

Siren sounds for footy legend



Goal machine: Lake Tyers great Ronnie Edwards, circled, poses with a 1948 Victorian Aboriginal side.

By Andrew Rule

IT'S BEEN a big week for footy funerals. One that won't make the news takes place tomorrow afternoon in the old white weather-board church on the hill at Lake Tyers Aboriginal settlement in East Gippsland.

The round trip from Melbourne is 600-odd kilometres, but a few of us will make the trip "up-home" to be there, and one mourner will come further, from beyond Bendigo.

He's my father, and he has to get to the church on time, because now he's one of only two men still living who played in the 1950 Lake Tyers footy team. Until last Sunday there were three survivors of that remarkable side, but the third bloke is getting buried tomorrow.

His name was Ronnie Edwards. No disrespect to his two living mates and 15 departed ones, but he was the star of a team that played probably the closest thing Victoria has produced to the cheeky poetry of the Tivi Islanders' game.

Although Ronnie played only one game in the big league, he was a hero in our corner of the world — one of a handful of local legends now remembered only by a dwindling band of contemporaries.

There was Joe Wandin, the bantamweight tent boxer who won a pro 10-rounder at Festival Hall on a week's training, once beat three heavyweight bruisers who set him up in a pub, and won his last fight as a 50-year-old with a dodgy heart and bare fists. Joe was a very tough rover in 1950.

"Choppie" Hayes beat the fastest printers in Australia in the 75-yard dash at a Stawell Gift meeting. He was centreman and skipper.

The backline was all Harrisons: Stan at full-back and his relatives, Alf and Rupert, in the pockets. Harold Hayes played centre half-back — a wispy figure who cut big centre half-forwards down to size.

And there were more: Hoods, Mulletts, Moburns, Carters, Greens and Peppers, all famous Gippsland Koori names. The team's trainer was Laurie Moffatt, an old full blood reputed to have tribal scars.

All were gifted sportsmen for whom having fun was more important than money. Although they had nothing against performing for money, there was something touchingly amateur about the way they enjoyed what they were good at.

What Ronnie Edwards was good at was kicking a ball through two tall sticks from any angle. In the bush, he stood out from the scrubbers the way an Ablett, a Daicos, or a Blight stands out from ordinary AFL players. He had flair, intuition, and freakish goal sense. Because he was Aboriginal, it's tempting to say there was something of a Krakouer or a Michael Long about him. Maybe there was. But there was no Robbie Muir in him. Ronnie Edwards was a gentle man who just loved kicking goals. One day he kicked 43.

Please do not adjust your newspaper. Exactly 45 years ago — on Saturday 26 August 1950 — playing full-forward for Lake Tyers against the visiting team from the nearby timber-mill town of Nowa Nowa, R. Edwards kicked 43.12, out of a total score of 43.17.275 to Nowa Nowa's 11.10.76. All my life I've believed this

was an Australian record. If it wasn't, I don't want to know now. It happened like this. Orbost had a hotshot spearhead who'd played league football. Because he was in the top side he bagged big tallies of goals and looked a certainty to win the competition's goalkicking award. Until, that is, the Lake Tyers boys decided to knock him off in the game against Nowa Nowa, late in the season. The entire team set out to feed the ball to Ronnie.

Result: He kicked goals from every angle. He soccered them off the ground with either foot. He kicked them from 50 metres out and two metres out.

It was a walkover. A procession. But, in all such displays, there is a moment that, frozen in memory, captures the event forever. It came, according to my father — a slow 18-year-old ruckman that day — when Ronnie somersaulted on to his back, threw the ball on to his boot as his shoulder hit the ground... and kicked a goal from 10 metres out.

Later, he went down and played a game with Fitzroy, but he soon came home to live beside the lake, where he spent the rest of his days. City life and VFL full-backs weren't much fun. And footy, to Ronnie Edwards, had to be fun.

Tomorrow, after the service in the church where he was christened and married, he'll be buried alongside so many of his people in the little cemetery overlooking Bass Strait.

He was 70. May he rest in peace.