Ray Sleeth

AFLUA Life Member

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As Carlton's Adrian Gallagher sprinted into an open goal at the opening of the final quarter of round 22, 1970 he was about to blaze away when he heard someone yell, "'Give it to Alex!'".

Carlton full-forward Alex Jesaulenko had been stuck on 99 goals for most of the match. There had already been four ground invasions, each taking minutes, police and sirens to clear as he searched for his 100th goal and kept missing.

As Gallagher recalled, "So I kicked it to him and I reckon it went five yards. Anyway, Ray Sleeth paid the mark and Jezza finally got it over with. The bottom line is that I kicked the ball to Alex Jesaulenko in the goal square because the umpire kept yelling 'Give it to Jezza!'."

In many ways the story sums up Sleeth's umpiring career. He was a no-nonsense man always ready to take control and brooked no attempt to take it away. He wanted Jezza to get his ton so the interruptions would stop – and he got his way.

Born in Carlton on 26 March 1939 Raymond Sleeth grew up in Oakleigh, West Melbourne and North Melbourne where he played school football for Oakleigh state and technical schools, underage football for East Coburg under-21s and later Happy Valley in the Sunday Association where he was runner-up in the club Best and Fairest and recipient of Best Clubman. Along the way he tried his hand at cricket, golf and squash.

Ray joined the VFL Reserve Grade umpires in 1958 when he realised a senior playing career was not realistic. Early on he was involved off the field by taking a role on the Social Committee in 1959 and then the Executive Committee from 1960-61. There was little in his Reserve Grade appointments to indicate he would become one of the top umpires of his era when he was promoted to the senior list in 1962.

After toiling in the VCFL for almost three seasons his breakthrough came in 1964. A series of VCFL finals, including the Southern Mallee preliminary final, set up promotion to the VFL Reserve Grade in 1965. He spent most of the year in the Reserves and finished with his first of twelve VCFL grand finals – the Ovens and King at Beechworth. In the first five reserve matches of 1966 Ray impressed the board enough to be appointed to his first VFL match.

Sleeth debuted at Princes Park on 28 May 1966 earning heritage number 248 as Carlton defeated Footscray. The challenge of the day was managing both experienced captain-

coaches – Barassi and Whitten. He later recalled, "Both were most helpful at the start. But in no time they were both trying to pull the wool over my eyes."

Elated at the prospect of his first match he commented, "I hope I can do well and stay in the top panel now." He did maintain form finishing that season with seven VFL matches and a night series semi-final.

From 1967 to 1971 Ray was rarely out of the 'big-six'. His first VFL final – the Second-semi – came in 1968, followed by that year's Reserve Grade Grand Final. That same year an intoxicated Windy Hill patron jumped the fence and punched him in the face.

Relations between the umpires and the VFL tribunal were often contentious but never more so than what became known as the 'Technicalities fiasco' of 1969 and Ray was centre-stage.

Collingwood visited Carlton in April and came away with a ten goal win from a match as spiteful and violent as had ever been played. Each of the five umpires had multiple reports with eight charges laid against four players. Sleeth informed the club delegates that there were reports and that it would be some time before the written charges were ready but neglected to verbally convey the details of the charges. By the time they were ready, and after the delegates constantly banging on the change-room door, Sleeth handed them over and the delegates left following another heated exchange between Ray and Carlton's delegate Perc Bentley.

At the ensuing tribunal hearing the charges were never heard because VFL rule 14 had been contravened when no verbal details of the reports were conveyed 'immediately' after the match and prior to the written charges. An outraged umpires' association threatened withdrawal of services before being placated by the Umpires' Appointment Board who guaranteed amending the arcane reporting rules. Throughout the press flurry, which included a bomb-threat at the tribunal, Sleeth appeared in all the newspapers in various photographs. The umpires were cleared of any wrong doing and the rules did eventually change.

That year Sleeth achieved what he always felt was the highlight of his career when he travelled to Adelaide to represent the VFL at the ANFC Carnival officiating in the WA v. Tasmania and SA v. Tasmania matches. He also umpired the 1969 night grand final, a five-point thriller between Hawthorn and Melbourne.

While successful on the field Ray also contributed to the fabric of the umpires' association. He served on the Executive Committee in 1967-68 and as VFLUA Cricket club captain from 1965-71 and President from 1971-73. Ray was also one of the original drivers of the sporting panels held at Pentridge Gaol having been introduced to Father Gerald Brosnan. It was these nights that ultimately led to the annual Pentridge football matches between the prisoners and the umpires. Ray coached the umpires' team on at least one occasion.

His final three seasons contained two more finals: the 1970 First-semi in front of a record 104 239 spectators who saw Sleeth almost knocked unconscious. South's Peter Bedford drilled a kick which travelled five metres before crashing into the side of the umpire's head. Trainer Eric Gabb raced to treat Sleeth who had the presence of mind to blow time-on before collapsing. He recovered and completed the match but sported a cut and blackened eye for a week.

Ray's final senior match was the 1972 First Semi-final and he retired at season's end having amassed 119 VFL matches (4 finals), 34 VFL Reserve Grade matches, and 98 VCFL matches (12 grand finals).

The retirement may have seemed premature to some, given he was only 33 years old and had been emergency umpire to Bill Deller for the 1972 VFL Grand Final, but in Ray's mind the decision was clear.

"To be honest, I'm just tired of the whole business. I've lost my enthusiasm. I'm sick of the training. And I'm fed up with having certain clubs attack my integrity. I've never regretted becoming an umpire and those years with the whistle have been great. The rewards have been many."

Immediately after retiring Ray took up the opportunity to become the umpires' advisor to the Western Australian Football League. It was a three-year contract and one of two offers he received, the other from Tasmania. He commented at the time, "It's a big honour for me and I intend to upgrade the standard of WA umpires to the Victorian level. I won't be able to achieve this overnight but within two years I hope to have a panel worthy of VFL standard."

Working with legendary WA field umpire Ray Scott they proved a successful double both being instrumental in introducing the two-umpire system to the league in 1976. Sleeth left the WAFL at the end of 1976 but remained involved in the west in various roles with the South Suburban Football League: umpires advisor 1978-80 and director 1981-83.

Returning to Melbourne he was senior coach at Kew Amateurs in the VAFA in 1985 and a recruiting officer with Melbourne from 1986-2007. He was CEO of Prahran Assumption Football Club in the VAFA. Given his gregarious nature, outspoken opinions and general confidence it is not surprising he was also involved in the WA media as a television commentator on Channel 9 and a commentator for ABC Radio Perth.

Among Ray's last activities with umpiring was his organising of a trip reunion. The VFLUA trip to Perth in 1969 was memorable to all who attended. Ray, as trip manager, was greatly responsible for its success. In 2009 he got those surviving members together to relive a great experience forty years on.

Ray's contribution to the umpires' association was recognised with life membership in 1972 and with induction to the AFLUA Hall of Fame in 2010. Combined with his on-field success and contributions to coaching, administration and the media he has left a remarkable legacy that will be long remembered.

Ray Sleeth passed away at Cabrini Hospital 29 July 2013.