.  [@bencollocollins](#)

