

Kicking Off

With the 2013 AFL season about to kick off, veteran AFL journalist Mike Sheahan shares his 2013 premiership tip with Casey-Ann Seaniger.

In your new book *Open Mike* you speak to a number of high-profile people involved in AFL. Who do you think our readers would find most interesting?

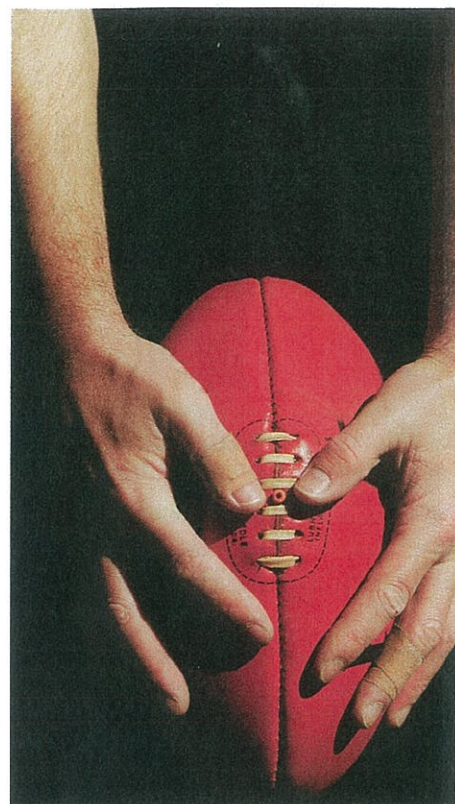
Tony Charlton. He was such a powerful force and he is someone that was a hero of mine when I started out in journalism. He was articulate and happy to talk. The interview was done about three months before he died so I was really pleased to get him on record. The other one that was good was Robert Walls. I thought his honesty was wonderful, he is a blunt man anyway but he was just so honest.

You've been covering the game for 35 years, what are some of the biggest changes you have seen?

Well, I think the best of the game is better than it's ever been before. The players are more athletic, their diet's better, they train more. I love the modern game; even though there are plenty of times I walk away and think 'that was a crap game of footy'.

What's been your most memorable premiership?

The most emotional moment for me was when the Swans won the flag in 2005 because it had been 72 years...



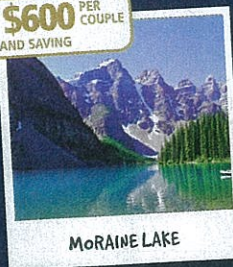
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the emotion of that day I will never forget, it was the most emotional day in sport that I've been a part of. The other premiership was Collingwood in 1990 because it was the end of a long drought and it was such an aggressive, hostile game.

There's been criticism of other sports lately: tennis players' bad behaviour and the Lance Armstrong doping scandal. Is the AFL facing similar challenges?

I'm much more sympathetic than most to the behaviour of sporting people. I don't think the public generally understand how strict they are and how disciplined these guys are. I think 95% of footballers behave better than people of the same age and same background from the general society.

What about drugs in the AFL?

It exists. I'm not trying to be smart here but I remember, at least eight years ago, that I mentioned to people in authority at the AFL that they have a major problem with drugs and they didn't want to know about it. They've been forced to acknowledge it (drugs) now because it just happens. But the problem is certainly not as bad in football as it is in cycling.

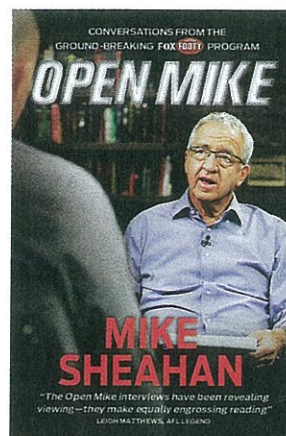
Who are the players to watch in 2013?

I think Gary Ablett Jr is the best player in the competition. The other guy I love is Buddy (Lance 'Buddy' Franklin). When I watch Hawthorn, play, I just love the ball to be in his area to see what he can do. But the other guy who

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I just think is going to be an emerging star, if he's not that already, is Patrick Dangerfield from Adelaide.

When will you be releasing your much awaited top 50 players' list? I think the plan is to do it at the start of the season in late March.



Do you expect the game between Carlton and Collingwood to be a blockbuster, given Mick Malthouse's switch to his new club?

For whatever reason, when Carlton play Collingwood, regardless of where they are on the ladder, it's a massive game. Mick didn't leave Collingwood on good terms. He'll be hell bent on winning. That first game against Carlton will be the one he will want to win more than anything else so there'll be a lot of emotion attached to that because of the way he left Collingwood and the public spat he had with Eddie McGuire. There's always huge interest in it, but it will take on another dimension this year.

Who is your tip to win the grand final?

If the planets align for Hawthorn, I think they should win. They were really hurt by what happened last year, being so close and missing it, I think they'll be driven by that this year. ■

Open Mike by Mike Sheahan is available in book stores from March. RRP \$34.95

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