

“The Way We Were” - The Early Years 1924-1945

On a Sunday morning in January 1924, a few young friends held a meeting at a tennis court in Crinian Street, Hurlstone Park. One of them had heard that the local football competition was in need of new teams. They decided to enter a team in the Canterbury District Association’s Under 16 competition. From these humble beginnings, a football club was born.

The organiser of this meeting was a young Bill Brackenbury. The man they called “Brack” would become a local legend. As a player, he was a tough right back who could kick with both feet, but it was as a coach and mentor that he really thrived. He served as club secretary for 44 years and acted as a father figure to hundreds of young footballers. Kell Jolly, a junior player in the 1930s and 40s, was one of many who benefited from Bill’s tutelage:

“I have heard many people described as champions and legends, but he is the only one I ever met”.

In 2014, the Canterbury Association renamed its top mens competition the “Bill Brackenbury Cup”, in honour of his lifelong contribution to local football.

[image]

Hurlstone Park experienced success right from the beginning of its existence. The mens team won the local knockout competition at the first attempt, and a year later the Under 18 side won the club’s first premiership.

The club’s first home ground was Hurlstone Park Reserve, later renamed Ewan Park. Jack “Occa” Payne, a member of the very first Hurlstone Park team, recalls that the players themselves had to maintain the park and mow the lawns. Despite this, the ground quickly gained a reputation as one of the best playing surfaces in the district, although as it lacked fencing plenty of balls ended up in the Cooks River.

The Canterbury Cup and the Golden Age – 1945-1960

The immediate postwar period was one of unprecedented success for Hurlstone Park Wanderers. The club won the inaugural state-wide Robertson Cup in the late 1950s, defeating Canberra 2-1 in the final. It also won the “Crystal Cup” – the Canterbury Association Club Championship – five times between 1950 and 1955.

In 1949 the club helped establish the Canterbury Cup, a popular Sunday knockout competition played at Blick Oval with a prize of 100 pounds. Under the guidance of Bill Brackenbury, Hurlstone Park dominated the tournament, lifting the trophy nine times in the fifteen years of its existence.

The Canterbury Cup was unique in that it included both local teams and many of the newly-formed migrant clubs that had sprung up across Sydney in the postwar period. Some of these clubs would become very well known, such as Hakoah, St George Budapest, APIA and Pan Hellenic. Other migrant teams included Austral, Yugal, Polonia and Prague. In 1950s Australia, the football field was a place of cultural conflict and exchange, and Hurlstone Park Wanderers were right in the middle of it.

[image]

The clash of cultures off the pitch often spilled onto it. The predominantly Anglo-British local teams played a brand of rough, physical football based on toughness and athleticism. Former Hurlstone Park player Dave Stephenson remembers his amazement at the technical style of the migrant teams:

“their style of play differed very much from ours – they taught us ball skills, finesse and unorthodox tactics – we relied more on fitness and physical consistency”

In the clip below, former HPWFC player Tom Cornforth shares his memories of the Canterbury Cup and football in this period.

[video]