

The Victorian Premier League 1991–2006: a short history

By Roy Hay

The top level of competition in Victorian football, known as the State League since 1958, became the Victorian Premier League in 1991. In 2006, it is called the Vodaphone Cup but still involves the leading clubs in the state in a conventional league season, followed by a play-off series. The standard has risen steadily in recent years and this is reflected in a substantial increase in attendances. Developments at national level, in particular the inception of the A-League, have benefited the state competition. Former National Soccer League clubs, the Melbourne Knights and South Melbourne have rejoined the league, raising the level and helping to bring back many supporters. Promotion and relegation ensures that every club in Victoria can aspire to membership of the Premier League and new clubs often do well, though none, so far, has matched North Geelong which won the Premiership in the first grand final in 1992 in its first season in the league.

In 1991, Brunswick Juventus won the first Premier League from Bulleen. There was no finals series and Juventus topped the ladder on goal difference, thrashing Mooroolbark 6-1 in the final round, while Bulleen beat Northcote City four-nil. Juventus had been runner-up the previous two years.

North Geelong won the first division of the State League in 1991 with Branko Culina at the helm and went on to win the Premier League in 1992 after two excellent finals against Juventus. The Grand Final was locked at one-all at the end of normal time, but three goals in extra time saw North home. North's team included Steve Horvat, the Cervinski brothers, Bogdan Bonk and Robbie Markovac.

Bulleen topped the league in 1993 four points ahead of Fawkner with North Geelong, Sunshine George Cross and St Albans making up the top five. The top two went all the way to the grand final won by Bulleen by two goals to nil. Adrian Pender was awarded the inaugural Jimmy Rooney medal for the best player in the final, but it was Robbie Krajacic of Bulleen who lifted the trophy.

Port Melbourne Sharks emulated North Geelong in reaching the grand final in its first season in 1994 after being promoted along with champion Werribee City from Division One of the State League. The Sharks survived two penalty shoot-outs against Bulleen to gain its place in the final, where Preston Lions proved too strong in a three-one win. Two goals to teenager Chris Sterjovski helped him to the Rooney Medal.

In 1995 Altona Magic and Bulleen played off in the grand final and drew two-all at the end of normal time. A magical intervention by Soccerroo John Markovski in the first minute of extra time when he headed home a cross from Rooney medalist Chris Emsovski proved to be the winner for the team from Paisley Park. The other scorers in a high quality final were Dale White with two goals for Bulleen and Ice Kutlesovski and Nick Georgopoulos for Altona.

The Magic won back to back titles in 1996 after an even closer finish in the grand final against Heidelberg United. After taking the minor premiership Altona was favoured to win, but it was three-all at the end of normal and extra-time and it took a penalty shoot-out to decide the title. Darren McGrath was the hero for the Magic saving Brian McNichol's spot-kick while all five Magic players converted theirs. Henry Velkovski's final penalty caused coach Gary Cole to lose his hair, since he had promised to have it shaved off if the midfielder scored the winning goal.

Bulleen Inter Kings were favoured to win the premiership in 1997, but once again the Magic had a surprise in store with another narrow Grand Final win by four goals to two after extra-time. Two goals to Damon Collina kept Bulleen on track but Simon Micevski and Sash Becvinoski replied for the Magic, while Zdravko Atanasovski's cross was deflected for an own goal and Becvinoski made the title secure in extra-time. Savva Rusmir picked up the Rooney Medal and Ian Dobson coached the Magic to its third win.

Bulleen made amends in 1998 defeating the minor premiers St Albans in a see-sawing final by three goals to two. Slavko Rados complete with warpaint, won the Rooney Medal in a losing side, but Bulleen deserved its win when Michael Mazzini, who had scored a spectacular own goal earlier in the match, released Zdravko Atanasovski whose cross led to a simple tap in by Damir Gnjidic after two defenders had collided.

In 1999 and 2000 the Premier League reverted to a first past the post league championship with no finals series. Green Gully Cavaliers had a comfortable five-one win over St Albans Saints in the last round in 1999 under Ian Dobson to secure its first title. Veteran striker Tony Neceski scored the final goal to round off a season in which he finished as Gully's top scorer. The other scorers were George Svigos, Nick Papadopoulos, Zlatko Donev and Daniel Genovesi for Gully and Harry Karl for the Saints. Port Melbourne Sharks finished as runner-up. George Jolevski won the Gold Medal for the third year in a row.

Green Gully retained its title in 2000 despite losing its last match at home to runner-up Bentleigh Greens by three goals to nil. Gully had led the league all season and only came under challenge from Bentleigh in the latter stages. Altona East Phoenix was third followed by Bulleen and Preston.

Heidelberg United coached by Peter Ollerton won the 2001 title after a penalty shoot-out victory over Port Melbourne in the Grand Final. There was some consolation for defeated coach Harry Chalkitis as he was chosen as coach of the year, having taken the Sharks from near relegation the previous season to the final. George Georgiadis and Mile Medjedovic gave the Bergers a two-nil lead just short of the hour mark, but Peter Psarros and a Peter Tsolakis cross which was diverted past his own keeper by Cameron Brown saw the Sharks on terms in normal time. Brown made amends with the final penalty after Jim Kourtis had saved two kicks.

An epic grand final in 2002 saw Preston Lions defeat minor premiers Fawkner Blues by two goals to one. John Sapazovski nearly scored in the first minute in what turned out to

be a Rooney Medal-winning performance. Two early injuries depleted the Lions but Sapsazovski was on hand to tap in the opener after Robert Dolevski challenged Blues' keeper Steven Tilovski. Ante Deak set up Frank Tramontana for Fawkner's equaliser and the game went into extra-time when Nick Cuculevski spotted hesitation in the Blues' defence to chip the winner.

Green Gully under Ian Dobson beat surprise finalists Frankston Pines by a single goal in 2003 in atrocious conditions at Knights' Stadium. Nick Tsaltas's solo goal saw the Gully home against Stan Webster's team which had contrived a sudden death goal and two penalty-shoot-out wins to reach the final. Simon Storey of Green Gully won the Rooney Medal.

The 2004 competition saw Green Gully win the minor premiership from Oakleigh Cannons, Bulleen Zebras, Preston Lions and Altona Magic. But Gully was eliminated in the finals series and the Zebras won the Grand Final from Altona Magic on penalties after both sides had failed to score in 120 minutes. Michael Theoklitos of the Zebras was the hero, saving three penalty kicks as his side won the shoot-out three-one. Levent Osman won the Rooney Medal.

In 2005 South Melbourne and Melbourne Knights returned to the Victorian Premier League and the competition was extended to fourteen teams. Crowds rose to an average of 1373 per game, atmosphere improved and the standard of play was boosted. Green Gully finished on top of the ladder under Ian Dobson, three points clear of Fawkner-Whittlesea, with Heidelberg United, South Melbourne and Altona Magic making up the top five. This time Gully went on to win the final against Heidelberg United by two goals to nil scored by Brandon Vassallo and substitute Peter Hader, with Vassallo taking the Rooney Medal.