Dealing with the Devils:
Fairness Challenges of a 19-Team AFL Fixture

University of the Sunshine Coast

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Abstract

The Australian Football League (AFL) uses an unbalanced fixture that creates significant, systematic inequities for its competing teams. The pending introduction of the Tasmania Devils in 2028 gives rise to examining the impact of scheduling constraints, commercial objectives, and variables. This research will develop a quantitative framework for an optimised 19-team fixture, with the objective of minimising the extremes separating the most and least advantaged teams. It will aim to optimise variables that contribute to strength of schedule, home ground, travel burden, and player welfare advantages. It is hypothesised that the framework will produce a demonstrably fairer fixture by reducing the impact of fixture bias on teams. Using the current AFL scheduling model as a benchmark, the framework will be evaluated using Monte Carlo simulations. Outcomes are proposed to inform evidence-based recommendations to optimise the fixture for a 19-team competition.

Contents

Introduction

Problem definition

This research project addresses a complex optimisation challenge presented by the Australian Football League (AFL) fixture, requiring a solution that balances conflicting goals (Kyngäs et al., 2017). A multi-objective optimisation approach is proposed. A unique feature is to introduce a 19th team, the Tasmania Devils, who will join the AFL in 2028.

Clarke (1998) established that the AFL fixture has significant bias, such that fixture difficulty doesn't equalise over time. Fixture difficulty "refers to the level of challenge a team faces in its schedule based on factors such as its own form, its opponents' form, whether matches are played at home or away, and travel demands [and] serves as a useful benchmark to compare the degree of difficulty that teams must contend with" (Stats Insider, 2024).

Fairness in AFL scheduling is essential because unbalanced fixtures can distort competitive balance, fan engagement and ultimately revenue generation. AFL is an integral part of Australian culture, dating back to the 1850s, and as Australia's most popular spectator sport (Jakee et al., 2022), it attracts an annual attendance exceeding 9 million people (Smith, 2025). As a billion-dollar industry (Lassey, 2025), it contributes significantly to Australia's economy.

Background

From 1970 to 1986, the AFL (then called the Victorian Football League) comprised 12 teams competing in an objectively fair, dual round robin system of 22 rounds. It moved to a partial round robin system in 1987, where 14 teams played four opponents once and nine twice in a 22-round season. The number of teams competing has increased over the years; that is, 15 teams participated from 1991; 16 from 1995; 17 from 2011; and 18 since 2012. The number of games played per team per season remained consistent at 22, until it was extended to 23 for season 2023. Wu (2024) noted that in 2024, the AFL dismissed a suggestion to extend the fixture by another additional round.

A partial-round robin system creates strength of schedule (SoS) inequities, due to the relative strength of each opponent a team plays twice. Currently, 18 teams play 11 opponents once and six twice in a season of 23 rounds (excluding byes). The AFL applies a ‘weighted rule’ to address SoS inequities, by grouping three tiers of six teams to allocate opponents played twice in a season. To maximise attendance and meet consumer demand for events such as blockbuster games, exceptions apply to this rule (Smith, 2024). The Stats Insider assessment of 2025 fixture difficulty (refer Appendix A) provides an interpretation of the impact of the weighted rule as it was applied to the 2025 season.

Multi-objective optimisation involves aggregating multiple functions into a single composite function, typically using weighted sums to produce a single quantifiable formula (Kim & de Weck, 2006). This research will apply a multi-objective, weighted sum approach to minimising the extremes of advantage.

Research goal

The research goal is to minimise the extent of AFL scheduling inequity within the scope of known constraints, commercial objectives, and variables, while introducing a 19th team.

Hypothesis

The AFL fixture should optimise fairness for all teams while accommodating its constraints and stakeholder requirements. However, it systematically advantages some teams over others, and the pending arrival of a 19th team will impact fixture complexity and competition balance.

Research question

To what extent can an optimisation model generate an equitable fixture for a 19-team AFL competition that minimises the extremes between the most and least advantaged teams, and mitigates trade-offs with constraints and commercial objectives?

Literature review

Keywords and online resources used in the literature review are detailed in Appendix B.

Clarke (1998) demonstrated that random outcomes of close games have the greatest effect on ladder positions, and proposed that percentage is a better indicator of teams' performance than premiership points. Clarke analysed fairness by quantifying the impact of randomness on wins and ladder positions. He used team ability, venue, and home advantage to predict the final ladder. Clarke concluded that ladder positions poorly represent teams' performances, with random luck and schedule difficulty as the most significant factors.

Using data from seasons 1997 to 2008, Lenten (2011) identified the opponents each team played an unequal number of times, calculated their average strength versus that of the remainder of teams, and created an adjustment factor to estimate a win ratio under a balanced schedule. He prepared league ladders to compare with actual seasons' results, and demonstrated movement in 35% of positions, noting that in some cases teams had moved by up to three ladder places. Lenten questioned whether 'triumvirate' rivalry games between Carlton, Collingwood, and Essendon guaranteed maximum attendances, and whether their default pairings would outperform match-ups with other Victorian teams.

Lenor et al. (2016) examined club rivalries with a view to optimising AFL attendances, and confirmed that the triumvirate rivalries were the highest drawcards. However, they observed declines in attendance in these teams' second meetings per season, concluding that attendances could be increased by up to 7% by redistributing some triumvirate pairings with other well-supported Victorian teams. In contrast, attendances increased at the second scheduled derby matches in Adelaide and Perth.

Jakee et al. (2022) conducted econometric analysis on the allocation of game-day scheduling to ascertain whether the AFL prioritised revenue over competitive balance. They noted that the AFL does not make schedule constraints publicly available for reasons of 'general secrecy' and confidentiality of venue availability. Jakee et al. found that, following a major broadcasting contract in 2002, clubs with higher attendance rates were five times more likely to earn premium broadcast timeslots, regardless of on-field performance, with Victorian clubs prioritised over others. They concluded that AFL scheduling practices were counter-productive to competitive balance, redistributing wealth away from financially weaker clubs.

Stefani and Clarke (1992) identified three main causes for home ground advantage (HGA): travel fatigue, crowd intimidation, and venue familiarity. They concluded that HGA is significant, quantifiable, and varies greatly between teams, with major determinants being travel and ground sharing. They found that West Coast had the largest HGA of 36.8 scoreboard points; MCG co-tenants, such as North Melbourne and Richmond, had minimal or negative HGAs; and the average HGA was 9.8 scoreboard points. They demonstrated that a common HGA can be calculated using the home team's average winning margin.

Clarke (2005) tested a variety of methods to demonstrate HGA using data from seasons 1980 to 1998, and linear models using individual match margins. Clarke combined travel fatigue with ground familiarity, and independently separated teams' abilities, to determine HGA. He observed that models using team-specific home advantages outperformed those that applied it uniformly. Clarke observed that Victorian HGAs were diluted due to ground sharing; and that non-Victorian clubs enjoyed isolation effects that supported greater HGAs over their Victorian counterparts, which could exceed 20 scoreboard points per game. He concluded that a sophisticated model to assess HGA is justified over an assumption that it applies uniformly.

Contrasting Clarke (2005), Ryall and Bedford (2010) considered travel fatigue and ground familiarity as independent variables. They concluded that ground familiarity and distances travelled by interstate visitors were significant HGA determinants.

Easton et al. (2001) viewed breaks as a necessary and beneficial component of a fixture designed to minimise the greater burden of travel. They addressed minimising travel distance using the travelling tournament problem (TTP), proposing road trips and breaks as efficient ways to play multiple opponents. They argued that savings in cost and fatigue through less travel outweighed the benefits of maintaining alternating home and away patterns.

Contrary to Easton et al. (2001), Kyngäs et al. (2017) treated the reduction of breaks as a primary objective for achieving a fair and balanced schedule. They used a heuristic population, ejection, annealing, shuffling, tabu (PEAST) algorithm to minimise and balance both travel distance and breaks within the AFL's operational constraints.

As a player welfare objective, break minimisation in the AFL aims to have no more than two home games, and no more than two away games, every three weeks (Smith, 2024). Clubs now have no more than three five-day breaks per season, and their opponents must be coming off no more than six-day breaks to play these games (Atkinson & Lawson, 2024). These constraints will be incorporated into a solution framework.

Panton et al. (2002) applied three Integer Programming (IP) models to address the scheduling problem in three phases; with each phase optimising and refining fixtures. The three-phase approach included (i) generate optimised pattern sets of home and away fixtures from an array of feasible patterns, for all teams; (ii) apply basic match schedules to build a valid timetable, and populate it with anonymous team names as placeholders; and (iii) assign teams to the placeholders, incorporating constraints.

Barone et al. (2006) applied a multi-objective evolutionary algorithm to balance conflicting scheduling factors including equity, expected revenue, travel, and venue distribution. Benchmarking the 2006 AFL fixture, their model traded off degrees of the variables' advantages in generating sets of optimised alternatives, including a version superior in all four categories. They highlighted the economic and entertainment values of well-structured schedules, and concluded that their algorithm was highly effective in addressing AFL scheduling complexities.

Josman et al. (2016) used pre-game data to quantify season difficulty. They applied multivariate logistic regression (MLR) and a Bernoulli simulation framework to evaluate performances by teams. Their research provided AFL-specific data to evaluate and quantify the finished schedules as being fair or not.

Kyngäs et al. (2017) collaborated with the AFL to benchmark and improve on the 2013 AFL fixture, incorporating the constraints listed in Appendix C. Their three-phase process systematically addressed allocating opponents, assigning rounds and byes, and aligning venue and broadcast schedules. The AFL recognised its superiority over their existing model.

Exclusions from the literature review were based on their relevance to the research goal. A literature gap exists relating to AFL fixture modelling that accommodates Tasmania.

Methodology

Phase 1: Fixture generation

Constraints are non-negotiable (hard) and desirable (soft) rules applied in solution spaces, expressed as mathematical equations or inequities (Barone et al., 2006). Breaking a hard constraint will invalidate an AFL schedule. Breaking a soft constraint will result in an equity penalty. Three soft constraints to be considered for inclusion are provided at Appendix D.

Existing constraints will be examined for their modification potential. For example, Easton et al.'s (2001) travel minimisation concept conflicts with the soft constraint of break minimisation; road trips may, however, be considered for inclusion in the scheduling framework to minimise the travel burden. A potential additional benefit of this scenario is that if Carlton plays the Western Bulldogs in Round 5 at Marvel Stadium, fans may be disinclined to return a week later to see Carlton play Gold Coast. However, if Carlton has been on a two-week Perth road trip for Rounds 6 and 7, fans may return for a Round 8 game against Gold Coast following a brief football hiatus.

Data from recent AFL seasons will be collated for quantitative analysis and incorporation to a model framework. These will include teams' status as playing at home, away, as a venue co-tenant, or at a neutral venue (e.g., most Gather Round games); match results; travel distances; venue familiarity; and player rest days.

Key variables and equity metrics will be quantified with measures informed by the reviewed literature. Available data on AFL fixture constraints, including those described by Kyngäs et al. (2017), will also be prepared, noting limitations of the AFL's general secrecy policy as identified by Jakee et al. (2022).

An inequity baseline will be established for quantitative analysis (Lenten, 2011), with a composite fairness index calculated and measures of advantage generated for current teams.

Methodologies discussed in the literature review will be prioritised for their potential to achieve the research goal.

An objective function is a mathematical equation that computes quantifiable scores to satisfy problems with multiple objectives (Marler & Arora, 2004). This will be developed to guide an algorithm toward minimising the extremes of advantage generated within fixtures.

An optimised scheduling framework will be developed to generate fixtures with an objective to minimise fixture difficulty.

Each fixture score will comprise the sum of costs applied to individual elements of fairness, stakeholder, and operational functions such as travel burden, broadcast desirability, and venue availability. Multipliers will be applied to each element as weightings to represent their relative importance. Optimised fixtures will have the lowest scores.

The framework will also be applied to the existing AFL schedule as a benchmark of fixture difficulty.

Phase 2: Fixture evaluation

Monte Carlo simulations will be applied to identify fixture structures that are statistically the most likely to produce optimal results (Clarke, 1998). Typical software used for this is The R Project for Statistical Computing (The R Foundation, 2025). Potentially, millions of football seasons will be simulated for the existing and proposed scheduling models.

Simulation results will be compared and evaluated for statistically significant reductions in variance of fixture inequity outcomes, to determine the effectiveness of the framework.

This process will provide flexibility by generating an array of alternatives that trade off degrees of competing criteria (Barone et al., 2006).

Findings

A theme emerging from the literature was that the unbalanced nature of the fixture is a deliberate compromise by the AFL, primarily because revenue optimisation is prioritised over competitive balance. Primary drivers of repeated game pairings were optimising revenue, match attendance and broadcast obligations, which were considered to be detrimental to competitive balance. The AFL was perceived to prioritise Victorian teams over non-Victorian teams with more favourable scheduling. Occasional interstate travel was the most significant disadvantage for Victorian teams, with strong isolation effects girding non-Victorian teams; and regular, cumulative travel deemed a burden for non-Victorian teams. Ground sharing was considered to dilute Victorian teams' home advantage.

Discussion

A multi-objective optimisation approach to resolving the sports scheduling problem that accommodates fairness, stakeholder interests, and operational requirements will guide the development of an optimised 19-team AFL fixture.

To meet the hard constraint of equity in games played between all 19 teams, teams cannot play an odd number of total games, such as the 23 games per team played in season 2025. Two alternatives are feasible. Whether time permits the preparation of both 22-game (option A) and 24-game (option B) fixtures is yet to be determined. Option B represents the most extreme scenario and will be examined as the priority. Table A below illustrates these two options and provides relevant fixtures from recent history for comparison.

Table A: Fixture comparison

Season	2028 Option A	2028 Option B	2025	1986
Team count	19	19	18	12
Game count per team	22	24	23	22
Total games per season	209	228	207	132
Maximum unique pairings	171	171	153	66
Repeat pairings	38	57	54	66
Opponents played once	14	12	11	0
Opponents played twice	4	6	6	11
Possible combinations of repeat pairings	~3.35×10^{35}	~2.75×10^{44}	~1.68×10^{41}	1

Option A will increase the total games played per season by only two on 2025, while individual teams will play 22 games each instead of 23, which should benefit player welfare. This fixture will reduce the number of repeat match-ups from six to four, which will improve SoS outcomes, but be detrimental to the number of blockbuster games and associated revenue opportunities for the AFL. This option decreases the number of possible combinations of repeat match-ups by a factor of approximately 500,000, requiring far less computational resources.

Option B will increase the number of total games played per season by 21, which will significantly increase the AFL's revenue potential. It will increase the number of games played by each team from 23 to 24, which could negatively impact player welfare. This option will maintain the number of repeat match-ups at six per team. It increases the number of possible combinations of repeat match-ups by a factor of approximately 1,600, requiring significantly more computational resources.

Conclusions

The inequity inherent to the AFL fixture is sufficient to alter final ladder placings, which can deny teams finals participation. It also creates financial disparities between clubs, with some gaining significant financial advantages through favourable broadcast slots. To address scheduling inequity, a sophisticated, data-driven approach is essential.

The scheduling algorithms reviewed are well suited to balance SoS, HGA, travel burden, and rest requirements, and will inform the development of an optimised 19-team fixture model that accommodates AFL priorities for attendance, broadcast audiences and revenue.

The pending entry of the Tasmania Devils to the AFL will alter and potentially exacerbate the already complex existing logistical and fairness challenges. Option A discussed above prioritises fairness and is recommended, while Option B prioritises revenue generation and is anticipated to be preferred by AFL stakeholders.

Whichever is ultimately chosen, this research will inform a multi-objective optimisation model grounded in established frameworks, to develop an evidence-based tool to develop scheduling for the 2028 AFL season and beyond. The final output will not be a single, perfect fixture. It will be a set of optimised solutions offering different trade-offs between fairness and stakeholder interests.

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Appendices

Appendix A – Stats Insider fixture difficulty

2025 STATS INSIDER AFL SCHEDULE DIFFICULTY						
	Team	R20	R21	R22	R23	Overall
1	BRISBANE	@GCS	@COL	SYD	@FRE	9.2
2	WEST COAST	@FRE	@MEL	ADE	@WBD	8.7
3	P ADELAIDE	@ADE	@GEE	FRE	@CAR	8.4
4	HAWTHORN	CAR	@ADE	COL	MEL	6.7
5	MELBOURNE	@STK	WCE	WBD	@HAW	3.8
6	ESSENDON	WBD	@SYD	@GEE	STK	3.7
7	COLLINGWOOD	@RIC	BRI	@HAW	@ADE	3.2
8	RICHMOND	COL	@GCS	STK	@NME	2.2
9	N MELBOURNE	GEE	@STK	@GWS	RIC	1.4
10	CARLTON	@HAW	@FRE	GCS	POR	1.0
11	GWS	SYD	@WBD	NME	@GCS	-0.6
12	SYDNEY	@GWS	ESS	@BRI	GEE	-1.0
13	FREMANTLE	WCE	CAR	@POR	BRI	-1.7
14	GOLD COAST	BRI	RIC	@CAR	GWS	-4.2
15	ADELAIDE	POR	HAW	@WCE	COL	-5.2
16	BULLDOGS	@ESS	GWS	@MEL	WCE	-7.9
17	ST KILDA	MEL	NME	@RIC	@ESS	-12.8
18	GEELONG	@NME	POR	ESS	@SYD	-14.8

Appendix B – Search devices

Keywords

advantage, AFL, analytics, attendance, Australian Football League, Australian Rules, Aussie Rules, away, bye, club, competition, constraint, crowd, Devils, draw, fair, fairness, familiarity, fixture, football, footy, home, game, ground, interstate, match, opposition, opponent, player, round-robin, rivalry, rules, schedule, season, strength of schedule, spectator, sport, Tasmania, Tasmania Football Club, team, tournament, travel, venue, weighted rule, welfare

Databases

Google Scholar, Scopus, SPORTDiscus, University of the Sunshine Coast library

Websites and generative AI

afl.com.au, copilot.microsoft.com, gemini.google.com

Appendix C – AFL fixture constraints

The constraints listed below are sourced from Kyngäs et al. (2017) and relate to the 2013 AFL season. This is the most recent information available at the time of writing.

1. All teams have to play a minimum of five matches in Victoria.
2. Victorian teams should travel outside Victoria a minimum of five times.
3. Each team must have at least one home match against Collingwood or Essendon.
4. Each team must travel to Western Australia at least once.
5. For a number of matches, the home advantage is fixed. The selection of the opponents in the 5 additional matches for each team is as follows:
6. Blockbuster matches (i.e. between top teams) must be included.
7. Matches between local rivals (Adelaide Crows and Port Adelaide, Brisbane Lions and Gold Coast Suns, Fremantle and West Coast Eagles, Greater Western Sydney Giants and Sydney Swans) must be included.
8. The top four teams from the previous season can have only one meeting with the bottom four teams from the previous season, with the exception of the Sydney rivals.
9. The top eight teams from the previous season should play at least three other top eight teams twice.
10. The bottom ten teams from the previous season should play at least three other bottom ten teams twice.
11. The bottom two teams from the previous season should not meet the top eight teams from the previous season twice (Sydney rivals are an exception).
12. Pre-assigned matches, i.e. for which the round is already fixed, must be respected.
13. There must be at least 6 rounds between two matches with the same opponents.
14. There should be at most 1 home match per round for each of four pairs of teams. The pairs are Adelaide Crows and Port Adelaide, Brisbane Lions and Gold Coast Suns, Fremantle and West Coast Eagles, Greater Western Sydney Giants and Sydney Swans.

15. Non-Victorian teams that travelled in round 23 in the previous season cannot travel in round 23 this season.
16. If 2 teams play each other twice, the second match cannot be played before round 11.
17. If two teams play each other only once, that match cannot be played in the final round.
18. There must be at least 6 rounds between visits to Western Australia.
19. There must be at least 6 rounds between visits to Queensland.
20. Geelong Cats must play exactly 4 home matches in the first 10 rounds.
21. (There should be a minimum of 6 days between each match (with exceptions resulting from Anzac Day).
22. There should be no matches in overlapping broadcasting slots, so that all local matches can be broadcast on freeto-air in each market.
23. All clubs must play at least one match at the MCG stadium.
24. There must be a minimum of 45 matches in MCG stadium.
25. There must be a minimum of 48 matches in Etihad Stadium.
26. Other venue contractual requirements (pre-defined number of matches played at each stadium).
27. At least 15 matches in the Etihad or MCG stadium should be played on Friday.
28. No day or twilight matches at TIO Stadium.
29. No Sunday early or Saturday afternoon matches at Patersons Stadium.
30. No home matches for Geelong Cats at Simonds stadium until Round 10.

Appendix D – Proposed soft constraints

The following are proposed for consideration in revising AFL fixture options from 2028.

The first round robin can be scheduled for approximately the first 15 rounds and a floating fixture for the remainder of the season. Blockbusters can be scheduled for the first half of the season and pencilled in for the second half. At the season mid-point, the remainder of the season can be scheduled using strength of schedule assessments applicable at that time for repeat match-ups.

Teams from the East and West coasts of Australia, such as Sydney and West Coast, can play together at Gather Round in Adelaide, sharing the travel burden.

Road trips for teams to travel interstate to play two local teams will be considered; such as Adelaide visiting Queensland to play Brisbane and Gold Coast over consecutive rounds, saving one return flight.