



With thanks to [Bunyip](#) historian, Robert Laidlaw

Situated in the beautiful Barossa Valley of South Australia 42 kilometres north of the city of Adelaide, the town of Gawler is arguably one of the most traditional centres of country Australian Rules football.

The first official record of the game is in June 1868, when the Gawler Town Council was told that a Gawler Football Club had been formed, and that they were seeking permission to put up goals in the parklands. In May 1869 Gawler played a fifteen-a-side match against Adelaide which they lost, and declined a return match. The visitors won by three goals to nil, with spectators being entertained at various times during the afternoon by the Gawler Band.

In 1877, Gawler Football Club was a foundation member of the South Australian Football Association (which today is the South Australian National Football League) but it only enjoyed junior status at that time. Gawler is also known to have played Kapunda on a number of occasions during these early years. In the same year fifteen and eighteen player sides from Kapunda defeated Gawler teams respectively. And there are records again in 1878 of Kapunda defeating Gawler.

Gawler's first fixture under SAFA rules was against Adelaide at the Gawler Parklands on 20th June 1877. 'The SA Advertiser' reported that Adelaide scored after approximately quarter of an hour, with Gawler equalising almost immediately. The match resulted in a one all draw. Later the same season, according to 'The Register', Gawler played host to another senior SAFA club, Woodville, with the visitors winning on this occasion by the only goal of the match.

Season summaries published in 'The Register' in October 1877 and again twelve months later make it apparent that clubs like Gawler only engaged in matches very sporadically at this time.

In 1880, Gawler separated into two distinct clubs, Athenian and Havelock, followed by the Albion Football Club in 1881. Throughout the 1880s Albion became the strongest team. Indeed, the Albions were invited to play Hotham, the second most powerful club in Victoria at the time.

Seven years later the clubs recombined to form another club bearing the name of Gawler. This second incarnation of a town club was admitted into the SAFA with full senior status in 1887. In orange and black colours, Gawler played its first game against Port Adelaide at Alberton Oval on May 7, 1887. That year Gawler won one, drew one, and lost nine games. It spent four seasons in the competition, finishing 6th (of 7) in 1887 and 1888, 5th (of 6) in 1889, and 6th and bottom in its final year.

In 1889, the Gawler Football Club had not been as successful during the two years it had been in the SA Football Association as the members had wished, and a second Gawler team could not play enough games so the Gawler Junior Football Association was inaugurated to improve players in the Gawler district and thus provide a recruiting ground for the Gawler league team. Teams were formed by Willaston, Gawler Central, and GAWLER SOUTH, to support the main Gawler Club and also interest more spectators. GJFA matches were then played regularly at Gawler Oval with the Central side also playing in the orange and black colours, while South wore red, white and blue, and Willaston red and blue. During this inaugural season Willaston won six games and drew one of eight to win the first premiership, followed by South with two wins and a draw and Centrals, with one win and two draws.

The Gawlers withdrew from the SA Football Association in 1890, disbanding, however the GJFA remained to become the Gawler Football Association. Though for some time afterwards there were thoughts of a revived Gawler club returning to the SA Football Association, the club was never reformed.

Over time, from the original three clubs in Gawler town, the Gawler Football Association evolved into the Gawler & District Football League – for almost a century intermittently comprising teams as far

north as Hamley Bridge and as far south as Salisbury – from neighbouring competitions the ill-fated Lower North Football Association, the Barossa and Light Football Association, the Adelaide Plains Football League and the Central Districts Football Association.

By the 1950s, footy in the northern suburbs of Adelaide had become dominated by the Gawler & District Football League – annexing Elizabeth, Elizabeth North, Salisbury, Salisbury North, Two Wells and Virginia. The dynamic GDFL now had established A and B grades but there was still no junior structure or development.

In 1956 a junior football competition was founded by local football identities at Salisbury Oval. By 1958, the three Gawler clubs had come aboard so it became known as the Salisbury, Elizabeth and Gawler District Colts Football League. This new structure soon became a successful sporting venture and was quickly affiliated with the SANFL.

Fred Rogers, at this time Secretary of the GDFL and heavily involved with the junior competition, made an unofficial approach to SANFL President Thomas Seymour-Hill regarding an admission of a league club from the growing northern suburbs. Rogers was to be instrumental in forming the network that was to ultimately lead to the formation of a new SANFL club, while those associated with the SEGCFCL were to serve in this new entity's administration.

Rogers was told that the SANFL would not entertain a single application. It was known that a consortium from Woodville were also considering an application. After several meetings in 1958 both the GDFL/SEGCFCL and Woodville agreed to make a joint submission to the SANFL.

Officials then faced the difficult task of designing the new entity with delegates from Salisbury, Salisbury North, Elizabeth and Gawler failing to reach consensus on issues such as the club name and home ground. Eventually a new identity was reached – Central District (derived from the agricultural and meteorological definition of the northern area) was to play its games at Elizabeth Oval (a neutral venue as far as the delegates were concerned). The name Central District was already synonymous with a Queen's Birthday Holiday Football Carnival contested by the Gawler, Barossa, Adelaide Plains and Mid-North Leagues.

The colours of red, white and blue of Footscray in the VFL, the new club's inaugural patron, were suggested by Rogers for their working-class connotations and the same Bulldog emblem adopted. Centrals' very first guernseys were hand-made by Mrs Rogers.

While failing soon after, essentially the SEGCFCL became the formation of Central Districts, and an indecisive GDFL disappointingly had missed out on re-establishing the old-time Gawler league club once again – probably for the last time. Following the creation of the Bulldogs, the GDFL was never to return to those great heights of the late 1950s and 60s, especially after the Central District Football Association was created – ironically as a breeding ground for the CDFC. Although the GDFL did enjoy a brief renaissance in the late 70s and early 80s of the old rivalries, the more rural clubs decided that that they could no longer compete with the Gawler establishment.

In losing out to the more populated northern metro area, the GDFL was virtually decimated, and ultimately Gawler footy's destiny was to become only part of the Centrals amalgam. However, today the Central District Bulldogs emphatically embrace Gawler and the Barossa as part of its heartland, acknowledging how the local football culture had always begun with the GFA.

Meanwhile, the neighbouring Barossa and Light Football Association had become even stronger but was experiencing similar disharmonies with some of its clubs further north. In 1987, after the GDFL was faced with the prospect of only a five team competition – unacceptable in these modern times – at an Extraordinary Special Meeting the members of South voted to apply to go country and join the Barossa and Light Football Association, rather than look to the city at the CDFA as Willaston and Centrals were contemplating. As Robertstown were looking to leave them, the old BLFA began making overtures to South as a financially stable and famously successful club who could most importantly prevent the bye.

Historically, for a time it seemed that the three Gawler clubs would be finally going their separate ways and that the old triumvirate of the original GFA had at last dissolved. However Willaston and

Centrals later hurriedly did an about-face and followed our lead, which resulted in a consortium representing the three Gawler clubs to express a desire to enact a merger with the BLFA.

Soon enough, a new "superleague", the Barossa, Light and Gawler Football Association was born, eventually overtaking the CDFA (now renamed as the Northern Metropolitan Football Association) which had usurped the old ailing GDFL in the first place. The NMFA finally folded in 1994 as the new BLGFA became one of the most powerful country leagues just north of Adelaide, continuing to flourish today.

Of the three original junior clubs in the GFA, Gawler South has since gone on to become the most successful. Remarkably, a number of times over the early years, South was so dominant that there was even discussion that it should move to the SANFL as its own entity.

Indeed, the SGFC is probably one of the most successful football clubs in Australia, if not the world.