

THE 'VALE BOYS

While the Lions were a club with players and finance in search of a ground, Springvale was a club with a ground in search of players and finance. It seemed that this was a propitious convergence of aspirations and actualities.

Springvale was an older club than the Lions. It was reported in the Dandenong Journal's Springvale News that a meeting had been held at the Mechanic's Hall "with a view to organising a baseball club in Springvale". This meeting had been addressed by both the President of the D.B.A and the President of the then V.B.A. "who spoke on the game, the layout of the diamond, the placing of the field and the use of material." Those who had so much to learn about the basics of the game would have been impressed by the appearance of "Jack Ellis, Victoria's inter-state catcher" who "spoke on fielding" and there were also presentations on batting and base-running.

Thanks were given by Mr Syd Wagland, early President of the club. Other names to appear in the initial Springvale records include J. Bignell, J. March, R. Wagland, J. Neal, R. Dodge, V. and C. Bloch, and in 1938 some of the seven Vice-Presidents required according to the Annual General Meeting minutes (in 1933, the club had required only five VPs, so we can assume that the number of members had grown) were George Chellew, J. Gardiner, A. Erickson and A. McQueen. F. Brash was an early Treasurer, and, of course, the man who became the driving force in the club, Bob Luxford is mentioned in the minutes many times.

The club was already celebrating "family" occasions by 1934, when Miss N Trebilco, honorary secretary of the Baseball Ladies' Social Club and Mr Leo Thornhill who "has played with the club since its inception" were celebrated at an evening given by the club at the Church of England Hall before "entering into the holy state of matrimony". Card nights were a regular social occasion, and in 1940, trophies for Batting Average and Most Consistent Player were awarded at a dance – to Charlie Bloch and J Neal.

And the talents of the club were not confined just to the diamond. In support of the Blind and Alfred Hospital Auxiliaries, "the Springvale Baseball Repertory Club" were congratulated by the Journal for "the fine action...in staging the three-act comedy 'A Regiment of Two'". The Auxiliaries, it seems were "most appreciative to the talented artists for their spectacular showing". The 1933 review agrees that "in deportment, expression and performance all were splendid, and all-round applause came from the large assemblage." You wonder which of our current players might emerge with such glowing reviews of "deportment, expression and performance" if given the opportunity to stage a "three-act comedy". Who would play the romantic leads? There would be many contenders for comic relief, and even some child stars might be unearthed. It is to be hoped that the stage saying "break a leg" did not prove prophetic for the Springvale Baseball Repertory Club.

Springvale continued to seek out opportunities for instruction and improvement, with Syd Wagland hosting "a very interesting lecture" at his home in 1938. Mr J. Lowe, "late of America, and now coach of St Kilda and inter-State teams in Victoria" gave advice to "the Vale boys" and to lady scorers and the ladies' committee. Lowe discussed fielding, throwing the ball, batting and "the finer art of bunting", using "a diagram of the 'diamond' he carried for lecturing purposes." The Vale boys must have been heartened by Lowe's praise: as the Journal reports, "when commenting upon the play which he saw at the recent game, Mr Lowe said he was very much impressed with the high standard shown, and said, during his lecture, that he felt he could cut out all preliminary explanations of the game, as he felt he was able to talk just as he did to his own teams at St Kilda...Mr Lowe kept everyone on their toes by his 'Americanisms' and his happy style, and his great praise of Australia as

a baseball country.” Yes, the “Vale ‘ballers’” must have taken great pride in the respect shown to them by one “late of America”. And, of course, the evening ended with a supper provided by the ladies’ committee.

By 1938, Springvale had two teams – Vale “A” was put out in the finals, and Vale Blues just missed out on the four, under the “able coaching of our president Mr Syd Wagland.” But the minutes for the 18th March 1942 read abruptly: “Moved C Bloch, sec R Luxford that meeting be adjourned until further notice owing to War Situation. Sec to inform Assoc that Springvale will be unable to enter team this year. Carried.”

The minutes do not resume again until 1946, with Mr J Dodge in the Chair, Mr J Marsh as Secretary and Mr F Brash Treasurer. Present were Bob Luxford, G Neal, J Gardiner, C Bloch, M Billings and R Dodge. No mention is made of the sad and stern gap in the club’s history the war had made, and the first item of business is that the minutes of the 1941 Annual meeting be re-confirmed. Certainly, Springvale returned to competition with gusto, winning the premiership in 1946. Trophy winners were, again, J Neal for Batting Average, and C Bloch for Best in Finals.

Wearing their white shirts, with blue letters S.V, and royal blue socks and caps, and playing at Burden Park, Springvale continued to be successful, winning the A Grade Pennant in 1950, having been “strengthened by additional players who proved their skill throughout the season.” We know that a “wily, young, slow curve-ball pitcher” named Bob Luxford was on the mound because years afterward, a young Jim Prokhovnik was wearing Bob’s premiership cap.



But soon after this, with the young men of the team becoming parents and home-owners, the Club was put into recess, as not enough "Vale 'ballers' could commit the time needed to keep the Blues viable."

It was that curve-ball pitcher of the 50s, Bob Luxford, who was to resurrect Springvale and become its great patriarch. Springvale Lions Life Member, Jim Prokhovnik remembers that "Bob Luxford's love of baseball didn't stop" even though his connection with Springvale had suffered an interruption. "He started umpiring, and held various executive positions with both the DBA and VPBL. Over the years, he was awarded Life Membership of the Springvale Baseball Club, the DBA and the VPBL (subsequently recognised by the VBA)." Bob was also a Springvale councillor, had several terms as Mayor, and was later to receive an Order of Australia.

And when the time was right, Bob, "the true father of baseball in Springvale", was ready to restore the club he loved. An original member of the junior Springvale team Bob instituted, Prokhovnik recalls: "In 1961 Bob decided his two oldest boys, Garry, aged 10 and Ross, 8, along with a group of their similarly aged mates, were old enough to play baseball. So Bob pulled out the old Springvale kit, which had been kept in his garage for just this occasion. It consisted of flat gloves (no pockets) – which certainly taught you to catch with two hands, a pudding-bowl catcher's mitt, an antique breastplate with the stuffing falling out of it – and far too big for any of the boys – and some very old bats, which promptly split and broke. Not to worry, Bob was a pattern maker, so the lathes at Luxford Engineering were put to work and new bats were produced out of some sort of hardwood he had lying around. They weren't quite Louisville Sluggers, but they did the job." Luxford Sluggers!

"Thus, baseball in Springvale was resurrected, and coached by Bob (of course), we played in the DBA U16s, under the banner of the Springvale Community Youth Club (of which Bob was President). Naturally, enormous thrashings ensued for the first few games, but by the end of the season we played in the first semi-final." Sadly, the boys lost, but players in that first team, including David Bates, Peter Grainger, Geoff Gooey, Doug Little, the Luxford boys, Robert Lynch, Jim himself, and Terry Rankin, were helping Bob re-build a baseball club.

A club, though, needs more than a bunch of keen juniors. Jim outlines how Bob, a man whose enthusiasms and energies had spread a wide web, went about recruiting senior players. That wiliness that had characterised his pitching was now put to good use: "In the mid 60s, Bob utilised another of his affiliations and convinced a number of volunteers at the local Springvale Fire Brigade to try baseball – so there was now also a C Grade team and the local fire brigade was involved in funding it.

"This team, made up nearly solely of Springvale firemen who had never played baseball before, went on to win the 1968 C Grade flag." Players in this team included Glenn Dickson, John Blackney, Stephen Eaton, Graham and Alan Etherton, Peter Gainger, Geoff Gooey, Doug Haddow, Garry Luxford, Robert Lynch, Bob Shaw, Ron Staunton, Daryl and Terry Rankin, and Gordon Williams. There were also a few, very transient, American imports throughout those years; the Mormon Church was sending young missionaries out to Australia and upon discovering a baseball club, they would turn up on their bikes to play – for a week or two! Then they would be moved on, only to be replaced a week or two later by a couple of new guys. Some of them could certainly play, but their commitment to the Club was far less than to their Church. The most significant thing about our Mormon players was the number of uniforms that went with them."

So, Springvale had been competing under various banners throughout the early and mid 60s. But a new appointment at the Fire Brigade was to coalesce the Club under its old name. Jim remembers

the new Station Officer at the Fire Brigade quite reasonably resolved that “a fire brigade was not a baseball club.” And so it was, of course, Bob Luxford, who, in 1967, called a meeting, held, of course, in the Luxford lounge room. Robert Lynch and Geoff Gooley moved to “form a baseball Club in Springvale and the Club be called the Springvale Baseball Club.” While it was natural for Bob to be elected as President of the “newly ‘reformed’ club”, with a membership made up of many juniors, Jim explains that “a number of very young baseballers were thrust into executive and committee positions. For instance, the Secretary/Treasurer was Geoff Gooley, who was 15 and in Year 10 at school.” A bank account was opened, with a balance of \$6.32, but by the end of “a very successful season as far as activities went”, this had swelled to the “healthy” total of \$61.60. The team was also successful, reaching the finals before being knocked out in the semi. By 1969, Springvale was entering one team in the C Grade, winning the Grand Final against Cheltenham 13-1, and the Secretary, having to devote his efforts to doing Year 12, had handed over to the much older 18 year old Jim Prokhovnik, a position Jim held until the amalgamation with the Lions.

Players from that era not only brought senior baseball back to Springvale, but many became founding members in the yet-to-be created merged Springvale Lions, and some of their sons became Springvale Lions in later years; many of us will recognise names among the list of 1970 premiership players: Norm Burne, Ron Drysdale, Brian Edgar, John Evers, Alan Fincher, Bill Logan, and Ian Rickards.

Early on during the Springvale renaissance, the Dandenong Lions were a strong A Grade team, although they had not yet claimed the crown from their most hated rival, Cheltenham. Jim recollects a devious ploy by which Cheltenham tried to nullify the Lions: “At around this time, the DBA brought in a rule, allegedly to help promote junior baseball, which required every A Grade team to field a junior team to play a curtain-raiser to the main game.

“My recollection is that this rule was voted in at a very fiery meeting on the eve of the season and was strongly backed by the powerful, but not popular, Cheltenham Club. There was a perception that the rule was aimed specifically at Dandenong Lions, who had a strong A Grade team, but no junior team at the time; Cheltenham had junior players coming out of their ears.” With the Wearne boys still too young to participate, and no juniors, Cheltenham would have eliminated a rival without a ball being pitched.

“They hadn’t counted on Bob Luxford, though, who despite the fact that he employed Lance Purton (who had defected from the Lions to become the Cheltenham first baseman) brother of Keith Purton from the Lions, promptly suggested that, as Springvale didn’t have an A Grade team, its junior team would represent the Lions for the year – enabling them to stay in A Grade.

“So began many great friendships (and rivalries) between the two Clubs, who were destined to amalgamate.”

Jim has some wonderful memories of that first association between the two clubs:

“The Lions players picked up the Springvale boys and took them to the games, coached them, and made sure they were transported home afterwards. That year was a marvellous experience for the Springvale boys – watching A Grade was a real eye-opener for them, and Lions players took on hero status. It didn’t get much better than being picked up on a Saturday morning, to travel to your favourite event of the week, in Ocker’s [Ross Little’s] Jaguar – with the hood down!



Ocker's Jag

"There was one eventful Saturday morning, when transport arrangements were confused. After vainly waiting far longer than was wise for the other supposedly rostered drivers to show, it was left to Colin Carmody to transport himself, the whole team of nine, plus equipment, from Springvale to Frankston in about 15 minutes. We made it, but there wasn't time for a warm-up. In those days, Colin drove a blue Mini Minor – it was a little cramped!"

The association between the two clubs extended to social functions. The young Springvale boys enjoyed the frisson of almost lawlessness: "Another memorable event that year was an 'illegal' fundraiser on a Saturday night after the game. It was held at the Wearne household in Dandenong West, and was a 'bingo' night. Gambling at an unlicensed venue was a very serious crime in those days, so it was 'invitation only'. A lot of young lads were introduced to illegal gambling for the first time that night, and the hero status of our risk-taking A Graders grew some more."



Jim Prokhovnik. The wallpaper belongs to Bill and Elsie Reay

But the finances of the club did not continue to grow strongly. In 1969, "the social aspect of the club was not as effective" and the club suffered "a severe decrease in the amount obtained through these functions", leading to a deficit. With plans to develop the club, it was decided that efforts must be made to redress this failure. Thriftily, it was even suggested that the club adopt a new uniform, appropriating the colours of the ex-Carrum club, black and gold. While the club enjoyed success in those years, winning the B and C Grade pennants in 1970, the number of players was not stable. When it was moved in 1971 that the club enter A, C and junior teams, this motion was amended to read "that this club *attempt* to field A,C and junior teams." Despite this, the U17s and U15s continued to win finals.

Long-time Springvale Lion Mark Anderton was one of those juniors. He remembers playing on Burden Park before Bob Luxford, as a Springvale councillor, had ensured that the DBA's first all-weather diamond was constructed. Mark remembers that kids from Springvale High and from Noble Park Tech filled the spots in his first junior team. Perhaps the financial troubles outlined in the minutes affected the kit provided. Mark says "we had no uniforms, no hats, no gloves, no nothing. There was a sack of hand-me-down gloves from senior players that was emptied onto the ground each weekend, and we dived like seagulls to try and get that favourite glove". In the second year, some of the mothers had made uniforms for the juniors, and the more serious players had bought their own gloves. Mark's junior coach insisted that "if you turned up with dirty boots and glove you were on the bench." Keen to play, and desperate not to miss out, this started Mark's habit of "fresh shoe nugget on the boots and fresh tan nugget on the glove every Friday night," and those who have warmed up with Mark might remember that the ball "always had a nice sticky grip" although they might have wondered at the sudden murkiness of any new ball.

In 1972, a meeting was held at Luxford Engineering to discuss junior coaching positions. Special invitations were extended, G. Scranton was installed as coach of the U/15 and U/13, although in the end, Springvale was unable to field an U/15 side. Bob Shaw was named coach of the U/17 team. But the other invited attendee was Ern Jones, and the committee carried a motion "to welcome offer of coaching assistance for E. Jones and accept his offer." This is the first mention of the legendary Ernie Jones in the records. Ernie had been prominent in the Moorabbin Baseball Club, but Bob Luxford discovered that the Jones family had moved to a home just behind the palings at Burden Park. His invitation to Ernie brought into the club one of our great characters, and a man who shaped generations of Springvale Lions' players through his passionate commitment. Mark Anderton remembers that, with his time and with his enthusiasm, Ernie was absolutely generous. But we all know he was fearsome, too. Still, respect for his knowledge dominates the memories of current Lions, with Myles Barnden calling Ernie a life-long "student of the game" who "always listened, always learned."

Jim Prokhovnik recalls the construction of the new diamond in 1973: "Bob just overlaid the plans of Ross Straw field (Australia's best at the time) on the Burden Park plans. There was no way Springvale wasn't going to get top class baseball facilities under Bob Luxford's watch." The ground was so impressive that VBA team Prahran, looking for a merger, approached the Springvale club. But the Springvale committee, sensing that the merger proposal was more like a take-over plan, rejected the idea, and Prahran eventually joined with Cheltenham. When it came time to officially celebrate the opening of the new field in June 1973, "it was the Lions that we invited to participate in an exhibition match to follow the official function." A further fixture match that year was moved to a Sunday to create a special atmosphere, and a function at the household of Springvale player Geoff Gooley saw the profits split evenly between the two clubs.



Burden Park looking not so “all-weather”; super-sopper definitely required to make the ground playable

This camaraderie that transcended competitive rivalry was strengthened further in the summer of 1972/73, when the VBA was looking to shift its season from winter to summer. Along with some VBA clubs, various regional associations also entered composite sides. The DBA’s side was coached by the Lions’ Bill Reay, and included players from both clubs, like “the unforgettable Laurie Sherlock”, and Springvale’s pitcher Norm Burne, along with Bob Garrett and Jim Prokhovnik. Jim remembers that “the bond between our Clubs was further strengthened –over a marvellously enjoyable summer of baseball, beaches and socialising.”

During this period, the social activities of Springvale blossomed, and the “social committee’s great effort” was congratulated. This was made easier by the opening of a new pavilion at Burden Park (although “pavilion” sounds slightly airier and more pleasant than the blank brick block many of us remember) which made it possible for the social committee to “sell refreshments after games at a small profit.” With the construction of the all-weather field, and the embankment behind the back net, Burden Park, remembers Mark Anderton “was a fantastic place to play, with its ‘amphitheatre’ atmosphere” creating a coliseum for the rather more robust style of supporting acceptable at the time.

Visitors to our current Doug MacLean clubrooms might wonder at the stained and knobbly bone, mounted and proudly displayed in the trophy cabinet. When Springvale’s Geoff Gooley moved to Canberra, he began to play with Queanbeyan Baseball Club. Regular trips between the two clubs became a great social occasion – with the civic receptions, hosted by Bob at the Council Offices, some of the more refined festivities. And after the amalgamation, the Queanbeyan tradition continued. Each trip, two games would be played – a social game on the Saturday, and then a more serious competition for the “bone of contention”. Mark Anderton recounts some memorable events, such as Brian Riddiford’s bare-handed catch – having actually turned the wrong way from the ball. The “bone” had always been won by the home team. But in what turned out to be the last ever

Queanbeyan trip, Springvale had a memorable victory. Paul Smith had started on the mound, but kept bouncing his pitches in front of the plate. After an innings, Anderton was brought on to pitch, and the Springvale Lions won the game. "The next day we found out why Smithy was bouncing his pitches...it was 66 feet, not 60 feet, 6 inches." The "Bone of Contention" came home with Springvale, and with no further games, there it has stayed.



Note – this is not the ‘actual’ bone of contention (but we could not access a photo)