

Panthers continue to roar

By Grant Keiller

The lakeside township of Milang is an archetype for many small country communities struggling in today's economic times.

While water sports enjoy a resurgence as Lake Alexandrina returns to its former glory after droughts and low river levels during the past decade, the town is witnessing its sporting teams drying up.

Milang was founded around 1853 and became one of the busiest ports in SA for River Murray traders during the 1860 to 1880s period, with many goods being sent onwards to Adelaide.

In its heyday boat building and repairs to paddle streamers that plied the river also featured prominently.

With businessman Albert Landseer erecting a large store and flour mill to supplement his shipping concerns – combined with being situated on the main land route from Adelaide to Melbourne – Milang's population swelled to approximately 1200-1300.

Alas the building of the Adelaide-Morgan railway line provided a more direct and shorter route, so business disappeared rapidly even though Milang also gained a new line.

In more recent times the railway was scrapped in the 1970s, dairy farms have dwindled and the primary school numbers dropped from around 100 to a count of 30-odd.

Luckily tourism has been a strong point for the small community throughout its history with the town's population (215 according to Census 2006) doubling at times over the summer holidays, due in part to the many shacks along the foreshore, the annual Milang Goolwa Freshwater Classic sailing event and the Port Milang Historic Railway Museum.

While the bowls club which has been in its current location since 1938 holds steady with two mens and one ladies team, the cricket, tennis and netball clubs have all gone into recess.

The cricket club had reached the 150-year milestone – having been formed on November 1, 1860 – while tennis was played for in excess of 100 seasons, but neither has continued since 2015.

Hope still flickers that the two clubs may spring back to life at some near-distant point.

Earlier the netball club that was reformed in 1948 disbanded in 2000.

The Milang Football Club was formed in 1881, making it one of the oldest clubs to be affiliated in the Hills Football League (HFL).

As can be gauged from the attached timeline, the Panthers have had their successes and low points, including periods of recess, but remain defiant in keeping the doors open and history alive.

The initial 40 years comprised of challenge games only against neighboring communities, including cruising across the lake to play against the Point McLeay natives and Narrung.

Highlighting how things have changed across the decades, the McLeay natives who journeyed not only to Milang but inland to the likes of Mt Barker etc, on occasion sent the scores back to the homelands by carrier pigeon.

With the brief formation of the Alexandra Football Association for 1922-23, the Blues as they were known initially, played

competitive matches, capped off by winning both premierships.

The first came against former long-time rival Langhorne Creek with whom it clashed in numerous grand finals down the years.

The two clubs even merged for two seasons during the 1950s with the A-grade team playing in the blue and white of Milang, while the B-grade donned the then black of gold of The Creekers.

The 1930s found Milang appearing in Hills Central Football Association (HCFA) B-grade ranks, winning the 1932 flag before later stepping up to A-grade competition.

In an unlucky streak Milang lost the 1938 premiership decider to Kangarilla by four points, the 1939 preliminary final to eventual premier Echunga by five points – after leading by two goals with minutes remaining – and the 1940 grand final by 17 points to Kangarilla.

In 1946 the club continued in HCFA A-grade ranks after WW2, and although having had no team success, captain Bruno Castagna kicked a club record of 19 goals from a score of 37-31 against Strathalbyn B on August 3.

Following the 1952-53 merger with Langhorne Creek, Milang reformed in 1954 and were immediately successful, defeating Happy Valley for the flag.

However, both clubs apparently received a shock in their first meeting at the Valley ground, each wore nearly identical blue and white guernseys – thankfully black and white shorts made it a little easier.

Meanwhile captain George Millhouse – a great goal kicker for the club who was blind in one eye – won the association medal.

A notable addition to this group is the late trucking magnate Allan Scott of Scotts Transport, who was born and later began his business in Milang after WW2, building it up into a multimillion-dollar empire.

He also played for the club and later made a significant financial contribution to the building of the new clubrooms he helped open in 1986.

Scott's involvement in a small community football club is best illustrated by a paragraph from *A Truckie's Dream* – his official biography penned by Graham Greenwood.

"Allan Scott is a mad keen sportsman and long-time sponsor of the Milang Football Club.

"While only a small club, the club banner and his sponsorship record hang proudly in the hallway of his office in the company headquarters in Mt Gambier."

After coming out of another recess in 2010, the current club has stayed within its means while a staunch group of locals keep the traditions of this elder club of Hills football alive in Division 3, while also giving the opportunity to all to play, no matter the grade or ability.

The Panthers are underpinned by coach Peter Kleemann and long-term players such as captain Aaron Dalitz, Adam Kidd, Tim Kleemann, Matt Giles, James Williams and Denny Kelleher, helping keep the dream of another flag alive in Hills football's most southern outpost.

Off the field Lyn and Garry Unwin, Amanda Vivian and Tony Graham are some of the volunteers who are so critical in keeping the club functioning, especially on match days when its all hands to the pump.

Similar scenarios are played out across the State in many a small town or district, as the local sports teams mean more than just wins or losses, but provide an invaluable gathering point for social interaction.



Those assisting to keep the spirit of Milang alive during the 2017 Hills Football League Division 3 season include (rear from left) Garry Vivian, Max Thomas, Daniel Schubert, Richard Van Dijk, Jake Evans, Denny Keller, Sam Copping, Ethan Osmond, Jeff Hann, Aaron Dalitz, Michael Wilson, Tim Kleemann, Lochlan Hesse, Jake Auright and Peter Kleemann.
Front: Amy Di Fabio, Will Werry, Brodie Sheidow, Angus Smith, Paul Barrett, Matt Giles, Kym Rohde, Nicholas Schubert, Dylan Hopgood and James Williams.

Right: Milang Football Club team from circa 1897. The club is believed to date back to 1881, and despite periods of recess, remains one of the oldest affiliates within Hills football.



Successful era for club

The 1960s featured the Milang Football Club becoming very competitive, winning three premierships in five years, and for the first time fielding two senior teams 1961-63, together with a colts team in 1966.

Milang joined the Southern Zone of the newly created HFL in 1967, making the finals every season until 1973.

Highlights included reaching the 1970 grand final, thrashing current HFL premier Hahndorf by 100 points – 26-21 to 9-23 – in the 1972 first semifinal, and from the mid 70s, Milang started to field teams in all four grades, two senior and two colts.

Well known names of the era comprised past West Adelaide ruckman Len O'Driscoll, who leased a farm in the area, key forward Peter McCarthy who won three Mail Medals and five club best and fairest awards, and centreman Henry Jones with three best and fairest trophies and third place in the 1967 Mail Medal as team-mate McCarthy finished runner up.

Defender Robert Ness was one of the club's toughest players ever – according to his contemporaries – and he later went on to coach the club, just missing out on the final four by one point and then percentage in 1974-75.

Many memorable matches and great rivalries were played and developed over time within the HCFA and later the HFL.

Milang's record against its long-term southern rivals in the HFL during this period reads as follows: Hahndorf 7 wins/1 draw/12 losses; Langhorne Creek 15-12; Echunga 12/1/18; Meadows 17/1/15; Kangarilla 11/1/20 and Macclesfield 8/15.

A move to the Great Southern Football League occurred in 1979 with a new guernsey design implemented as the white V was replaced with the now familiar MFC on the front of the blue jumper, and the Panthers nickname replaced the Blues.

Milang met with little success and eventually the club went into recess in 1985, but a move back into Hills ranks led to the club reforming in the Zone 2 B-grade competition, where the Panthers again made grand finals and also won the 1987 Courier Cup.

The Panthers shifted throughout various grades, with 1989 providing reason to celebrate.

Coached by Trevor Ware, and taking part in the A3-grade competition, Milang defeated defending dual premier Mt Lofty by a point in a thrilling grand final at Callington Oval, sparking great jubilation around the lakeside community.

The club moved back into A-grade competition in Zone 2 for a few seasons, with the 2000 season producing some wonderful memories – reaching the preliminary final and Shane Russell winning the Mail Medal.

Current president Garry Vivian – the humble but tireless worker keeping the Panthers purring along – first played colts and A-grade football at the age of 15 for Milang back in 1966 when the club was still in the HCFA.

Vivian continued playing regularly up until 2013, however, during 2015 he celebrated his 50th season of football with Milang by adding another game.

It further enhanced a tally of 500 games plus, with his career highlight being the recipient of the best and fairest award during the 1989 premiership campaign.

Milang have been blessed down the years with many priceless club people including the oval committee of 1957 – Claude Sim, Peter Bagley, Lloyd Deer and Alvin Hopgood – who were assisted as it is common in many a small community by the local population rallying to the cause.

It is believed an oval in the Memorial Gardens was used as the venue for cricket/football from the 1800s until around WW1.

The current oval was redeveloped, with the slope of the oval markedly reduced, new grass planted, and in 1966 an old tin shed gave way to the current change rooms.

It meant for one season that Milang's home games were played on a paddock within the McGuinness farm, with hessian walled toilets amid some primitive facilities.

Ground facilities have certainly changed with Milang oval's pristine surface and wide expanses always a treat to play on, cars able to circle the playing arena to witness the action, and an excellent bar and canteen area available.

From studying the club's honor board, names such as Schmoock, Landseer, Ness, Bagley, Hopgood and Blackwell are but a few of the long-term families connected with not only the district, but having multiple generations play or contribute down the years for the football club.

Grant Blackwell is a great example of contributing on both sides of the fence, with a record breaking seven best and fairest awards, 1973 Senior Colts medal and spending 26 years irrigating and mowing the oval.



Milang Football Club Timeline

1881 – club formed playing challenge matches against Langhorne Creek, Finnis, Strathalbyn, Mt Barker, Goolwa, Macclesfield, Point McLeay, Narrung among others.
1905 – played 13, won 10, lost 3, game 494 points to opponents 242.
1922 – joined Alexandra Football Association. Won G/F 5-12 to Langhorne Creek 5-5.
1923 – won GF 4-12 to Finnis 4-3.
1924-25 – played challenge games only.
1926 – transferred to HFA.
1928 – lost semifinal to Murray Bridge Rovers: finished third.
1932 – moved to the HCFA B grade. Won G/F 8-9 to Langhorne Creek 6-10.
1933 – lost GF 4-7 to Langhorne Creek 8-12.
1937 – Ross Martin won Mail Medal with 30 votes and B Rowe equal third with 18 votes.
1938 – lost GF 4-17 to Kangarilla 5-13. Alan Ross equal third Mail Medal with 21 votes.
1940 – lost GF 8-11 to Kangarilla 10-16. Alan Ross third Mail Medal with 19 votes.
1952-53 – merged with Langhorne Creek to form the Alexandra Football Club in HCFA.
1954 – back under their own name playing in HCFA B-grade. Won GF 9-7 to Happy Valley 7-8. George Millhouse won Douglas Trophy for best and fairest in B-grade.
1961 – won GF 8-5 to Langhorne Creek 4-8.
1963 – lost GF 8-7 to Meadows 7-14.

1964 – won GF 11-11 to Nairne 8-6.
1965 – won A2 GF 10-14 to Langhorne Creek 4-11.
1966 – Peter McCarthy won Mail Medal with 20 votes.
1967 – joined HFL in Southern Zone. Peter McCarthy second and Henry Jones third in Mail Medal.
1969-70 – Peter McCarthy won successive Mail Medals with 24 and 20 votes.
1970 – lost GF 9-10 to Kangarilla 15-10.
1979 – moved to the Great Southern Football League.
1985 – in recess
1986 – Rejoined the HFL. Lost Zone 2 B-grade G/F 5-9 to Kersbrook 7-4.
1987 – Lost Zone 2 B-grade GF 9-8 to Kersbrook 16-12. Won Zone 2 B-grade Courier Cup
1989 – won A3 GF 6-6 to Mt Lofty 6-5. David Ball won A3 Medal. Peter Wilson A3 leading goal kicker.
1990 – combined with Macclesfield
1991 – Resumed under own name in Zone 2 A2-grade.
1992 – moved to A3-grade.
1995 – in recess.
1996 – Div 2 B-grade
1998 – moved to A3.
1999 – joined Div 2 with A-grade and A2-grade.
2000 – lost Div 2 A-grade preliminary final. Shane Russell won Mail Medal with 27 votes.
2006-09 – in recess
2010 – back playing in A3-grade.
2013 – lost GF 5-7 to Blackwood 12-4.
2015 – lost GF 1-4 to Blackwood 17-1.
2016 – Jake Moisey won Div 3 Medal.