

DANCING WITH FEVOLA

TO HIS FANS, HE'S A CHARMING ROGUE WHOSE FOOTBALL SKILLS HAVE BEEN UNDERMINED BY AN OVERACTIVE LARRIKIN STREAK. TO HIS DETRACTORS, HE'S A DRUNKEN DISGRACE WHO HAS TOO OFTEN DRAGGED THE AFL INTO DISREPUTE. ROGER FRANKLIN TRIES TO GET A HANDLE ON THE REAL BRENDAN FEVOLA.

HE DOESN'T LOOK SO DANGEROUS UP CLOSE, THIS wild man called Brendan Fevola, just another dirt-speckled face hanging on the coach's three-quarter-time harangue. It's Easter Sunday, a good day for resurrections, and he is on his best behaviour, the very picture of an attentive team player. This isn't the Gabba or the MCG, the storied grounds where the most mercurial and baffling figure in Australian sport once plied his goal-kicker's trade. As footy fields go, this one looks a lot like the end of the road – a bush patch beside the Murray in Mulwala, humble home ground of the Yarrawonga Pigeons. The MCG's grounds-men cross-hatch the hallowed pitch with calibrated mowers and a manicurist's touch. Here they scour the turf for dog dirt and take for granted that the bushy tree behind the goals will add another lost ball or two to its collection.

Once, and not so long ago, Fevola commanded seven-figure contracts, now he is reduced to pulling on the boots for any bush-league club with the \$5000 match-day fee. On the strength of statistics alone, he deserves to be carried shoulder high into retirement, and that should not have fallen due for at least another couple of years. An ability to read the play that verges on the clairvoyant, the long goals from improbable angles, the muscle to brush opponents aside, the sure marks and blinding speed to set up a lead – it's all still there and very much in evidence. But no major club will touch him no matter how low the asking price.

If you could understand Fevola, pick up the whir of cogs that make him tick, it might just make sense, put the misadventures and madcap antics in a context that at least a medical professional might understand. Plenty have tried – teachers, coaches, captains, friends and family – but it is doubtful any have ever really got a handle on the man. The confusion is contagious. The people with the most reason to dislike him almost invariably are at pains to add that he is a hard person not to love, no matter how sorely he

might have tried their patience. "Don't be hard on Brendan, there is a lot that's good about him," urges Denis Pagan, the former Carlton coach whose guidance transformed an undisciplined kid into an undisciplined star. Another of the Blues' ex-coaches, Wayne Brittain, thinks of his former forward as an overgrown child, which is as good an explanation as any.

As for Fevola, he may be the last person to untangle that knot between his ears. The business of being Fev has not left much time for introspection.

ONE OF THE INTERESTING THINGS ABOUT FOREIGN TRAVEL IS THE INEVITABLE discovery that other nations do not share the fine details of the Australian vocabulary. Bogan is one such word, and an attempt to explain it does little good because the species is an exotic native with a taxonomy that is highly subjective. Your American redneck, all patriotism and gun racks, does not equate, nor the lager louts from England's nastier council estates. The closest you could come to defining the word would be to tell the curious foreigner that it has to do with class or, more pertinently, a perceived lack of it. The bogan is in the eye of the beholder, and many commentators held up Brendan Fevola as the breed's exemplar. "Mad, bad and dangerous to know" – that was the poet Byron's unofficial epitaph, and it would fit just as nicely on the headstone of a football career that began amid a smear of brick veneer called Narre Warren on the outskirts of Melbourne.

Narre, as locals habitually shorten it, didn't really need Kath and Kim, but the comedy series certainly needed it. Where else on Melbourne's broad suburban plain could the scriptwriters have found such a perfect location for their bogan princesses, at least as far as the popular imagination was concerned? Sure, the TV suburb was a fictional place, but its name, Fountain Lakes, was the wink and nod to viewers. The vast Fountain Gate shopping centre is smack in the middle of Narre Warren, where strange and sometimes terrible people always seem to be making headlines.

When a 16-year-old bottle blond called Corey Worthington threw a notorious party for 500 uninvited guests, sociologists and academics took to the opinion pages with patronising summations of everything they found appalling about our major cities' outer-suburban wastelands, from the locals' obstinate preference for large homes to the prevalence of trackie daks and hooning. According to a much-publicised study, the simple decision to live in a place like Narre Warren might be enough in itself to bring on alcoholism, obesity and depression. As a lifelong resident puts it, the rest of the world believes that if Narre Warren ever inspires its own edition of Monopoly, one of the penalty cards will read, "You have just turned 14. Get pregnant."

Fox Road Oval, home to the Narre Warren Magpies, is where it all began for Fevola, whose first game as a five-year-old proved something of a prophecy. Positioned on the wing, he ambled in an apparent dream to the ground's centre, where he scraped the cricket pitch's covering of winter sand into a



castle. You could not have asked for a more telling foretaste of the adult who could resist anything but temptation, the one who would so often let down teammates and drive officials to distraction.

But he had the gift. In one game as a teenager he booted 23 goals, and the following week a further 17. Kids like that get noticed, especially when it isn't just size that makes them stand out in the pack; as a former junior coach tells it, Fevola was the sort of boy you couldn't help liking, even when delivering him a roaring out.

MICK MORLAND, WHO COACHED JUNIOR teams at Narre Warren for two decades, will not even begin to hazard a guess at the number of times "young Brendan" met the sharp edge of his tongue. But then he pauses, adding almost apologetically that there was always something about Fevola to make him smile. "If he has a problem, and he has obviously had a few, it's not that he is bad, because there is not a nasty bone in his body – not that I've ever seen, anyway," he says. "There is nothing malicious about him, it's just that he does not know how to stop." It is a template, that quote, one paraphrased by every other coach who tried to distill the essence of a consistent professionalism into the raw material of a perpetual adolescent.

By 17, he was being sucked up by the AFL's recruitment machine, moved through a succession of AFL junior squads and affiliate clubs to join the ranks of the anointed in 1998, when he was signed by Carlton as pick No. 38 in that year's national AFL draft. Twelve months later, he kicked his way into the record books with an even dozen goals in a pre-season game against Collingwood, the highest tally ever booted under lights.

But leave the stats and records to the footy fiends, along with the twin Coleman Medals he collected as the leading goalkicker in 2006 and 2009. Those on-field exploits made Fevola a star and a fortune, but it was the many off-field misadventures that made him a celebrity.

Celebrity sells, as the gossip mags know all too well, and stars with their pants down (or tops off) sell even better. When the couple involved in an extramarital affair happen to be a champion footballer and a cover girl later engaged to Michael Clarke, vice-captain of Australia's cricket team, there is not the slightest chance the private follies of a fool and his sly squeeze will stay under wraps.

The girl, of course, was Lara Bingle. With Fevola's eager co-operation she dealt not one but two body blows to a public image already staggering beneath the weight of scandalous episodes and drunken misadventures. The first came when Alex Fevola, a wife of just 14 months and new mum to boot, intercepted a voice message from the bikini model to her husband. Bingle denied it, only to be confronted by a transcript of her message, played to delighted reporters by Fevola's aggrieved father-in-law. Only a month earlier, Fevola had been shipped home in disgrace from an international rules tour of Ireland after assaulting a Galway barman. All those other drunken escapades – his star turn urinating on an eatery's window, the day he sported a pink nightie accessorised with a giant dildo in Melbourne's CBD, a string of worn-out coaches and exasperated officials – taken in total, it was one crushing load of black marks.

Then came the 2009 Brownlow Medal, when a rampaging Fevola stole the show. Geelong's Gary Ablett took the award but few remember his triumph or the runaway margin that secured it. What everyone recalls is Fevola's outrages – the simulated sex acts and beer tossing, the woman he



“IT'S NOT THAT HE IS BAD ... THERE'S NOTHING MALICIOUS ABOUT HIM, IT'S JUST THAT HE DOES NOT KNOW HOW TO STOP.”

GAME FOR ANYTHING: (from top) Fevola flies high at his peak with Carlton; planting a kiss on Sydney Swan Ryan O'Keefe at the 2009 Brownlow Medal night; the candid shot of Lara Bingle that eventually surfaced in *Woman's Day*.

pursued into the ladies' lavatory, the cursing and leering and public announcement that the groin that had bothered him throughout his career was working just fine and standing up for itself.

Almost every second of it was captured on video, as Fevola was being followed by a crew shooting what should have been his turn at competing the Street Talk segment for *The Footy Show*. Most of the footage was too gamey to be aired, but the bits that did see the light of day were violations not just of civilised conduct, but assaults on the image the AFL has invested so much time and money to promote.

Once, Brownlow night was a reflection of the sport itself, a home-spun affair entirely lacking in glitter and pretension. There were no women present in 1970, when the count was first televised, because none had been invited, and there were very few players on hand. Mostly it was grey men in suits calling out names and numbers. If you were after riveting viewing, everything leading up to the announcement of the winner was about as captivating as watching meat rot. These days, Brownlow night is the closest thing Australia has to the Oscars (the Logies notwithstanding). When *Vogue* sends a team of photographers and reporters to cover a sporting award, and advertises on the sides of trams that pictures and fashion commentary will be streamed live to its website, you know it's not your father's game any more.

Fevola's problem as he arrived at the Crown complex on Melbourne's Southbank was that he

was there for an old-fashioned night of beer and blokey buffoonery. The suits who oversee the modern game talk a lot about role models, and their annual big bash was the moment to demonstrate just how upright their code had become, despite plenty of evidence that many of the young men who play the game remain as intemperate and prone to trouble as young men always have been. Pub brawls, drug use, the mistreatment of women – they had been the scandalous staples of Monday-morning news coverage that year, as they seemed to be every year. But Brownlow night was supposed to put a nicer, cleaner face on things. Glamorous, rich, bow-tied and everyone on best behaviour, that was what the script called for. Instead, what football's image-makers got was a throwback called Fevola.

The next day, if he had not been too hungover to care, the Brownlow barbarian would have been astonished at the sheer volume of venom being directed his way. Victoria's acting premier, Rob Hulls, denounced Fevola as a fool. Deputy Police Commissioner Kieran Walshe accused him of setting "a terrible example". AFL Coaches Association president Danny Frawley also pushed the role-model theme, branding him "a pretty slow learner" for not cleaning up his act after so many other scrapes. The chairman of the federal government's Preventative Health Taskforce, Melbourne University's Professor Rob Moodie, even predicted that Fevola would end up "injured or dead" if he did not renounce the grog.

It was the final straw for Carlton, which traded him to Brisbane, where the last days of an AFL career played out as a mix of farce and tragedy. The Lions thought they were buying a match winner, what they got was an impossible headache.

It started with Bingle once again, this time when some long-forgotten shower snaps surfaced in *Woman's Day*. Then came revelations of six-figure betting plunges and crippling gambling debts, followed by a New Year's Eve spinout that paused briefly in the watch-house before landing Fevola in a psychiatric hospital. Oh, and along the way, there was a family breakup and allegations of indecent exposure.

It was the ruinous gambling, though, that provided the greatest indication of a personality hell-bent on ruin. In one 48-hour period he won \$365,000 on the punt, then blew the lot the following day. He denied he had a problem at the time of the Brisbane move, swearing that he was a \$10 poker player and nothing worse. The bookies knew otherwise, as did their collectors, who were hounding him for payment. Later, when he 'fessed up to the bridge-jumping plunges and manic wagers, the places he found to blow a fortune spanned half the globe. Flat-racers in Singapore, trotters in Toowoomba, greyhounds in Melbourne – a \$1000 here, \$4000 there...

Brisbane cut him loose, no other club would touch him and, eventually, the road led here, to the Yarrowonga Pigeons and the sound of a career's clock winding down before its time.

WHAT TO MAKE OF BRENDAN FEVOLA and his decline and fall? It was his great stroke of luck to be born in a city obsessed with a sporting code that celebrates the clash of wills and bodies. And it was also his great misfortune. Men remaining boys indefinitely – good boys, bad boys, smart boys, dim boys – they are the characters in each winter weekend's passion plays. Love it or loathe it, there can be no denying that what AFL demands is an adolescent disregard for risk and injury, a mental disconnect

between action and consequence. Most manage to keep that reckless passion inside the boundary line, but not Fevola, whose life off the field has so often shown precious little appreciation for restraint.

Can his fall be written off against the near-mythical place that is supposed to be Narre Warren? Richmond captain Chris Newman grew up on the same street as his good mate Fev, and he is the picture of a responsible adult. You could say that Fevola's curse was being born beyond his time. Footy has had its degenerate gamblers, quite a few of them, if truth be told, and its thieves, brawlers, sex machines and drunks. But most were blessed to inhabit a different age, a time when a partying player could throw up in a pot plant and only his mates and the cleaning lady would know. When an over-lubricated Fevola mulched a restaurant's rubber tree, his heaving was caught by security camera and analysed, frame by frame, on the next morning's TV news.

So perhaps it is just that Fevola is the ultimate hard case, a man born with a faulty firewall between desire and destruction. Wayne Brittain, his former coach, thinks it all boils down to a compulsive lust for the limelight. "When his footy was going good he was fine, no worries," Brittain says. "When his footy wasn't going good, he'd go out and do something stupid just for the attention."

If Brittain has it right, it has to make you wonder what lies ahead for Fevola when his footy days are done. In Yarrowonga there is adulation aplenty, from the town bakery's Fev pies ("curried chicken for that extra kick, like Fev") to the star-struck local who had the Pigeon recruit's signature and number tattooed on his foot.

As a weedy 17-year-old, Fevola told an interviewer his dream was to kick the winning goal in



“ WHEN HIS FOOTY WAS GOING GOOD HE WAS FINE, NO WORRIES. WHEN HIS FOOTY WASN'T GOING GOOD HE WOULD GO OUT AND DO SOMETHING STUPID JUST FOR THE ATTENTION.”

KICKING ON: (above) Brendan Fevola takes a mark for the Yarrowonga Pigeons in April.

front of 100,000 people. That didn't happen, not on Easter Sunday, not even in front of a humble 10,000 barrackers. But none of those old dreams cast too long a shadow, not on Easter Sunday, not at this moment. "I'm a lot happier doing what I'm doing now," he insists after that first game at Mulwala. Then comes the eloquence of a brief silence and the admission of regrets that are still there, still smouldering: "I will admit it's tough watching the guys I've played with go out there in front of big crowds and dominate games."

His family is with him in Yarrowonga, and father Angelo, too. He is making jokes and the crowd is laughing. It's all gone, all blown away, the seven-figure contracts and his last hope of finding an AFL club prepared to roll the dice and put him in their jumper. But he is the centre of attention all the same, practising a slate of slick dance moves in the goal square for his upcoming turn on *Dancing With the Stars*. Brendan Fevola, attention magnet to the end, wins a few more eyes and ears at the after-game celebration, keeping the diminished flame of his fame alive.

There is what appears to be water in his glass that night at the Ski Club, but the smile is full-on and overproof. For once Brendan Fevola looks not just placid but harmless – not just to others but, at least on that evening, to himself.

FEVOLA'S FUTURE IS FEVOLA'S CONCERN. BUT OF HIS next audience the only certainty can be that there will be one, whatever path his muddled life might take. Indeed, the first seats for Fevola: The Sequel are already being filled, and not just by those viewers who paid a premium to SMS their votes during his run with *Dancing With the Stars*. Putting himself on display could be the ticket. He

made a popular contestant on *Dancing*, and surely not for his routines, which even the most charitable viewer might sometimes have suspected were executed in lead-soled boots.

It was that big-hearted, open, everybody's-mate personality that did the trick, that boyish ebullience so many viewers found very hard not to like, no matter how familiar they might have been with the long list of scandals and shame-faced apologies. Perhaps there is a media career in his future, perhaps even a return of sorts to footy as commentator or analyst. He has had plenty of experience in front of the camera, officially, and via those pesky CCTV intruders. He's quick with a quip and despite the goofiness, no fool – when sober. Time forgives and bad memories fade. The Fev package is volatile and explosive, but there is material for booking agents and producers to work with.

But the ultimate verdict on a football life has already been brought in and comes straight from Narre Warren, where one day last December four little kids were shooting out-of-season kick to kick at the ground where Fevola learnt his craft. Did they know about Fevola, I asked? Well of course they effing did, and each had his opinion about why the Tigers or Magpies or some other club should have given the local hero one last chance.

So, boys, would you like to grow up to be like Fev? One kid, arms like string and half his body weight in freckles, had been cursing a blue streak and casting aspersions on the inquisitive visitor's sexual orientation, but he didn't skip a beat.

End up like Fev? "F... no." GW

Fev Unauthorised: The Biography of Brendan Fevola, Football's Flawed Genius by Roger Franklin (Slattery Media) is out this week.

BENDIGO WRITERS FESTIVAL



10-12 AUGUST, 2012

ITA BUTTROSE. LEIGH HOBBS. IAN JONES.
MARGO LANAGAN. DAVID MARR. ALEX MILLER.
KATHERINE THOMSON. DON WATSON. ALEXIS WRIGHT.

Don't miss the inaugural Bendigo Writers Festival, with more than 50 events over three days including panel sessions, poetry slams, story telling, book launches and workshops.

With names such as Ita Buttrose, Leigh Hobbs, Ian Jones, Margo Lanagan, David Marr, Alex Miller, Katherine Thomson, Don Watson and Alexis Wright it will be a fantastic program.

Get away for the weekend...

By relaxing in Bendigo and booking a range of exquisite writers festival packages and experiences, including weekend accommodation packages, wine tours and high teas.

Tickets: 03 5434 6100

Packages: 1800 813 153

www.bendigowritersfestival.com.au

90 MINUTES FROM MELBOURNE AIRPORT,
90-120 MINUTES FROM MELBOURNE VIA V/LINE

PRESENTED BY

