



From father to son: A review and demographic analysis of the Australian Football League's Father–Son rule



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ABSTRACT

The Australian Football League's (AFL's) Father–Son rule is a unique player drafting rule that allows sons of former players to be selected by their father's club. The rules that determine eligibility have undergone numerous changes since its introduction in 1949, including rules for new teams from outside of the traditional Victorian-based clubs that had no history of fathers from which Father–Son selections could be derived. The observed number of Father–Son selections to each club is markedly different between the Victorian-based clubs, and between the Victorian and non-Victorian-based clubs. In this paper, a demographic model and player data from the AFL and the state leagues are used to estimate the annual number of available sons to each of the AFL clubs. Results show that the observed number of selections can largely be explained by the number of available sons. The model can also be used to predict the number of available sons into the future, and so can be used to guide management decisions regarding competitive balance if further modifications to the AFL's Father–Son rule are required.

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1. Introduction

The Father–Son rule was introduced to the Victorian Football League (VFL) in 1949 to allow family traditions to continue within a club by permitting sons of former players to be chosen by their fathers' club (Borland, 2006; Hillier, 2006). The Father–Son rule continues into the current principal league for Australian (rules) football, the Australian Football League (AFL), and now exists in some form in the state-based Australian football leagues (for example, the Tasmania State League also has Brother–Brother and Grandfather–Grandson rules (AFL Tasmania, 2014)) and rugby league State-of-Origin (Anonymous, 2014a).

In order to maintain spectator and sponsor interest through competitive games and uncertain outcomes, the AFL has adopted various labour market regulations to improve competitive balance, including a reverse-order draft and controls on player transfer and payment (for a detailed history of the AFL labour market, see Booth, 2004; Dabscheck & Opie, 2003; Frost, Schuwalow, & Borrowman, 2012; Stewart, Nicholson, & Dickson, 2005). While limited free agency exists for players following a number of years of service (Dabscheck, 2015), the Father–Son rule can be seen as a particular drafting mechanism

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that allows a small degree of club choice (for those players fortunate enough to be eligible) outside of the more restrictive AFL drafting system (Macdonald & Booth, 2007). As a consequence, potentially competing objectives arise through the desire to maintain an equitable draft, while seeking to uphold the sense of sporting romanticism that surrounds the drafting of sons of past players. Devising labour market regulations that balance these objectives is an ongoing issue for the management of the AFL (Borland, 2006; Landsberger, 2015).

The VFL/AFL Father–Son rule has undergone several changes since its establishment, including changes to the minimum number of games played by the father for a son to be eligible, changes to allow the newly established non-Victorian AFL teams with no alignment to the VFL (the non-VFL aligned teams: West Coast, Fremantle, Adelaide, Port Adelaide), access to sons of prominent fathers from associated leagues outside of Victoria, and changes to the rules by which a club secures a Father–Son choice in the draft (i.e. the draft picks that a club must sacrifice in order to obtain a player (Borland, 2006)) (Table 1). The rule has also been controversial (Quayle, 2014; Rucci, 2009). Father–Son selections supersede the AFL's reverse-order draft, potentially denying outstanding players to poor-performing teams. In addition, competitive balance is brought into question due to the difficulties in providing equitable rules between the VFL-aligned teams and the non-VFL aligned teams that did not have a history of players from which they could select sons under the Father–Son rule (Macdonald & Booth, 2007; Quayle, 2014), and the apparent inequitable distribution of selections across the clubs and subsequent influence on performance (Niall, 2012) (Table 2).

The Father–Son rule has seen several prominent players drafted to clubs outside of the traditional reverse-order draft (Hillier, 2006). From 1986, when the reverse-order draft commenced, to the end of 2014, a total of 78 players have been drafted under the Father–Son rules. The distribution of the number of selections to clubs is quite broad, from Collingwood having 12 selections to Adelaide having no selections (Table 2; Anderson, 2013; Quayle, 2014). Ideally, the probability of obtaining a Father–Son selection should be equivalent across all teams. However, using a Binomial Generalized Linear Model (GLM) to test the assumption of an equal proportion of successes (Father–Son selections) across all teams (accounting for years in the competition) leads to rejection of this hypothesis (Dev Residual = 41.3, df = 16, p -value = 0.0005).

The main difference in the rules for eligibility occurs between the VFL-aligned clubs and the non-VFL aligned teams (Tables 1 and 2). Until recently, the principal Australian football competitions were state based, with local competitions in Victoria (the VFL), South Australia (SA; the South Australian National Football League, SANFL) and Western Australia (WA; the Western Australian Football League, WAFL). The other Australian states and territories also have local competitions. The VFL expanded in 1982 when the South Melbourne Football Club relocated to Sydney to become the Sydney Swans. This was followed by the establishment of the West Coast Eagles (WA-based) and Brisbane Bears (Queensland-based) in 1987, Adelaide Crows (SA-based) in 1991, Fremantle Dockers (WA-based) in 1995, Port Adelaide Power (SA-based) in 1997, Gold Coast Suns (Queensland-based) in 2011 and Greater Western Sydney Giants (New South Wales-based) in 2012 (Macdonald & Booth, 2007). Clubs with affiliations to previous VFL teams, such as Sydney (with South Melbourne) and Brisbane (with Fitzroy, having merged in 1996 to become the Brisbane Lions), currently operate under the same Father–Son rules as Victorian-based clubs, with these clubs able to choose sons of players that have played the appropriate number of games for either South Melbourne or Fitzroy. If only the VFL-aligned clubs are included in the analysis of equal probability of selection, then the hypothesis of equality is also rejected (Dev Residual = 25.5, df = 12, p -value = 0.013). This is not surprising given the large disparity between Collingwood and Geelong (with 12 and 11 selections) and North Melbourne and St Kilda (with 2 selections). This seems to indicate that not all VFL-aligned teams have had an equal ability to select sons of fathers from their clubs.

Recognising that it would take a number of years for the sons of fathers from the non-VFL aligned clubs to become eligible, since 2001 West Coast, Fremantle, Adelaide and Port Adelaide have also drawn their Father–Son selections from the WAFL or SANFL (Table 1). Three of the four non-VFL aligned teams have the fewest Father–Son selections (having had 1 or no selections): Fremantle, Port Adelaide and Adelaide (Table 2). West Coast has had 5 selections, 2 of which were from a West Coast player having played more than 100 games for the club. If only the WA and SA-based sides are considered, then the hypothesis of equal probability is retained (Dev Residual = 7.25, df = 3, p -value = 0.064), indicating that there does appear to be a similar probability of selecting a Father–Son player for these clubs.

Consideration of the historical relative success of clubs in obtaining Father–Son selections appears to show that there is a substantial difference in the probability of drafting a son under the Father–Son rule for clubs both within the VFL-aligned teams and between the VFL- and non-VFL aligned teams. However, a more appropriate way of exploring the disparity of Father–Son selections is to consider the expected number of sons that are available to each of the clubs. The number of fathers that qualify will differ between clubs and, depending on their age, the expected number of sons to those fathers will differ over time. For example, a father that has qualified but is aged in his 20s will not have an 18 year old son that could qualify for Father–Son selection. However, once that father is in his 40s and 50s, it is more likely that he will have had a son when in his 20s or 30s that is now of qualifying age.

In this paper, a demographic model that uses player data from the AFL, VFL, SANFL and WAFL is employed to estimate the numbers of eligible sons that might potentially be available for Father–Son selection across all AFL teams (excluding the two most recent expansion teams, Gold Coast and Greater Western Sydney). In this way, a better explanation may emerge to account for the unusual between-club disparities observed in the Father–Son selections to date. It is also argued that the model can be used if further modifications to the Father–Son rule are needed to promote between-team equity.

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