

2022 Season Review – Carlton

A fan's lament

I don't expect many to remember this, but Charlie Curnow did an obscure Channel 9 interview during the bye rounds. A genuine bulletin-filler, only good for fattening Fr Hitchener's stocking. Somehow the bloodthirsty cadet they sent out to the soup-kitchen-cum-hospice-cum-guide-dog-training-centre managed to get poor Charlie insinuating we'd already made the finals. We were 8-2 (or thereabouts) at the time. The video turned up on my Facebook feed, days later – because Facebook thinks I'm scarcely more than a Carlton supporter – and watching it immensely deepened my fear we could yet be in trouble. Laconic, effervescent, *spontaneous* Charlie was unlikely to have had that interview in his head, last week, when rushing to soccer a ball he might've gathered, when hooking a shallow snap, when playing-on at a stage that wanted composure, but certainly it loomed large in mine. I was watching the whole thing court-side at the MCG – cursed with the best seats I've had for some time.

Of all culprits for our Blues' premature exit this season, the football media looms largest. First, there was the giddy overstatement of early success. We started *well*, of course, but luck was in our corner at that stage of the year. We beat Richmond in round 1 largely thanks to their poor understanding of the new 50-metre penalty rule (lowest cumulative IQ of any team, I'd wager) and the Bulldogs' terrible goal-kicking in round 2 then helped to rocket us into premiership calculations. Yes, it's nice to support a club that gets eyeballs, that's presumed important, but the media fascination with Carlton does, at times, seem a little undeserved to someone born in 1995 – alive for our last premiership, if not quite sentient. I'm led to believe the powerhouse teams of the 70s and 80s, in an era of cheque-book recruiting, go some way to explaining the situation. Commentators talk about Carlton as though it's an old monster, as though it's the same *thing* it was back then, only it's bruised from a few decades of ignoble results. Definitely it felt patronising when, just as we beat Hawthorn by a point in round 3 (they'd been very mediocre in 2021, weren't much better in '22), revered commentator Anthony Hudson had the gumption to shout, "Make no mistake – the Blues are back!" He was a smidgen off sounding ironic. Of course, the pressure to just *talk*, as a commentator, often leads to tactless stuff like this. Painful as it was to watch last week's game at the ground, I'm glad to have avoided whatever limp generalisation a Channel 7 commentator used to summarise our meltdown.

Admittedly, my feelings at the end of the match weren't much worse than those from the previous round. In both cases, utter devastation. After the Melbourne loss, I slipped into awkward silence at a pub. Post Collingwood, I fell back into the plastic chair, looking up at twilight sky like I wanted to denounce football gods, and seeing, primarily, the scarves of black-white sadists instead. This was nothing less than an implausibly shit finish to a year. A younger version of myself would've barely coped. I'm reminded of the tweenage meltdown I had, in 2009, when Brisbane recovered our five-goal final quarter lead to send us packing in an elimination final. That had been 'charge out of the TV room, slam bedroom door, cry self to sleep' sort of stuff. I'd toughened a little by the time of Trent Dennis-Lane's lunging tackle on Dennis Armfield (an awful clash of Dennises) a year later. And a little more again, in 2011, when a self-serving umpire chickened-out of paying a free kick to Andrew Walker at Subiaco that surely would've put us into a prelim final. Devastating results, as well. Yet I'm not sure those teams carried the weight of expectation that ultimately saddled 'Carlton, ver. 2022'. I write about Carlton's 21st century history, wielding trivia from the last few decades, and it can feel like the Blues are a childhood obsession I'm yet to outgrow – as bad as if I were still hanging on to *Thunderbirds* or *Harry Potter*. It's comforting there are plenty of fanatical supporters in my same boat. But there are millions of adult Potterheads, too.

As a kid, I used to attend AFL matches in a headspace that feared I had some control over results. Many years before a legit diagnosis, I'd enact blatant OCD rituals. I'd check stadium clock-times for affirming or discouraging signs, rub my eyes compulsively, conspicuously arrange little statements of

'C'mon, Blues...'. It was probably only after my wider hopes of actually *playing* for Carlton were dashed in my teenage years that these compulsions started to fade, as though I overall came to accept life on the periphery. And yet, for over-thinkers, there's such thing as too much detachment. I had a strange moment *this* year when I briefly grazed sporting fandom's version of the 'existential crisis'. During the Sydney game – Friday night, Superhero Oversaturation (a.k.a. 'Marvel') Stadium – I recall looking out at a withering seven or eight-goal Carlton run that decided the contest in the second quarter, wondering *why*, exactly, the scene was giving me so much joy. Why should I be satiated watching men (on a median basis, roughly my own age) pass pigskin in wildly successful fashion? What did that say about *me*? To be so pinned to a sporting contest very remote from my own body? And amongst that, a further crisis. If this was to turn into a 'special' year, a premiership year, as it might've then, could I get my head to a place where I'd be *ready* to receive that result, where it could actually feel real? Someone heard me, of course, and gave me at least another season to get things in order. Embarrassing, really, that it took only ten rounds of a home-and-away season for me to stumble into the identity challenge fans of traditionally disappointing clubs can feel during a climb up the ladder. Richmond-supporting friends have described it to me well. How barracking for the Tigers now doesn't feel like it had in the noughties, and therefore there's a tinge of disconnect.

In truth, I was so anxious before and during the Collingwood match that I did note a returning urge for old compulsions. For the day, I wore Sunday best – the Carlton undies that a contact at Bonds gave me earlier in the year, knowing me well. A best mate (boyfriend of the Bonds designer) sent me a photo assuring he was wearing his own. Throughout the afternoon, I had a thing about excessively adjusting my beanie, in case it being out of place was contributing to the *team* being visibly unsettled. I was at the ground with family, a roughly even crew of Carlton and Collingwood that had been reconfigured during the week due to Covid. My uncle (Collingwood, sadly, but not quite anti-Carlton) holds some sway in an AFL members dining room – from decades of merry patronage rather than a link to league office – so that foreign setting was added to our experience. I was so grateful for the tickets, I didn't complain to be served a steak. Scoffed it, ignoring vegetarianism.

In the second half, I made it back to the seats with my brother in time to catch early goals from the likes of Cerra (a snap) and McKay (not a snap, fortunately). The rest of hospitality-obsessed level 2 had barely emerged. It meant I accidentally claimed a different seat, just to the left of where I'd been for the first half. But such was our early momentum, I was subtly resistant to changing, meaning a Collingwood supporter in our extended group I didn't know well got pinned on his own. Too bad. I'd had a little alcohol, but I think it was irrelevant to my own energised performance that quarter, cheering Charlie's mark (a missed shot, though), then his freak goal, then two Motlop specials, Cerra chasedowns, et cetera. It was my turn to make noise. The girl behind us had all-day been pining for 'Guinea', like it wasn't a blonde piece of bumfluff ever-lurking out the back in Collingwood's forward line but an impoverished African country. I can vouch that he's spiritually impoverished, at least, to have taunted the Carlton crowd in the fashion he picked after his second goal. Whenever Jack Ginnivan has a success, it's like getting slapped by TikTok. His highlights packages are perfect for that medium, too – usually digestible in ten seconds or less.

All superstition aside, what influence can a single fan have on their team? Less than a butterfly has upon an earthquake, I'd say, except if you're the type to bellow loud enough that you're registering in a player's ear, ruffling their confidence. My loudest words for the day were undoubtedly, "Go Saad!", as the All-Australian half-back valiantly hunted Jamie Elliott in a fateful moment. He wouldn't have heard me, though, and it seemed the suggestion had already occurred to him. As with many things, I suppose, a fan's best hope is to bolster, infinitesimally, their particular crowd, their tribe of well-wishers. And that's about it. For some games, the effect of this is monstrous and unfair (the Richmond and GWS prelim and grand finals are strong examples, although I'm loathe to refer to Richmond any more). In other cases, a pithy supporter turnout must sap the team's willpower (read: North

Melbourne). Influence aside, I think what fans can be most excited about is that, if they're doing it right, they're likely *feeling* similar emotions to their warrior-god-heroes. See, on Sunday, there'd have been Carlton fans vastly *more* and *less* nervous than Charlie Curnow appeared, but 'nervousness' was nevertheless our shared experience. And the elation that Jesse Motlop effected for *himself* with those two glorious third-quarter goals was immediately passed-on to the wider navy family. Nothing profound established there, though. But perhaps from this: Carlton fans didn't *feel* the dread of a Collingwood comeback emanating off our players, rather it descended on both groups at roughly the same time. All of Sam Docherty and Matthew Cottrell and Luke Sayers and Lance Whitnall and I, early in the fourth quarter, would've had the thought Collingwood's bullshit luck this year could well come through again. Who knows how we might have psychologically reacted better. My sister, Alex, long ago diagnosed Carlton with mental wobbles, but she just *sits there*, eyes ahead, without any suggestions that we might ferry down to the players. She isn't a psychologist *or* a football aficionado. But, based on years of evidence, she's probably right. For what it's worth, my own read is that we're addicted to momentum, and often stuck in concrete without it.

The finish was terrible, there isn't more to say. The fact they insisted on a brief ceremony for the Richard Pratt Cup, post-game, was macabre. Patrick Cripps took 'best on ground', putting in what's been widely-acknowledged as one of our greatest individual performances of recent years. He plies his trade at stoppages, of course, and so hadn't been as noticeable to me as titanic Cerra, even emerging Setterfield. To be honest, I'd expected the medal to go to a Macedonian. In any case, I felt desperately for Cripps (another emotion the club and supporters and Cripps himself must've shared) when he was required to briefly speak. I worried his slightly tepid thanks to Carlton fans for 'turning out' revealed his awareness that the strongest critics of his team would likely come from our own tent. Take the guy my brother, sister and I encountered on the train home, for instance.

He was black-clad, unadorned, fifty-something. He turned conspicuous only after a couple of Collingwood garden gnomes trailed off on another rendition of their prison cry, revealing his Carlton sympathies through a howling phone conversation he was holding with a friend. I hope the friend was just as angry about the result as our traveller, otherwise they'd have found the chat pretty tedious. 'Greensborough-bound' Carlton supporter railed about a 6 year rebuild that's come to nothing (steady-on) and fringe players who lack requisite ticker (throwing out names that my brother and I rapidly made eye contact to disagree with). He garbled on for the few unfamiliar train stops after Jolimont, the carriages cruising above the Collingwood slums and whatnot (these are jokes – relax!). We were on the unusual Greensborough line because I'd parked my car near our sisters' place. When he finished his call, the lonely Carlton man got told by a mother magpie – well-dressed, very *reasonable* – that, unbeknownst to him, he'd been invading the space of her three chicks (the name for magpie children, I'm presuming). They were huddled in a priority seat, able-bodied, epic victory seemingly wasted on them. Made to feel embarrassed, the Carlton man offered a pretty meek 'fuck off' at a moment when general train conversation waned. So it came across as a bit violent. The mother magpie said – yes, impressively, responsibly – that she didn't appreciate the language in front of her children. The Carlton man shuffled away in disgrace, having just sworn at a stranger and toward her joyless offspring. And yet, deplorably, watching on in the midst of my own despair, it was *him* I most felt for, him I wanted to wrap into a hug, which doubtlessly would have been very poorly received. I might've told my companion that things will turn out alright, unsure if I was lying. And that his words, while here objectionable, were only misplaced. They'd have paired perfectly, at a much greater volume, with the final siren. Also, I might've reminded him how, last Friday, the club's chief propaganda minister informed us Charlie had signed for the next 6 years. I believe we can reasonably expect flags in 3 of them.