



THE JOE SLATER STORY

Joe Slater was one of Geelong's greatest and most inspirational players, and his death on a French battlefield 100 years ago was an enormous loss to the game.

BEN COLLINS

Rob Gaylard has always been conscious of the old journalistic credo to simply report the story and not become part of it. But the veteran media presenter has been drawn into this story; and it's quite a yarn – one of football's worst wartime tragedies.

For Gaylard – the former Channel Nine sports newsreader – it all began in 2001 when he received a phone call from Geelong Football Club.

The Cats had just selected their Team of the Century, which included (on a half-back flank) the late great Joe Slater, whose next of kin, the club had established, was Gaylard. And the Cats wanted Gaylard to represent Slater at the event.

All of which came as a shock to Gaylard, who'd never heard of Slater, let alone their family connection.

This isn't surprising given the passage of time – Slater played the last of his 108 games for Geelong way back in 1914 and was killed in World War I in 1917 – and their distant link in a complex family tree.

Gaylard's great-uncle Alexander Gaylard had married Alice 'Queenie' Slater (Joe's older half-sister) in 1909. It's also said that the Gaylards played a significant role in Joe Slater's upbringing.

(Rob Gaylard is also vaguely connected to two of Slater's star teammates, Henry 'Tracker' Young and 'Ike' Woods, both of whom married Gaylard girls.)

"The family link to Joe Slater is so distant that we feel a bit like imposters becoming his family representatives, but we were delighted to find out that there's a hero in the clan – and we've certainly adopted him," Gaylard told the *AFL Record* when we caught up with him and his wife Karen at their property in Lara, 17km north of Geelong.

"Joe's story is endearing and we're in awe of what he achieved in his short life as a sportsman, as a soldier and as a person. And we're proud that his legacy continues to this day."

May 3 will mark 100 years since Slater's supreme sacrifice, which proved a devastating blow to Geelong (both the city and the football club) and the game.

Indeed, Peter Burns – the South Melbourne and Geelong legend who, as Geelong timekeeper, saw all of Slater's games – decades later declared that "had he been spared, (Slater) would have revolutionised Australian Football and gone down



PROUD LEGACY: Former media identity Rob Gaylard was delighted to discover he had a family link with Geelong war hero Joe Slater.

"
(He would) have gone down as the greatest player

LEGENDARY PETER BURNS ON JOE SLATER

as the greatest player our game has produced".

Joseph Henry Slater was the only product of the marriage of Henry Slater (a middle-aged English widower) and Diana Reynolds, and was born on November 29, 1888, in Ballarat.

The Slaters soon settled in Geelong where young Joe was well educated at Geelong College and became a sporting prodigy.

Slater's greatest love was football, but he also became the Australian 220-yard (200m) champion and the Victorian 110-yard champ, and occasionally ran in sprint races at half-time of Geelong games he was playing.

Slater was also a talented cricketer, impressing with his fast bowling for a Geelong team against the touring Englishmen at Corio Oval in 1912.

By then, he was a football superstar.

After shining for United Methodists in the local churches competition, Slater made his VFL debut at 17 in 1906, just four months after the death of his 71-year-old father.

He developed into a 179cm and 86kg dynamo whom Burns hailed as "the finest material I ever saw in football togs".

Sport newspaper observed that Slater could dominate in "any position on the field ... there are few better all-round players than Joe Slater".

In 1936, legendary player and coach Jack Worrall deemed Slater one of the best centre-men he'd seen, while *The Sporting Judge* believed he "had no peer" at half-back.

The greatest Geelong player of his era and a notable omission from the Australian Football Hall of Fame, Slater used his pace and power to great effect and earned rave reviews for his overhead marking and wonderful kicking.

He once goaled with a booming drop kick from near the centre at Punt Rd Oval – an estimated distance of almost 80m.

In 1912, the *Geelong Advertiser* published a fan's poem that included the line: "an ancient Gladiator would not scorn to be a Slater".



The single blemish on Slater's League career was a brief fallout with Geelong in 1913 when he relocated to Melbourne for work (he was an accountant) and the club refused to clear him to the Redlegs (now Demons).

Slater instead became honorary playing coach of Hawthorn (then in the metropolitan association) and showed great courage in one game to play on with a broken collarbone and lead his team to victory. (The Hawks also claim Slater as one of their war dead.)

To the relief of Geelong fans, Slater soon gained employment as the manager of a printing and stationery company in his hometown and resumed his League career, playing out the 1913-14 seasons.

In this period, Slater experienced highs and lows in his personal life, celebrating his engagement to local girl Nellie Wigley, and also mourning the death of his half-sister Queenie Gaylard at just 34, leaving behind a young daughter.

Of course, more heartache would follow for Slater's widowed mother, who lived with her only son in Swanston St, Geelong.

When World War I broke out, duty called for Slater who, having already

served 11 years in the citizens' forces, entered the 22nd Battalion, D Company, as a lieutenant.

On April 27, 1915 – two days after the disastrous Anzac landings at Gallipoli – Slater was among 150 soldiers to be given a big public send-off in Geelong.

The Geelong mayor told the masses he was pleased to see “that grand and noble footballer, Lieutenant Joe Slater”. In response, Slater said the troops would long remember the occasion and vowed they would fulfil their patriotic duty.

Slater served at Gallipoli for two months towards the end of the ill-fated campaign before suffering tonsillitis, rheumatism and diphtheria, which laid him low for three months.

Slater's letters home to Geelong secretary Charles Brownlow, published in the *Geelong Advertiser*, reveal an articulate man.

“The constant strain of watching and the shelling leaves its mark. You get broken sleep, at the most four hours on a stretch,” Slater wrote from Gallipoli.

He reported that Fitzroy's 1913 premiership player Artie Harrison had been “hit”, while Geelong teammate Leo ‘Dodo’ Healy's



A feeling of profound sorrow passed over Geelong

THE GEELONG ADVERTISER ON NEWS OF SLATER'S DEATH

ALL-ROUND STAR: Also a champion sprinter and talented cricketer, Joe Slater, pictured in the 1908 Geelong team, could dominate in any position on the field, according to *Sport* newspaper.



“leg gave way, and dysentery took him rather badly”. (Harrison and two other League players in the 22nd Battalion were later killed the same day and place as Slater.)

Slater also came close to grief at Gallipoli: “I had two swims this week, and one was not too comfortable; the shrapnel was too close for pleasure.”

He was surprised a troublesome knee hadn't buckled on steep hill climbs, and was “very fit, but would not care to do four quarters in the ruck”.

Throughout his sporting career, Slater had been a non-drinker and non-smoker, but trench life had turned him into “a great pipe smoker”.

He expressed appreciation for gifts, including copies of *The Football Record* (which he circulated among “the boys”) and mouth organs that ensured “the trenches now fairly ring

with sketches of favourite songs and comic operas”.

Slater rose to the rank of captain within 10 months of enlistment and was praised by a soldier as “one of the most popular officers in the Battalion”.

Sent to the Western Front in France in early 1916, Slater briefly served as the chief instructor of an Anzac bomb school and as the commander of a bombing division.

British commander Sir Douglas Haig mentioned him in dispatches for “distinguished and gallant conduct and devotion to duty in the field”, and “for conspicuously good service as Divisional Bomb Officer and for exceptionally good work during operations at Pozieres in July and August 1916. This officer is keen and capable, and his services have been of benefit to the Division.”

Through it all, Slater understood the daily peril of life on the frontline.

When he learned the Australian people voted against conscription, he lamented it as “rather a solid slap to us. It means we have to go into the trenches time after time, whether fit or otherwise”.

And French battlefields had become hellscapes, as Slater noted on March 23, 1917, in what was possibly his final letter.

“I have been in the fore of things and have passed through scenes that I never in my wildest dreams thought to see ...

“I went through one town about the size of Geelong with the buildings burning on each side, and roads blocked with fallen houses.

“All the trees in the orchards were simply sawn through – pure wantonness ...

“If only I could get away with all the various souvenirs I see lying about I would have an interesting collection.”

This wanton destruction claimed Slater’s life just six weeks later, on the first day of the Second Battle of Bullecourt.

Around 5pm on May 3, 1917, Captain Slater was leading D Company when he was struck by shrapnel.

The 28-year-old was taken into a shell-hole where he was relieved of his equipment, and was on his way to a dressing station when he was hit again, by machine-gun or shell fire, or both.

One witness reported Slater had been wounded and became entangled in barbed wire, while another stated that the death blow

HIGH PRAISE:
Slater was recognised by British commander Sir Douglas Haig for his “distinguished and gallant conduct”.



We could not find anything except one of his boots

PRIVATE FRANK HANCOCK

drilled “a big hole right through the body”.

Private Frank Hancock revealed: “I went out next night to try and find his body with some other men, but we could not find anything except one of his boots.”

When news of Slater’s demise circulated back home, the *Geelong Advertiser* reported that “a feeling of profound sorrow passed over Geelong”.

This proved the inspiration for the line in local musician Vin Healy’s 2013 song *Joe Slater*: “The town he loved couldn’t bare what they learned.”

FACT FILE

Joe Slater

Born: November 29, 1888, at Ballarat, Victoria

Died: May 3, 1917, at Bullecourt, France

Recruited from: United Methodists

Debut: v Carlton, round 16, 1906, Corio Oval

Height: 179cm

Weight: 86kg

Geelong 1906-14: 108 games, 17 goals

Victoria 1912: 2 games, 2 goals

Slater’s mother, now childless, “bore her grief with heroic fortitude”.

Mrs Slater placed a death notice proudly declaring that her son had “died as he had lived, a soldier and a man”, signing off as his “loving and lonely mother”.

It’s said that when Geelong fans heard about the tragedy as they walked to a game at Corio Oval, many returned home to mourn.

Rob Gaylard: “Not many players would have had that impact on a club.”

Geelong players showed their respects in their next game by wearing black crepe armbands.

Slater’s fiancée Nellie – a career nurse who joined the Australian Army Nursing Service and served in England, France and Germany – was aboard a ship to join the war effort when her husband-to-be was killed.

Sister Wigley lived to the age of 57 and never married. On the anniversaries of her lost love’s death, she often placed notices in newspapers, including: “In remembrance of my dearest fiancé ... deeply mourned.”

The returned men of Slater’s unit submitted this verse to *The Argus*:

“He gave the appointed signal / Valiant he led / Into the thick of the fighting / Where his gallant life was shed / He led his men oft in the football field / And he led in the sterner test.”

Slater’s legacy was further honoured via the J. H. Slater Memorial Cup annual amateur sprint race, which in the 1920s and ’30s was run annually at half-time of Geelong home games; and Slater Square, an open public space just a few hundred metres north of Simonds Stadium.

When Slater Square was unveiled in 2013, Cats CEO Brian Cook said Slater “epitomised all that was great about the club, the game and indeed the patriotism of his time”.

Slater has no known grave, but is commemorated at the Villers-Bretonneux memorial. Two years ago, Rob and Karen Gaylard made a “very humbling” pilgrimage to the site.

“In this beautifully maintained place where once there’d been such horrible carnage, all of a sudden you find this name that you’ve travelled halfway around the world to see,” Gaylard said.

“I obviously never knew Joe, but it certainly brought a tear to the eye.”

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