

TRIUMPHS & TRAGEDIES

Jimmy Wilson, Geelong's greatest player of its pre-AFL/VFL days, was also a legend of the 'sport of kings' and part of a famous sporting family.

BEN COLLINS

CHARLES BROWNLOW

JIMMY WILSON

EARLY SUPERSTAR: Jimmy Wilson, fourth from right in the bottom row of this 1882 Geelong team photo, was arguably the greatest player of the game's early years. On his right is Charles Brownlow, after whom football's most prestigious individual award is named.
HISTORIC PHOTOS: COURTESY BOB GARTLAND COLLECTION

For a family so synonymous with winning, the legendary Wilsons of Geelong endured extraordinary loss.

Remarkably, in the latter part of the 19th century, the Wilsons dominated two of Australia's most popular sports at the same time.

Jimmy Wilson – arguably the greatest footballer in the game's early years – and younger brother Billy are the only men to have achieved the astonishing double of winning elite-level football premierships and a Melbourne Cup.

This brilliant pair piloted Geelong to its first four premierships in the VFA, then the pre-eminent football competition, but gained lasting international fame in the sport of kings – Jimmy as a trainer and Billy as a jockey.

Their sire, James Wilson snr, was Geelong president during that golden era and was a leading horse trainer.

It was said that 'Old Jim' proved to be "as good at turning out footballers as Derby and Cup winners".

For all their celebrated triumphs, the Wilsons were beset by several tragedies – and a salacious family secret that has only recently surfaced.

However, the irrepressible Wilsons took the bit between their teeth and continued to live life as though they were racing the clock.

A Yorkshireman, Old Jim migrated to Victoria at 16 in 1845 – more than a decade before Australian Football was first played.

He married Mary Jamieson and they settled in Hamilton, where they had six children, including two boys, the eldest of the brood being 'Young Jim' (born 1856) and Billy (1859).

In 1863, Mary Wilson died at 28, leaving her husband to raise six children under the age of seven.

By then, Old Jim – who would marry twice more – had built a strong reputation as a racehorse trainer, finishing second in the previous year's Melbourne Cup with Musidora.

He established the world-famous St Albans Stud and a 30-room mansion (now heritage-listed) on the Barwon River near Geelong.

The property might well have once been an Aboriginal burial ground because many skulls were uncovered during digging works.

Old Jim's prime period was 1870-77 when he won two Melbourne Cups and was second on four occasions.

"Holy smoke, the Melbourne Cup is a hard race to win," he'd muse while stroking his beard.

Old Jim was the revered 'Wizard of St Albans', hailed "the best horse



FORMIDABLE ATHLETES:
Portraits of the 1881 Geelong team, featuring captain Jimmy Wilson (left) and brother Billy.



trainer of his day in Australia" – a status his sons certainly helped him achieve as frightfully young jockeys.

Young Jim started at 12, rode in his first Melbourne Cup at 13 (weighing just 24kg), and finished second at both 14 and 15.

Billy Wilson, at 13 or 14, rode 1873 winner Don Juan to victory in a then-record time, while Old Jim's 1876 sensation Briseis – the first of only three fillies to win the Cup – won by six lengths with an 11-year-old jockey, the youngest ever.

Young Jim's toughness was evident when he suffered a broken collarbone in a steeplechase, but rode on and won.

The Wilson boys hung up their whips in their mid-teens because

they grew too big, but continued to become formidable athletes.

In his younger days, Old Jim had acquitted himself well against professional fighters and his sons were also handy with their fists – particularly Jimmy, who would "sooner fight than feed".

Old Jim, who staged some illegal bare-knuckle fights among the willows at St Albans Stud, delighted in regaling people with a story about how his eldest son was a 'coodabeen' boxing world champion.

When ex-world champ Jem Mace visited St Albans, he asked whether the muscular Young Jim could box, and Old Jim told his son to "get the gloves".

After sparring with the youngster, Mace told Old Jim: "If you'll let me take this lad to England, Mr Wilson, I'll make him champion of the world in a year."

But Young Jim was too valuable as his father's right-hand man to accept the offer.

However, his physical prowess came to the fore on the football field.

The Wilson boys first attracted attention for Geelong Imperial, where Old Jim was president. The trio then joined Geelong, where

“ I’LL MAKE HIM CHAMPION OF THE WORLD IN A YEAR

EX-WORLD CHAMPION JEM MACE ON JIMMY WILSON'S BOXING ABILITY

the Boys starred in the club's first premierships in 1878-80 and 1882, the last three with Old Jim as president and Young Jim as captain (which was basically a coaching role in those days).

Billy Wilson, more easy-going than his stern father and brother, was a high-marking follower – a star – but his brother was a superstar.

Indeed, Jimmy Wilson and Carlton champion George Coulthard were generally regarded as the two greatest footballers of the game's early days. Some rated Wilson superior.

A powerful man of 178cm and 82kg, he was an impassable defender but could be a match-winner anywhere with his ferocity, weaving runs and long kicking.

Football great Jack Worrall, later a prominent journalist, recalled Jimmy Wilson as "a mighty power in the football world", declaring his fame "will never die".

"He played like a man possessed. There was no holding or stopping him, and he came through fearlessly and gloriously," Worrall wrote in *The Australasian* in 1936.

"It is questionable, indeed, whether he ever had an equal on the football field."

A.R. Clarke, an old Geelong teammate and close friend of the Wilsons, observed: "The skipper could run 100 yards (91.4m) in 11 seconds, dropkick 60 yards (55m) at any time, had immense strength, and the courage of a lion. He ... was beautifully made, a perfect figure of a man."

GRANDEUR: The world-famous St Albans Stud mansion established by Big Jim Wilson on the Barwon River near Geelong.
PHOTOS: COURTESY WILSONS REAL ESTATE, GEELONG



Wilson, who captained Victoria, also possessed unmatched leadership skills.

A great team builder, he'd invite teammates to St Albans Stud for bonding sessions. He also insisted on high training standards.

Clarke, who Jimmy Wilson called 'Canary' because of his blond hair, recalled being brought back to earth while playing on a wing during match practice.

"Being a fast runner and quick on my feet, (I) was lucky enough

“**IT IS QUESTIONABLE WHETHER HE EVER HAD AN EQUAL ON THE FOOTBALL FIELD**”

FOOTBALL GREAT JACK WORRALL ON JIMMY WILSON

to beat my opponent to it, dodge a couple of others and got my kick," Clarke wrote.

"A proud youngster returning to his place was relieved of some of his pride by hearing his captain call, 'Very pretty, Canary, but the ball's back again. If you had kicked to Jack Field, he could have passed to Percy Douglass, and the goal was a certainty.'

"A lesson for me and for others who heard him as well."

As can happen with iconic figures, the odd story of Wilson's deeds have been greatly embellished, as was the case in the retelling of an incident in a big game against South Melbourne.

The Southerners thought they'd goaled, but a behind was signalled. As they argued the point, so the story went, Wilson kicked in, regained possession, ran down the field and kicked the winning goal just before the final siren.

In truth, his kick-in simply started the chain that resulted in a goal to a teammate soon after half-time.

Despite being a legend in his own lifetime, Wilson remained admirably modest.

Once as he travelled by train from Melbourne to Geelong, he overheard a heated argument over who was a better footballer, Jimmy Wilson or his teammate George Watson.

Wilson listened in silence until the man championing his cause asked him: "Young fellow, who do you consider the better player of the two?"

A SCANDALOUS SECRET

● 'Young Jim' Wilson's personal stud book makes interesting reading.

It seems the legendary Geelong footballer and Melbourne Cup-winning trainer had an extra-marital affair with a housekeeper at his Bonny Vale stud that produced a love child.

The revelation, apparently a closely guarded secret during Wilson's life as it would have scandalised an upstanding family, links the Cats great to later generations of prominent footballers, including two premiership stars.

New genealogical research found that Wilson had a previously unknown relationship with Janet McIntyre (born in 1860, four years his junior) that spawned a son, Claude Stanley Wilson, in December 1895.

The problem was that Wilson was already a married father.

In January 1885, he'd wed Jessie Cunningham – the daughter of popular, Boston-born Geelong mayor George Cunningham – and they'd had a daughter, Rose (who in turn had a daughter in 1909 and died in 1924).

Wilson died in 1935 and 'his beloved wife' Jessie was buried with him the next year.

Paul Hallam (Claude Wilson's grandson and Wilson's great-grandson) said he'd been told his grandfather had been an illegitimate child of Jimmy Wilson's.

Claude Wilson inherited his sire's name but none of his wealth, growing up in squalor in Burnley, in inner Melbourne.

It's unknown if father and son had any contact.

Claude Wilson was a 20-year-old labourer when he volunteered for service in

World War I, in which he was gassed, causing health problems for the rest of his life (he died in 1957 at 61).

He also served time in a military prison in France for desertion before being dishonourably discharged and, consequently, forfeited any war medals.

Claude Wilson (right) married New-Zealand-born Isabella O'Halloran (a sister of Richmond dual premiership great Tom O'Halloran and a grand-aunt of Hawthorn dual premiership defender David O'Halloran) and their son Stan played six games for the Tigers in 1949.

Despite the sad tale, Hallam – whose middle name is Wilson – is thrilled with his famous bloodlines.

"The Wilsons' achievements are absolutely sensational and they give me a really big kick of pride," said the 59-year-old Cats fan from Gherang.

"To be so multi-talented, such great athletes and so tenacious – what men they must've been.

"To see the photograph of Jim Wilson jnr out the front of Geelong footy ground just makes me beam with pride."

Young Jim is one of only three Geelong football identities honoured in the Legends Plaza at Cats headquarters.

BEN COLLINS



“George Watson,” Wilson replied.
 “What do you know about the game?” the other man snarled.
 “And who are you, anyhow?”

“Jim Wilson,” came the soft reply.
 When Wilson considered relocating to Melbourne in 1881, he was approached by Coulthard’s Carlton, but he remained with Geelong – for the time being anyway.

Wilson took several of his father’s horses to Adelaide to run in the May racing carnival, so he started the 1882 season with South Australian club Norwood.

But he returned to Geelong mid-season and led ‘The Invincibles’ to another premiership – their fourth in five years.

One of the great careers then ended when Wilson was forced to retire at just 26 due to severe rheumatism.

Just nine of his 89 games had been losses. Billy’s 75 games included just five losses.

They’d set up Geelong for the greatest era by any club – seven flags in nine seasons from 1878-86.

Young Jim served as the club’s vice-president under his father before being president himself in 1887-88.

He then pursued horse training and breeding alongside his father.

Old Jim was a two-time widower. His second wife Esther also died young, at just 30, in 1872.

Wilson snr suffered another setback in 1886 when he was gored by a bull and thereafter he was unable to sleep lying down. He then streamlined his racing and breeding operation and sold St Albans Stud.

In 1930, the stud came to prominence again when it was revealed as a secret hideaway for the legendary Phar Lap after a gunman tried to shoot the wonder horse three days before the Melbourne Cup, which he duly won.

More hardship followed when Billy Wilson died on May 3, 1890, aged 30 or 31, after severe influenza led to “paralysis of the head”.

Young Jim picked up the pieces and established a superb seaside facility he named ‘Bonny Vale’, near Ocean Grove.

His greatest moment in racing was when his charge Merriwee was the strongest “swimmer” in the rain-soaked 1899 Melbourne Cup.



COURTESY COLLECTION: MUSEUM OF APPLIED ARTS AND SCIENCES



Like his father, Young Jim was indefatigable (he trained horses into his 70s), community-minded, charitable and a generous boss, but was “morose in appearance”, could be gruff and was wary of strangers.

He warned young jockeys: “Keep your eyes open and mouth shut.”

This philosophy had served Young Jim well.

“A reserved man, he did not seek publicity. Nor did he waste words, but when he chose to speak, you could absolutely rely upon hearing the truth,” *The Sporting Globe’s* racing correspondent ‘Fernhill’ noted.

“Reared in a pretty hard school, he learned to take good and adverse fortune as ‘all in the game’. He was

RACING ROYALTY: (top) a painting of 1871 Sydney Cup winner Mermaid with trainer Old Jim Wilson (left), owner Edward Twomey and jockey Jimmy Wilson; (above) Old Jim (right) with fellow Melbourne Cup-winning trainer James Redfearn; and (left) the trophy presented to Jimmy Wilson as the winning trainer of the 1899 Melbourne Cup with Merriwee.

not unduly elated in success, nor did he complain when the wheel turned against him.”

Surprisingly, though, Young Jim was also a practical joker.

During trackwork at Bonny Vale, he noticed a neighbouring racehorse owner secretly timing his runners from the judge’s box, so he upended it and the humiliated spy trudged off in disgust.

After another perceived insult, the same man challenged him to a duel, so Young Jim insisted they use pistols. The aghast challenger withdrew.

All good things come to an end.

For Old Jim, it was in 1917 at 88.

As for Young Jim – whose weight ballooned to around 100kg – an illness that prevented him attending a Melbourne Cup for the first time in 70 years claimed his life 11 days later on November 16, 1935, at 79.

Old Jim and Young Jim had been close friends with the powerful John Wren – the notorious businessman, racing identity and Collingwood Football Club benefactor – who was a pall-bearer at their funerals.

In tribute, Wren named one of his racehorses Wilson and another Bonny Vale. Of the latter, Wren said that if it became half as good as the man he was named after, he’d be another Carbine.

• Thanks to AFL statistics and history consultant Col Hutchinson and fellow historian Mark Pennings – author of the *Origins of Australian Football* series – for sharing their research.

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