

My Uncle Bob, the St.Kilda Football Club and when a little bit of luck goes a long way.

Uncle Bob is the youngest of my (deceased) dad's four living brothers. Two other brothers died at early ages from illness in France in the 40's . My grandmother only ever gave birth to boys. Passionate ones at that. Bob was born in Paris in 1941 and was very young when his family became dislocated, separated, in hiding and liberated and mostly re-united.

When the family of mother and five sons moved to Australia in 1948, Bob was 7 and went to St.Kilda Primary School on Brighton Road. Most of the children already supported St.Kilda, their local team so it was natural that he did too. He played Aussie rules at school, and became a Saints member at 9 years old, when the St.Kilda Football Club players came and gave out Junior Memberships to the Primary Schools football team. He was instantly hooked to be a life-long Sainter. He went to games with his neighbour and her family, who were regular St.Kilda followers. Every Saturday that St.Kilda played at the Junction Oval, they'd be there, even when the parents just dropped the two youngsters and picked them up after the game.

Bobs mum, my grandmother, didn't speak English well, didn't drive and didn't understand football. For Bob, it was an entry into the new world of Australia. He loved sports of any nature, and Aussie rules fascinated him both as a player and as a long time supporter.

Bob then began making money from the football. He and his friend would collect bottles at the ground, and if they handed them into the attending staff, they could get ½ penny for each bottle. But my uncle Bob was always a smart man, and he and his friend took them in sack loads to the local Milk Bar where they would get 2 pence a bottle instead. Hence they both made a lot of money for youngsters of the time. They would go halves in the booty. He also got his photo in the Sporting Globe, sitting on the boundary as a spectator. His income allowed him to continue his membership as well as buy the Sporting Globe each week to get the results of all the games (which at that time were all on Saturday afternoon.) Many people waited for the final delivery of the Herald and the Pink Sporting Globe to appear on late Saturday, hot off the press.

He moved with his mother and his step-father to Richmond for several years finishing high school, and lived with his eldest brother and young family until moving out on his own. He studied Accounting at Swinburne.

His older brothers were all working and none got involved when Bob did, until the Saints moved to Moorabbin in 1964.

Bob remembers always loving sports. He queued up for tickets for the 1956 Olympic Games when he was 15, and supplied tickets, mostly to the athletics, for all his brothers and their wives or girlfriends. He remembers seeing Betty Cuthbert race 100 and 200 metres, John Landy coming third. For Bob, sports was a hobby, and to watch such events was a highlight that he will always remember fondly.

He has always played some sport, be it squash, a little football in High School as well, and some soccer and cricket. He now regularly plays golf and tennis with one of his brothers Jo.

When he became a member at St.Kilda at the age of 9, he continued with his membership and has never missed a season. That means that today, he has followed his beloved Saints for 61 years. In 2009, the Club retrospectively acknowledged Bob and others support over the years, and he was honoured for 50 years continuous membership. The St.Kilda Football Club gifted Bob with a certificate as well as a flask and a mug. It was on behalf of the Board and the Players. He was thanked for his passion and loyalty and it was signed by CEO Michael Nettlefold.

Bob was there when St.Kilda improved and got into the Grand Final in 1965, and was there for the Saints one and only in 1966, along with my mother, my father and my brother who is 14 and in the St.Kilda Cheer-squad.

I asked Bob what his favourite football memories were. He remembered that St.Kilda used to lose every week when he first went, and so when they'd win one game, it was, for the excited crowd of the day, like winning a Premiership. In the old Junction Oval, there was a wooden grandstand, and those seated would stamp their feet on the wood and make a noise that deafened.

He talked of Alan Killigrew who was appointed coach in 1955 after one of St.Kildas worst seasons on record. Bob remembers him as a great orator, like a gospel speaker full of passion and theatre. He said it was an amazing experience hearing him speak to players or members on the ground. St.Kilda was a bottom of the ladder team, but Killigrew began the process of instilling pride, both in the players and in the supporters. He would stir up the supporters like a maestro conductor and that in turn would spur on the players to play better and more hungry football. (According to Wikipedia Killigrew's first action was to clean up the list and he cut players so that only 17 were on the books for 1956 and 11 new players played in the opening match).

In the next years, St.Kilda had three consecutive Brownlow Medalists: 1957 Brian Gleeson, and 1958, Neil Roberts and in 1959, Verdun Howell won (retrospectively on count back, to tie with Bob Skilton).

As Bob said, they got better players and better coaches and therefore better results.

Bob's worst memory was losing in any Grand Final. He remembers them all painfully. In 1965, St.Kilda went down to Essendon by 35 points. Luckily, in 1966 there was finally success led by Allan Jeans as Coach, where St.Kilda won their one and only Grand-Final by a measly one point. But it was enough and this is held onto like the holy grail by Saints supporters ever since. (For history nuts, St.Kilda first Grand Final appearance was in 1913 and were beaten by Fitzroy by 13 points.)

St.Kilda lost to Hawthorn in 1971, and they lost to Adelaide in 1997 and of course, well known recent loses in 2009 to Geelong and 2010 to Collingwood. Each bring painful

memories, because for most of the game time St.Kilda were leading in all these attempts, to be pipped at the post usually in last quarter come-backs by the winning teams.

So after all this, I wanted to know what sustained Bob as a long time Saints sufferer/supporter? Bob answered simply, the sport itself. He said once you support a club, you seldom find people who change clubs (except through marriage) and that it becomes the team that the family follow together. Over the years, he has gone with friends, with my father and brother, with me, and when he married Betty, with her. Once he had children, his son Gary and later, daughter Susie would all go as a family. It is still he and Gary who travel together and enjoy all the matches together.

Bob feels that AFL footy is the best spectator sport to be involved in and to really enjoy it, you have to have your team. He says it gives him great enjoyment when St.Kilda are on winning streaks. Bob likes the sport so much that he lives in hope. Even when St.Kilda has bad times, there are upsets when St.Kilda wins. He's not like others who drift away in membership or support when the bad times come. He is there rain or shine.

I asked him what he'd do if he was the President of the Club, with power and money. I went to the last AGM with him and it was interesting to hear his comments on the finances. He's a strong believer that the best clubs keeps reserves from the good years to sustain them through the bad (which will inevitably come), and feels that if the Club budgeted for that, they'd be in better nick. St.Kilda seems to spend all the money it has, and has a debt at the end of this year.

I also asked what one word describes his feeling about St.Kilda, and he said, now, in 2011, disappointment. Overall, we've had a lot of enjoyment over the last few years, and there was never a dull moment when you're a Saints supporter. But he follows this with lists of superstars he's watched over the years, Lockett, Baldock, Winmar, all who played well even when the team didn't.

He enjoyed watching all our Brownlow Medallists, especially in the early years with Brian Gleeson, Neil Roberts, Ross Smith, Verdon Howell, Ian Stewart (who won three times). He enjoyed watching Baldock play, he was a great player and centre half forward, and it was uncanny in how he played. And he said there were always players who surprised you. The two who came to mind were Carl Ditterich, in his first 4-5 years, when there was such spring in his step. He remembered Trevor Barker as superb in a team that never was. He took high marks, screamers both in full forward and full back.

Bob has no second favourite team, but keeps a special supply of hate for those who beat us in Grand-Finals. He said that no team had a perfect record of behaviour, all teams mucked up at times and managed to get into trouble and take actions they later regret.

As for favourite Coaches, "Yabby" Jeans would always hold a special place as the one and only Premiership Coach, but Bob remembers Allen Killigrew fondly as the one who changed St.Kildas mentality and hope. Killigrew showed the endeavour in his speaking and he hated losing more than anything else.

Bob's favourite President was Travis Payze, an ex-player who ruled St.Kilda and managed to keep the club strife-free in his tenure.

I gave Bob a magic wand and asked him what he wanted, and typically, it was that we'd go into Finals, especially Grand-Finals, with no injuries. I think all clubs want one of those. He worries that St.Kilda seem to always have too many injuries and not enough depth to fall back on at that vital time of the year.

I gave him a further three wishes and he responded that firstly, we wouldn't have the strife that has hit us all the time, secondly, we'd be financially sound with good, solid, long term sponsors, and thirdly, that we'd always have a decent list of players and a decent coach. There's a Jewish saying that goes, from his lips to Gods ears. We wish....

He longs for real champions who lift the team, like Baldock who only had to walk the boundary and the whole ground of supporters and the team spirit, lifted. He sadly feels that Riewoldt has not been able to provide that kind of leadership and lift, often having poor performances when we've needed him the most.

What does Bob wish for 2012 and the future? Well, he wants to start with a fit Captain Riewoldt and Vice Captain Hayes who can be in their best form to lead us to the top four in 2012 and then a Premiership, with a list that, if fit, still have it in them to compete in finals, no matter who coaches them. He wishes that Gary and I get to see our first premierships as St.Kilda supporters. He feels lucky as he approaches his 70th next week that he was able to witness St.Kildas one and only Cup win.

He also watches the move to Seaford for the Saints with some sadness. He lives only minutes from Moorabbin Ground and used to love walking up to games and more recently, watch practice, especially in Finals times. He feels the move to Seaford is not supporter friendly, it's hard to find and even harder to park, and from rumblings you hear, even the players and staff aren't enamored of the new venue. But Bob remembers people didn't initially like the move to Moorabbin or to Waverly, which was the home ground for a time.

We finished off by talking of the operations that Goddard and Riewoldt have just had, and the leadership we've missed with Hayes injury this year. We're waiting to hear about Coaching, staff and players. It's all out of our hands as we watch Geelong and Collingwood, the two teams who defeated us in the last two years, fight it out for this years Cup. It doesn't seem to console us that we have been beaten by the Mohammed Ali teams of recent football glory, we still were losers and that stings.

For the last three years, I have returned to going to the footy with my uncle every game we could, as I did as a teenager. Back in the day, at Moorabbin, when my father would go, and after awhile, got Reserve Seating next to Bob, they would enjoy the game together. I would sit on the boundary with my friend Deb, getting autographs after games, being in love with various players over the years. I stopped going once I went to Latrobe University and a much more gypsy life. I have returned and been a constant as a Social Club Member and sit in Reserve Seats with my Uncle Bob and Gary for the last 4 years.

We sit together but we don't catch up at the games, too much else going on, but often phone each other to go over the events and check in with each other especially in weeks of drama and we've had plenty of those in 2011.

A few weeks ago, as I was about to dial his number, he called me. We had a lot to analyze, discuss, review and ponder. There was the Ross Lyon resignation, the loss of David Misson, the conditioning coach, another assistant coach, the news that Robert Harvey was considering putting himself in the mix, and generally, the flat feeling that we were now observers to others finals experiences. The mutual thought was that we were glad that we were bundled out early, rather to live on and be bundled out yet again, in a Semi Final, Preliminary Final or a Grand Final. It has been a painful, tortuous few years and, like all other Saints supporters I've talked to, we're relieved to have the whole season over and done with.

Talking with my Uncle Bob has given me the long term perspective, and we may not have a chance at the silverware this year, but we have the expectation of future games sitting together enjoying (or not) matches, reviewing them, discussing them and being Saints supporters together.

What's more, this weekend we celebrate Bobs' 70th birthday. May we continue to support our footy team together for many more years to come.

Yvette Wroby
7th October 2011