**Netball's oldest rivalry started in Melbourne, Doug Ackerly reports.**

TODAY'S netball gold-medal match at Melbourne Park will take place across town from from the scene of the first international, near the Melbourne Zoo.

It was on August 21, 1938, on the unfamiliar grass of what is now Poplar Oval, that Australia and New Zealand were part of history.

The game, then known as women's basketball, had been introduced to both nations by English teachers at the turn of the century. But occasional attempts to engender international competition had foundered, not least because of fundamental differences in the rules.

It was NZ that went the extra yard to ensure the match took place.

The Kiwis had been invited to participate in the annual All-Australia carnival, for which they had to make some big concessions.

The game was played nine-a-team in NZ, and on asphalt. The court was bigger, and the ball lighter.

But probably the greatest culture shock was the method of starting play. In NZ, it was the centre pass, with which netballers are familiar today.

In Australia, it was the bounce. Not quite AFL-style, a bit lower. But it was no place for the faint-hearted as the two centres eyed off.

As Kiwi Muriel Boswell recalled, Victoria's Dot Middleton was an expert.

"The Australian girl, her head came up, connected with my nose, and that was the end of my first game," she said.

The rules were standardised for the match that was to be played seven a-side on a court of English dimensions.

The centre bounce, the NZ practice of guarding while shooting for goal, personal contact and play outside the court were eliminated.

But the Kiwis were still disadvantaged by a style geared to the more structured nine-a-side game, and struggled in the Test match.

"They used to be able to pass it so quickly, and get it with a distance with this one-handed pass," observed goal shooter Marie Fitzgerald.

The Kiwis were penalised continually for progression, and poor shooting (11 goals from 33 attempts) compounded the situation as Australia won by 29 goals.

But the result was academic in a broader context. Administrators now had a uniform game to take to the world. The Kiwis announced plans to invite teams from England and Australia to compete in a tournament the following year.

Unfortunately, World War II intervened in 1939, and it would be another 10 years before a return trans-Tasman series was played.