



# HUT! HUT! HUT!

One of the University's less publicly known teams is also one of its most successful.  
Shari Wakefield reports from the gridiron

sport

It's time for Sydney to sing the praises of one of its most successful football clubs – The American Football Club. From humble beginnings (read three Vet Science guys and a newspaper) it has progressed in leaps and bounds, winning six straight Gridiron NSW Championships, setting a state record and thereby equaling their own winning streak record of 33 games. Now that's impressive!

The Sydney University American Football Club was involved from the start of competitive gridiron in New South Wales, being a foundation member of Gridiron NSW in 1984, the inaugural year of competition. One of only two foundation clubs to have survived, it is the only club to have played in every year of competition of Gridiron NSW.

The story goes that in 1984 Keith Phillips, David Little and Phillip Moses told fellow Vet Science classmates that “gridiron is a new inter-faculty sport” to get them involved. The trick worked because at least one-third of the original team was drawn from the Vet Science faculty. The team, originally called the Sydney University Stormtroopers (after the *Star Wars* characters with all their padding), changed its name to the “Lions” in 1985 at the suggestion of then Sports Union President, Roy Pearson.

The club's great qualities – humour, self motivation and camaraderie, to name a few – reflect its origins as a

University club, being run by the players, for the players. Head Coach and Offensive Coordinator, Stephen Dunne, says, “The American Football Club has a great tradition that we've added to by winning 10 out of the 25 State Championships. We've been consistently competitive.”

The club worked hard in its early years to secure sponsorship to build up a supply of the necessary equipment – helmets, shoulder pads, accessory pads, uniforms etc – to keep playing costs to a minimum. Many outside the game do not understand that, while the equipment increases the force of the physical contact in the game, it also serves to take away the advantage of sheer size. So good athletes, whose body types don't suit the conventional football codes, can find a place in American football.

American football is a very specialised game, with roles for players with different abilities and strengths. While the club gets its fair share of current and former rugby union and league players looking for a different challenge, it has found that there are many athletes with size and explosive power (but not necessarily great aerobic fitness) who can succeed at the game.

“We've now had 72 wins and two losses in the time we have won our six Championships. I don't think any team in the nation can match that. But the main thing is that the team played good football and represented the University



*It is the only club to have played in every year of competition*

well,” says Dunne. This year, the following 12 Sydney University players were chosen for the Australian team to tour the United Kingdom in May, playing internationals against Ireland and England: David Allen, Chady Aoun, Fady Aoun, Matt Croasdaile, Kiernan Dorney, Liam Erby, Mathew Freeman, James Gifford, Joe Lim, Piotr Milewski, Anthony Sinton and David Thode.

### *Gridiron Explained*

American Football can be very confusing, especially to non-Americans who have not grown up surrounded by references such as “roughing the snapper” and “hiking the ball”. Here are some of the basics aspects of the game, which are relatively easy to grasp.

**Lesson 1** The game’s first principle is that the offensive team must try to cover a 10-yard (9m) section of the field in four or fewer “downs” (or “plays”). If unsuccessful, possession of the ball is lost to the other team.

**Lesson 2** An American Football field is 100 yards long by 160 yards wide (90x145m approximately). The field is divided into strips by white lines, which are marked out every 10 yards. The areas at each end of the field, which begin with the “zero-line” are called the “end-zones”. When a player successfully touches the ball down in the end zone of the opposing team, he scores a touchdown for

his team. In the NSW Gridiron Competition most games are played on hockey turf, as it is similar to that of an American Football field.

**Lesson 3** Games last for one hour, divided into four fifteen-minute quarters. In practice, however, a game will last longer as the clock is stopped if: the offensive team runs a passing play and the pass is not completed, the player carries the ball out of bounds or during timeouts.

**Lesson 4** The most important player on the field is the Quarterback who is usually responsible for leading the other players onto the field and calling out plays on the advice of the coach. It is usually the Quarterback who hands off the ball to the Receivers or Running Backs, who then run or pass to advance the ball.

**Lesson 5** Offensive linemen block for the Quarterback and Running Backs, to try and protect them from the defensive players on the opposing team. Linemen are usually among the largest players on the team. The line includes the Centre who is typically responsible for beginning a play with “the snap”; the Left and Right Guards who stand on either side of him; the Tackles; and finally, the Receivers, who stand on the furthestmost point at each end of the line.

**Lesson 6** Meanwhile, the Defensive Linemen will try to thwart the efforts of the offensive linemen as they try to block for their Quarterback. It is their job to bring down the Quarterback before he can hand the ball off or attempt to advance the ball himself. They are supported by around five Linebackers.

**Lesson 7** The Cornerbacks are positioned to prevent the Receivers and Running Backs from catching the ball. They attempt to “pick-off” or intercept the ball as the Quarterback throws it to these players.

**Lesson 8** A “touchdown” is worth six points and awarded when a player successfully carries the ball into the opposing team’s end-zone. Once a player has scored a touchdown he is then faced with a choice: try for an extra point by attempting to kick the ball over the crossbar, or go for two extra points by trying to advance the ball into the end-zone again. A “field goal” is worth three points and is awarded when the ball is kicked over the crossbar from the field.

### *Play by the rules*

There are three rule books which govern the finer points of the game. They are the NFL Rulebook (the rules of the NFL, the American professional league), The NCAA Rulebook (which outlines the rules for college football) or High School Football Rules (the rules adapted slightly for younger players). These rulebooks are extensive, and cover every possible eventuality. You can find them online.

“Every year is a challenge. We are always looking for new players to contribute. The challenge of going for our seventh straight championship is going to make 2009 a big year!” says Dunne. **SAM**

*To contact the Sydney University American Football Club go to its website: [www.sydneyunigridiron.com](http://www.sydneyunigridiron.com)*

*The Club practices at Sydney Uni’s St Andrews Oval and St Johns Oval. The Division 1 season is early September to mid-December, pre-season began late May. The Sydney Uni Cubs season runs from mid-February to mid-May. Games are played at St George Hockey Centre, Pennant Hills Hockey Centre, Craik Park, Mascot Oval, UWS Nepean and Berkeley.*

*Keep up with the team in ROAR, SU Sport’s news mag.*

Photos by Terri Shine