

St Patrick's College Old Collegians Podcast

Episode 1 Transcript

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Interviewer: Mr Paul Nolan, Director of Community Development

Interviewee: Mr Brian Gleeson (SPC 1947-52), winner of the 1957 Brownlow Medal.

Producer: Mr Gavin Nash, Mulcahy & Co.

Link: <https://soundcloud.com/user-874458973/spc-old-collegians-podcast-episode-1-brian-gleeson>

Paul Nolan

Welcome to the official St Patrick's College podcast. As we begin our journey into discovering some of the all-time great stories from one of Ballarat's most famous institutions.

I am Paul Nolan, the Director of Community Development at St Patrick's College and I'm excited that you are joining me on this school excursion of sorts as we explore the moments and the men that have contributed so greatly to our rich tradition.

In this episode one we will explore in detail a timely story with one of the College's favourite sons as we head into footy final season, which of course includes the Brownlow medal. We will spend some time with old Collegian Brian Gleeson, the winner of the 1957 Brownlow Medal.

While not quite the oldest surviving Brownlow Medalist (1958 winner Neil Roberts is marginally older), no man who won a Brownlow before Brian is still with us, so he holds a unique place in the game's history.

As a passionate supporter of the green, white and blue we're very pleased and privileged to welcome Brian to join us today.

Music

"When the Saints go marching in, oh when the Saints go marching in".

Paul Nolan

OK, Brian, thank you very much for joining us today. It's a great honor and privilege to have you involved in our first podcast. So to get started you attended St Patrick's College as a boarder from Willaura in 1947. What prompted that move?

Brian Gleeson

Well, we were a farming family in those days, living 10 miles out of town.

You know there were no school buses or that type of thing and sending Catholic children to Catholic schools was a big issue, and I think the guidance of the clergy at the Ararat parish would have persuaded it. But it started seven years earlier when we went off to Ballarat boarding school at Villa Maria, which is just a little school for 30 people run by the Mercy nuns from Ballarat East.

I guess the dad had been to St Pat's, so we looked forward to going to St Pat's and we went up there and saw football games or athletics at times. And we were really well preconditioned to want to go to St Pat's.

Paul Nolan

So, coming into that environment, you know so far away from home must have been challenging for you. So how did you go about settling in?

Brian Gleeson

Well it was challenging when young. I remember the first day when my parents left I felt very sad and dislocated. Standing under a stand with the tank on it at Villa Maria and I put my hands up and held it, but years later when I went back there, I found it wasn't even up to my hip in height so you know I must have been very small at the time.

And then on to St Pat's it didn't seem to be a problem, moving onto St Pat's from the point of view of integrating because we've been involved in boarding school before.

On the other hand, uh, it was a difficult integration in regards to the academic side of things.

There was a different curriculum. That's it. They taught different subjects at St Pat's in terms of Latin, French, algebra, geometry in Years 7 and 8, which I didn't do at Villar Maria, so I was good two years behind in that area when I got to St Pat's, and as a result, my academic career at St Pat's wasn't very good.

Paul Nolan

So according to the 1947 College annual, you at least quickly made your mark on the Athletics track winning the under 13 100 yards and the 220 yards handicaps as well as the high jump of course. What can you remember about that day?

Brian Gleeson

Well, I just don't remember the running so much, but I do remember the high jump and it appealed to me very much. Yeah, that was one of the great things about St Pat's - the opportunity for sport was fantastic and, of course, I had a bit of a bit of a love for sport. And you know, I was reasonably good at it. So we're like doing things but we're good at don't we?

Paul Nolan

Oh absolutely, I understand you had a special affinity for the old handball courts as well.

Brian Gleeson

Oh yes so both my brother and I did well at handball. I think in one year I won the under 14s, he got the under 15s, a bloke called John Moloney won the under 16s and Les Mogg got the open, won the open competition and three out of the four became VFL footballers. Some of us played interstate and my brother of course got a couple of premiership medals as well so it must have been good for us to play handball.

Paul Nolan

The old handball courts must have contributed greatly to the school's football history, the hand eye coordination must have come into play there.

Brian Gleeson

And there were six of them. There's always plenty of room, but it seemed to go off the boil a bit of time, so playing handball, but it was a great game we thought.

Paul Nolan

I think in that year you also won the high jump at the Ballarat combined sports you know, representing St Patrick's College. That suggests that you must have had a very natural talent for jumping.

Brian Gleeson

Oh well, it was pretty old fashioned, you know, just the old scissors but, uh, you know. I guess I was the one who did better at it than anyone else at St Pat's at that time and then in the BPS team I think it was called and I did win it, yeah. I was in three or at least 4 events that day in the last year and I came second to John James in two of them, namely the weight put and the long jump. And he broke records in both of those. And also I was in the hurdles which John won. Just while we're on John he won five events at that event, that sports day in Ballarat schools competition. And he broke the records in two of them so he wasn't real bad, was he?

Paul Nolan

It seems like he was incredibly talented, the two of you, had, you know, eerily similar career paths - you both left school to play VFL football - you for St Kilda, he for Carlton - and you both made your senior debuts on the same day and you both won Brownlow medals. Can you share some of your favourite memories of John?

Brian Gleeson

Well, John was the best at everything on the sporting field he was. He had the muscles of a man when we were boys, you know and I recall he won the bowling and the batting averages at cricket and then he was the best footballer - and you know, including that day with 35 goals and then in the Athletics, I just told his story of the five wins. You know, another thing you either did cricket or rowing. Not John James - he did both! He pulled an oar in the first crew, so he was just fantastic and he was a good student as well. Yeah, remarkable fellow John.

Paul Nolan

It's amazing to think that he kicked 35 goals in in one game. This year in the AFL he would probably be leading the Coleman medal after just one game.

Brian Gleeson

Amazing yeah yes, but he wasn't a great kick in terms of accuracy and that's why he finished up on the backline at Carlton I suspect. But he was a Tiger in, you know, chasing the ball way. He had a mind where he couldn't allow himself to be beaten.

Paul Nolan

Now, while you came to St Patrick's initially you know in search of academic excellence it soon became apparent that football too would play a very big part in your life as a student. Can you share with us some of your favourite memories of playing football at the College?

Brian Gleeson

It was real privilege to play in the first eighteen, I mean to get the guernsey. Green, white and blue stripe guernsey currency in the 1st place was - we all regarded it as an exceptional honor and we had the benefit of Brother Bill O'Malley as the coach and he had very simple rules but they worked. You know, for example we weren't allowed to bounce the ball so that there was no misunderstanding further up the field and people could lead immediately when someone got the ball downfield. Another one was we had to play on immediately if we got a free kick or a mark from the centerline forward. Well, that sort of threw the balance out of the opposition, right? They didn't catch on to that one and so forth. The rest of it was very much basic skills, training and we were given a lot of that and skill development, you know, on both sides of the body was very, very important.

And the other thing was, of course, the morale building by pointing out what previous people had done for St Pat's and the green white and blue. And we should emulate them and keep winning, you see. So, he had us in his hands really. And we responded to it.

You know individual games I don't recall particularly other than that one where we kicked the 48 goals to nothing. You know it was a bit sad for poor old High School that day.

Paul Nolan

So how did you balance the rigours of striving towards academic excellence with your sporting and extracurricular activities in your final year of school and what tips would you pass on to this year's graduating students?

Brian Gleeson

Well, I did it with difficulty in terms of the academic, but I think you know the thing we learned at St Pat's is to give everything we did our best shot. And that sort of stayed with us, you know, we had to take responsibility for what we did. Some people are good at this, some are good at that, then you know, some are good at both - the football, sports and in academics. But I think it's good to pursue the things you like and are good at him to give it everything, right?

Paul Nolan

Now leaving St Pat's, how did you come to end up at St Kilda, particularly when you're older brother as you've mentioned, was at Melbourne already, and what was the transition from school to VFL footy

like? I imagine, back in the day, you would have had to have worked full time as well as playing footy on the weekends.

Brian Gleeson

Yes, well I was under the radar a little bit in that I wasn't expected to be playing senior football or anything like that because I was in the minor seminary that existed at St Pat's at the time called St Peter's and it was only in halfway through the last year that I came to the conclusion that being a priest wasn't for me, and I applied for the public service in Melbourne on leaving school and there was a delay so I worked at home in my parents hotel which was in Berrigan in New South Wales. The coach of Berrigan at the time was a former North Melbourne champion Les Foote. And Les was a bit impressed with, you know, my skills on the training track and in the school Holidays I played in a second there a couple of times. And Les wanted to re-ingratiate himself down in Melbourne again. He wanted to get back there. He reckoned I guess that St Kilda was his best chance, so he took a few players down to have a run at St Kilda.

And St Kilda were impressed enough to say well we want you, you know, we want him and I had no idea that I was going to be a St Kilda footballer at that stage. In fact I wasn't very keen on the idea at all but they persuaded me and they also had a fellow on the committee who was a big wheel in the public service and he arranged to bring forward my appointment and that I should be appointed to the Department of Army at the Albert Park Barracks, which was right across the road from us the St Kilda Football Club ground. So, my world was all around St Kilda in those days for a few years and everything worked out fine.

Except in my first game. I was selected at centra half forward as part of the promise. I'd never played there in my life. I just couldn't see myself as a ruckman in the VFL at that stage. Anyway, by quarter time I got moved out to the flank because it wasn't doing any good and I heard a voice from the stand yell out, clear as a bell: "Get back to Berrigan you mug Gleeson!". So that was my first comment from the crowd.

Paul Nolan

Well, tell us about your coaches at St Kilda. I think Les Foote was your first coach and then it was Alan "Killer" Killigrew?

Brian Gleeson

No, no Colin Williamson was the coach at the time and I played a year under him. He was a nice man and a former St Kilda player – a police sergeant by occupation. But Les got the job as Captain Coach the next year. And Les was a very skillful player, personally, but trying to get everybody else to be the same as he was. In terms of doing the sort of things that he did and most people were incapable of it. His coaching career didn't go so well. You know he actually led us to the bottom. And he did that over two years and then he was replaced by Alan Killigrew. Well now Killigrew was my kind of person. He really called us all into line and he gave us specific things that he wanted the team to do and he, you know, he really worked on making a team of us and using handball and backing up very skillfully, which wasn't terribly popular in those days.

And he helped very much to become the best I could be. And, in reality, I just had a gentle, sort of a growth a bit each year but kept on knowing that I wasn't anywhere near the standard I needed to be, but I kept growing by trying hard and listening to my coach and it worked.

You know, I sort of got to the top.

Actually, a year before 1957 they played the first night football at South Melbourne. A competition amongst the teams that didn't make the finals and the first game was St Kilda and South Melbourne and it was a bloodbath, generally very poor quality lights and lots of unfair play and so forth. I was given a really rough time including being knocked out. You know, the game became a melee there at one time and half a dozen people finished up getting reported and one fellow finished up with a broken jaw. All this sort of silly stuff. The umpire was a young umpire – not Alan Schwab but a Schwab was his name at the time. I think it took, you know, they only had one umpire in those days and two boundary umpires and they had a real job to get it back under control. Anyway, that night, afterwards in the dressing rooms I was very dejected and so forth and Killigrew came and sat beside me and he said “Look, I know you must be down at the moment because all that went on.” He said: “But I just want to tell you how proud I was that you kept on trying, you know. And you did well.” And he said “You’ve got enough in you to win a Brownlow Medal.” And the next year that's what happened. Same game, same place, same opposition. And the Brownlow had been counted the night before and I was the winner. So thanks very much Alan Killigrew.

Paul Nolan

In that year, in 1957, you obviously had a career best year and you went into the Brownlow count as a favorite. Obviously, this was in an era before the red carpet and the glitzy award ceremonies. So what did you do on that night, and how did you react once it became apparent that you were crowned as the best and fairest player in the League?

Brian Gleeson

In those days they counted, the delegates of the clubs, counted the Brownlow with the League officials in the league headquarters and the only media people was, I think, one radio and two newspaper people. Or there might have been three radio it, you know that doesn't really matter, but you could only hear about it on the radio. And I was at home and hadn't tuned in and we got a phone call from a fellow I used to do a bit of part time work with and he was a publican. And he said: “You’ve won the Brownlow!” I said it couldn't be, they wouldn't have counted by now. Anyway, he said, “Well, they've counted the first votes.” (They just counted the three votes you see first). But he said “And you’ve got 18 and Roy Wright's got 12 and John James has got 12.” He said “They can't beat you!” Anyway, I listened to him and when they counted the second votes, so I got a couple of those and they counted the thirds and I got a couple of those. So, I totaled up to 24 votes and I think Roy Wright got 20 and John James got 19, so that's how it worked. Now, there was nothing official on from the League and that night but a lot of media people came around to the home and you know, my dad had to put on a few beers I think, and I had to do interviews, do photos.

Television those days had two evening shows, one run by Graham Kennedy and the other one was run by a young Bert Newton. And they both invited me in and I went with the Bert Newton one and that was the night so nothing else happened then. But the presentations in those days were done at the first

semifinal. And then the league had a new Brownlow Medallist presented and a dinner with the previous Brownlow medalists and a few press members and the delegates, of course they were running the League in those days.

And I was sort of like the guest of honour, except that they had a bigger guest of honour in the Prime Minister and I sat next to him - Bob Menzies in those days. And it was a great honour.

Paul Nolan

That's fantastic. I think it's terrific to know that you found out you won the Brownlow Medal by the local publican. That's just brilliant.

Brian Gleeson

Yes, well, after work I used to, on a busy night, I used to go down and pull a few beers for him and then do the same on Saturday to make a little extra money. I wasn't in a well-paid job. There was no money in football in those days – it was just five pounds a game.

Paul Nolan

So the Saints missed the finals that year, but your Brownlow win combined with the emergence of some other key players such as Neil Roberts, it gave the Saints' faithful some hope that a great year was coming in 1958, and in fact you were named captain of the club and were ready to lead the Saints as a 23 year old, you know, star of the game at the pinnacle of your career. But then fate intervened in a preseason game. Tell us what happened.

Brian Gleeson

Well, it was, it was painful. A recruit that was down to have a run. He ran into my knee while he was running full pace. He kneed me in the knee while I was pivoting on it and it did damage to my knee to a degree that doctors at the time, specialists, thought I needed to have my cartilages removed. I don't think they knew much about those pieces that keep the knee together, ligaments, in those days.

And so, I was stuck with a knee operation and I thought was going to come good and play again and all that type of thing. But the knee never came good. Apparently, I must have busted the main ligament in the knee, and the outside one as well so. All the effort after that didn't work as the knee was blowing up and wasn't getting any strength in it despite lots of physiotherapy.

And, the next year I had another one which was called a synovectomy where they spread the knee membrane and try to sew it back to stop the fluid but that didn't work either. In the next year, I had lots of fluid removed every week after training I would go into a doctor and get my knee, release the fluid – lots of it, you know, like a pint or something like that each week and it just wasn't settling down at all. So, it was over three years that I learned that I was never going to play again at that level.

You know it was just so disappointing, but it also is a bit like the frog that are in the kettle of cold water and didn't know he was going to be boiling in, didn't realise it. You know, I was going through that sort of a situation.

Paul Nolan

It must have been an incredibly challenging time mentally to try and keep your hopes up that you're going to get back out on the field. What sort of support back in the day did the clubs offer for people like you in that sort of situation?

Brian Gleeson

Well, there was no support in terms of psychological help or guidance – it and didn't exist in those days. They paid for the operations that I had and for the physiotherapy but I was on my own outside of that. They were sad and sorry about it all and that type of thing but, yeah, it was just what happened in life.

Paul Nolan

In the following years you moved to Queensland and coached Coorparoo in the QAFL and attempted a playing come back. How did that go?

Brian Gleeson

Well there was something else in between that I probably should mention then. I was invited to be on the first football panel on television in Melbourne, which was the Pelaco Inquest show on 7S7 on a Saturday night when football was only played on Saturdays and I did that for a couple of years and that was interesting. I had no idea what impact we'd had and nobody did because television was so new.

And I was invited by my company, which was Carnation Milk at the time, to go up to Queensland as their senior representative up there. It was through the publicity I got on the television, I suppose, that I had three invitations to coach. You know, like three teams invited me to coach them up there while I was working and that turned out to be a very good year for me remuneratively because I finished up getting three times as much as I would have got in playing league football just as a playing coach. Then I got some bonuses if I got into the finals with the team, like you know another 30% and then if I got into the Grand Final, get another 30%. About half my salary, about half my income that year came out of football. And then we lost a grand final, but it was, it was fine. Why did I play? Well, I was running around the ground. You know, probably looking good and you know, I thought I should be good enough to play. I guess I got my ego, and I played a few games. I had been five years out of the game at that time. I did OK, but not great. I kicked six or seven goals one day which wasn't bad. It was part of what went on.

Paul Nolan

Now, after that stint in Queensland, you came back to Melbourne where, you know, your close links back to St Patrick's College became even more evident when you were coaching what was then the St Patrick's Ballarat Old Boys Football Club in the amateur competition. Tell us about those years and some of the lifelong friends that you made from that involvement.

Brian Gleeson

Yeah, well that was very fortunate. I remember Michael Bourke, Doctor Michael Bourke – a former Old Boy, he told me that I ought to coach Newman College because the coach up there is resigning and he doesn't want to, you know, do it next year and Newman want a coach. And he sort of persuaded me to make myself available for that and I did. But then I found also that (that was a mid-week competition) – that St Pat's had a few Old Boys who are hankering to maintain their school-day relationships by forming

a football team in the amateur competition in Melbourne in a Saturday competition. So, they consulted me you might say and, you know, I knew some of them and I had played a game or two in first Old Boys football team that St Pat's had. Back in the 40s and early 50s. Yeah anyway, I got involved and I was helping them to recruit people and then they needed a coach so took that on as well and I did it for a couple years and we had a wonderful time. And the friendships, the school day friendships of the players made the club just such a happy place to be. And we won a couple of premierships in those first two years and in the second year we got a seconds team going and it was just a pleasure to be part of it. Yeah, so that year I was coaching Newman College mid-week and St Pat's on the weekend and then I was also a player's representative on the VFL tribunal defending those you know who would maybe be charged, yeah, so it was a big year.

Paul Nolan

It kept you busy. And then that following year, you played a role in St Kilda's famous only ever Premiership, which was in 1966. Tell us about your contribution to that year at the Saints.

Brian Gleeson

Well, I was probably more in a PR role at that stage as a member of the committee of management. I had six years as a committee man or director at St Kilda. In the last two I was a delegate to be VFL for them on the football playing side. They used to have two delegates per club, one on the Finance Committee and one on the Permit Committee as they called it and I was the Permit Committee. So that was just more experience.

Paul Nolan

And what about your life outside football Brian. You know, tell us about the rest of your family and your career.

Brian Gleeson

I married they year after I won the Brownlow and we had four children and, we still have. Nine grandchildren nowadays, and unfortunately my wife has been unwell for two and a half years and she's in care. I live in a retirement village myself now.

But my career - after leaving the public service going to the sales world, and finished up in the life insurance industry. First as an agent for a few years and then I was invited into management and then the regional management and national sales management. I had twelve years at my peak I suppose in that role. And then things went downhill as I aged and I finished up my last five years working for the Christian Brothers who were running the St Vincent's boys home which became McKillop Family Services. Yeah, that's pretty much it.

Paul Nolan

It so you career almost went full circle starting off with the Christian Brothers and then ending up with the Christian Brothers.

Brian Gleeson

Yeah and I had a happy career. I worked in Melbourne, Sydney, Brisbane in national roles and had a little travel around Australia before there were any video calls or long term telephone calls that you could really get down to business with.

Paul Nolan

So even now, in your later years and even in periods of lock down due to COVID-19, you're still keeping very active. What do you? What are you studying these days?

Brian Gleeson

Well, I got the attitude that I have probably learnt by necessity that one has to keep growing in life and particularly as I had such a, what I regard as a poor academic career at school. Today ... I did finish up writing a book, nearly 500 pages, which is called the Gleeson Butler story going from my great grandparent level and that that was the biggest thing I ever did in my life. But I never considered myself a good writer and now I'm just doing writing for pleasure in a type of a course, every week. We have, we have homework and we send it out to one another in the group, and then we get together on Zoom on Friday morning and have a chat about it and it gives focus - that part of my life and a lot of pleasure to catch up with those people every week and to challenge myself to write better. So that's what I do Paul.

Paul Nolan

It's a great example of life-long learning. Now as we've mentioned before, you're not quite the oldest surviving Brownlow Medallist as I think Neil Roberts is marginally older than you, but nobody who won a Brownlow before you is still with us so you've got a very unique place in the game's history. Do you still watch the footy a lot?

Brian Gleeson

Oh yes, I enjoy my football. I think it's the most exciting thing that comes on television these days. And I watch a lot of television – it's my best friend, the television, and my worst enemy because I watch too much of it sometimes and go to sleep in front of it but football on television is really good I think. Particularly when St Kilda are winning!

Paul Nolan

Oh, when the Saints are winning, yeah! So which players do you take an interest in?

Brian Gleeson

Which players? Oh well I try and keep an eye on some of these St Pat's boy who are doing well. Young Duggan over there – it's good to see him playing well. Young Dan Butler, I haven't met yet, but I'm delighted he's at St Kilda and when he does well, St Kilda win so that's all very good.

Paul Nolan

Fantastic. Who's your tip to win the Brownlow Medal this year?

Brian Gleeson

I feel for the very good players like Martin at Richmond and Dangerfield at Geelong. The game is geared to give the defender the advantage. You know people sit on one another you know in terms of when they go in to grab the ball and they rush them and run them into the ground and they're very tightly held these days you know. So their brilliance is probably knocked off a bit. So it could well be a new fellow this year rather than one of the champions whose skill is dumbed down a bit by the unfortunate rules of the game at the moment I think.

Paul Nolan

I take it you're not a fan of taggers then?

Brian Gleeson

Well, I think there's too many, what do you call them, scrums. There are too many people around it. They have to move the ball quickly and they have to move it accurately and all those types of things but that's all very clever but the game, I think, would be a better game if we had maybe two less players. They're all such talented and skilled and athletic people these days that they cover a lot more ground, do things more quickly, but the skills get covered up a bit when the tackling is so easy in my opinion.

Paul Nolan

Brian, I have one final question for you. When you look back on your life what role has St Patrick's College played in your life?

Brian Gleeson

Ahhh, a very important question. I think it was very formative in my value system. It gave great opportunity to develop skills in the areas of my life that I was good at. It gave me plenty of people to be friends with and it always was my alma mater, in the truest sense of the word. I've always been made welcome when I come back to St Pat's and I feel part of the place and there's probably more to it than I've spoken but those things come to mind. Very important in my life, yes.

Paul Nolan

Well thank you so much for sharing some of your great memories with us today. It's wonderful to still have you involved with the College. Many may not be aware that we struck a medal in your honour a couple of years ago. The Brian Gleeson Medal to the St Patrick's College 1st XVIII player who is named best on ground in a Herald-Sun Shield Grand Final so that's a great honour for you and it's great to have you as exemplar for our students today. So thank you once again for joining us.

Brian Gleeson

Thank you Paul. For me it's a real honour to have been invited and it's been a real privilege to have the benefits I have achieved through being connected with St Patrick's College, Ballarat.

Music

"When the Saints go marching in, oh when the Saints go marching in".

Paul Nolan

We hope you enjoyed the first episode of the St Patrick's College Old Collegians Association podcast series. We aim to produce two of these each term and will distribute the Green, White and Blue e-newsletter which is emailed to all Old Collegians twice a term. If you're not receiving it and want to sign up for it make sure you get in contact the College and give us your details. We look forward to seeing you again when the next episode airs.