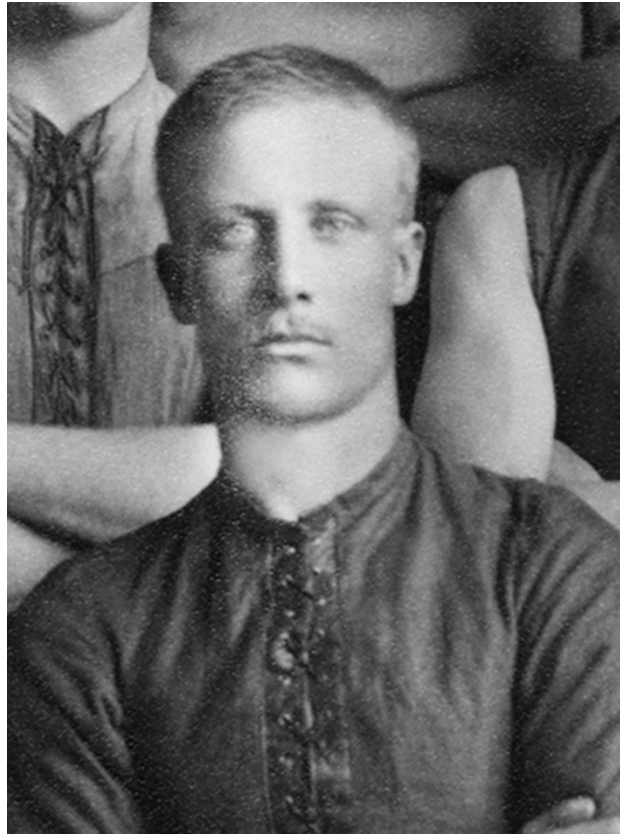


# The Search for Topsy Waldron :

Is he Norwood's G.O.A.T. ('Greatest Of All Time')?

**By Chris Brown**



A decade ago (or thereabouts at least), I was vaguely aware of the legend of Norwood's early pioneer, Alfred Edward "Topsy" Waldron, but little else. People I asked about him knew little, yet he was collectively referred to as though he was a sleeping giant. But I wanted more answers and no one could give them to me. Who is this enigma of our club? What befell him to the extent that before death, he turned to the club to take care of him in death? And why did the club honour his legacy in such a unique and everlasting way as erecting his gravestone during the depression era? And so began my quest to find out more about exactly what was the legend of Topsy Waldron.

Topsy Waldron was Norwood's second Captain and is Norwood's longest serving on-field leader. Playing between 1879 and 1898, he was captain for 10 seasons, six of those as premiership Captain, whilst he also collected another three premierships as a player. Prior to coming to Norwood, he had also been a member of Carlton's 1877 Premiership team. Known as "the Prince of Dodgers", Topsy captained South Australia before he captained Norwood. He is arguably not only Norwood's greatest player, but also Norwood's greatest clubman. A sporting icon at the time and a natural leader in life, his love for Norwood has

always been legendary, but less well known is that his legacy to Norwood and to football has been enduring and under-acknowledged, a fact that recent research is confirming.

To answer my own questions, I undertook three main lines of inquiry: researching historic newspaper and other football reports; tracing Topsy's family tree to see if he had any living descendants; and speaking to everyone I could.

There is relatively little information available on Topsy via football pages found on the internet, until you begin to search historical newspapers on the National Library's amazing resource, Trove. Little by little, his sporting achievements unfolded into a significant story.

In parallel, I began using the genealogical tool 'Ancestry' to trace his family tree. Given the club had erected his gravestone, I feared he had no family or that he had become adrift or estranged from any family he did have. Amazingly, I found he had been married twice and had a total of eleven children plus a step-daughter. Fortunately, I was able to eventually track down a number of direct descendants, and what a thrill that was!

Finally, I made phone calls and sent emails to all and sundry – I contacted almost every member of the Norwood Football Club History Committee; author and journalist Mike Coward; Col Hutchinson (AFL Historian); David Studham (MCC/MCG Librarian and historian); Wally Miller; Mark Pennings (author – *The Origins of Australian Football*, Volumes 1-5); Tony De Balfio (Carlton FC historian); other Australian football historians and even cricket authors and historians. I appreciate all the support they provided.

Through these different lines of inquiry, I was eventually able to answer my own questions. I learned that Topsy was indeed an icon in his lifetime. But my greatest satisfaction was that I came to understand who Topsy really was and is, almost as though I knew him myself.

As a young boy, "Topsy" was a nickname given to him by one of his brothers, and it stuck throughout his life. He was born and raised in Victoria, the son of Thomas and Ada, and had four brothers and two sisters. Of his siblings, Frank Waldron played for Melbourne and Hotham (a forerunner to North Melbourne). Ern Waldron played for Carlton and Collingwood and was in fact a member of Collingwood's first team in 1892. (See [Ern Waldron | Collingwood Forever \(collingwoodfc.com.au\)](#)). Herb Waldron played for Carlton too.

Topsy played junior football at a club called 'Montague', before going on to play for Albert Park (1875) and at Carlton Imperial (1876) with his brother Frank. His big move was to cross to Carlton in 1877. It was the first year for the new "Victorian Football Association" – the forerunner to the Victorian Football League. Carlton won the premiership in 1877 – the first of many premierships for Topsy. Topsy played for Carlton again in 1878, with his brother Herb, and in those two years he ran out alongside and against some of the greatest names of colonial era Victorian football including Carlton and Australian football royalty in George Coulthard. (See [Blueseum - History of the Carlton Football Club | George Coulthard](#)).

In early 1879, Topsy was at a crossroads. His last game for Carlton (playing on the M.C.G. alongside his younger brother Herb), saw Topsy leave the ground mid-game after an apparent dispute on the field with some senior team mates. Off the field, Topsy's father was

in serious financial strife. Although lured to play for a team in Sydney, Topsy was swayed by his former Carlton team mate Alf McMichael to come across to South Australia and play alongside Alf at Norwood in 1879.

Topsy was not a man of great financial means but his three great loves were family, football and cricket. His first wife Elizabeth Puckey – known as Tottie - was particularly patient and supported Topsy to pursue his love of football even when it meant moving with him from Victoria to South Australia. Thereafter, Topsy was often away from his young and growing family for periods of time, playing football and cricket. Tottie died in 1894 shortly after giving birth to their 8<sup>th</sup> child and sadly, this daughter also died shortly thereafter. Topsy fittingly named their daughter Elizabeth – after her mother. In 1898 he married Annie Alexander. Annie had a daughter of her own - Doris , and they had (another) three children together.

It had been thought that Topsy played for Norwood from 1879-1892. However, Graeme Adams from the Norwood History Committee recently discovered that Topsy played another league game in 1896, and two more games in 1898, by which time he was 41 years of age! My own painstaking research has determined that Topsy played a total of about 250 games of league football for Carlton, Norwood and South Australia, over a remarkable 22 seasons. Twenty of these seasons were spent at Norwood, making him likely to be the longest serving Norwood player ever, and the most successful.

Topsy also umpired league football. He is believed to have been Norwood's first coach in 1898, and he was the caretaker at the East Parklands training ground in the same year. He served on the Norwood Board. He provided the goalposts for Norwood Oval when in 1901, it became Norwood's new home ground. He promoted skill development, introducing 'training and development' at Norwood, and was potentially the first to do so at any football club in Australia. Topsy was routinely at games to watch his club play, right up until his death.

In 1977, Norwood Hall of Fame legend Wacka Scott was asked by Mike Coward to recall some of his greatest memories of the club. Wacka's first response was to say...

*Topsy Waldron, you've heard of Topsy? (He was) one of the Norwoods' first skippers, and we used to love to see him coming into the rooms before and after a game. He would come in there and he'd hear what the captain or coach had to say to us. And you'd see when we'd win, old Topsy'd be there, (and) you'd see the tears rolling down his cheeks with pleasure, it meant so much to him.*

In summer time, Topsy was a passionate cricket player – a left-handed batsman who played three first class games for South Australia. In one of those games, playing against G.F. Vernon's England X1 at Adelaide Oval in 1887, he was unable to play on the last day due to the sudden overnight death of his son Reggie, who was only two years of age. Many of Topsy's football and cricket team mates went on to play and umpire Test Cricket for Australia. Topsy played a lot of club cricket. In Victoria he played for Montague and the Star of Richmond cricket clubs. In South Australia, he played for Norwood, Kensington, Austral, South Adelaide and Adelaide cricket clubs, with some success. Again, he played with many

esteemed cricketers – none greater than perhaps Australian cricket’s greatest all rounder, George Giffen (who also played football for Norwood). See [REDLEGS MUSEUM | PLAYERS](#) .



**MEMBERS OF THE AUSTRAL CRICKET CLUB WHICH WON THE GOODFELLOW CHALLENGE CUP IN 1885-86**

Back Row (Left to Right).—A. E. Waldron (coach), W. Aron, H. Haldane, F. Leak, A. N. Day, A. Pettit (secretary).  
Middle Row.—H. Gent (scorer), W. Gunn, B. V. Scrymgeour, J. Fairweather (captain).

Front Row.—M. F. Dawkins, W. Delaney, L. Hill, A. Scrymgeour.

Photograph reproduced through the courtesy of Mr. W. J. Dawkins.

In the 1890s, Topsy was a business partner with Joe Darling at their ‘Sports Depot’ in Rundle Street. In following years, Joe Darling would go from playing for Norwood to Captaining the Australian cricket team. See [REDLEGS MUSEUM | PLAYERS](#)

*Messrs. Darling & Waldron, two well-known cricketers, have opened their sports depot in Rundle-street, a few doors below the York Hotel. They have an excellent stock of cricketware, as well as requisites for other games. Repairing – a most important item to cricketers who cannot afford a new bat or ball when the old one is a little broken—will be made a specialty, Mr. Waldron himself, as a practical man, undertaking it.*

*The Evening Journal, 23 September 1893*

Topsy was not always a ‘clean sheet’ on or off the field. He was fined by police for riding his bike without a light. He was front and centre in shaping our most traditional and enduring football rivalry with Port Adelaide, and was guilty of assault in the infamous fight at the Imperial Hotel with Port Player Robert Roy<sup>44</sup>. Topsy was even found and arrested on numerous occasions in illegal gambling dens! He was a genuine character, always sticking up for himself and his mates, looking after his family, and chasing his next ‘little earner’.

Topsy always spoke up for what he believed in – a trait that sometimes earned him the ire of others, including officials of his football club, other clubs and even the South Australian Football Association (the forerunner to today's SANFL). However, this trait was nonetheless respected as Topsy was also a very giving, and a very forgiving person. He was also a committed member of the YMCA for many years.

Topsy lived a life of spotlights and shadows. An exalted player and club man and a respected all-round sportsman, he is a member of the SANFL Hall of Fame and the Norwood Hall of Fame. He is Norwood's longest serving Captain and likely our longest serving league player. His football legacy as a player, umpire, coach and newspaper commentator has extended through family lines. His son Arthur played 4 games for Norwood. His granddaughter Rita married Lancelot Maddern, who played 11 games for Norwood from 1932-34.

Three other direct descendants played for Port Adelaide (of all teams, ironically!) Topsy's esteem and reverence was so great in South Australia that his grandson, Hercules Waldron, played 11 league games for Port Adelaide in 1927-28 under the assumed name of "Norman Wilkins" to avoid the spotlight of the Waldron name, much akin to Sir Donald Bradman's son John changing his surname for a time to "Bradsen". A great-grandson, Norman Waldron, played one league game for Port in 1952.

Topsy's great-great-grandson is Martin Leslie. Martin played 150 games for Port Adelaide, 107 games for Brisbane Bears and won best and fairest awards at both clubs. He was the first ever number one national draft pick (in 1986), an All-Australian in 1988, and played 9 state games for South Australia – the same number as Topsy did a century beforehand.

In the 50<sup>th</sup> year of the club in 1928, little more than a year before his death, Topsy was given the honour of blowing out the 50 candles on the club's birthday cake at the "Jubilee Social" held at the Norwood Town Hall. That meant a lot to Topsy. This same year, he was described in a newspaper report as "failing in health and unable to do the work necessary to provide the wants of his wife and children." In the week prior to his death, he had been at the football club reminiscing over old photographs of himself and his team mates.

By then, Topsy had also approached the hierarchy at the Norwood Football Club and asked that the club "look after him in death". Topsy was struggling to make ends meet. On 21 March 1929, he was still advertising for employment at the age of 72.

*CARPENTERING, Jobbing repairs, &c- A.E. Waldron, 27, Fourth-avenue, St. Peters.*

Sadly, he fell from scaffolding at a house in Olive Street, Magill on 30 May, 1929. He never regained consciousness and passed away in the Adelaide Hospital on 7 June, 1929. The City Coroner concluded that

*in my opinion, the cause of death was fractured ribs, concussion and shock following the injuries.*

In death, members of his family declined offers of financial assistance from the Norwood Football Club and paid for his funeral. However, the Norwood Football Club did put together the money to erect a 'memorial tablet' over his grave at the Payneham cemetery. Fittingly, the club went on to win the premiership in the year of Topsy's death.



Topsy's death was reported in Newspapers all across the land – from Adelaide, to Perth, to Broken Hill, to Melbourne. He was thoroughly eulogised by many luminaries of the time.

*Until his accident the former Norwood skipper never missed a training night or a visit to the dressing room wherever his old club was playing. He always took a great interest in young players.*

Joe Travers – Norwood Premiership Player 1894. See [REDLEGS MUSEUM | PLAYERS](#)

*Waldron was the greatest captain I have seen in club or interstate football. One of the cleverest dodgers and most skilful tacticians I have seen on a football field. The Prince of Dodgers he was called, and he earned the title. His grip on a match was remarkable. He would study weaknesses of opponents, and concentrate on them. Many times I have seen him change the complexion of a game by changes in position, when all chance seemed to have gone.*

J.J. Woods – Norwood and SANFL luminary. See [REDLEGS MUSEUM | PLAYERS](#)

Testimonies in life also count – these two newspaper testimonies of Topsy were penned in the years just prior to his death.

*His grandest success was when he led Norwoods to victory on three successive matches against the victorious South Melbournes, with the famous Peter Burns, Dinny Mackay, Didley Young, and Sonny Elms at their head. Topsy says, "They could beat us man to man for weight and strength, but I gave our men strict instructions to play quick passing and keep the game open and fast. Every man did my bidding, with the result that we out-manoeuvred them." With all the seasons that have passed, and all the skilled captains we have had, none equalled the subject of this paragraph. Topsy, as a player, was religiously clean. One of the cleverest turners and twisters of his day (a regular Artful Dodger), and he can be classed as one of the few surviving pioneers and fathers of the great Australian winter pastime. Alas, the great deeds of these fine men unfortunately are too soon forgotten. He rarely, misses a match, and has closely followed the destinies of football for well, over the half-century. Football owes much to him, while he owes nothing to the game he liked so well. He played for the pure love of it. You don't catch men of his calibre playing the game for nix today. Oh, no.*

Frank Coffey, writing in *The Sport* (Adelaide), Friday 19 August 1927, page 14.

*Topsy Waldron skippered the Redlegs in masterly fashion. He invariably out-manoeuvred the opposing captain, and was awfully strict in the matter of keeping your places. He was keenness personified, and woe betide a young player if he strayed from his appointed station. My word! He used to tell the erring ones in no uncertain tones. Topsy generally gave himself a roving commission. He was here, there, and everywhere, getting a well-directed kick and urging others to follow suit.*

Jack Reedman, writing in *The Advertiser*, Thursday 21 June 1923, page 14.

30 years after he had last played, he was being lauded by Frank Coffey as unequalled then or since as a player, captain and coach, and acknowledged as a pioneer and father of Australian football! Coffey described Topsy as one of the giants of his time, having played himself at Carlton in 1886 (a decade after Topsy left) before coming to South Australia in the 1890s and becoming renowned as one of Australia's best football umpires. See [Bluseum - History of the Carlton Football Club | Frank Coffey](#). Similarly, Jack Reedman was a man of considerable sporting stature himself – as a footballer and cricketer. See [Jack Reedman - Wikipedia](#).

So what football successes did Topsy achieve? Here are a few examples:

- Topsy had a unique and remarkable record at the Melbourne Cricket Ground. My research found that he played on the hallowed turf on 13 occasions – six times for

Carlton, and seven times for Norwood. (No State games were played there between SA and Victoria from 1880-1890, for a variety of reasons). In the thirteen games he played there, Topsy was named in the best players on every single occasion.

- In 1880, Topsy captained the first South Australian club team (Norwood) to beat a Victorian team (Melbourne). This feat occurred in Melbourne, at the Melbourne Cricket Ground. Norwood 2 goals, defeated Melbourne nil goals.
- In 1883, Topsy captained the first South Australian club team (Norwood) to defeat a touring Victorian club (Essendon). This feat occurred at Kensington Oval. Norwood 5-5 defeated Essendon 1-6.
- In 1890, Topsy captained the first South Australian (state) team to beat Victoria. South Australia 6-8 defeated Victoria 4-6 at the South Melbourne Cricket Ground.
- South Australian team Captain – 1880-1890

Clubman? Always! In fact, another discovery in my research is that Topsy actually wrote a fifth verse for the original club song. And sure enough – it referenced Port Adelaide, and losing the premiership to them (in 1884 – the year the rivalry took off).

*The Ports they thought we lost the name,*

*Premiers of our noble game,*

*So to Kensington they came*

*Strong to meet the Norwoods.*

*But like the rest they, too, were licked,*

*Thirteen goals to three we kicked.*

*Forward, Norwood, red and blue,*

*Beauties' lips are still praising you.*

The club's first song was written by Arthur Diamond, referencing the 1878 year when George Giffen kicked Norwood's only goal in the club's first ever game. This was against South Adelaide at Adelaide Oval on 16 May, 1878. It was also during this match that the players donned distinctive red stockings which gave rise to the nickname of the "Redlegs". The fifth and final verse was penned by Topsy Waldron, in late 1888. Norwood defeated Port in Round 12 on 28 July, before a crowd of 7,000 people at Kensington Oval. Norwood actually kicked 11 goals that day, not 13 like his memory suggested when he wrote this verse, and the final scores were 11.21 to 3.6.

Topsy epitomised the club motto, (which was adopted well after his playing career had concluded). "Fortis in Procella" was exactly how Topsy lived his life – and amidst all his adversity and family tragedy (including the deaths of his first wife and four of his first eight children), he showed enormous strength to be the heart and soul of the Norwood Football



Club for fifty years and a beacon of leadership. Above all, he was a football player renowned as one of the very best not just in South Australia, but in Australia. Topsy Waldron is a true Australian football legend who warrants much more club, state and national recognition than he has been given. With ten premierships to his name and a Champions of Australia title, Topsy had one grand prize for each of his eleven children! He was also a member of the Carlton Imperials team (second twenties) that won the Challenge Cup in 1876 – a 12<sup>th</sup> title for his step daughter Doris.

At a club level, there are arguably five genuine club greats who defined their eras by their deeds for the Norwood Football Club – Topsy Waldron (1879-1929); Wacka Scott (1920-1932); Jack Oatey (1940-1956), Wally Miller (1958-1996) and Garry McIntosh (1982-2004). Miller, Scott and McIntosh are already Norwood Hall of Fame 'Legends'.

To this day, the club still maintains Topsy's legacy. The curator of Norwood Oval, Barry Solomon, regularly checks on his gravesite at Payneham cemetery to ensure its upkeep and continue to maintain his honour and dignity and death. Nearly 100 years after his death, Topsy's spirit is still alive within the soul of his football club - our great club.

See also: A E (Topsy) Waldron at Bluseum (Carlton FC history website) - [Bluseum - History of the Carlton Football Club | A. E. 'Topsy' Waldron](#)

*\*Extensive further research is currently being undertaken into the life and playing career of Topsy Waldron. If you have any information, photographs or memorabilia that could support this research, please contact Chris Brown via [enquiries@redlegsmuseum.com.au](mailto:enquiries@redlegsmuseum.com.au).*

## **Alfred Edward 'Topsy' Waldron**

### **STATISTICS**

Guernsey Number – N/A

Playing Career – 1879-1898

NFC Games: 197\* (157 SAFA games; 40 Intercolonial games.).

*(\*Likely to have played more but was not mentioned in newspaper match reports for other games.)*

NFC Goals: 45 (39 SAFA goals, 6 goals in Intercolonial club games)

Debut: vs South Adelaide, 17 May 1879, East Parklands

Finale: vs West Adelaide, 13 August 1898, Jubilee Oval

Norwood Captain: 1881-85, 1887-90, 1892

Premierships: Carlton (1877) and Norwood (1879, 1880, 1881, 1882, 1883, 1887, 1888, 1889, 1891)

Champions of Australia – 1888 (Captain)

Challenge Cup (Second Twenties) – won by Carlton Imperials in 1876.

NFC Life Member

NFC Hall of Fame

SANFL Hall of Fame

State Captain: 1880 -1890 (9 games)

Umpire: 1882-1891 (16 games)

VFL/AFL Clubs: Carlton 1877-78 (Played/named in the team for 42 games. Premiership player in 1877).