

“Handball, handball, handball!” - An Analysis of the Myths Surrounding the 1970 VFL Grand Final



Given the allegedly stunning effectiveness of Carlton coach Ron Barassi’s half time injunction to his players to play on at every opportunity, and use handball in order to open up the game, the 1970 VFL grand final has earned itself a prominent place in football’s unofficial, anecdotal hall of fame. But just how faithfully did the Carlton players adhere to their coach’s instructions? And to what extent did their doing so influence the result of the game? Although statistics can be notoriously misleading, this is arguably one occasion when a statistical analysis might afford some insight.

The table below displays totals for each category per quarter as well as for the entire match. The figures in brackets represent the percentages (rounded up) of those totals which could be deemed to be effective, i.e. in the case of disposals, those which resulted in the team retaining possession, and in the case of shots for goal, those which were successful in registering full points.

Drop Kicks include **stab passes**.

Punt Kicks include **flat punts, torpedo punts, and checkside/reverse screw punts**.

All other classifications should be self-explanatory.

CARLTON					
	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	Match
Drop kicks	4 (0%)	4 (25%)	6 (50%)	4 (24%)	18 (28%)
Punt kicks	23 (13%)	29 (38%)	34 (44%)	35 (34%)	121 (34%)
Drop punts	20 (25%)	17 (35%)	17 (71%)	16 (63%)	70 (47%)
Grubbers	1 (0%)	1 (100%)	2 (50%)	4 (75%)	8 (63%)
Soccer off the ground	1 (0%)	0	0	3 (0%)	4 (0%)
All kicks	49 (16%)	51 (37%)	59 (53%)	62 (42%)	221 (38%)
Handballs	9 (67%)	11 (64%)	19 (63%)	13 (69%)	52 (65%)
Contested marks	6	3	12	12	33
Uncontested marks	6	3	6	8	23
Playing on	3	2	13	7	25

COLLINGWOOD					
	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	Match
Drop kicks	4 (25%)	3 (67%)	12 (50%)	2 (50%)	21 (48%)
Punt kicks	31 (47%)	20 (45%)	22 (32%)	23 (17%)	102 (34%)
Drop punts	34 (44%)	29 (52%)	23 (70%)	18 (33%)	104 (50%)
Grubbers	1 (100%)	0	3 (0%)	0	4 (25%)
Soccer off the ground	0	1 (100%)	0	0	1 (100%)
All kicks	78 (42%)	53 (51%)	60 (62%)	43 (26%)	232 (43%)
Handballs	17 (71%)	7 (100%)	8 (50%)	7 (100%)	39 (77%)
Contested marks	6	10	10	2	28
Uncontested marks	15	6	9	8	38
Playing on	7	0	10	4	21

It seems evident from the above table that the drop kick was well on its way toward extinction, although a handful of players in this particular game - Jackson and Robertson for Carlton, Greening for Collingwood - continued to favour it. Meanwhile, the drop punt was emerging as the main alternative to the flat punt or torpedo. By the end of the seventies, the drop punt would be the most popular kick in the game, while the drop kick would have virtually disappeared. A decade earlier, by contrast, the drop kick was still quite prevalent, while the drop punt tended to be regarded almost as an oddity. Exemplifying this, during the 1961 VFL grand final between Hawthorn and Footscray, of the 437 kicks effected during the match, only 2 were drop punts, with the remainder comprising 293 punts, 105 drop kicks, 24 soccer kicks and 13 grubbers. (For comparison, the equivalent statistics for the 1977 VFL grand final between North Melbourne and Collingwood were: drop punts 255; punts 172; drop kicks 1; soccer kicks 4; grubbers 18). In rather less than two decades therefore, one important facet of the game - kicking - had altered fundamentally. [1]

BEFORE and AFTER



What then of the “play on” game? As the above statistics show, the Carlton players utilised handball more frequently in the second half - 32 instances as opposed to 20 - and they certainly played on a lot more - 20 times as opposed to 5. Moreover, their handballs were just as effective after half time as they had been before (65%). That said, one is forced to question just how much of an overall impact 21 accurate handballs (the total managed by the Blues all game) could have had on the eventual outcome. Of somewhat greater significance, perhaps, is the fact that Carlton enjoyed 56% of the possession after half time compared to Collingwood’s 44% - an exact reversal of the first half statistics. Carlton’s disposals were also noticeably more accurate in the second half (51% compared to 34%), while Collingwood’s disposals became increasingly wayward as the match went on (44% accuracy in the second half compared with 50% in the first). As far as playing on goes, the Magpies did this only marginally fewer times overall than the Blues (21 as against 25), and so it seems unlikely that this factor alone could have had a significant impact on the outcome of the match. Carlton’s players did handball more than their Collingwood opponents, but again this is arguably more than counterbalanced by the Magpies having had more kicks, taken more marks, and overall been more accurate with their disposal by both hand (43% to 38%) and foot (77% to 65%).

As was noted above, however, statistics can be notoriously misleading. In the aforementioned 1961 grand final, for example, there were a total of 88 handballs, only 3 fewer than in 1970. However, no one watching the two matches back to back could be in any doubt as to the game’s having evolved significantly during the years between them. In 1961, handball tended to be used as a last resort, most notably when a player was being tackled and was thereby being prevented from kicking the ball; it was hardly ever used creatively or offensively, and only once during the entire match did either team produce a sequence of as many as three successive handpasses. In contrast, by 1970 a player in possession of the ball would often see a handpass as his preferred method of disposal, regardless of how much immediate pressure he was under. In other words, handball had become part of a team’s offensive armoury. (The other point to be made is that in 1961 it was technically easier to effect a handball than would later be the case, given that the flick pass - which when perpetrated by the likes of Footscray captain-coach Ted Whitten was sometimes scarcely distinguishable from a throw - was still legal. Of the 88 handballs executed during the 1961 grand final, 18 were flick passes.)





To suggest, as some people still do, that the 1970 VFL grand final witnessed the “birth of the modern game” is clearly laughable. (Apart from anything else, it presupposes that all significant innovations in football took place in the VFL, which is ludicrous.) However, just as the previous season’s grand final clash between Richmond and Carlton or that of 1967 between Richmond and Geelong had done, it clearly showcased some of the key ways in which the game was evolving, and, given that it was a grand final, this has, perhaps understandably if not quite forgivably, given rise to an inflated perception of its significance. Ultimately, however, it seems perfectly clear that the Blues won the 1970 VFL premiership not because of a revolutionary implementation of the ‘play on’ game (they actually played on more, and more effectively, in their loss to Richmond in the 1969 grand final), but because, after half time, they produced better football than Collingwood. By this is meant that they were more effective at winning the ball, distributed it more accurately, and were able to limit their opponents’ success in doing likewise. In a sense therefore, far from heralding the birth of a new era, the 1970 grand final merely gave one or two minor fresh twists to an age-old story, affirming in effect what anyone who has ever played the game already knows: that success in football hinges much more on aptitude and attitude than tactics.

FOOTNOTE

[1] It should perhaps be mentioned that both the 1961 and 1977 grand finals were played on mild, sunny afternoons, and - most crucially - the playing surface was dry and hard.