

Disturbing picture painted of AFL boys' club that rules the game

A ferocious new book describes a high octane, bloated, chauvinistic and, according to many, intimidatory working environment



Michael Warner's [The Boys' Club](#) is a ferocious book, and essential reading for anyone who loves, but worries about the game.

Jonathan Horn
Sun 13 Jun 2021

In winter 2013, at the height of the Essendon supplements scandal, AFL CEO Andrew Demetriou was on a fact-finding mission in New York. On a bus with several club bosses, he leaned back, necked a beer, and talked about the departure of Sue Clark, a former police officer and AFL staffer who alleged a member of Demetriou's executive team threw a file that struck her on the head in meeting.

"Of course I run a boys' club," he is alleged to have said. "It's a boys' game. If it was netball, I'd run a girls' club."

Michael Warner's book, *The Boys' Club*, is peppered with stories like that – some trifling, some eye-popping, some reeking of sour grapes, many downright disturbing. There's the executive who swims across the putrid Victoria Harbour after losing a bet with Gil McLachlan, with dozens of whooping staff lined along the causeway. There's the executive who is alleged to hand out cocaine at a Brownlow medal afterparty. There's the senior manager who throws a pen at a female staffer's head, and pursues her into the carpark. There's another female staffer who says she was "screamed at, sworn at, abused and publicly humiliated."

The obvious comparison is with Garry Linnell's Footy Ltd, written just as the game was becoming fully professional, and truly national. In Linnell's book, it was the club bosses who had all the clout. Men (always men) like John Elliott, Christopher Skase and Dr Geoffrey Edelsten were having a complete lend. One, Reuben Pelerman, bought the Brisbane Bears as a Valentines' Day gift for his wife.

Warner cleverly shows how power quickly shifted to the administrative headquarters in Melbourne's Docklands. He describes a high octane, bloated, chauvinistic and, according to many, intimidatory working environment. There's not a lot of new material there. Much of it has been covered by Warner himself in the Herald Sun over the years. Unlike other footy writers who have built careers on the AFL's teat, Warner has been belittled, sidelined and denied accreditation. It's a ferocious book, and essential reading for anyone who loves, but worries about the game.

Warner is particularly scathing of Andrew Demetriou. "I don't imagine there will ever be a scandal involving Andrew," author, historian, speechwriter and friend Don Watson said upon his appointment as League CEO. "He's a straight arrow." But the son of Greek-Cypriot immigrants has had a volcanic, and increasingly eventful career. He left a brief job as a teacher at Trinity Grammar before making a fortune selling false teeth. He was a surprise choice as the head of the ALPA. Demetriou is virtually a footballing unperson now, but he was a formidable figure in footy circles for years. Not surprisingly, Warner has plenty of people lining up to savage him. He pocketed \$3.8m in his final year at the AFL, four times what the best player made. Soon afterwards, James Packer invited him to join the Board of Crown Resorts. His testimony at the public inquiry into their fitness to hold a NSW Casino licence, where he read from downloaded crib notes, was less than exemplary. "We exist to win" he emailed Packer. "I remain committed to serving the best interests of Crown and, most importantly, you." He also earned \$900,000 a year in an advisory board role with Acquire Learning, which Justice Bernard Murphy described as "an unscrupulous fly-by-night operation."

Demetriou was at the vet, tending to his injured cat, when he phoned Gil McLachlan to hand over the reins. McLachlan was a very different operator to his predecessor - more consultative, more calculating, more of an each-way punter. He would make a fine politician. Whenever he's patting away questions, I think of what the critic James Wood called, in reference to Old Etonians, an "uncanny ability to soften entitlement with charm".

He deserves credit for helping to establish a national women's competition, for negotiating a TV rights deal that still beggars belief, and for working his backside off to salvage season 2020. He's always been willing to admit his mistakes, such as when he bottled it with the Adam Goodes saga. You suspect, or hope, that he would be devastated by a lot of the material in Warner's book.

Most footy fans couldn't care less about the AFL. They simply want to rock up to the game without having their eardrums perforated, without having every consumer product known to man shoved down their throats. They want a vaguely competent TV broadcast. They want a strong and even professional competition, a thriving grass roots game, and a governing body who don't tinker with the game, and don't pay themselves banker's salaries.

But it's important to know who these men are, where they come from, how much they are being paid, and what their end game is. The parachuting of mates into senior positions, the obscene salaries of administrators like Demetriou, the Faustian pacts with Big Gambling, and the way they are in thrall to the host broadcasters have sat uneasily for years. But for women looking to build a career, for young girls playing the game and for anyone who values a safe workplace, Warner's book would be especially bruising.

Years ago, I was at a function with many of the men who would end up running football in this country. "You boys all talk exactly the same," my then partner said afterwards. "You all speak in code. I can't understand what the hell you're all on about." All of us, like Demetriou, like McLachlan, like countless administrators, managers, journalists and key stakeholders, at some point played in the Victorian Amateur Football Association. "If you've been an Old Xav, or played with Uni Blues, you're qualified for a job with the AFL," Demetriou joked to Caroline Wilson back in 2012.

At the turn of the century, the dominant club was Old Xaverians. They were well run, resourced, coached and connected. In long sleeves in the back pocket was Andrew Dillon, now the AFL's general counsel. At full forward was Dan Richardson, now the head of umpiring. He replaced Grant Williams, who coached McLachlan at Uni Blues. In the middle was Simon Lethlean, a sumptuous kick who later became the AFL's head of football operations. At centre half back was Craig Kelly, on his last legs as a footballer, but already one of the most influential men in the game.

"A symbiotic relationship exists between many of the game's key stakeholders," Warner writes. "They rely on each other, and protect each other." Running with that, Kelly is in many ways one of the most intriguing figures in the book. "Cement Head" they called him in his Collingwood days. "Ned" he's universally known as now. Often described as a kingmaker, a ruthless operator and a "ripping bloke", he is one of the best-connected men in football, and in Melbourne. He manages many of the leading players, coaches and commentators. At McLachlan's cowboys and Indians themed 40th birthday, he arranged for dozens of London plane trees, at \$250 a pop, to line the birthday boy's driveway. A who's who of Australia's football establishment chipped in to pay for them. "Those plane trees," one industry figure told Warner, "are a testament to the boys' club that rules our game."