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HAPPY HOLIDAYS

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ENJOY AUSSIE RULES

Travelling in Australia offers a wonderful opportunity for the uninitiated to observe the sport of Aussie Rules football.

IF YOU'VE NEVER seen an Aussie Rules match before (aka "footy", "football" or "AFL" - after the Australian Football League, which runs the game), your first experience may leave you feeling as if you've been dropped onto another planet. You'll be dazed, confused and wondering what exactly is going on. While the game may at times appear to be completely unfathomable, don't be alarmed - our handy tips will help you quickly pass yourself off as an expert.

At the end of the day, "footy" is simple. Everyone tries to get the ball and kick or run it towards their goal. Don't be afraid to ask someone in the crowd what's going on. AFL fans are as keen on conversions as most evangelical religions.

Need to know
To the right are the simple points of the game. There are subtleties and nuances that take time to pick up, but don't let that bother you. Most fans and commentators have never learnt them either. ✂

Titus O'Reilly is a Melbourne writer with a deep love of AFL, despite supporting the Melbourne Football Club, which hasn't won a Premiership since 1964.

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The competition
The AFL is a national competition of 18 teams. It's played from March to October, with the ultimate game, the Grand Final, held in Melbourne each year. Victors hoist the Premiership Cup.

Food
Traditional food at a footy game is a meat pie with tomato sauce, but these days there's even salads and sushi on the menu (a clear sign of civilisation as we know it is coming to an end).

Ball!
When a player is tackled, they must release the footy or be penalised for "holding the ball". The crowd will yell "ball!" whenever a player is tackled. Feel free to do this too (don't be concerned about being accurate, as no one else is).

Banners
Before the game, each team runs through a giant banner made of crêpe paper. Why? Why not?

Handballing
Holding the ball in one hand and hitting it with the other clenched fist. A good player can hit a target 30 metres away on the run, a bad one will miss entirely.

Tackling
A player can be tackled as long as it's not above the shoulders. When tackled, players must dispose of the ball or get a free kick awarded against them.

Field of play
AFL is played on an oval, and the game was originally invented to keep cricketers fit in winter.

The mark
Catching the ball on the full from a kick is a "mark", and means the player can't be tackled and can either kick or handball from that spot. Players will sometimes leap onto an opponent's back to mark.

No offside rule, madness!
Unlike soccer, the AFL has no offside rule, so players can run anywhere on the field. It may look like chaos but there is method in the madness.

Scoring
At each end of the field, you'll see two big sticks with two smaller sticks on each side. Kicking the ball through the big sticks is a "goal" - worth six points - and kicking it through the small ones is a "behind", worth one point.

Players
Each team has 18 players on the field and another four players on the bench with rotations limited to 90 per game.

Get into the game
AFL matches are played in every state and territory. For dates and venues go to AFL.COM.AU

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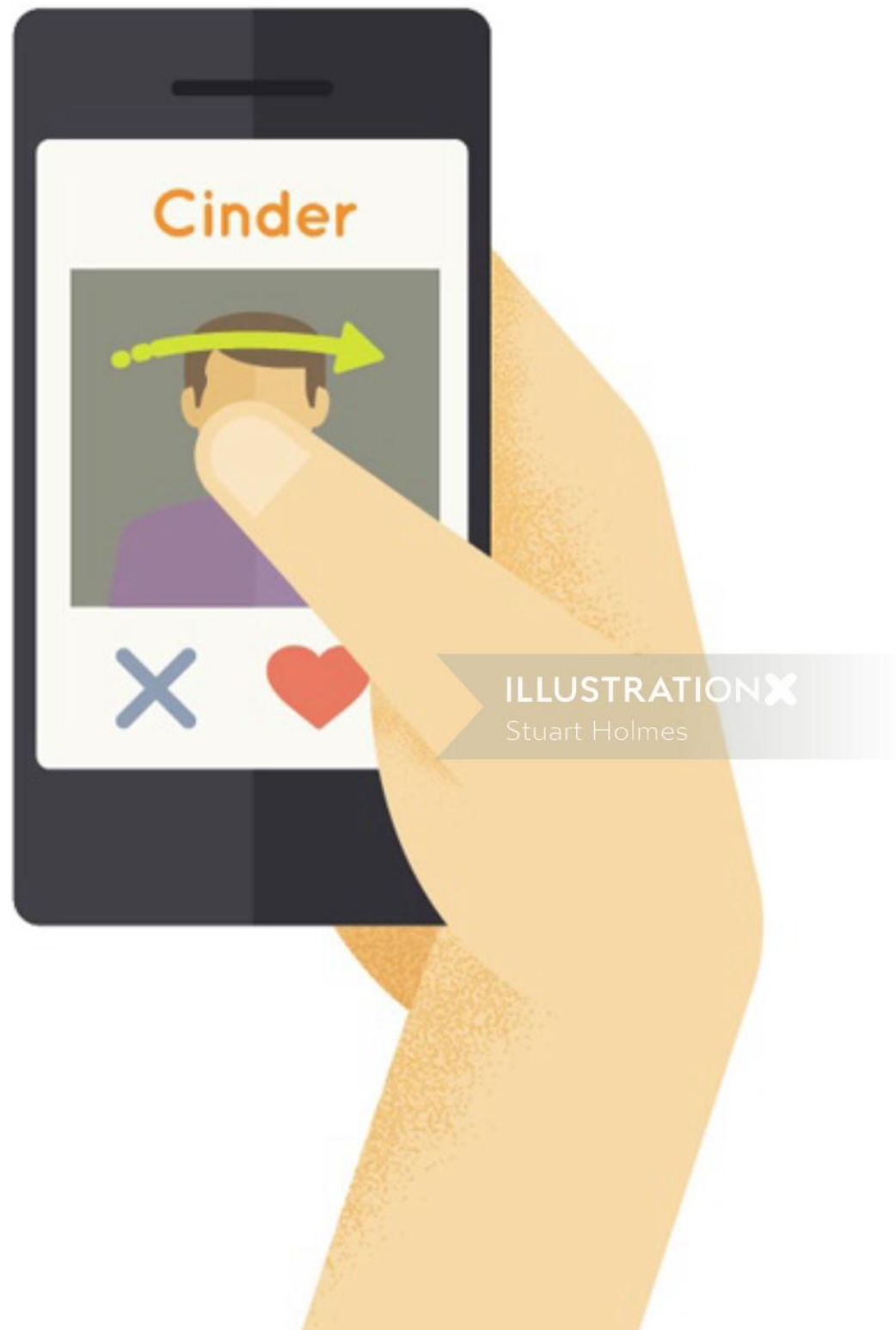
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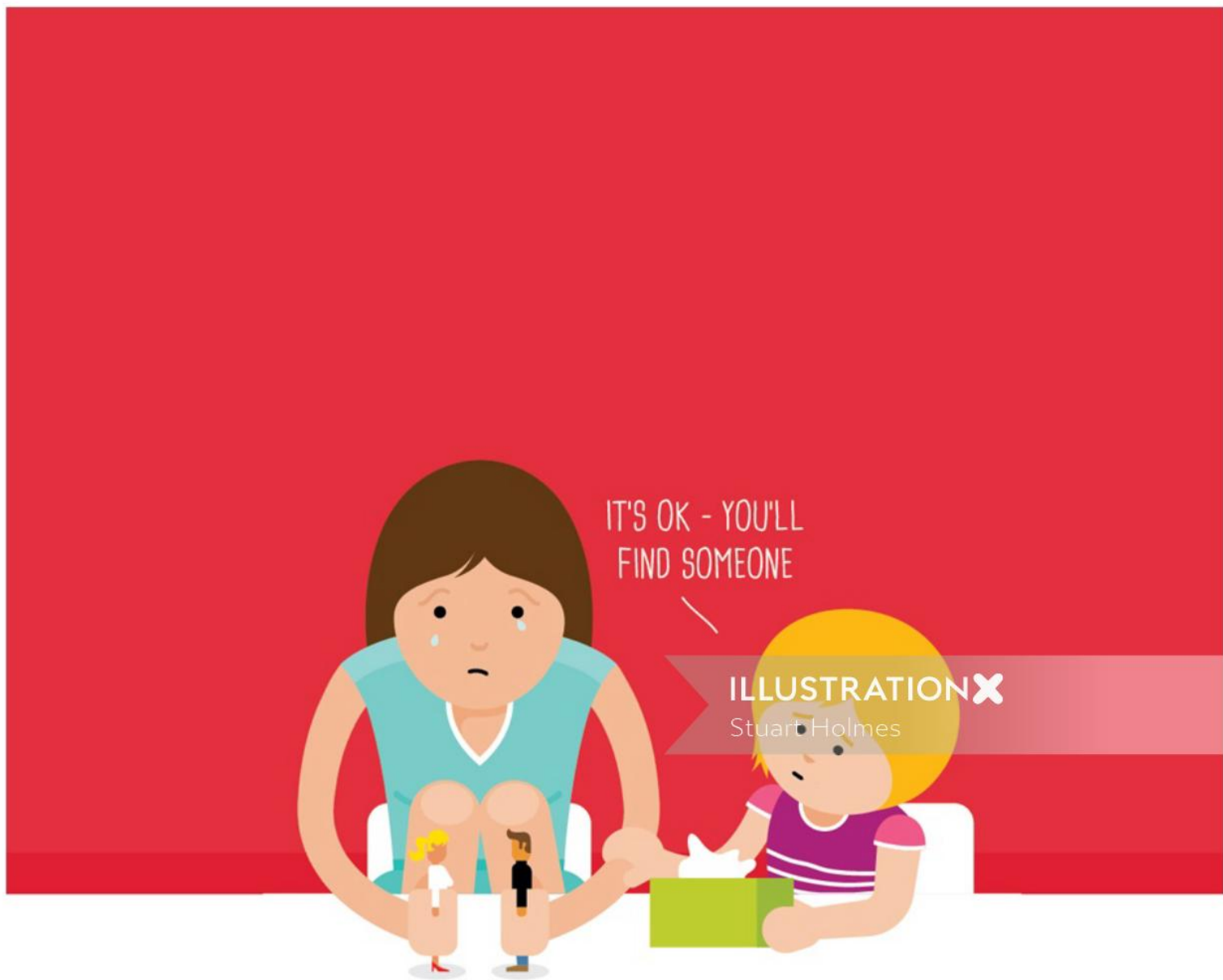
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