

and cricket pitch, so it's fitting that many are set to return to help celebrate the  
There's renewed pride in the home of the Magpies as...

# centenary birthday 'bash'

*The grew up on a Merbein fruit block, was spotted by footy talent scouts purely by chance, and had it not been for the war, could have been one of footy's all-time greats. Merbein's August centenary celebrations will no doubt hear the tale of...*

## The lanky kid and his hands of steel

HAROLD Ball was one of those outstanding county footballers who were invited to look at the towering VFL talent scouts, was picked up by chance, and turned out to be a prodigious talent.

The son of George Henry Ball and Alma Daisy Wellington, Harold was born in Mildura on May 29, 1920, and was educated with his brother George and sisters Alma and Joan at Merbein State School, and later at Mildura High School.

He was regarded as a particularly good sportsman, excelling at cricket, football and athletics, and in one game of cricket as a teenager, playing for St John's at Merbein, made 55 not out and took 4/21. George made 57 in the same match.

But it was on the football field that Harold really made his mark. At 6ft 2ins on the old scale, he played mainly in the ruck, and had the distinction of playing in four consecutive premierships - Merbein Wanderers Under 18's, Merbein seniors, and the Melbourne premier-ship teams of 1939 and 1940. He played every match in 1939.

Harold was picked up almost by default. Melbourne talent scouts had come up north to look at another

player, and while in the Mildura area at first-shipped under the radar of Merbein youngsters.

He turned in an impressive performance - again - and while in Mildura area while in the Mildura area

History books show he weighed in at a healthy 13st 9lbs, was known by one and all as 'Snowy', and was a good kick and outstanding mark. As a ruckman he kicked 30 goals in his first season, and was described by some critics as the find of the year.

There were some tough and will-ing big men in the league at that time, but as one Melbourne sports writer was to say, "Ball more than held his own against the lot of them."

Harold spent his time in Melbourne working with the ground staff at the MCG, making sure he could return home at season's end to work on the family fruit block.

He played just 33 games, but it was enough for him to be put alongside some of the Demon greats in the VFL Finals, author Graeme Atkinson wrote, "Ball thrilled the crowd with brilliant finger-tip marks, dragging down screamer after screamer in the last line of defence. It was an amazing last quarter."

He predicted that Ball could have gone on to become one of the greatest players of all time. Sadly, that wasn't to be, as the lanky ruckman didn't return from war service.

Posted to the 2/9th Field Ambulance in October, 1940, he sailed on the Queen Mary to Singapore the following February, disembarking on the west coast of Malaya. Their Army mainly football, where Harold's team won all 14 matches for the season.

As crack Japanese forces advanced through Asia, the 'invincible' Singapore fell on February 14, 1942, and Harold was working at a dressing station tending the wounded two miles behind the front lines when orders came through to withdraw.

Harold and a fellow medic, the then Aussie hurdles champion John Park, stayed behind with two others to continue their treatment of wounded Diggers.

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said to be the reason the Demons legends.

VFL historian Norm Sowdon, writing about the players who made play that day as one of the greatest individual performances he had seen, more so because of the quagmire that day.

The Demons had lost the second semi, and has to beat a strong Essendon team if they were to meet the Tigers in the Grand Final. For three quarters the game was fairly even, with Melbourne holding a five-point lead.

Then the Demons lost the great full back Wally Lock to injury. He was replaced by the 19th man, who lasted only a few minutes before he, too, was carted off. The rain pelted down, and the MCG was reduced to a quagmire.

As Essendon threw everything they had into attack, the Demons asked Ball to stem the tide at full back. It was a match-winning move. In the final 25 minutes he pulled down 15 marks with a ball that everyone else was having trouble grasping.

And according to Sowdon, they weren't chest marks or easy overheads. Practically every one was a soaring finger-tip over a milling pack, with Ball taking more marks in that last quarter than all other 35 players combined.

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• GENTLE GIANT: Harold Ball towers over another former VFL legend 'Chick' Smallhorn before a services footy game in Malaya, and (left) Ball in action with the Demons in 1940.

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