

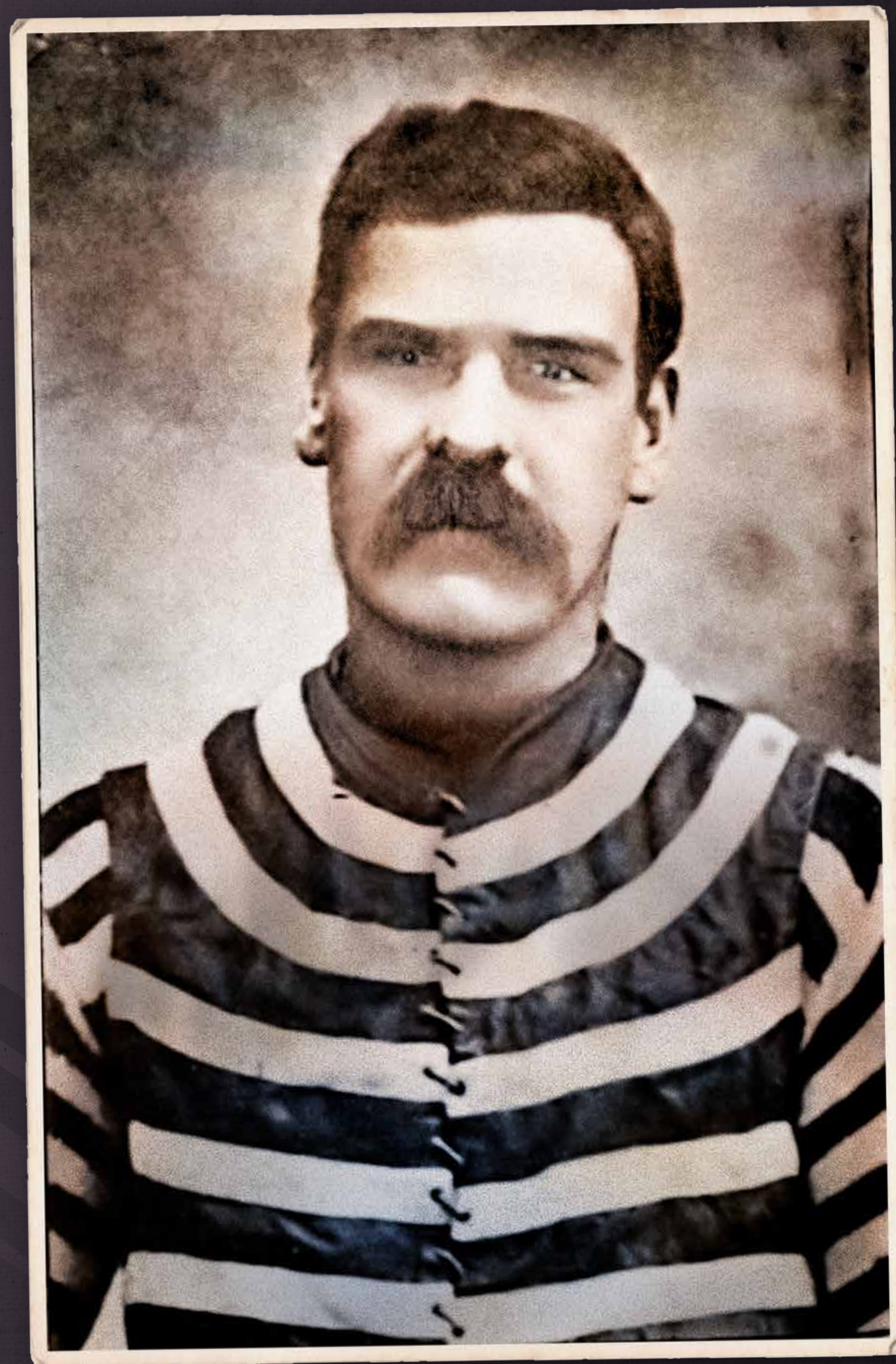
All I hail

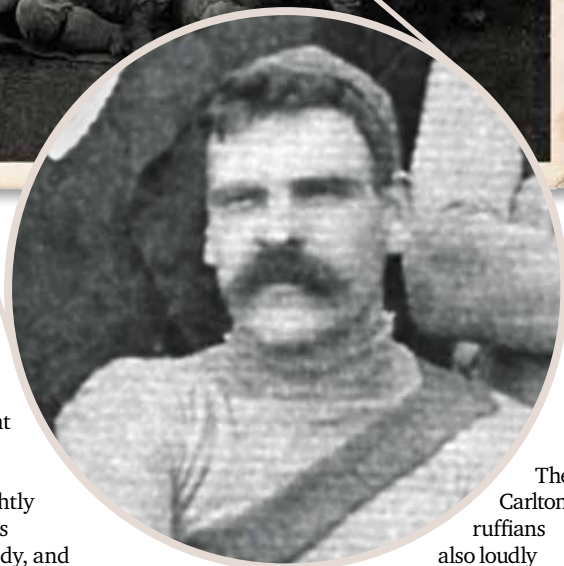
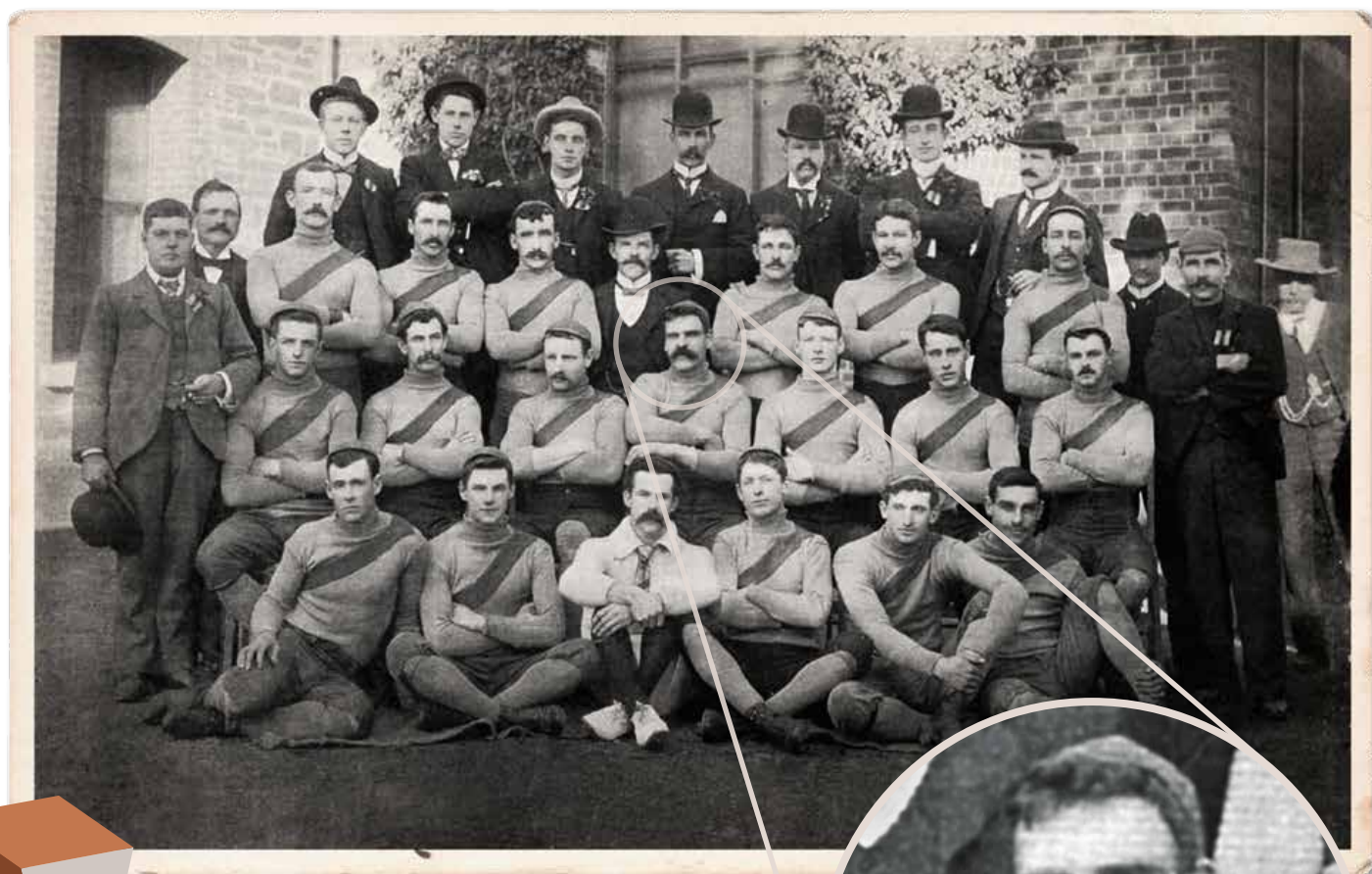
PETER THE GREAT

It's 150 years since the birth of the remarkable Peter Burns – the first man to play 300 games at the highest level, perhaps the game's first genuine superstar, and a worthy candidate for official Legend status in the Australian Football Hall of Fame.

BEN COLLINS

PHOTOS COURTESY OF BOB GARTLAND COLLECTION





The Carlton ruffians also loudly announced their

another Legend is due to grace the Australian Football Hall of Fame next year and Geelong and Sydney will campaign for that honour to be bestowed upon early great Peter Burns.

The Cats and Swans, whom the phenomenal Burns represented with distinction from the early 1880s to the early 1900s, are considering lodging a joint submission to the AFL to lobby for Burns' elevation.

They will have a compelling case.

During Burns' lifetime, there was never a question of his legendary status.

In fact, the peerless big man achieved a reverence that lifted him head and shoulders above the pack of most Australian sporting superstars.

Burns' impeccable qualities as a footballer and a man earned him a perhaps unique place in the broader football psyche.

A high-marking, long drop-kicking ruckman, follower (on-baller) and key defender, Burns was a rare mix of brilliance and toughness, of strength, speed and stamina, and of aggression and chivalry – "the Fairest of the Fair", declared one observer.

Not surprisingly, he was an inspiration to many.

God bless Mummy and Daddy, and Peter Burns

THE NIGHTLY PRAYER SAID TO HAVE BEEN BE RECITED BY YOUNG SOUTH FANS

EARLY SUPERSTAR: Peter Burns, pictured as captain of the 1901 Victorian team, was a peerless big man and "arguably the best player of the 19th century".

His genius inspired the nickname 'Peter The Great', after the famous Russian tsar.

He inspired such devotion that it was said young South Melbourne fans recited a nightly prayer: "God bless Mummy and Daddy, and Peter Burns."

Such was Burns' stardom that a schoolteacher asked his class who was the most famous man in Victoria and a student automatically replied: "Peter Burns, sir."

He inspired at least two racehorse owners to name their charges after him.

He inspired songs and poetry that sang his praises as a heroic figure.

Perhaps most eye-opening, though, was that Burns was the inspiration for a vicious brawl between two of Melbourne's most notorious street gangs.

To the disgust of clubs, gangs such as the 'Fitzroy Forties' and the 'Collingwood Flatties' often loitered with intent at games.

On this occasion in 1890, Burns and the 'Southerners' were aiming for a premiership hat-trick when the 'Bouveries' from Carlton marched around the MCG carrying a red-and-white striped coffin bearing the inscription: 'Peter Burns'.

intention to put the South vice-captain in the coloured casket.

The would-be assailants were intercepted by South Melbourne's 'Flying Angels', who flew into action, smashing the coffin, cracking a few heads and sending their rivals packing.

For the rest of his long life, Burns revelled in the tale of the "tremendous push fight".

However, Burns' modesty would have prevented him from regaling listeners with his on-field heroics that day, which ensured South won both the fight and the footy.

Burns inspired awe – and presumably further scorn from the bruised Bouveries – when he produced perhaps the greatest moment of his career, rising from the mud to sink Carlton in a virtual flag-decider with a booming 65m place kick.

Fellow great Jack Worrall, a longtime Fitzroy counterpart,

recalled that “as in the case of (Essendon champion Albert) Thurgood, kicking a goal from almost any distance, when it meant winning a match, was Burns’ long suit”.

Mark Pennings, an authority on early football history, hails Burns as “arguably the best player of the (19th) century”.

In the 1930s, some old-timers still deemed him the greatest player of all.

Geelong vice-president and history buff Bob Gartland (who supplied photographs for this story) recently called for official recognition of Burns’ effort to become the first player to reach 300 games of elite-level football, 213 of which were amassed in the VFA, Victoria’s top competition before the formation of the VFL in 1897.

The story of this apparently forgotten legend starts in the long-forgotten mining town of Steiglitz – between Geelong and Ballarat – where Peter Charles Burns was born on January 5, 1866, to teenage couple John and Martha Burns.

The old Steiglitz courthouse – which was under construction in 1874 when young Burns lived there – still opens on Sunday afternoons and proudly displays the gold rush town’s links to its favourite son.

The Burns family – which eventually accommodated eight children – moved to Ballarat when Peter was eight.

Also a talented rower and cricketer, Burns was one of several brothers to play elite-level football.

Inspired to become a top-line player after watching Geelong champion Jimmy Wilson, Burns started with Ballarat Imperial at 16 in 1882 and soon attracted interest from VFA clubs.

Legend has it Burns would have started his VFA career with Essendon had it not been for some South Melbourne skulduggery.

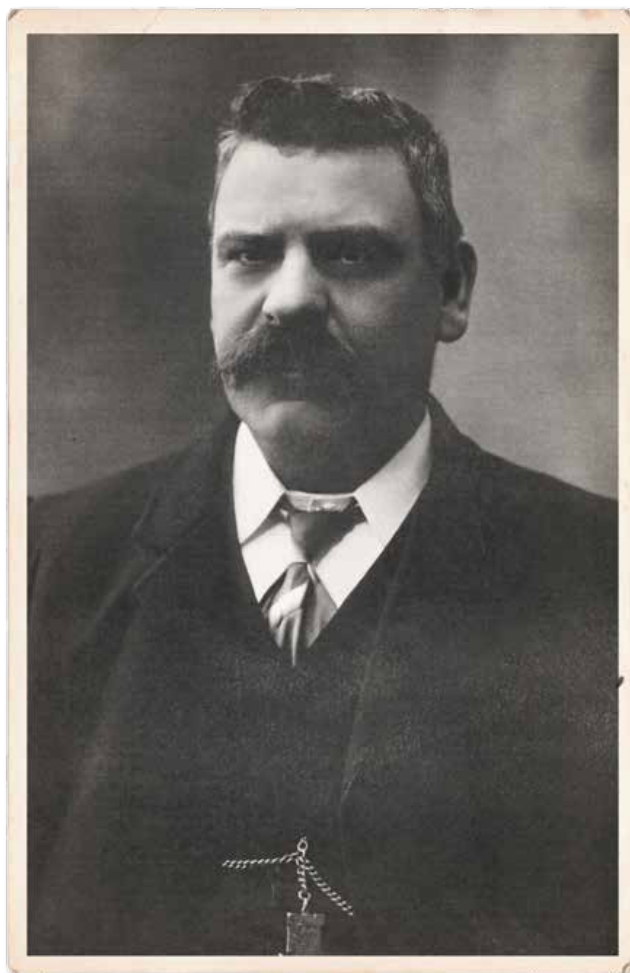
Midway through the 1885 season, so the story goes, the 19-year-old prodigy was to catch a train to Melbourne’s Spencer Street (now Southern Cross) station to meet Essendon officials.

However, when the train reached North Melbourne, the sneaky Southerners spirited him away.

It was said Burns played against Essendon that week, but this is incorrect. It seems he was selected but the game was postponed due to bad weather.

Indisputably, though, when Burns finally met the unlucky Essendon in a big match 10 weeks later, just to rub it in, he was best-afield in a draw.

It probably helped South’s cause that it could improve its boom recruit’s employment situation.



Burns was a fearsome sight with his powerful build, piercing eyes and thick moustache

FORGOTTEN LEGEND:

After his 302-game career as a player came to an end in 1902, Burns spent the next four decades as timekeeper for Geelong and then the VFL.

FACT FILE

PETER BURNS

Born: January 5, 1866

Died: October 11, 1952

Recruited from: Ballarat Imperial

South Melbourne

1885-91: 125 VFA games, 100 goals

Geelong 1892-1902: 177 games (88 VFA, 89 VFL), 34 goals

Total: 302 games, 134 goals

Playing honours: South Melbourne (VFA) premierships sides 1885, 1888, 1889, 1890; Geelong captain 1896 and 1900; Victoria (14 games), Victoria captain (1889, 1899-1902); Australian Football Hall of Fame inductee 1996

Burns had been a handyman in Ballarat, but South got him work as a boilermaker, which caused some consternation in the trade because he didn’t have the required qualifications.

Burns dominated the VFA from the outset, becoming a key member of a premiership team (Essendon was runner-up) and being rated by *The Australasian* as the player of the season.

As Pennings revealed in his comprehensive *Origins of Australian Football* series, the big-bodied teenager had overcome various challenges, including the roughhouse tactics of Hotham enforcer Joey Tankard, who had boasted pre-match: “I’ll take the country bumpkin conceit out of him, and I’ll monkey bear him in the bargain.” It mattered not – Burns was best-on-ground.

Burns was a fearsome sight with his powerful build, piercing eyes, thick moustache and an ability to, as one scribe reported, play “like half-a-dozen men”.

A natural leader, he was South Melbourne’s vice-captain in the 1888-90 hat-trick.

The Referee’s ‘Onlooker’ later wrote of Burns: “The keystone of the arch of mighty South ... was Peter Burns, undoubted champion of Victoria ... Over 6ft tall, loose and big limbed, moving huge bulk with electric rapidity, and handling the ball in air and on ground with the ease and certainty of a juggler, Burns was simply unapproached till (sic) past his best.”

At the end of 1891, after another player of the season award, Burns caused a sensation by leaving South Melbourne.

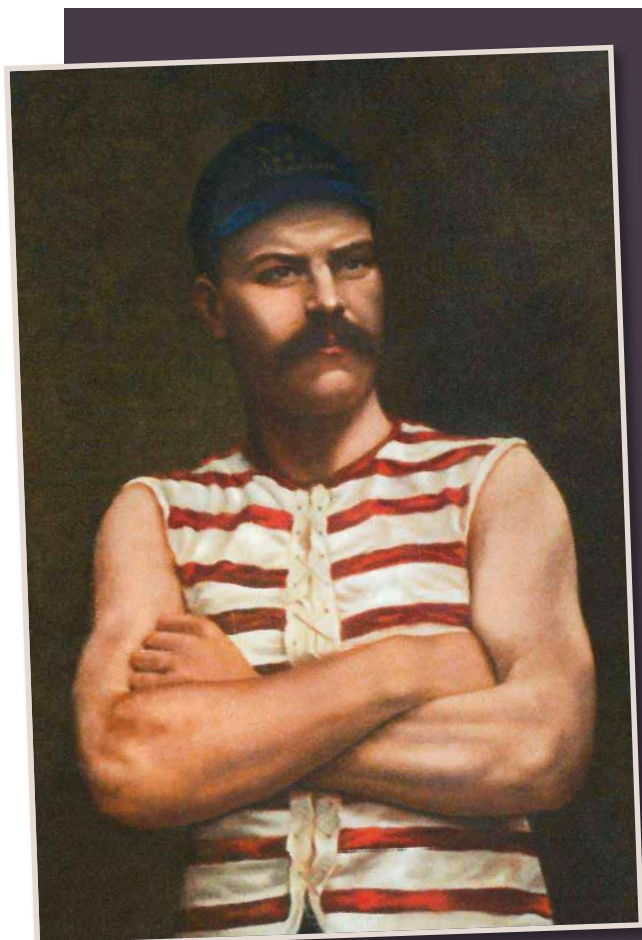
With a wife to support and the country in the grip of a depression, an out-of-work Burns relocated to Geelong, where he was variously reported to have accepted a position as either curator of Corio Oval (Geelong’s then home ground) or as a machinery installer at wool company Dalgety & Co (where he ultimately spent the last decades of his working life).

Football was secondary, with Burns later revealing he only agreed to play with Geelong on the proviso it wouldn’t interfere with his job.

A key to Burns’ success, and longevity, was his progressive attitude to physical conditioning, and the move to Geelong proved beneficial as he followed his long, dawn walks with dips in chilly Corio Bay.

This self-discipline was critical, given Burns’ description of training methods of the day.

“We trained two nights a week, going to the ground after tea.



PAINTING MYSTERY SOLVED?

● For a few decades, Geelong Football Club has displayed a mysterious painting of the great Peter Burns.

Intriguingly, the portrait's origins have remained unknown to the Cats – but we might have found the answer.

Club stalwarts could only vaguely suggest that the piece – depicting Burns in his South Melbourne days – had been won in a raffle some years back.

If our research is correct, it was indeed a raffle prize – 126 years ago!

Thanks to the wonders of Trove's online archive, we dug up a pertinent 1942

interview Burns did with *The Weekly Times*.

Then 76, Burns revealed that after South had won its third successive flag in 1890, he agreed to sit for a portrait by artist Herbert S. Barnicoat.

The South Melbourne Art Union then raffled the painting, but Burns was so impressed with Barnicoat's effort that he wanted it for himself.

"I bought it for a fiver from the winner – and I still have it," Burns recalled more than 50 years later.

If you can help solve the mystery, please email ben.collins@afl.com.au.

"We would have a run about and then have a go at the punching ball and never see a (foot)ball between games," he told *The Sporting Globe* in 1935.

"(Now) practically the whole team gets together in daylight, having plenty of ball practice, hot baths, masseurs and other aids to mending injuries. All I can say that if they are not champions, well, they should be."

When the breakaway VFL was established in 1897, Burns was 31. But he played on for another six seasons, the last three at full-back, from where he was known to run the ball half the length of the field.

Fittingly, Burns notched his 300th game against South Melbourne in round five, 1902.

The 36-year-old made just two more League appearances before succumbing to a leg injury.

Burns' last official game was as captain of Victoria in a mid-season clash with South Australia in Adelaide.

He played 14 interstate games and skippered the Vics in 1889 and in all four games for which he was available from 1899-1902.

Astonishingly durable for the time, Burns was claimed to have missed just seven games in his 21-year career.

"I was very lucky, as I have never received any real serious injuries," he'd recall. "I always tried hard to play the game as it should be played."

(By coincidence, these words were used in Geelong's theme song, written in 1963.)

Burns' association with Geelong had only just started.

He was the club's timekeeper from mid-1902 to 1941 – a sequence broken only by Geelong's decision to withdraw during World War II – and the League's official timekeeper in Grand Finals from 1938-43.

He rang the final bell that signalled Geelong's 1925, 1931 and 1937 flags – some consolation for not saluting at Geelong as a player himself (after twice being minor premier and, separately, twice finishing runner-up).

This continued involvement in the game kept Burns feeling much younger than his years.

"What I like best about my lifetime in sport is the splendid fellows I met," Burns told *The Weekly Times* of his 60 years in football.

"Many have passed on, but I retain as my outstanding impression the grand feeling it always was to be among them — teammates or club rivals. Our games made good friends of us all."

Burns' wife of 62 years, Elizabeth, died in August 1951. He followed her 14 months later, at the age of 86.


The couple didn't have children, so Burns doesn't have any direct descendants.

However, the *AFL Record* contacted a great-great nephew, Danny Perry, whose great-grandmother Mary Ellen Souter (nee Burns) was a proud younger sister of Peter Burns.

Perry, a Sydneysider, said it had been passed down that Burns had been "very much a gentleman, a man's man, humble, honest and very fair and direct in his views".

Sporting talent continues to flow through the Burns gene pool.

Great-great-great nephew Gerard McCallum, 23, represented Australia in both rugby codes as a schoolboy and has taken leave from the NRL to complete an electrical apprenticeship.

Other family members (including Perry) have represented state or country in rugby, soccer, boxing and martial arts. 

 @bencollins



TOUGH AND DURABLE: Burns, seventh from left in the back row of Geelong's 1896 team, missed just seven games in his 21-year career.