

Geoff Green

1978 – 1979



News of the BCAE reunion has brought memories flooding back to me of my early days growing up in Bendigo and the huge role soccer has played in my life both then and beyond.

While it was a great place to grow up, Bendigo was a pretty unsophisticated, parochial and predominantly Anglo-Saxon country town back in the 1970s. Life was simple, there was no internet or email and the rest of the world felt very distant, almost non-existent.

If you were a young Aussie boy like me and into your sport then the choices were pretty simple - tennis or cricket in summer (tennis in my case) and Aussie Rules in winter.

In my early teens, I was really into Aussie Rules, always wearing my Richmond Tigers footy jumper with Royce Hart's famous number 4 and harbouring schoolboy dreams of one day playing for the mighty Tigers.

I started playing footy at centre half forward, moved to the wing and finished up as a rover. At the end of the 1973 footy season my under 14s coach quietly took me aside and broke my heart – "You've got a fair bit of talent and give it everything but you're just too small to keep playing Aussie Rules mate."

For the next few weeks I moped around, totally despondent. Around this time a new phys ed teacher turned up at my school, White Hills Tech, a young English bloke called John Palmer.

A few weeks later I noticed John taking a few boys out to the oval to kick around what looked like an unusual totally round ball after school. Curiosity finally got the better of me and I wandered over and asked if I could join in. Within a few weeks I was totally hooked on this exotic, foreign game called soccer.

This was the start of being totally obsessed with soccer for the next few years. Every day I would get to school early and play soccer before classes, gobble down lunch and play soccer all lunchtime and usually have soccer training after school, initially

with our school team and over time also with Golden City and then Colts. Most weekends I would referee a game as well as play in a couple of games.

John Palmer had a huge impact on my life during this time. He spent a lot of time with me (and plenty of others) teaching and drilling me not just on the technical skills of soccer, which I picked up pretty quickly, but also the art of soccer - creating space, running off the ball, thinking tactically etc.

John had a massive influence on the development of junior soccer in Bendigo at that time and was instrumental in many young Aussie boys like me taking up soccer. He was a wonderful teacher and terrific mentor and has had a positive impact on hundreds if not thousands of young people's lives in Bendigo over many decades, first in soccer and then gymnastics.

The next year, 1974, was a breakout year for me with soccer. Much to my astonishment, I managed to win the Player of the Year Medal as well as score the most goals in the Bendigo under 15 comp in my first year playing junior soccer (for White Hills).

While I was pretty chuffed at the time, I was effectively being personally coached by John Palmer nearly every day and had also started training with the Golden City senior team, which had a phenomenal group of players at the time, so was learning very fast. Also, junior soccer in Bendigo at that time was at an early stage and the standard was still pretty low. It improved quickly over the next few years as a lot more Aussie kids picked up the game.

In 1975 I played 8 games for Golden City in addition to junior soccer and learnt so much playing beside players like the mercurial Joe Judge (who I was in total awe of), John Palmer (who really looked after me on the pitch as a 15 year old kid playing against grown men), Joe Reilly (who could dominate a game from the centre circle), Celly McCuskey, Ted Ellinghaus, Bob Balic and many others.

In 1976 I moved to Colts, which had a lot of younger players, and it wasn't such a great year compared to the previous two. I did enjoy playing a full season though and getting to know a lot of players at other clubs including wonderful guys like Tony Longano at Strathdale, an absolute gentleman in every sense of the word.

When I reflect back on this time in my life I feel so grateful for being introduced to this great game that I knew virtually nothing about a few years earlier and being able to learn from such a generous and talented group of foreigners, all of who ended up in Bendigo of all places having made the huge decision to move to Australia from England, Scotland, Ireland, Italy, Germany, Denmark and many other countries around the world.

Learning soccer in this rich environment also meant I much more quickly came to appreciate the beauty, finesse and subtleties of soccer when played well and why for so many people around the world it will always be the "beautiful game".

Spending time with so many people from other countries also helped open my eyes to the fact that the world was a much bigger place than Bendigo. I'm sure that had a significant influence on my decision to become a Rotary exchange student and spend a year in Hamilton, Ontario in Canada in 1977.

Soccer was in many ways my passport to a great year in Canada as joining the school soccer team helped me quickly integrate and become accepted. We had a terrific soccer team and, again, it was a league of nations with guys from England, Scotland and Ireland as well as, of course, one Aussie.

After a great season we went tantalisingly close to winning our way through to the Ontario schoolboy championships.

Our final game, which we lost in a close penalty shootout after extra time, was played on Astro Turf at the Hamilton football stadium. It was the most surreal soccer match I've ever played in as both schools turned out in full (over 2,000 people), school bands, cheer leaders and continual chanting and singing throughout the match. More like an American football or basketball match.

The other big thing I did during my exchange year was not cut my hair. Mum and Dad were pretty shocked when I got off the plane with an afro! It also had a big impact on my brother Rod who decided he would stop getting his hair cut too, much to Mum and Dad's chagrin. Within a few months we were both sporting great afros, which made us pretty indistinguishable on a soccer pitch.

After getting back to Australia in early 1978, I started pre-season training again with Colts. I wasn't enjoying it very much though and Rod hadn't enjoyed his season there the year before.

Serendipity kicked in and Siggie Nowack quietly reached out to see if I'd like to come and have a kick with the BCAE boys, no pressure, just see if you like the feel of how we go about it at BCAE. I did like it, a lot!

Great bunch of guys and I really liked Siggie and his approach to playing good football and enjoying it. Very different to how Colts was at the time.

Problem was I didn't want to go to BCAE without Rod so told Siggie it had to be a two for one deal and I was sure he wouldn't regret it.

Long story short, Siggie agreed and within a few weeks Rod was also a regular in the senior team. I wasn't surprised that Rod went on to be a much better player than me and once we both got to Melbourne Uni he was always a walk up start for Melbourne Uni Soccer Club seniors while I played a lot more in the reserves.

1978 was a cracker of a year playing with BCAE. Great club, brilliantly led by Siggie, plenty of excellent soccer, good results and a wonderful group of guys to play soccer with. The highlight for me though was playing together with Rod in a way we never had before and never really did again. I'm sure we were quite a sight for some of our opposition with our twin afros tearing up and down the pitch full of frenetic, youthful energy.

I headed to Melbourne Uni the following year but continued playing a bit for BCAE heading back to Bendigo on weekends to visit my then girlfriend, Anne, and now wife of 35 years.

After that my soccer was a mixture of Melbourne Uni Soccer Club, a short, fiercely contested annual soccer comp between the Melbourne Uni residential colleges, some intervarsity plus indoor soccer.

Reflecting back on soccer, the positive impact it's had on my life and the many terrific, generous people I've spent time with along the way, particularly from the early days in Bendigo, has been a wonderful exercise.