

Year of the Dogs

Study Guide

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Introduction

'Year of the Dogs' chronicles a season in the life of the Footscray Football Club.

The people of Footscray are battlers and so is their football team. The *mighty* Bulldogs haven't won a premiership since 1954. The club is close to broke and the AFL keeps trying to kill them off for the sake of a national competition. Footscray sees it as the big end of town versus the little end of town.

But the people of the western suburbs remain passionate about their footy club. It's the heart and soul of the west. To try and kill the Bulldogs is to declare class war.

Now the 1996 season is about to begin. The hopes and aspirations of a whole tribe are resting on the broad shoulders of the 'Doggies'. It is a season of high drama and tragedy, for that is the eternal fascination of the game. And for the first time in Australian cinema we are privileged to witness the inside story of a football season, from the board room to the change room.

No matter how the team performs the faithful will not desert the Bulldogs. To them this is not a game. It is life. But this time, maybe this time, the red, white and blue will triumph. And the west will have its day.'

Before viewing

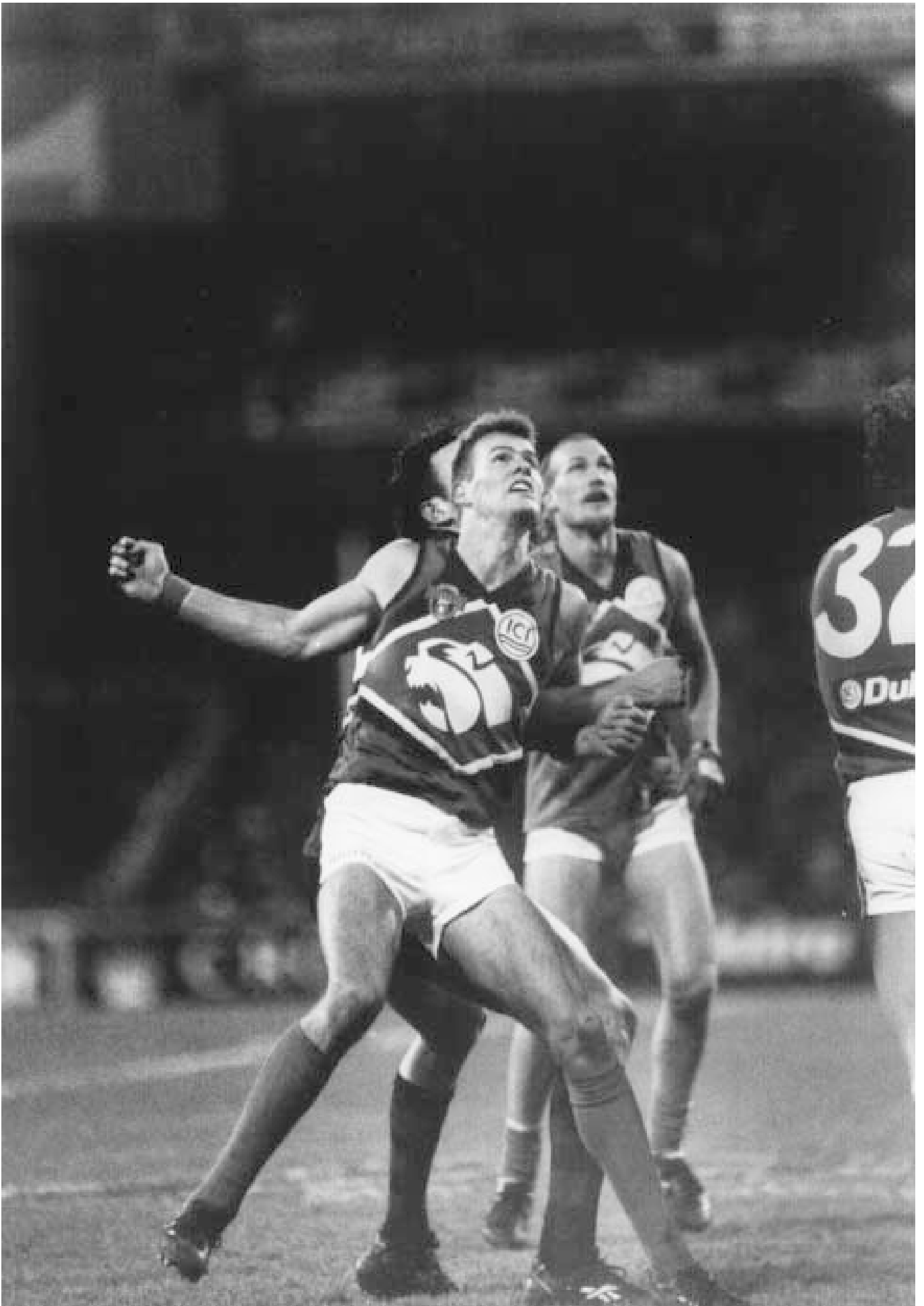
The above introduction comes from the film's press kit. Read it carefully. What claims is it making about football, and about Footscray in particular? What would you expect such a film to focus on? Would you expect it to be of interest to a broad audience? Claims of 'high drama and tragedy' are made. What expectations does this create for potential viewers?



Explore the place of sport (Australian Rules) football in particular, in Australian culture. Increasingly football is becoming a national competition and business. When interstate teams joined the league, and the VFL became the AFL, some commentators predicted the demise of football. Others criticised the increasing commercialisation of a game that had its roots in the local football club, in the local community. Discuss the changing role of sport in Australian society. Does it matter if the business focus becomes the driving force? What happens to team loyalties when players are bought and sold to the highest bidder? What are the differences between a local competition and a national one? What are the advantages and disadvantages of both?

Consider your own experience of sport, both as a participant and a spectator. If you play sport, why? What do you get out of it, physically, socially, emotionally, psychologically? If you don't play sport, why not? What sorts of sport do you enjoy watching, either live or on television, if any? What are the differences between playing and watching sport? Are men's and women's experience of sport the same? Are men's and women's sport valued equally in our society? Does sport develop character? How? Discuss your responses with others and see if there is a common understanding of what needs are met by sport.

Left: Luke Darcy (front) and Danny Southern (rear) in Year of the Dogs
Above: Footscray fans, Jenny (left) and Pat Hodgson.





When producer and director Michael Cordell set out to document a season in the life of a football club, he would have had no idea how the season would turn out — where the team would end on the ladder, the spate of injuries and illness, the change in club personnel. If you had to make a documentary about your favourite team, where would you start? What images, ideas, people, events would you want to capture on film? Discuss the difficulties in creating a coherent story out of something as unpredictable as the fortunes of a sporting club.

After viewing

There are many different areas to focus on in this film. The suggestions below could be starting points for discussion or exploration in a range of classrooms, including English, Studies of Society and Environment, Personal Development, Psychology, and Physical Education.

Personal Development

Sport is regarded by many as character building. Team sport, in particular, supposedly develops the players' capacity to work together, to strive for a common goal. It forces players to communicate with

each other. It builds camaraderie, and forms the basis of lifelong friendships. And many players have the opportunity to learn how to win and lose graciously. Is there evidence of this in *Year of the Dogs*?

At the end of the season, Tony Liberatore notes, 'It's an emotional game, isn't it?' List the various emotions displayed during the film — by players, spectators, officials and the media. For example, emotions range from the spectator yelling 'too slow, too young, too stupid - you got creamed' to the reaction of players to Baxter's recovery. Which of these emotions seem to be expressed in a healthy way?

Read the following description of football:
 A sealed bag full of air,
 Passed and kicked and thrown away,
 On which rests the happiness of thousands.
 (Martin Smith - *This is not Spain*)

Discuss ways in which football can either enhance or inhibit one's personal development, either as a player or a spectator.

Motivation

Following Footscray's loss to Brisbane, coach Alan Joyce tells his players, 'I can't do it for you.' After their loss to North Melbourne he repeats the message: 'I can scream at you 'til I'm blue in the face, but I can't make it happen.' Terry Wallace says the same: 'Me standing here makes no difference.' Club president Peter Gordon acknowledges a similar problem: 'I can't make that happen.'

Examine the ways in which each of these men attempt to motivate the players, and the ways in which the players attempt to motivate each other. Whose responsibility is it to motivate the team? If you were involved with the club, how would you try to motivate the players?

Trace the motivations of the following 'characters' throughout the film:

Pat and Jenny Hodgson — the supporters. 'It's a silly game, I don't like it,' is Pat Hodgson's reaction to her first game of football, but eventually it grows on her. Pat and daughter Jenny never miss a game in Melbourne, and attend training once a week to watch 'their' players. Trace

their reactions throughout the film. What do they get out of football? What needs does it meet for them? Discuss their fierce loyalty to their club — look particularly at discussion regarding possible mergers, and the priorities they set if a merger is to occur. Do you think they are typical supporters? (Note their reluctance to involve themselves in the entertaining fundraiser.) Danny Southern — the injured warrior. Danny's season begins with an injury — a broken thumb. He has chronic problems with his knees and seems to have endlessly recurring injuries. At twenty-two, he is battle scarred. Look at the way injuries are presented in the film, Danny Southern's and those of others'. Injured players get back up to play again. Note Terry Wallace's comment after an injury on the final game of the season — 'tell him to stay on — he's got six months to get over it.' How does the filmmaker use injuries to highlight certain aspects of the game? What would motivate someone like Danny Southern to put his body through such trials?

Shaun Baxter — diagnosed with cancer (a malignant lump on the back of his neck) early in the season, he doesn't play a single game. His priority is no longer football, but to 'try to get my life together.' Look at the way his team mates rally around and support him. What role do football and the team play in Baxter's recovery? His motto, 'Pain is temporary, Glory is forever' is picked up at the club. Why do you think this is? Several times during the film the plight of Baxter is juxtaposed with the plight of the football club. Why do you think this is done? What are the similarities and the differences between the two? During a discussion about cost-cutting, one comments about Baxter, 'It would kill his spirit if you chopped him at the end of the year.' Is it possible to run a football club purely as a business enterprise?

Steve Wallis — at 261 games, he has the fourth highest number of games in the history of the club. His final game results in a two-point loss to Essendon, leaving Footscray second last on the AFL ladder. Coach Terry Wallace used the fact that it was Wallis's final game to try to inspire the rest of the players — 'Win it for Wally'. Nevertheless, Steve Wallis doesn't react

badly to the loss. He speaks of ongoing loyalty to the players and the club. He hasn't been lured away by offers of more money, and he doesn't turn his back on the club after an extraordinarily unsuccessful year.

Examine his reaction, his message to the rest of the players, both before and after the game. What seems to have motivated him?

Team Management

During the film players meet to discuss their reservations about their coach. The camera is turned off while players discuss their concerns. After watching the film, what do you imagine some of those concerns might have been? Not long after, Allan Joyce, who has coached teams to night premierships and grand final wins, and is described by some as the 'best coach' they've had, 'resigns', and Terry Wallace, the man who brought news of the players' dissatisfaction to the notice of the powers-that-be, is appointed in his place. Compare and contrast the approaches of these two coaches. Similarly, look at the approaches of Gordon and Kennedy — examine their language, the imagery they employ, the aspects of the club they focus on. Compare their approaches to the words of Charlie Sutton: 'I ask you for a personal effort. Go on to the field full of grit, full of football. Come with me and we'll win this.' (from the 1954 newspaper reports on Footscray's last premiership).

Of these four men, which is most effective? Which is a better leader? Is it possible to define an effective style of management or leadership for a football team? Is it possible that a coach can be successful in some circumstances and not others? If so, what factors might determine that success?

The Psychologist

The club psychologist spends a lot of time dissecting words and images: 'desperate

dogs', 'Australian football battlers', 'scrappy win'. And he claims that such negative images are perpetuated in the club's annual report. Positive thinking seems to be his goal — and he attempts to replace the negative images with words such as 'exciting, passionate, professional'. What do you think he is trying to do?

Obviously during the year he was engaged in other work which was not captured or included in the film. What sorts of things do you think he would have / should have done? Did the focus on words and images pay off?

To what extent does the team psychologist need to work with individuals — players and coaches — and to what extent does he need to work with groups? What is the difference?



Review

After viewing the film, revisit the results of your discussion about high drama and tragedy. Did the film live up to these expectations? The film aims to appeal to a wide audience — not just Footscray supporters, not even just football fans. Is it successful? Why?

Videocassettes of *Year of the Dogs* (in widescreen format) are available from Ronin Films, PO Box 1005, Civic Square, A.C.T. 2608. Phone (02) 6248 0851. Fax (02) 6249 1640 email: roninfilms@netinfo.com.au

Left: Michael Cordell, director of Year of the Dogs with sound recordist Tom Bodycomb, and the Footscray Football Team and club officials. Above: Footscray players, Brad Wira (left) and Steve Wallis.