

FREE SAMPLER

THE COACH

A SEASON WITH RON BARASSI



**THE SENSATIONAL STORY OF NORTH MELBOURNE'S
BATTLE FOR THE 1977 PREMIERSHIP**

JOHN POWERS

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A BOOK ALMOST BENCHED

BY RON BARASSI

NORTH MELBOURNE FOOTBALL CLUB'S 1977 PREMIERSHIP COACH



John Powers' *The Coach* is one of the best football books ever published. That I am the main subject, while initially causing personal consternation, is irrelevant because its content – a powerful insight into the inner workings and psyche of a successful AFL/VFL club – remains entirely relevant.

Readers of this reprint of *The Coach* might be interested to know it almost never eventuated – or, at the very least, it could have delivered a drastically different story about a year at the North Melbourne Football Club.

It all started in October 1976. I was at a cocktail party organised to farewell the late Claudia Wright (a journalist and broadcaster who died in February 2005 after a long battle with Alzheimer's Disease). She was about to relocate to the United States with her American husband. In that setting, John Powers introduced himself and said he had an idea I might be interested in.

I said: "Well, let's hear it then."

John briefly rattled off his CV – writer, playwright, editor – and said: "I want to go to a league football club, be there full-time – through all the training, the meetings and the games – and write a book from the inside."

I shook my head. "That's already been done, mate."

He was a little taken aback. "What do you mean?"

I told him about an American writer (George Plimpton), who had done the same thing with a baseball team, a gridiron team and even with some stand-up comedians.

John wasn't deterred. "But no one's done it with Aussie Rules."

He was right. But I still had reservations. "I don't think anyone will give you permission to do it," I said.

We drifted apart, but I started thinking about John's idea. I thought: "North Melbourne is flying high at the moment" – we'd played in the previous two Grand Finals and won the club's first premiership in 1975 – "but we still need publicity because we're not a big club. We've got to keep striving to improve

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our image to compete with the bigger clubs and build on our membership and sponsorship. Maybe a book about the club will keep the ball rolling for us.”

A couple of hours and a few wines later, I approached John and said: “Mate, I’ve been thinking about your idea. You’ve got my permission. But you’ll need the permission of both the president and the secretary.”

I arranged for John to meet with the president, Dr Allen Aylett, and secretary, Ron Joseph. Permission was granted – on the proviso that we would be able to read the manuscript before it went to print as we didn’t want any sensitive information revealed that might have a negative effect on the club.

Once we had agreed to his proposal, we wanted to make the project a success for both the club and for John. As a result, John had open access to all areas of the club. He was at the club 95 per cent of the time; he hardly missed a thing – every function, every training session, you name it. Rather than seeing him as a nuisance and being guarded in his presence, he soon won our hearts and minds because he was such a genuine bloke. I really admired how he kept fronting up day-in, day-out. He earned our respect.

John didn’t appear to me to be a man given to physical exertion. I’m not sure what he weighed when he began running laps around the Arden Street Oval – I wouldn’t allow him to train with us – but I reckon over the course of the season, he would have lost about 10 kilograms!

His timing for the book was perfect. Season 1977 was a historic one for the Kangaroos and for the VFL. We made the Grand Final, played in only the second drawn Grand Final in the League’s history and then capped it off by winning the premiership over no less an adversary than Collingwood. John really got lucky. What would have happened if we’d had a nightmare season and finished near the bottom, I shudder to think. I’m sure John does too!

A few weeks after we won the flag, John submitted a draft of the manuscript to us and I was horrified to read that the main character of the story was me – the coach. My first reaction was: “This is supposed to be about the club and the team! You knew that! How did you come up with this?”

John explained: “That’s the way the story developed.”

We said: “Well, you have to change it.”

John’s jaw hit the floor; it would require a mountain of work to rewrite it.

We eventually relented, more out of pity than anything else. If John hadn’t grown on us so much, we probably would have stood firm.

In the following years, I coached my beloved Melbourne for five seasons, albeit without much success, and spent a few winters at the helm of the

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struggling Sydney Swans, who were developing a foothold in rugby territory.

I have witnessed many changes to the game, among them the introduction of the three-umpire system, the expansion of the interchange bench, matches in several different timeslots other than the traditional Saturday afternoon and the establishment of the game's first 'indoor' stadium, Telstra Dome.

Television now plays an enormous role in our perception of football. Fans can watch several live matches each round – a far cry from the early years of television when a Saturday night replay was the only offering.

We are privileged to witness today's players perform feats that most of us in the 1950s and '60s were incapable of. And so they should because they are now professional footballers – bigger, faster, stronger and with better skills – while we had full-time jobs and trained only two or three nights a week.

As for the future of our game, I'm caught between being a promoter and a constructive critic. I've always felt Australian Football is far superior to the other football codes. Soccer is a very skilful game, but it lacks physical contact; rugby has the physical contact, but it isn't quite as skilful.

Some might accuse me of "living in the '70s" as I do believe our game is not quite the spectacle it once was. However, they would be wrong as I applaud vision, welcome new ideas and support the rule changes trialled in the pre-season competition: nine-point goals, three-point rushed behinds, play-on when the ball is kicked backwards in the defensive 50-metre arc.

But for all the elements that have changed, in essence, nothing has changed. You've still got to achieve high levels of fitness, you've still got to win the ball and dispose of it correctly by either hand or foot – and if you don't win the ball, you've got to tackle.

The Coach tells it like it is. Its impact now is as strong as it was in 1978.

- *Ron Barassi played 254 games (204 – Melbourne, 1953-64; 50 – Carlton, 1965-69), including premierships in 1955, '56, '57, '59, '60 and '64. He captained Melbourne and was named in the AFL's Team of the Century. He coached Carlton (147 games, 1965-71, premierships in 1968 and 1970), North Melbourne (198 games, 1973-80, premierships in 1975 and 1977), Melbourne (110 games, 1981-85) and Sydney (59 games, 1993-95). He was made a Legend in the Australian Football Hall of Fame in 1996.*

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From his first training address, then throughout the season, Barassi used Hawthorn as the major goad to his players. Whenever he discussed optimum levels of fitness, courage, power, skill and determination, he used Hawthorn as the yardstick. His undeviating aim throughout the year was to regain the Premiership, but that aim became synonymous with the always more immediate objective: beat Hawthorn!

Rage seemed to consume Barassi whenever he mentioned Hawthorn. Memories of 1976, when Hawthorn defeated North Melbourne in each of the five times they met, fuelled in him an insatiable appetite for revenge. Nobody better exemplified the accuracy of the famous dictum of the legendary Knute Rockne, American football coach: "Show me a good and gracious loser, and I'll show you a failure." Ron Barassi did not lose gracefully. Nor did he intend to lose when the teams met again on April 2 in the opening match of the season.

He'd made one point very clear to his players – he would only select "goers" to play against Hawthorn. "Goers" is a term dear to Barassi. It defines the men who won't ever turn the other cheek to an insult, men who will as quickly issue a challenge as they will unhesitatingly accept one, and men who will never be intimidated by the application of brute force on the football field. "Goers" play the style of football that made Barassi famous. And "goers" were the footballers Barassi respected and admired most.

"If I had to choose between a 'goer' and a 'non-goer' with marginally more football ability," he told his committeemen and players at a pre-season dinner, "I'd choose the goer every time."

Yet it was Max Ritchie, not Barassi, who began the sabre-rattling

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at Arden Street. Pacing among the players after training on Tuesday, he boomed to them all: “Do you know what they’re thinking at Hawthorn? They’re thinking they’re so bloody good that they’ve just got to run on the field and we’ll fall in a heap.” His face registered a magisterial indignation as his eyes flicked from one player to the next. “That’s what they reckon – that we’re going to fall in a heap. That’s how good they think they are. I’ve got that information from very high sources. They’ve written us off before we even get out there. And I’ve had enough of that shit. I’ve had enough rubbishing from that crowd to last me a lifetime. We’re going to rub their faces in it on Saturday. It’s going to be survival of the fittest out there. It’ll only be for the brave. But we’re going to win. We’re going to get this bogeyman off our backs once and for all.”

If he’d wanted electrifying response, he must have been disappointed; all he got were grunts and nods. Sometimes, catching a player’s eye, he stared at him as hardened paratroopers must before jumping together from a plane into enemy territory. But, as an ex-North Melbourne player and a veteran of locker-room mentality, Ritchie must have judged the time was right to begin the emotional revving.

For the final sharpening of the squad on Thursday night, Barassi introduced triangular work for the first time. Splitting the squad into three groups, 70 metres apart in a triangle, he ordered them to run in turn, three abreast as an attacking unit, until they could pass accurately to the three who led from the next station of the triangle.

Using this technique, he could stand in the centre of the ground and observe the reflexes, handballing, kicking, talking and marking of each player. And throughout the 40 minutes he worked them through this routine, he continuously yelled for greater speed, greater accuracy, more talking and better ball control. Every careless error brought a thunderous reproach: “Jesus, Steven, what sort of a pass was *that*? ... Grab the bloody ball *aggressively*, don’t pat it like a girl! ... *Bad* kick! You’ve got to get your kicks closer than *that* ... Chase it! Chase it! Don’t give up! ... You can’t miss handpasses at *that* distance! ...Talk to him! *Talk!* Tell him what you want! ... That fumble just cost us a *goal*, do you realise that?”

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“Winners never blame anybody. It’s only losers who try to blame other people for what went wrong. So never con yourself that your failures and your weaknesses are someone else’s fault.”

RON BARASSI

After the triangular work, he ordered all the forward players to practise goalkicking, which he supervised personally, while the other members of the squad kicked end-to-end or worked on their skill deficiencies until the late afternoon light faded. Then they all left the field to shower and wait for Barassi to make the team announcement and brief the selected players.

Generally the match committee decided the team each Tuesday night but, as Ritchie explained to the squad: “Many times it’s virtually a toss-up as to who makes the team.” Training form on Wednesday and Thursday nights could, therefore, cause Tuesday’s “toss-up” decision to be reversed, so announcements are not made until after Thursday’s training. Players failing to gain selection for the senior team are advised before the briefing and go home, knowing they will play with the reserves on Saturday. The selected 20 wait until Barassi and his co-selectors meet to confirm the line-up of the senior side, then they are summoned to the coach’s room.

The actual formation of each week’s team was of paramount interest to the players. Barassi’s insistence on flexibility, his imperative demand that each man playing for North Melbourne be equally adept in both the attacking and defensive skills of modern football, meant he had created a virtually interchangeable side. With the exception of his followers, and a few key positional players such as David Dench at full-back and Keith Greig on the wing, most players in his squad did not know until the team announcement what position they would play on the coming Saturday.

“Rules that once applied to backmen alone, and forwards alone, no longer apply,” Barassi told them repeatedly. “Instead of playing as forwards and backmen, you now play according to whichever of two situations exist – if we have the ball, even if it’s David Dench with it in the goalsquare, we are the *attacking* team and play attacking football; if they have the ball, even on our full-forward line, every member of our team plays as a *defender*. All our

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rules apply everywhere, in every position on the ground. Certainly we have shades of difference – a backman must punch the ball, he can't take the risks that a forward can. But they're only little differences, shades of difference. Essentially, we all play the same game, and think the same way. The old ways of thinking – that backmen and forwards play differently – are *out!*"

Throughout the naming of the team, which Barassi did from memory, the players showed no outward reaction. Nobody smiled, nobody showed even a flicker of disappointment. No glances were exchanged between the players. Everyone stared fixedly at the coach.

With the naming of the side completed, Barassi began explaining the reasons for various positionings, tactics to be adopted against specific opponents and general encouragement to individual players.

"Johnnie (Byrne), you've got a chance now at centre half-back. You know my thoughts on Martello. He's not a great player, but he can be very valuable. He's not a high flyer, so you should be able to spoil him. And you could really become a trump card for us in that position.

"Crackers' (Peter Keenan), we're playing you, but don't forget that that last Grand Final game of yours was bloody awful. All you did was try too hard. You got so keyed up that your normal thinking functions, and even your body functions, didn't operate. You had a chance to open up with a goal for us, and you kicked it out of bounds. Those things just can't happen. You've got to go about the job on Saturday. Just go straight in for the ball! Keep your mind on the job and don't get sucked in by anything that goes on."

Keenan nodded eagerly at every point Barassi made. His 6'5½" (197 centimetres) body hunched forward. Both his hands squeezed each other nervously. ("Barassi really scares me," Keenan admitted once. "Nobody else's ever done that before, but Barassi scares me. There's just something there, something about him, that I just can't handle.")

"Brent (Crosswell), it's no good us having you on Moncrieff, or Hudson, if he plays, and you starting any rough stuff. You can be a very valuable player. All you've got to do is stop your man – and you can do that.

"Steven (Icke), we're giving you another crack at Knights. Your game in the Grand Final was very good, but he was in great form. Still, you've probably

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improved 20 per cent since then, so this time you should be able to really nail him down.

“Melly’ (Graeme Melrose), your showing over the past couple of weeks has been excellent, so keep that up.

“Johnnie (Cassin), you’re another bloke with a reputation for fire, and I know you want to control that. So don’t get sucked in by anything they throw at you or say, because they’re pretty ruthless, this mob, and they’ll probably try to upset you.

“Arnold (Briedis), we’re bringing you back into the side in the easy way – on the flank. I don’t really want to put you up against Knights at the moment. If things don’t work out, then we might give you a go at him, but we want Steven (Icke) to have first shot. And Steven’s going to play him as a defender, because Knights is a tremendously attacking player who launches attacks from wherever he gets the ball.

“Snake’ (Phil Baker), you’ve got the full backing and confidence of every one of us for your job up there at full-forward.” The players gave Baker a barrage of encouragement to support Barassi’s expression of confidence.

“Now, we’ve got a pretty unruly forward line unless we can work it right,” Barassi continued. “The ball’s going to be kicked to the square, but before that, Snake’s going to duck out so that he can have a run. He’s got a big spring and he can take the big mark, so if he gets the right run, there’ll be no punch-downs from Hawthorn – they won’t be able to get near him. But if there is a punch-down, ‘Cables’ and ‘Melly’ have got to be down in front to pick up the crumbs – and you two should be able to get anything that hits the ground. Just read those punches, and get in front of your men to snap up those crumbs.”

He had spoken with his arms folded across his chest. Now he unfolded his arms and swept his eyes slowly around the faces of his players. His change of mood was immediate. “This time up,” he began, injecting some typical Barassi force into his voice, “we’re more on level terms with them physically – in terms of physique – so that side of things shouldn’t be a problem. There’s just one thing about Hawthorn’s play that I want you to think about, and that’s their intensity – their discipline in getting between you and the ball. You *have*

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to counter that! You've got to have steel traps for minds, so that any handballs given are instant and accurate, like they were last week in the practice match against Footscray. That game was fantastic. We went into packs hard, we got the ball, and we burst out with it. Because we went in hard and came out hard, we could handball cleanly, because there was no one there to harass us. And last week the run-on was brilliant."

His work on them was intense now, his voice booming in the cramped room. With the Barassi fire burning, the players became responsive, punching fists into their open palms and urging each other with controlled mumbles of "We're going to win this! ... Come on! ... Make this a big one! ... Come on!" Their voices sounded like a muted orchestral support to Barassi's solo trumpet.

"All this new stuff we've been thinking about, that's all got to happen as well," Barassi continued. "Go in hard, but don't be bluffed into having your concentration split onto two different things – *them* and what you've got to do. And stop them getting between you and the ball, because they do that better than any other side. That's their aim – get in front of the man. And that's what they'll do if you give them any leeway at all.

"With Schimmelbusch in the centre, we should be able to match their centre-line pace better than we've done. And we *have* to do that! We just *can't* have a great side like we've got getting beaten by Hawthorn all the time. That's just *not* on! So we've done something about it. Whether it's the right thing or the wrong thing, we'll know on Saturday. But I know you're all keen to win, and our pre-season training's been really good – the best we've ever had. I'm happier now than I've ever been with your attitudes. I know a lot of you are wanting to get over last year's hammering."

He paused momentarily to look down at them. He must have been delighted with what he saw. All 20 men looked ready to punch the walls down if he'd demanded it. Emotionally, they were beautifully primed. They wanted victory. The hunger for victory and the excitement at the imminent prospect of it – fuelled by Barassi's speech – roused them to the point where they seemed virtually unable to sit still on their benches.

Barassi nodded slowly. "We've got a very good side on Saturday," he told

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them approvingly. “A *very* good side. There’s no reason at all why we can’t win. None at all.” He banged his hands together. “So let’s get out there on Saturday and *do it!*”

As the players changed into their gear in the visitors’ dressing-room at Princes Park, Barassi paced at the far end of the room. He wore dark trousers and a creamy shirt that opened to the centre of his chest; a thin silver necklace reflected brief sparks of light as he moved. His concentration, his absorption in what he would say to the players before the start of the game, generated a tension that worked on everybody. He kept checking his watch impatiently.

On the rubbing tables, players’ legs were being massaged; in the medical room, ankles were being strapped with tape. Some sat in a brooding quiet near their lockers, others seemed to be worried about the fit of their boots. A few kicked footballs into the special netting at one end of the room, Keith Greig bounced a ball against the nearest brick wall and four of them handballed to each other in the centre of the room.

A group of perhaps 50 supporters had massed inside the doorway to watch the final minutes of the team preparation. Contained in a tight bunch near the door by metal barriers and half a dozen officials, they watched with the silent reverence of the dedicated team follower. Through the open doorway, the shouts of the crowd watching the last quarter of the reserves match came in muffled waves.

The circle of handballers increased from four to six, then eight, then 10, and as they snapped the handpasses to each other, the cries of encouragement and admonition built in frequency and intensity: “Think about it! ... Come on. Come on! ... We’re going to take this mob apart today ... Come on, fellas, we’re going to go at them from the first bounce! ... First into the ball wins! ... Hard and fierce today! ... Plenty of talking! ... This’s the one we want! ... Give them nothing!”

They began to dance, like boxers warming up before the bell, as the handpasses zipped through the air.

Barassi kept checking his watch – checking it every half-minute now – and he constantly rubbed the palms of his hands on the outside of his trousers

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to keep them dry. Patches of sweat showed under his arms. He kept pacing outside the area where the players jiggled up and down, whipping ever-faster handpasses to each other and still building the volume of their shouts to each other: “This’s the one we’ve worked for! ... *Into* them, right from the start! ... Make them chase us! ... In hard! ... Keep the pressure on *all* the time! ... Let’s show them how to do it!”

Outside, the siren hooted to end the reserves game and a deep swell of roaring sounded from the crowd.

Barassi snapped out of his absorbed reverie and signalled Andrew Taggart to begin the warm-up, and as the warm-up routine began – the stretching and limbering – Barassi moved among the team.

“Everything’s got to be done properly today!” he bellowed. “Hard and fierce!”

From the floor where they worked through the exercises of their warm-up routine, the players kept up a steady, overlapping stream of yells: “Come on! Come on! ... Let’s go and get them! ... Let’s go! ... We’re going to wipe the floor with this lot today!”

“Controlled *aggression*!” Barassi roared, and his roar was taken up by the 20 players.

As soon as the warm-up finished, Barassi ordered the room stewards to clear everyone out except the players and officials. While the half-hundred spectators were bundled out, Barassi paced nervously, easing the tension in his shoulders with a series of shrugs. The players sat uneasily on their benches, chorusing encouragement to each other. Then, as soon as the large double-doors leading to the race were bolted, there was an eerie quiet in the room. This now was what it would be for the next 100 minutes of play, and for each match throughout the remainder of the season – the coach and his team working together in a war of survival.

Hunched forward on their benches, the players waited for Barassi’s final words, gathering some of his energy, gathering some of the momentum he wanted. It took perhaps half a minute from the closing of the doors until Barassi swung around to face them.

“All right,” he began, his voice thick with tension. “A few days ago, our new president talked about this being a year of challenge. He couldn’t have been

more correct, particularly when talking about himself. He has a massive job. We have an easy job. All we've got to do is go out there and make a concerted effort to improve on that *crumb-bum, weak-kneed, jelly-hearted* effort in last year's Grand Final. And *that's what it was!*" He stared down at them defiantly. In the moment of silence, an expression of disgust etched his face as he glared at them. "Today, for those of you who played in that Grand Final," he continued with weight rather than volume dominating his voice, "could be labelled *Self-Respect Day!* No self-respecting person, let alone a bloody North Melbourne footballer, could put up with that memory – plus the rubbishing we've endured since – without feeling something rise up in *here!*" He smashed his fist against his chest.

Now, with his voice at full volume, all ears hummed with resonance in every pause. He held in front of him the clenched fist that he drew away from his chest. "While I want the bloody scoreboard to show a win today, and I want four premierships points for us, *more* than that I want some bloody *guts* shown! ... Plenty of *heart!* Not mad heart – going in to prove you're brave and giving away free kicks – but *intelligent guts!* Self-disciplined *effort!* That's what I want as number one."

On points of emphasis, his fist thrashed through the air, giving visual support to the explosive energy of his voice. "We can forget all about the bloody theories we've talked about – which are good, and correct, and must be learnt – but today they come second to the pumping of the bloody *heart* ... with pure red blood ... and if there's a bit of that *spilt*, I don't mind ... and don't you mind, either!"

Now he flashed a rapid series of challenging stares into perhaps a dozen faces. For the second that his eyes caught theirs, they were confronted with the expression that had been captured in a thousand photographs – the concentrated ferocity of Ron Barassi in the full flight of his obsessional passion. Barassi's words may have lacked the elevation of poetry, but the passion was authentic. Nobody could have wanted anything on earth more than, at that moment in time, Barassi wanted his men to deserve respect and earn pride by their display of manliness in the contest ahead.

"If they're going to take a mark, they have to *earn* it!" he bellowed, crashing

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his right arm downwards. “That’s what they’ll do to you – they’ll make you earn every kick and every mark. You will get *physical contact put upon you* ... and, after you’ve taken those things, I want some *dished out!* ... No free kicks, but by Christ, if it’s *there* and it’s legal, you go *in!* ... with everything you’ve *got!* ... *little* men into big men! ... They’re not bigger than us this year, and we’re going to have as much heart and, I think, we know how to play the bloody game better. So I want the whole lot to come together today – never forgetting for one moment about that *heart!* And the heart doesn’t just mean physical courage. It means *pushing* yourself when you’re tired, and pushing yourself when you find your concentration slipping ... By *Christ*, it means all those things!”

Again, during a pause, his eyes studied their faces. What could his eyes read? Outwardly, they were just 20 tense men absorbing this final burst of energy and adrenalin from a man who they knew would have, in his playing days, given his team everything that he now demanded of them. They consciously drew on his energy now, sucked in some of his mammoth and indomitable determination to compete to and beyond the outer limits of their strength and endurance. They were fuelling themselves from him now, reinforcing their egos, supplementing their wills and expanding their desire to demolish this Hawthorn team that had been the scourge of their summer and pre-season preparation.

Now, dully through the bolted doors, came a roar of the crowd as Hawthorn ran onto the ground. Max Ritchie called: “Time, coach.” Barassi blinked. The players in front of him did not stir. He looked carefully, slowly at his team.

“All of you,” he said, his voice pitched momentarily lower, “have enough self-knowledge now to know what turns you on full-bore. We are an experienced bunch of players – three successive Grand Finals, that’s *got to mean something* ... You have *been there*, and two years ago you bloody *conquered*, so you can’t tell me it isn’t there ... It’s programmed in there ... so just make sure the bloody thing comes out *today!*”

The players roared their endorsement. Barassi pointed to Keith Greig.

“Keith knows,” he said. “His best way will be to get the ball, beat his opponent and knock him down if needs be, and lead his team well. I know

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David (Dench) will and 'Schimma' (Wayne Schimmelbusch) will. And each and every one of you, when you're leading in the race to the ball, will realise you are leading North Melbourne at that moment!" He nodded his head as they shouted again. His face became totally gladiatorial and his chest swelled. "It's one in, all in today, boys," he said quietly, meaningfully. Then he bellowed: "*One in, all in!*" His players bellowed back excitedly – so loudly and in such total unison that no single words sounded, everything blending into an indecipherable blast of noise. And the wave of sound didn't stop. Barassi shouted loudly above it: "Keep your cool, but keep that bloody red blood circulating through every pore of your *being!*" They were straining on their benches now, desperate to move. "All right," Barassi screamed, sweeping his right arm to point to the race, "go out and *get them!*"

The players bounded to their feet with a wild roar of shouting. As they formed their line behind Greig, they encouraged each other continuously, banged each other on the shoulders, shook hands quickly as the door steward flung open the bolted doors and, to a thunderous burst of shouting and cheering, ran down the race and onto the oval. Behind them Barassi yelled: "One hundred per cent *effort!*"

After their obligatory runs around the oval, both teams formed lines facing each other while Dr Allen Aylett, the new president of the VFL, made a brief speech, congratulating Hawthorn on its victory in the 1976 Grand Final. The premiership flag was unfurled over the grandstand and then, to a sustained accompanying roar, the teams took their positions, the siren sounded and the umpire bounced the ball to start the 1977 football season.

How Barassi reacted inwardly to that first alarming 25 minutes of play, he alone knew. His players did everything he asked of them – bumped hard, tackled fiercely, played the run-on football he'd drilled into them and kicked long to position – but they didn't score goals. And Hawthorn, playing with the remorseless attack Barassi predicted, seemed uncannily to convert their opportunities into scores. The moment-to-moment play didn't look unequal, but at the quarter-time siren, Hawthorn led 5.5 (35) to North Melbourne's 0.3 (3).

For both coach and players, the scoreboard result hinted at disaster. They had tried desperately, played splendid football, but the leeway of scores

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was daunting. To play superbly – every bit as well as your opposition – yet trail by 32 points after 25 minutes of play, defied explanation.

Barassi spoke urgently through the quarter-time break. He reassured them that the scoring trend couldn't continue. He didn't rant or scream. In the few minutes he had with them, his voice remained controlled. And when his players jogged back to start again, they looked purposeful, eager for the siren.

But for Barassi, trotting back to his coach's box, the omens must have seemed sickening. If the first quarter trend continued, he faced a humiliating trouncing, even though his team was matching Hawthorn in physicality and, overall, equalling them in basic football skills. But games are determined by the scores on the board and Hawthorn undoubtedly enjoyed a major psychological advantage as the second term began.

Even in the second quarter, despite a quick goal to Cable, Hawthorn crept to a 38-point lead midway through the term. But suddenly, almost miraculously, the pattern changed. A flow of North Melbourne goals started – three in three minutes. Individually and collectively, the North Melbourne team hit top gear. And Barassi, from his coach's box high above the ground, had his runner sprinting almost continuously across the ground with encouragement, warning, reprimands and positional changes.

At the 25-minute mark of the quarter, the unbelievable happened – North took the lead. A running goal by Schimmelbusch put North three points ahead. North Melbourne had kicked themselves back into the match by scoring 8.6 (54) to Hawthorn's 3.1 (19) in the quarter. At half-time, the scoreboard read Hawthorn 8.6 (54) to North Melbourne 8.9 (57). And the crowd was buzzing with excitement.

In the dressing-room, the players showed a desperate need to breathe, to rest, to think quietly for a few minutes. In the toilets, Phil Baker vomited in choked spasms and trainers rushed to check that he would be fit to return to the field. In the medical room, cuts were being examined and strapped. On the rubbing tables, knots were being kneaded out of aching calves. Cool drinks were being sipped. And the players kept their emotional high by constantly calling to each other: "Come on, fellas! Come on! Keep it going."....

The Coach, available August, at a **RRP of \$19.95**

THE COACH

A SEASON WITH RON BARASSI

The Coach is the ultimate inside story about football, and the North Melbourne coaches, players and personalities who were game changers.

In 1977, writer John Powers was given open access to the North Melbourne Football Club when revered coach Ron Barassi was a dominant figure in the game.

The book that emerged from that season, *The Coach*, recorded the months of often brutal training leading up to the spine-tingling Grand Final draw between North Melbourne and Collingwood, and on to North Melbourne's ultimate victory.

This victory, against all odds, is considered one of the finest premierships in the game's history, as the Kangaroos not only endured an unprecedented five matches, but also came from 27 points behind at three-quarter-time in the Grand Final to force a replay.

Nominated as 'the bible on motivation' by *The Age*, John Powers' account of the team's massive commitment and Barassi's extraordinary motivation techniques remains as relevant and fascinating today as it was when first published in 1978.

Sadly, John Powers died in 2007, aged 72, but *The Coach* remains his eternal legacy, a true masterpiece of sports writing.

Forty years after North's extraordinary season, *The Coach* describes an era of football that preceded the professional approach of the modern game, but indicates how the game was in the process of changing, driven by the master coach, Ron Barassi.

The Slattery Media Group is proud to publish this work again to commemorate this anniversary, and to pay tribute to John Powers' ground-breaking work.

"Fascinating reading."

KEVIN SHEEDY, *INSIDE FOOTBALL*, MAY 1978

"A great book."

DAVID WILLIAMSON, NOVEMBER 1979

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