

Sydney Swans Support for the Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Community:

A Fan's Story and a Club's Commitment

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HEARING MATTERS AUSTRALIA
Support from real life experience

A small disclaimer before diving in: I am not a casual Swans supporter. I am a lifelong, dyed-in-the-wool, through-the-rain-and-shine Sydney Swans tragic. I've held Swans memberships for nearly four decades, and have attended around 90% of all Swans home games since the club relocated to Sydney in the early 1980s. My original membership number was 000430—nowhere near the famous “number one ticket holder,” but certainly low enough to demonstrate just how seriously I take my footy.

I was there in 1983 when Warwick Capper burst onto the Sydney Cricket Ground (SCG) in his legendary tight red shorts, and I was still there almost forty years later in 2022 when Lance “Buddy” Franklin kicked his thousandth career goal. That night will forever be etched into the history of Australian sport: the moment Buddy's kick sailed through, what felt like half the stadium leapt the fence and surged onto the ground to celebrate with him and the team. It took nearly half an hour to get everyone back to their seats—the longest quarter I've ever experienced—but the noise, the emotion, the electricity of that shared moment? Unforgettable.

For most of my Swans-supporting life, I was lucky enough to enjoy those moments with perfect hearing. But over time, my relationship with sound and with the stadium experience has changed. Since 2010, I've been totally deaf in my right ear, and my left ear has progressively worsened to moderate–moderately severe hearing loss. And while my love for the game hasn't diminished at all, the way I experience it has undeniably shifted.

This is a story not just about football, but about hearing loss, inclusion, and the ways a professional sporting club can truly support its fans.

A Personal Journey: How Hearing Loss Changed My Game-Day Experience

As my hearing declined, I began making quiet but significant adjustments. One of the first



A moment after Lance “Buddy” Franklin kicked his thousandth career goal.



The longest quarter I've ever experienced.

things I learned was the practical importance of seating position. Suddenly, where I sat wasn't about shade, sightlines, it was about making sure my companions were on my left side, my “good ear” side, so I could hear them properly.



At the SCG with my daughter Anastasya seated on my “good ear side”.

Technology also became essential. My Phonak remote microphone quickly evolved from a

convenience into an indispensable part of my match-day toolkit. If someone to my right spoke to me, I'd simply pull the remote mic from my pocket, switch it on, and clip or hold it so I could follow the conversation. Little things like that are what allow me to stay part of the moment, part of the atmosphere, and part of the social side of footy.

Because that's what Swans games really are: social. You don't have to be a hardcore stats-tracking AFL fan to enjoy a day at the SCG. The footy is the centrepiece, sure, but the experience is wrapped in conversation, shared reactions, catching up with mates, spending time with family, and soaking up the crowd energy.

I've had two reserved seats for nearly forty years. Those seats have seen me through life's highs and lows, through unforgettable wins and heartbreaking losses, hundreds of opportunities to catch up with friends and family and memorable nights out. When hearing is impacted, so too is that social fabric. But with the right support, from the club, from the stadium, and from thoughtful accessibility planning, much of that joy remains intact.

The Swans' Commitment to the Deaf and Hard-of-Hearing Community

What has become increasingly clear in recent seasons is that the Sydney Swans are not simply paying lip service to accessibility—they are actively listening, learning, and making adjustments that genuinely improve the experience of fans with hearing loss.

The club's accessibility foundations include:

- Companion Card membership support, allowing fans with disability to bring a companion free of charge.
- Trained customer service staff, available from entry gates to dedicated support areas to assist fans with disability.
- Pre-game coordination options, where fans can request help or special considerations before attending.
- Clear accessibility guidance, covering seating, navigation, and support services at the SCG.

These core measures may seem administrative, but for people with hearing loss they form the backbone of an accessible day out—reducing anxiety, removing barriers, and ensuring fans arrive confident that support is available if they need it.

Why Hearing Access Matters at the SCG

Game day at the SCG is a full-senses experience: the roar of the fans, the blare of the Public Address (PA) system, the music, the spontaneous chants, the match commentary, the goal celebrations. All of it creates the magic that keeps us returning season after season.

But with hearing loss, many of these cues vanish or become muddled. Crowd noise can overpower speech. PA announcements can sound distorted. Music becomes more vibration than melody. And when background sound rises—something that has increased over the decades with added entertainment, music, and on-field promos—following simple conversations becomes nearly impossible. That makes one story particularly important.

A Club That Listened—Literally

In 2023, after struggling with the volume of the PA system in my seating section, I wrote to the Sydney Swans explaining the difficulty I and many others were experiencing.

To my surprise and gratitude, the Swans acted swiftly and thoughtfully. They sent staff to my seating area during a game to monitor the sound levels firsthand. After reviewing what they found, they liaised with the SCG Trust and arranged to slightly reduce the volume of the PA in our area.

It may seem minor, but to those of us with hearing loss it made a major difference. Suddenly, conversations were easier. I could respond to people beside me without feeling drowned out. The balance between atmosphere and accessibility improved dramatically.

Small adjustments matter. And this one demonstrated something powerful: the Swans listen to their fans, especially those with accessibility needs.

Recent Initiatives for Deaf & Hard-of-Hearing Fans

The Swans have continued to build accessibility momentum through several recent developments:

Captioned Club Theme Songs – Introduced

March 2022 - The AFL rolled out in-stadium captioning of club theme songs across all matches. The Swans celebrated with the announcement, “Cheer cheer – we have captions!”, a joyful signal that deaf and hard-of-hearing fans were finally included in one of the most iconic match-day rituals.

Auslan Interpretation at Major Matches – September 2024

At the September 20, 2024 Preliminary Final, Expression Australia provided professional Auslan interpreting throughout the match. The visibility of Auslan at such a high-stakes event drew widespread praise from fans and advocates alike. It demonstrated that Auslan inclusion is entirely possible—and deeply valued—at major sporting events.

Hearing Loop and App-Based Assistive Listening at Swans HQ

The Sellers and Colless Centre—home of the Sydney Swans—features hearing loop and WaveCAST app-enabled audio across key areas including the Auditorium, the Learning Centre, and the Indoor Field. This ensures accessibility not just for members but for staff, visitors, and community groups engaging with the organisation.

Support for Typed Communication

The Swans Membership Support Centre operates a live chat service during business hours, allowing fans who prefer or require text instead of speech to resolve membership issues quickly.

Sensory Room at the SCG

Located in the Clive Churchill Stand, the SCG’s Sensory Room offers a quiet, controlled environment for fans who need a break from overwhelming noise or crowds. Access is available by speaking with SCG staff.

What’s Next? Improving Access for 2026 and Beyond

“We’re really proud of the improvements we have made in recent years to make our games more inclusive and more accessible, and this work continues.”

We are working with the Achieve Foundation to explore new initiatives to further enhance accessibility at match days, while we are working with Venues NSW to implement initiatives such as a dedicated accessibility squad.”

— **Scott Dalby**, EGM - People & Culture

The direction is clear: the Swans are committed to deepening their accessibility efforts, exploring better communication methods, partnering with experts, and preparing for the continued evolution of stadium technology—including advances in Bluetooth® Auracast™ broadcast audio, captioning, and real-time assistive services.

Why It All Matters

For fans with hearing loss, accessibility isn’t a luxury. It’s the difference between participation and isolation.

For the club, it’s a reflection of values: compassion, community, leadership.

For the broader sporting world, it’s an example of how inclusion can be woven naturally into game-day culture, setting new expectations for what “welcoming” truly means.

When hearing accessibility improves, so does the entire match-day experience. Everyone benefits from clearer communication, thoughtful noise levels, inclusive services, and a sense that every supporter belongs.

Final Thoughts: A Club Worth Supporting

The Sydney Swans are not simply improving access—they are building a culture where inclusion is instinctive. Their Companion Card support, captioning initiatives, Auslan integration, and willingness to respond personally to fan feedback show a club genuinely invested in its community.

And how have I responded? **Simple!** I’ve renewed my two Swans memberships for the 2026 season.

Because as it’s always been said:

“It’s never the same unless you’re there at the game.”