

A bush club goes its own way

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Wet track: Bullioh players run out for the 2010 Upper Murray Football League grand final against Federal. Bullioh won in extremely wet conditions. *Photo: Belinda Hindle*

WHEN Ian "Bluey" Campbell, Roger Burns and a few of their mates announced they planned to reform the Bullioh Football Club in late 2000, many people in north-east Victoria's football fraternity told them they were mad.

The reaction was fair enough. Footy hadn't been played at Bullioh's home ground for a decade, and more than 20 years had passed since Bullioh's original football club merged with arch rival Tallangatta.

But Burns and his friends have certainly proved their many doubters wrong. Since first taking to the field in the Upper Murray league in 2001, Bullioh has been among the most successful clubs in the VCFL, making the finals in all but its first season and winning four premierships along the way.

"People always said we'd never get the club going, then they said we'd fold after two years," Burns says with a chuckle. "We just knew we had to make it work or we'd have egg on our faces."

Most bush football clubs have a tangled and rather hazy history and Bullioh is no different. It is believed that before World War II the tiny settlements of Bullioh and Tallangatta Valley both had teams, and these merged to form Bullioh Valley FC in 1947. For reasons that are unclear, the club decided to play all its matches at the Wyebo Reserve in Tallangatta Valley.

Thanks to the talents of the local cattle farmers and their sons, Bullioh Valley prospered in the Tallangatta and District league for some time. By 1977, however, it could no longer survive on its own. A merger with arch rival Tallangatta was arranged, and the new Tallangatta Valley FC, which split its home games between the grounds used by the two former clubs, debuted in 1978.

The merged club was immediately successful, winning premierships in 1979 and '80. But there was always an uneasy alliance between the rural folk from Bullioh and the "townies" from Tallangatta.

"In Tallangatta, there are two pubs," Burns says. "The Tallangatta blokes always went to the Tallangatta Hotel and the Bullioh blokes went to the Victoria Hotel."

The relationship broke down completely in the early '90s when a decision was made to stop playing games out at Tallangatta Valley. The need to limit travel times was the major reason for the change. Most district clubs in the north-east recruit players from Albury-Wodonga, and while Tallangatta is only 45 kilometres from the rural city, Bullioh's ground is a further 27 kilometres away.

"Basically, a group of us weren't too thrilled about that so we pulled out of the club," Burns says. "A lot of the Bullioh people who were running cattle for the combined club said, 'Bugger it, we're not going to do that any more.'

"A few of us formed a sports club and put the money from the cattle into that. We thought we were better off putting our money into the Bullioh community than into Tallangatta. I suppose in the back of our minds we thought that one day we might reform our own footy club, although that was really a long shot."

One of the farmers who felt most aggrieved was "Bluey" Campbell. A fine player with Bullioh in his younger days, he started following Cudgewa in the Upper Murray league but it just didn't satisfy him. In late 2000, by which time the sports club's cattle-drive account was flush with funds, he decided the people of the Bullioh district needed to try to resurrect their own footy team.

"I was doing a bit of work with Bluey one day and he said, 'Look, I want to get Bullioh going again,' " Burns recalls. "I told him it wouldn't happen and then he replied, 'I've already got a coach!' I picked myself up off the bloody dirt and thought, 'He's serious.' "

After Campbell and Burns discussed the idea with a few of their mates, they decided to call a public meeting and see if the community was prepared to back their idea. They were shocked when 70 people turned up at the Tallangatta Valley footy sheds.

A vote was taken on whether to form a new Bullioh Football Netball Club, and the vast majority voted in favour of it, with Campbell elected president. But there were many roadblocks to come. The Tallangatta Valley and Cudgewa clubs went public with their concerns that Bullioh would pinch players they could not afford to lose. As a result, the Bulldogs' push was initially blocked by the VCFL.

Unfazed, Campbell and his helpers put forward their case at an appeal hearing and Bullioh was subsequently granted the right to join the Upper Murray league, which at the time had only five clubs.

Such was Tallangatta Valley's fury at the decision, it later dropped the word "Valley" from its name. "It was said that we were going to destroy other clubs," Burns says. "I've still got all the letters people sent us. Some of them were downright hysterical."

Campbell triggered more angst when he made good on his earlier claim by signing Cudgewa player Scott Curphey to be the Bulldogs' senior coach. However, many of the other players who came together during that first pre-season had grown up in the Bullioh district.

"Blokes were saying, 'My dad played so I want to play,'" Burns says. "Of the players who ran out on the ground in our very first game in 2001, 16 of them had a father or grandfather who'd played for Bullioh."

The Bulldogs sneaked into the top four in 2002, and two years later they made it all the way to the grand final. Campbell, Burns and many others watched on with pride as Bullioh defeated Corryong and won the flag. For Burns, "it was this huge thing. It put all the naysayers back in their box."

Bullioh returned to the top when local lad Mark Nichol took over as senior coach in 2007. But while his team lost only one game in the home-and-away season, it suffered an eight-point loss to Federal (another Corryong-based club) in the decider.

A year later, the Bulldogs made amends when they claimed their second premiership with a 108-point demolition of Corryong. Thanks to the UMFL's tradition of allowing the winner of the second semi-final to host the grand final, the big game took place at Bullioh's rustic home ground.

The Dogs have hosted, and won, the past two grand finals as well. Last year's victory over Federal was notable for the extremely wet conditions the game was played in. Federal's players found the going so tough that they failed to score a goal (the final scores were 6.4 to 0.4).

This season, Bullioh has been somewhat inconsistent, losing twice to Border-Walwa and once to top side Federal. But last weekend, the Bulldogs showed a fourth straight flag was on the cards when they beat Federal by 42 points.

For Burns, the win was yet another reminder of why he, Campbell and so many others had devoted so much time to bringing their club back to life.

"I've spoken to people whose footy club has folded ... and I've said, 'Get it going again.'"