

OXFORD AUSTRALIA
**WORD
OF THE
MONTH**

June 2011

Magoos

– noun plural: the reserve or 'seconds' team of a sporting club

Australian Concise Oxford Dictionary 5th Edition

The story behind the Word of the Month

What would you make of the following passages from Australian newspapers?

'I've been ignored for the past few weeks so I can't see why they won't ignore me for another week'—Brian Taylor predicting his stay in the **Magoos** may last at least another week. *Herald* (Melbourne) 9 May 1990.

At least this week the Demons will not be forced to show their hand early. The seniors play Friday night and the **Magoos** on Saturday. *Herald Sun* (Melbourne) 16 September 1998.

Even a spell this week in the '**Magoos**'—the ACB Cup Second XI clash against Queensland in Brisbane—couldn't get him back among the wickets. *Mercury* (Hobart) 18 December 2002

Magoos in these passages is clearly rhyming slang for 'twos', (in team sports) the seconds i.e. the reserve or second-ranked team in a club. It is an allusion to the nearsighted **Mr Magoo**, an animated cartoon character created in 1949 by United Productions of America.

While Australian rhyming slang was especially prolific during and after the First and Second World Wars, by the end of the century it had largely run out of steam. **Magoos** is an exception, since the 1990 passage above is our earliest evidence for the term (although it is likely that it was used in speech for some years before).

Scooby-Doo is another cartoon character, this time a dog, in the animated cartoon series of the same name. In Britain, *Scooby Doo* has become rhyming slang for 'clue': 'I haven't a Scooby Doo'. In Australia, there is some evidence that *Scooby Doo* rhyming slang took a slightly different direction, bringing us

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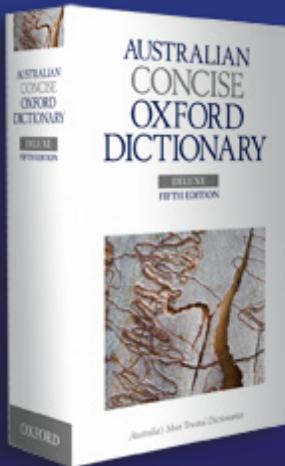
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closer to the Australian use of **Mr Magoo**. Take this passage:

If, after Thursday night training during the '60s, you were advised to bring your Thermos on Saturday, you were in the reserves (the Thermos being used to provide sustenance during the main game). Now, variously, they're known as the Scoobie-dooos, or the **Magoos** (rhymes with twos) or the Brumbies (unbroken horses). Age (Melbourne), Sportsweek Supplement, 29 May 1994.

It might seem surprising that Australian rhyming slang has fastened on to two American cartoon characters to find terms for the reserve or 'seconds' team of a football or other sporting club. But long before that, Australian English picked up the name of an American gangster, and made *Al Capone* Australian rhyming slang for 'phone'!