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WHY THIS FOOTY SEASON IS EVEN MORE SPECIAL

It has been the strangest of footy seasons in the strangest of years.

Our society has been shocked by the prospect of a health catastrophe. Australians have responded magnificently and in doing so we've avoided replicating the devastating experiences of places like the U.S, Italy and Spain. Now as we move from the immediate response to the recovery, we are faced with an economic shock not felt since the Great Depression.

Amidst all of this, the footy world has struggled to find its place in this new order.

Maybe the first round of the season should not have been played. At a time when Australians were being jolted into the necessity of isolation it might have sent the wrong message that life could continue as normal. But that old normal – in our pre- COVID world where social distancing was a foreign concept, washing our hands was not a matter of national duty, and when giving a hug to my 94-year-old mother was done without question– now seem to belong to a different era.

The risk that footy might subvert the national effort to remain in isolation and defeat this virus has long since passed. Yet the lingering thought that footy players need to set an example might have distracted us from the critical role that footy now has in helping us through the Pandemic.

The role of entertainment during times of crisis is well documented. And history is filled with many examples. Entertainment in such moments has been seen as an essential service

not an indulgence.

The Andrews Sisters are an iconic part of the musical story of the United States. They have been described as the most important female act of the first half of the twentieth century. A significant part of their place in history lies in the role they played during World War II at the height of their popularity. They performed before soldiers in war zones from Africa to Italy, as well as at bases, hospitals and munitions factories across the US.

Their entertainment was not seen as indulgent or discretionary. It was regarded as essential and necessary. Wearing the uniform, and the self-sacrifice it implies, is at the heart of the Andrews Sisters' story. Their effort and their work was about the soldiers and their nation. It was not about themselves. Similarly, Dame Vera Lynne who performed for British troops in Egypt, India and Burma is still adored generations later. Dame Vera even released a new version of her wartime classic "we'll meet again" to mark her 103rd birthday during the pandemic, calling on the public to find 'moments of joy' during 'these hard times'.

Here at home, two Australian sporting figures which transcend all others both came to prominence at the height of the Great Depression. Donald Bradman and Phar Lap were both champions in their own sporting domains. But unlike any other sporting heroes since, they have become culturally unifying icons and part of Australian mythology. In large measure this is because of the hope they came to offer during the Great Depression.

In the aftermath of the stock market crash of October 1929 Australia became enveloped in the Great Depression suffering as much as any country in the developed world. A full quarter of the workforce were unemployed for years with an unemployment rate peaking at 30 per cent. Against the backdrop of this misery, Phar Lap's victory in the 1930 Melbourne Cup gave hope to millions. This victory was much more than mere entertainment. For many it provided the joy of life.

At the same time Don Bradman was rewriting cricket's record books. His 334 in the third test against England at Headingly in July of 1930 reportedly put the crowd on the "*verge of hysteria*". It was the highest ever test match score and complemented his first-class world record of 452 which he achieved in January of that same year. Sam Loxton – a future team-mate of Bradman – said that for a country experiencing the depths of despair wrought by the Depression, Bradman's exploits "*lit up the nation*".

And as we pivot from a health crisis to an economic one, there is a clear role for footy to

provide some much-needed respite for our nation. Whatever your team, being able to switch on the television and enjoy the game offers an opportunity to switch off and enjoy the game.

As the players take to the ground, their efforts will be just as much about scoring goals as they will be about providing hope to the millions of Australians who have been rocked by the pandemic. Footy is the narrative of our winters and in 2020 we have never needed it more.

While some have suggested that shortened matches in a shortened season with no crowds devalues this year's flag, I believe it is precisely the opposite. This will be the most special of seasons. This is the flag you want to win. And whichever player and team fires our hearts, this year may just transcend the world of sport and light up the nation when we all need it the most.

I, for one, cannot wait.

This piece was first [published in the Herald Sun](#) on Thursday, 11 June 2020