



## ROYAL HISTORICAL SOCIETY OF VICTORIA INC.

239 A'Beckett Street, Melbourne 3000

29 January 2023

### **HERITAGE COUNCIL REFERENCE: ED-RECOMMENDATION-PUNT-ROAD-OVAL-NOT-INCLUDE-1.pdf**

I write on behalf of the Royal Historical Society of Victoria to object to the Statement of Recommendation from the Executive Director, Heritage Victoria, that Punt Road Oval, including the Jack Dyer Stand, is not of state-level cultural heritage significance and should not be included in the Victorian Heritage Register.

The Royal Historical Society of Victoria functions both as the peak body for 340 local history societies and as the historical society for central Melbourne. In the first capacity, the RHSV seeks to support the conservation of heritage across the state, including its capital city Melbourne. In the second, the Society seeks to preserve the heritage of the city and its inner area. On both counts the RHSV is concerned to protect and preserve the Jack Dyer Stand and objects to this decision of the EDR, which, by passing responsibility to the City of Melbourne, knowingly condemns the stand to inevitable and certain demolition.

We ask the Heritage Council to overturn the EDR on the grounds of inadequate consideration of relevant issues and evidence under Criterion A: Importance in the course, or pattern, of Victoria's cultural history; Criterion D: Importance in demonstrating the principal characteristics of a class of cultural places and objects; and Criterion G: Strong or special association with a particular present-day community or cultural group for social, cultural or spiritual reasons.

Criterion A: The EDR discusses all the land encompassed by the Punt Road Oval but we believe the significance of the Jack Dyer Stand can and should be evaluated separately from the oval as a whole. The EDR judges it to be wanting in respect of the State Level 2 significance test, which requires the historical associations of the place to be 'understood better than most other places or objects in Victoria with substantially the same association'. In subjecting the stand to comparison with other such structures the EDR resorts to assertion rather than evidence-based argument and uses ahistorical methodology in assessing the Jack Davey Stand and the oval against all cricket and football grounds and stands, urban and rural, undifferentiated by era or purpose.

Assessment should, rather, be related to the relevant subjects in Victoria's Framework of Historical Themes, especially 6.3 and 6.6, 8.4 and 9.1 and 9.4, and the focus should be on the factors influencing the transformation and popularisation of the local code of football, now called Australian Rules, which reflected and influenced all these themes and with which the Jack Dyer Stand is inextricably linked. In doing so, the assessment should acknowledge that the stand and the ground have resonance well beyond Richmond teams and supporters and must recognise the overwhelming importance of VFL competition in this state's popular culture. The crucial period, 1900–39, saw a demographic shift from the inner suburbs to new suburbs on the perimeter, the

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growth of electrified and better coordinated mass transport systems linking inner city traditional club grounds to the outer suburbs where many football supporters now lived, and the new importance and accessibility of popular entertainment and amusements, including football. The Jack Dyer Stand, conceived in 1907, completed and opened by Prime Minister Andrew Fisher in 1914, and extended in 1927 in conjunction with expansion of football's popularity and the Richmond team's success, represents a distinct phase in Victoria's cultural history when mass spectatorship and the popular culture of barracking and attachment to clubs reached new heights, and football asserted its predominance over cricket and all other spectator sports. The work of Chris McConville on interwar sport and popular culture should be consulted in order to provide a more sophisticated and detailed historical context that is both specific and broad ranging.

While the Jack Dyer Stand is certainly not the only surviving grandstand from this period of the state's cultural history, it is of far greater significance than other pre-WWII survivors, contrary to the EDR's assertion that the oval and 'the Jack Dyer Stand do not allow the establishment and success of Australian Rules Football to be better understood than other ovals and grandstands already included in the VHR'. None of the rural stands are associated with the VFL and most are linked to other activities such as cricket, racing and local produce shows. Of the VFL grounds of this period, the MCC and Kardinia Park have been completely rebuilt, South Melbourne is no longer an Australian Rules ground and the stand's significance is compromised by the radical changes to its surrounds and function, and the St Kilda stands are linked more closely with cricket than football. The Hawthorn (Glenferrie Oval) Michael Tuck stand is significant as a Moderne structure but signifies a middle-class rather than the mass spectatorship for which the era is most notable. The Brunswick Street grandstand precedes the period of expanded popular support represented by the Jack Dyer Stand and its sightlines have been compromised, whereas the Ryder Stand at Victoria Park is a basic unadorned structure noted for its Depression-era origins rather than the broader expansion of popular culture characterising the first 4 decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It is also noted for its local associations rather than any statewide significance—a seeming anomaly in the VHR. The Reynolds Stand at Essendon bears no resemblance to the original design, and the Alderman Gardiner Stand at Princes Park, Carlton, has been compromised by the overwhelming former John Elliott Stand and other brutalist buildings, and its sightlines have been blocked.

On the basis of this more evidence-backed comparison, it is clear that no other surviving grandstand of this formative period illustrates so clearly a continued association not only with a VFL club but also with the major historical developments in popular culture and urban expansion characterising the first 4 decades of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Criterion D: The EDR assesses the Jack Dyer Stand and the Punt Road Oval in the context of an impossibly broad range of sporting grounds and stands, and the resulting comparisons offered do not relate to the significance of VFL grandstands built in the period of expansion in popular culture signified by the growth of the VFL from 1900 to 1940. The comparisons referred to—the MCG, Waverley Park, Victoria Park and the St Kilda Cricket Ground—are not comparative at all, Victoria Park and St Kilda for reasons noted above, the MCG because no stands from the period survive and the ground is not related specifically to the expansion in Australian Rules football at that time, and Waverley Park because it was built well outside the period of cultural expansion represented by the Jack Dyer Stand and most of its stands have been demolished in any case.

In terms of this expansion, the Jack Dyer Stand is the only one that was ever physically expanded, and it thus literally and materially signifies the blossoming of popular spectator sport represented most clearly by the growth of the VFL and its widely distributed support base. It also represents the architectural work across this period of two significant Melbourne architects, Thomas Watt and Son (for the 1914 stand), and Frank Stapley (for the 1927 extension).

The Jack Dyer Stand was the first and remains the most distinctive of a series of grandstands VFL clubs built in response to the changing character of Melbourne and Victoria after 1900. They were crucial to ensuring football's ongoing dominance of the state's popular culture and

entertainment. The Jack Dyer Stand is also the most architecturally elaborate of the stands the EDR compares it with. Furthermore, its influential and exceptional character in this class should include the significance of its curvilinear form, arguably pioneered in Victoria in response to the specific needs of an expanded number of spectators—including members and women—demanding better and protected views of the game on a ground shaped in the form of an oval. The Jack Dyer Stand is the most significant remaining grandstand of the period in that class, a class that is inextricably linked to Australian Rules football and the growth of the VFL. It is also significantly located in the southeast corner of Yarra Park where other such curvilinear stands were built but have since been demolished. As the EDR acknowledges, it is largely intact in its original form but also in the extended form that represents the expansion of popular culture of the period, and in this sense is not only a particularly fine example of its class but arguably uniquely representative.

Further, given the advantage of the sightlines accorded by its situation at the southeast corner of Yarra Park and its proximity to the elevated railway line including Richmond Station as well as Punt Road, protection of the Jack Dyer Stand provides a unique opportunity to preserve a significant historical building within the already protected Yarra Park boundaries.

Criterion G: While the EDR acknowledges that the oval satisfies Step 1 in signifying a strong association between Richmond football supporters, as does the Jack Dyer Stand, albeit to a lesser extent, the recommendation asserts that this attachment does not resonate beyond this particular cohort of football followers to the broader Victorian community. No evidence is provided for this assertion. Using the framework of historical themes, specifically those referred to above, and the context of interwar expansion of the popular support base for Australian Rules football which laid the foundation for its continuing widespread cultural significance in present-day Victoria as a whole, a more convincing case can be made for the much wider attachment of Victorians to the Jack Dyer Stand and football heritage generally than allegiance to just one club. Further, given a major rationale for protection of Victoria Park is its importance in the history of ‘one of the best-known Victorian sporting clubs’, it would seem inconsistent to exclude preservation of an important aspect of Richmond’s football heritage when its support base is the largest of any club in the league. However, it is more important to recognise that appreciation and valuing of football heritage extends beyond allegiance to one club and has been formative to the identity of a very large number of Victorians for over a century. It remains the most popular spectator sport in the state. The EDR’s assertion to the contrary that allegiance to one club does not resonate more widely to support for protecting football cultural markers as a whole has no evidentiary base.

Further Comments: We note that, in the Heritage Impact Statement that accompanied the original permit application from the Richmond Football Club for demolition of the Jack Dyer Stand, Lovell Chen consulted Cox Architects and summarised 6 alternative options. One of these was ‘Option 4: Retain Jack Dyer Stand and redevelop Swinburne Centre’, which would preserve the Jack Dyer Stand while still allowing for the optimal training oval dimensions central to the club’s development proposal. Although it would necessitate added costs for the redevelopment of the Swinburne Centre, this is infinitely preferable to the demolition of the highly significant Jack Dyer Stand. The EDR does not canvass this option at all.

We also note that the EDR supports inclusion of the oval and grandstand in the Heritage Overlay of the Melbourne Planning Scheme. However, we contend this is an abrogation of responsibility since the MCC has already reached an agreement with the Richmond Football Club conceding demolition of the Jack Dyer Stand, though the record of discussion has not been made available for public scrutiny. Thus, appeal to the Heritage Council remains the only recourse for those interested in preserving this important heritage building. We hope the Council will undertake further investigation and hold panel hearings.

Yours sincerely,

A handwritten signature in cursive script, appearing to read 'Judith Smart'.

Dr Judith Smart AM, RRHSV  
Co-Deputy Chair, Heritage Committee,  
Royal Historical Society of Victoria.