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'Get yer ya yas out': aspects of Perth's Greek Australian youth culture from the 1950s to the 1970s

Abstract

By the mid 1950s there was a distinctive youth culture emerging in much of the western world. From its epicentre in the United States, it spread to Europe and beyond as the postwar economic boom took hold across the 'first world'. In Australia it would manifest itself in ways similar to overseas: through film, literature, dress, music, and politics. Other factors would also affect how youth bonded during these years, for example, mobility, games and fads, and sport. In Western Australia, young Greek migrants and an ever increasing number of Greek-Australian youth were exposed to these local and global cultural forces. How did these two groups react to these influences? What, if any, elements of western youth culture impacted on them? More specifically for the purposes of this article, what role did sport play in any emerging Greek youth culture in Western Australia? What do Greek youth sporting activities tell us about community dynamics and relationships? Did participation in sport hasten or slow assimilation during this period? This article seeks to address some of these latter questions through an analysis of two major Perth youth organisations.

Introduction

The 1950s was a decade with a difference for Australia. The suburban home, fashion, food, and families took on new dimensions in the pursuit of leisure and pleasure, helped by the increasing affordability of new labour-

saving devices. The steady improvements in housing, transport, education, and health care accelerated during the 1960s. Contributing to this affluence was the continuation of Australia's postwar immigration policies.

There also emerged a distinctive youth culture. Disputation over dress, music, sexuality, politics (including foreign policy), art, and relationships punctuated the subsequent decade. Australian youth sought to distance themselves from previous generations by developing their own identity. Some Greek Australian youth, too, were part of this change. For many, the period brought new challenges and questions about 'dual lives' and identity, as well as the challenges and promises of a new land. For others the 'counter-culture' simply passed them by.

My intention is to develop over time a series of articles examining aspects of Perth's Greek youth culture in the decades following World War Two. In this particular article, my focus is sport and various associated divides between locally and overseas born Greeks. What role did sport play in Greek youth culture in Western Australia? What do Greek youth sporting activities tell us about community dynamics, heterogeneity and relationships? Did participation in sport hasten or slow assimilation during this period?

In a selective analysis, the activities of two major Perth youth groups from the relevant time period have been examined.

Demographics and emerging activities

During the 1950s the increase in Australian-born Greeks in Perth's Greek community was becoming apparent. The Australian-born offspring of migrants who had arrived in the two decades following World War I were becoming demographically important as they matured into adulthood during the decade. There was a sharp increase in Greek Orthodox adherents by 1954 (see Table 2), reflecting the growing number of Australian-born children in the Western Australian community. Consequently, there emerged a distinct Greek youth culture that had not been evident earlier.

The increasing number of Australian-born Greeks prompted a re-organisation of Greek youth groups in the immediate postwar years. Founded in the late 1920s, the Australian Hellenic Young Men's Association (AHYMA) had been established to encourage greater social contact and cultural activities among young Greek males in Perth (Georgakis 2000: 118). In 1935 the AHYMA was reconstituted as the Australian Hellenic Progress Association (AHPA).

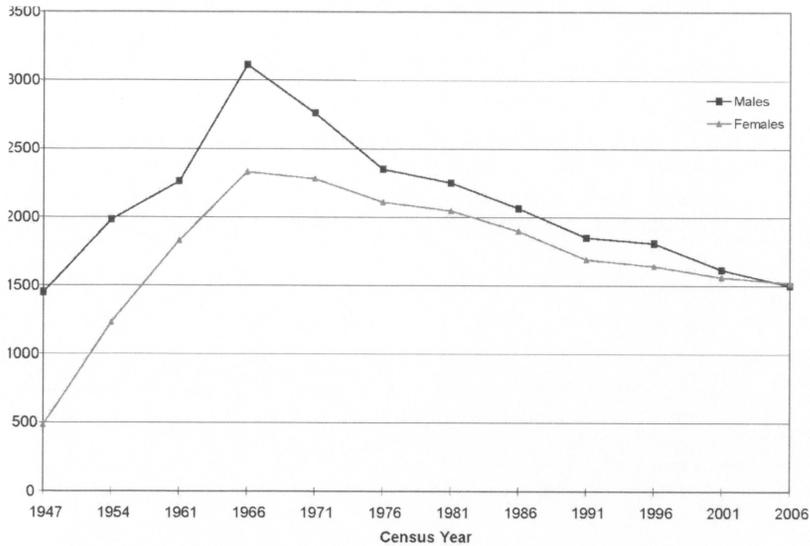


Figure 1: Number of Greek-born persons recorded in the Western Australian Census, 1947-2006.

Table 1: Age distribution for Greek-born persons and Greek Orthodox affiliates in Western Australia, 1947

Age Bracket	Greek-born			Greek Orthodox		
	Males	Females	Total	Males	Females	Total
0-4	1	1	2	70	76	146
5-9	1	2	3	92	89	181
10-14	12	9	21	91	97	188
15-19	25	23	48	97	90	187
20-24	83	44	127	119	86	205
25-29	81	33	114	85	56	141
30-34	116	42	158	100	47	147
35-39	189	87	276	128	86	214
40-44	254	62	316	145	53	198
45-49	283	68	351	170	61	231
50-54	126	23	149	94	24	118
55-59	97	25	122	82	25	107
60-64	75	21	96	55	18	73
65-69	52	16	68	45	15	60
70+	41	25	67	38	19	57
Not stated	5	1	16	10	4	14
Total	1,451	482	1,933	1,421	846	2,267

Table 2: Greek Orthodox affiliates in Western Australia, 1947 and 1954

Year	Males	Females	Total
1947	1,421	846	2,267
1954	4,183	3,030	7,213

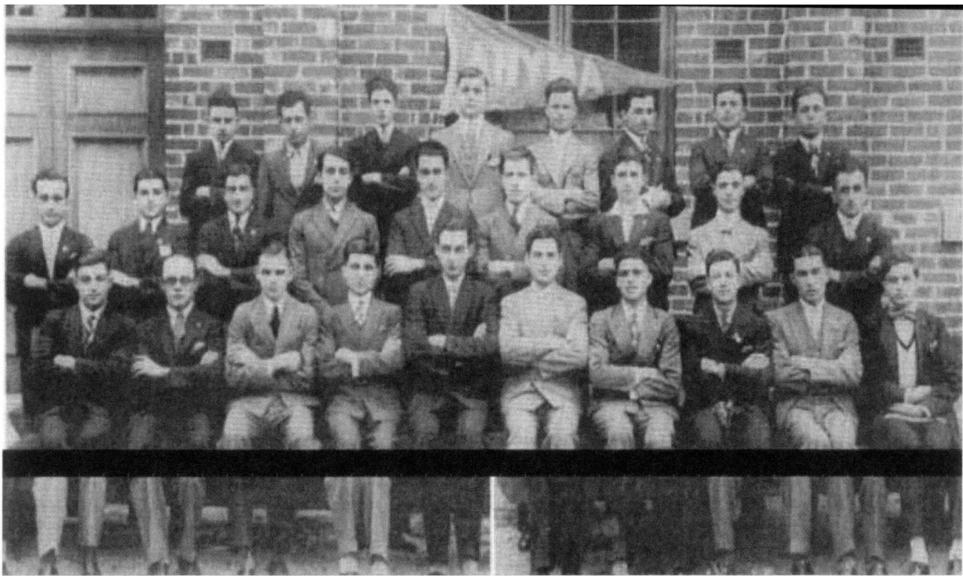


Figure 2: AHYMA 1929.

Courtesy: Hellenic Community of WA

The establishment of Hellenic cricket and Australian Rules football teams in Perth occurred in 1945. The cricket side first played in the 1945–46 season. The Greek interest in cricket had developed since the early 1930s when a South African team toured Australia and had as a member Xenophon Balaskas. The Greeks in Perth had treated him like a hero (Georgakis 2000: 118).

In 1946–47 the Hellenics cricket team was admitted into the senior Matting Association competition. Two years later the side (captained by Mick Michael) was undefeated premiers winning the Association Cup. By 1952, the *Australia-Greek* newspaper described the club as the best organised, ‘peacefully working together’ (Georgakis 2000: 118).

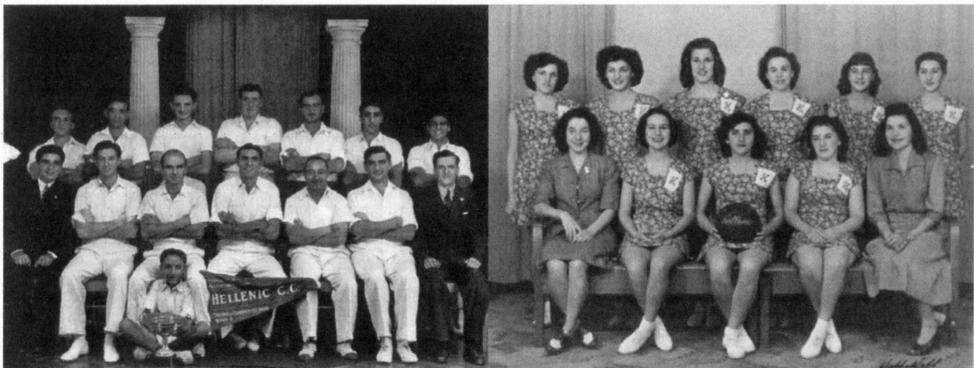


Figure 3: a) Hellenic Cricket Club Premiership team 1948-1949 b) Hellenes' Netball team 1948

Courtesy: Sheryl Gourdis

Sport was an important medium for male (and later female) ethnic peer group association. A number of Greek-Australian war veterans helped form various sporting teams not just as a means of 'bonding' young Greek men, but 'to prove we were as good as Aussies, as they treated us as second-class citizens' (Spartalis 2006 interview).

These teams were soon achieving considerable 'on-field' success and would be active and competitive for decades to come. It did not take long for their success to prompt the development of other sporting teams. During 1949–50, AHPA formed the Hellenics Rugby Club. According to Steve Georgakis, the Perth youth group was the only Greek club to take up rugby union. The popularity of the sport grew amongst Greek youth partly due to exposure to the game at Perth Boys School (Georgakis 2000: 161).

The male orientation of AHPA resulted in a distinct Hellenic girls' club being inaugurated in 1948. Its principal function was to organise social events and fielding a women's international rules basketball (netball) team, as 'it was way of keeping young people together' (Palassis 2008 interview). Known as the Hellenic Girls' Association of Western Australia (HGAWA), it was officially registered in 1950 (Spartalis 1967: 20-21). Comprised of Australian-born females, as 'the Greece-born girls weren't interested' (Palassis 2008), the Girls' Association provided a form of socialising approved by their Greek-born parents. Netball was the competitive sport played, though social games of tennis and coaching clinics were arranged at Robinson Reserve in North Perth.



Figure 4: Hellenics' Rugby team at half time during a 1952 match.

Courtesy: Sheryl Gourdis.

By 1951 the HGAWA was publishing a monthly 'gossip' styled newsletter titled *Roundabout*. It provided members with news about the club and upcoming sporting contests and plenty of information about picnics, christenings, weddings, and engagements. (*Roundabout* was the forerunner to the *HYA News*.) Although the Girls' Association and AHPA were two separate associations, they did work together in organising the occasional function. A point verified in the March 1952 edition of *Roundabout*, which advertised a combined picnic for members of the 'Boys' and Girls' Clubs'. With the number of Greek youth in Perth continuing to increase, it was a logical step for the two associations to join forces. The Hellenic Youth Association (HYA) developed from the merger of these two youth groups to form a larger organisation (Spartalis 1973).

Us versus them

With these two youth associations catering for the interests of the Australian-born, another association focussed on the interests of overseas-born Greeks soon emerged. The Hellenic Progressive Association of Athena was founded in 1951. Rivalry and occasional hostility between more recent arrivals from Greece and the older settlers resulted in some of the 'new Australians' joining with migrants who came to Western Australia in the very late 1930s to establish this organisation. The Athena Association saw itself at first as a cultural organisation aiming to attract Greek migrant youth. To some extent it took over the mantle of the AHPA, even using the word 'progressive' in its title.

Plays, lectures, dances, a regular newsletter, a radio programme, *The Voice of Athena*, and, finally, sporting teams in basketball, water polo and soccer were to be the means by which this association would help younger Greeks socialise. Athena formed the first Greek-Australian water polo team in 1958–59. Soccer however, emerged as its central sporting focus, and in 1953 Athena entered a team into the local third-division competition.

The sports advocated by the Hellenic Youth Association tended to make it more attractive to Australia-born youth, while Athena was more appealing to Greek migrants. 'We were strictly Aussie Rules', recalled one HYA and Hellenics football club stalwart. 'I don't think any of the boys had anything to do with soccer. They [immigrants] kept to themselves'. Furthermore, 'soccer wasn't that popular because it wasn't played at school in those days' (Kailis

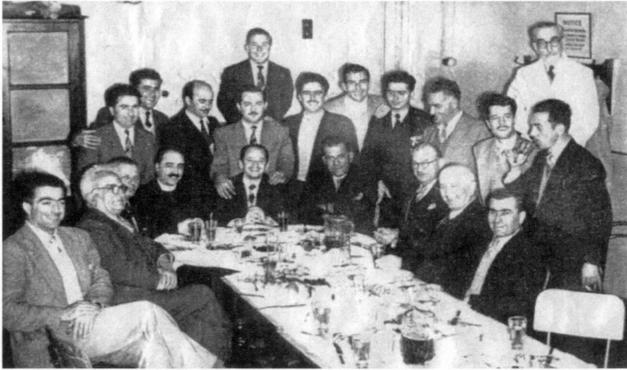


Figure 5: The first meeting of the founders of Athena

Courtesy: Arthur Athans

2006 interview). Conversely, cricket, Australian Rules and rugby meant nothing to the postwar immigrants from Greece. Thus, postwar immigrants tended to join Athena.

The Athena Association was viewed with suspicion by many pre-war migrants and their offspring, and ‘straight away [we] became the enemy’ (Athans 1989 interview). Athena’s growth during the 1950s became a concern for the Hellenic Community of WA, and its initial success may have been a factor in the amalgamation of the AHPA and the HGAWA into the Hellenic Youth Association.



Figure 6: The 1958-59 Athena water polo team

Source: Floreat Athena

Cooperation between the HYA and the Athena Association was limited in the 1950s, and antagonisms between the two clubs were sometimes intense and reflected broader community attitudes. At youth dances migrants often found themselves ignored. 'To them [locally born Greeks] we were always 'new Australians'; something second grade'. One community leader summed up the situation by saying that 'there was friction between Australian-born and overseas-born Greeks' (Kalafatas 1989 interview).

Many young overseas-born Greeks arriving in Perth during this period found themselves ostracised, as they were not always accepted in Greek-Australian circles. These new arrivals reminded the Australia-born of where their parents had been or had come from and in 1950s assimilationist Australia, association with these migrants may have been detrimental to their chances of acceptance by Anglo-Australians. Differences were compounded by language difficulties: the newcomers could not speak English adequately and poorly spoken Greek often embarrassed the Australia-born.

During the 1950s, while a new wave of immigrants helped replenish Hellenism in Western Australia, the processes of adaptation were not reversed. In Western Australia where fewer new settlers arrived and Australia-born Greeks outnumbered those born overseas by the early 1960s (in Victoria Greece-born persons still outnumbered second-generation Greeks born in Australia until 1986), the ascendancy of the locally born and that of the mainstream culture was clear. Yet, newcomers were reluctant to suppress signs of their ethnic past and by the late 1970s did not have to do so. The composition of new arrivals was no longer as homogeneous, predominantly Castellorizian, as it had been before the war. The unity of purpose and apparent harmony of Perth's Greek community of the 1930s as it strove to build its church dissipated. There was also the growing 'problem' of Australia-born youth questioning their parents' values and expectations as adaptation began to influence their morals, interests and behaviour.

As Hellenic sporting teams grew in size, number and stature, the acquisition and prospective development of land set aside by the Hellenic Community WA for Greek youth seemed to assure their future. The scope of the project, however, troubled the Hellenic Community. In 1956 it announced that any development would have to be for all Greek youth and that a Hellenic Park Grounds Development Committee would be established to investigate the usage and development of the land in Morley/Inglewood. The short-lived



Figure 6: The 1958-59 Athena water polo team

Source: Floreat Athena

local Greek newspaper *Eleftheria Phoni* (The Voice of Freedom), published from July 1956 to May 1957, and itself reflecting the growing Greek presence in Western Australian society, proclaimed in its September 1956 edition that:

Improvements to the Sports Ground at Inglewood were welcomed by both our Australian born and New Australian Youth. This could be the first step taken ... towards a unification of both parties in the near future (Vlahopoulos & Dailakis 1956: 1).

The success of the Hellenics football team in the 1950s regularly attracted ‘three or four thousand people ... We won two “A” Grade premierships [1959–1960]’, recalled HYA stalwart Con Kailis. As a child, Kailis had lived near Hyde Park, but would ‘whiz down to Lake Street where all the Greeks ... were born’. There he’d play marbles, football and cricket. Many of the friendships formed during these years among the first generation of Australia-born Greeks would belong-lasting. ‘Off the field we were great mates’, said Kailis.

On-field success for the Athena Association saw the club progress through the grades while its membership grew.⁸ The first Athena soccer team competed in the 1953 third-division competition of the Western Australian Soccer Football Association. By 1960, Athena was promoted to the State League, finishing sixth (Floreat Athena 2007). The suspicion held between Australia-born and overseas-born Greeks did not disappear despite this success. Evidence of this unease is reflected in the April 1973 edition of the *HYA News*, when the editor wrote, ‘Athena people, helped to some extent in this [land] development, and indeed it was one of the few instances the two bodies worked together compatibly’ (Berbatis 1973: 12).

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Notes

¹Athena would eventually have Adela House in Stirling Street as its headquarters, but for much of the 1950s different premises were used, most regularly a room above Con Mathewdakis' **Murray Street** milkbar. The premise was rent-free and equipment could be stored there.