THE DAY THE WHISTLE BLEW ON AN ALL-FEMALE MATCH — IT ENDED IN A BRAWL

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THEY were the pride of Melbourne University, Lou Lou’s Legal Lovelies and Coleman’s Commercial Cuties, a bunch of young women in 1959 not only taking on the men in degrees such as law and commerce but daring to match their weekly efforts on a football field.

If it was good for the guys then it was good for the girls, was the view of commerce students Lois Harding and Nan Peter, so they jumped in Harding’s VW and drove to the West Brunswick Hotel owned by VFL heart-throb John Coleman, the spectacular and handsome Essendon full-forward who had retired five
years earlier with a bung knee.

"Excuse me, Mr Coleman, but would you consider training and coaching us for a game of football on the Melbourne University Football oval against the girls from the law faculty?" asked a nervous Harding.

Nan Peter, 77, or Nan Oates as she is today, said Coleman couldn’t have been more generous, agreeing to take the students for some training sessions in secret at an oval where St Hilda’s College is now.

Once the polite Coleman grinned and agreed, the origins were born for what may be Australia’s first organised women’s football game — 57 years prior to the AFL announcing later this month who will be awarded either eight or 10 licences for women’s teams (possibly five in Melbourne, two in Perth and one each in Adelaide, Sydney and Brisbane), in what has become one of the hottest tickets in town and a rapidly growing sport throughout Australia.

But what about the pioneers, the Commercial Cuties and Legal Lovelies who donned University Blues and Essendon thirds jumpers, complete with sweat and ligament to get their knees dirty in a forerunner for women’s football?

For the record, Coleman and his Cuties took the game by three points, scoring 18.8 to the 1.5 of Lou Lou’s Lovelies. And Lou Lou? None other than the then recently retired Collingwood captain and media celebrity Lou Richards.

AN Gross (nee Robinson), 76, played for the Lovelies and has never forgotten the advice from the coach: "Lou Richards was just like he was on TV, a clown. I recall him saying, ‘If you can’t beat ’em, stomp on ’em.’

"The Commerce girls took it seriously and they had this player, Shirley Dennehy, who kept kicking towering drop kicks,” Gross recalled.

Gross’s recollection of the game being taken seriously is backed by Oates: “As the game ended, one girl was on the ground being hit by another girl so the supporters rushed in and suddenly it developed into an all-in brawl.

“I didn’t get involved because I was resting in a back pocket. In fact I ‘rested’ there all game. I was terrified of being in a position where I might have to take a mark. Had I played full-back I would have at least got a few kicks to bring the ball back into play.

“What made it so special was having such names as John Coleman and Lou Richards prepared to be a part of it. Plus, I was proud we were prepared to do it.

“There wasn’t any OHS or Workcare or any of that sort of stuff and I can remember just about everyone smoked in those days.

“We all loved watching footy. It was what you did on a Saturday afternoon.

“For me, standing in the outer at Princes Park in the drizzling rain, with a soggy pie in one hand and a soggy cigarette in the other yelling out, ‘Kill the ump’, was as good as it got.

“So it was a huge thrill for us to actually play a game over four quarters of 10 minutes each. Life was such fun and easy then. Full employment, no wars, we all got jobs within the first or second application. It was just a different place.

“We tried to maintain the university connection given John Coleman had completed a course through the commerce faculty. I’m pretty sure that Lou didn’t go there though but our umpires were both at the university.”

The umpires were a pair of budding Essendon stars in arts student Ken Fraser and John Birt from the commerce facility; teammates Ron Evans, science, and David Shaw, law, were also at Melbourne.

Fraser said this week: “My recollection of the alleged brawl was an enactment, a pretend melee to show the men they could replicate their actions, could be tough as well. It was a skirmish at best.”

Birt can’t recall the brawl because he decided to leave the ground as quickly as he could: “I took off because I had heard these law students behind the goals say ‘Take him down to Myer and debag him’. You never knew what some of those students would do so I jumped on my Vespa motor scooter and got going because I didn’t fancy standing outside Myer with no pants on.

“The actual game was just a bit of fun, from memory, and I didn’t see any real stars out there but most of them had probably never played a game before. I do remember Susan Rossiter (Renouf) being at the university in those days but I don’t think she played.

“There were a large number of VFL players at uni at the time and I think a year later the boys played a game between commerce and law. I remember John Elliott a few years ago at The Savage Club talking about playing in the commerce side that beat the law faculty. I was captain of that side.”

There can be no doubting Elliott’s then presence at Melbourne University, Nan Oakes actually changing football teams because of him: “I barracked for Carlton until John Elliott became president and then I decided to stop supporting the Blues. He was one of my fellow students, crude and arrogant. So now I barrack for Collingwood.”
MELBOURNE'S leading columnist of the time, Keith Dunstan, devoted space to the match in his daily and hugely popular A Place In The Sun.

Dunstan highlighted how disappointed a large group of male students were when the girls decided not to follow the tradition of the time in swapping jumpers after their epic grand final, instead going for a dip at the nearby Beaurepaire pool.

Then it was off to Coleman’s West Brunswick Hotel for the Commercial Cuties, while the crestfallen Lovelies partied at the long departed Mayfair Hotel in Elizabeth St.

Rosie Cunningham, 76, or Rosie Grimwade at the time, was part of the victorious commerce crew.

“I went to uni in 1957 and did inter-faculty rowing under a coach named Doc McMillan. That was great but then someone suggested football and I loved that even more. Plus, it stood me in very good stead when I became the mother of four boys and a daughter,” said Cunningham from her home in South Yarra.

“I remember a seventh birthday party for my eldest son where the football was produced. My son said ‘Come on, Mum, join in’, while the other boys looked on in absolute horror. Fortunately I kicked a couple of good kicks and was accepted after that. “So that game helped me in. On the day it was considered quite a spectacle.

“And there was a good crowd out to watch, probably hoping to see us make fools of ourselves. All the boys who watched the game thought it was great, the girls running around with grubby knees.

“I was on the wing because I did athletics and got a few kicks. I enjoyed kicking a football and still could. Well, maybe not, because at 76 I’ve lost my balance a little bit. I used to go to the football with my father to watch Melbourne. Ron Barassi, Geoff ‘the star’ Case, who I thought was gorgeous, and I liked the very little fellow who was a wingman or rover, Ian Ridley.

“I don’t know about women playing football because it is a rough game. I don’t like the way head injuries are going in football. Maybe with modified rules and less tackling.”

Jan Gross is all for women’s football, even though she worries at the direction the game has taken: “I do think women should play the game even though the game is now too commercial to interest me, and drugs and mistreatment of women by some players horrifies me, as do the huge salaries players earn.”

Gross and her friends received nothing for their efforts compared with the $25,000 to be paid to the leading players in next year’s women’s league over an eight-week season between February and March with one game a week to be televised.

But the 1959 trailblazers did create a bit of noise at the time. Essendon player and law student David Shaw, who was a resident of Ormond College where his bedroom window overlooked the football oval, recalled “a slow-moving spectacle that was very patchy but one that the combatants clearly enjoyed”.

And a newspaper report of the time gave it some valuable column inches as they were back then, and seemed to confirm Oates’s memory.

After training in absolute secrecy the grudge match was played at the Uni Oval. Despite the girls’ best efforts the talent was around the boundary. No sooner had the final bell rung when all hell broke out with players, officials and spectators engaged in a full-on blue around the ground.

Commercial Cuties were declared winners by three points and reports indicate players soon forgot their differences over a pint, or six, at the West Brunswick Hotel.

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Clockwise from left: The Lovely Ladies line up; the umpire leads the teams on to the field; a stoppage in play; the great John Coleman imparts his wisdom; and (below left) the all-in "brawl" that finished the match. Pictures: COURTESY NANOATES