

Excerpt from YELLOW & BLACK—A season with Richmond: By Konrad Marshall

Konrad Marshall, a senior Fairfax Media journalist, has been part of the fabric of the Richmond Football Club since the pre-season of 2016, creating a book that describes in great detail the Tigers' march from the horrors of 2016 to the 2017 premiership. In his prologue to the book, available now for pre-sale from richmondfc.com.au, he wrote:

"I would go to meetings; attend matches and training; sit in the rooms as the coach instructed and inspired his players. I would interview and profile the athletes and their mentors and trainers. I would sit in on match reviews, or opposition analysis, or selection committee, or Board meetings, or in the coach's box on game day."

In the Round 5 match against Melbourne at the MCG, he was in the coach's box. This is an edited excerpt of the chapter he wrote, of that experience, on a day that not a lot went right on the field, but the Tigers clawed their way to a 13-point win, before 85,657 fans. The book will be available early in November.

Their best punch

The coaches sit in the rooms before the game against Melbourne, and a video clip is played, recorded by Damien Hardwick earlier that day. It's him in casual clothes at home, sitting in front of a game of *Connect Four*, with a furrowed brow, scowling as he scans the yellow and red circular discs in the blue plastic frame. The object of the two-person game is to place four discs of the same colour in a row, while preventing your opponent from doing the same.

The voice holding the camera, that of his 17-year-old daughter, asks a baiting question: "Did I win?"

Hardwick frowns harder, realises the game is over, stands and flails a petulant arm: "Get stuffed!"

The coach hates losing. He was considering using the footage as part of a funny but pointed pre-game speech, but in this moment, he decides against that plan. The added novelty isn't necessary.

He brings up the Bureau of Meteorology website instead. It looks like wet weather is approaching. Torrential downpours, in fact. Justin Leppitsch glances up at the time lapse Doppler radar screen and purses his lips: "Well, it's got to be kicked, scrapped, knocked—whatever—forward," he says. "You know the rule: 'When it rains, metres gained'."

The players file into the briefing room, and Hardwick asks Dan Butler to unveil the photo of the week. And there it is—a picture of *Connect Four* in its box. "This is the greatest game on the face of the earth," says Hardwick, smiling. "Unfortunately, I can't beat my 17-year-old daughter. It drives me insane. But there's a reason why. What's the object of the game, David? *It gives you fair hint on the box.*"

"To *Connect Four*?" says Astbury.

"You've got to *Connect Four*, David. So, what do you think I'm trying to do? What am I *playing*?" he asks. "I'm playing too quick. I'm playing all offence. And what do you think my daughter's playing?"

"Defence," answers the room.

"Deny, deny, deny. That's all she does! So, Dad gets frustrated. Dad makes a shit move. Dad loses. She goes in with a defensive mindset and she either wins—or has a draw. With my offensive mind set I either win—or lose."

Hardwick begins getting to his point.

"It takes great discipline to play defence, but that's what we're doing. We're looking for that ability to deny. If you take away their strengths, what are they going to do? They're gonna try

to go for it, and eventually, they're going to lose. So, we're going to deny, deny, deny."

He points out that they've trained this system all summer long, and put it in practice in every game. The Tigers are—statistically speaking, after four rounds—the best defensive side in the AFL. "Understand today is all about defensive effort. We win. We don't lose. *Connect Four* boys."

It's such a playful beginning, and so representative of the Hardwick demeanour this season. The man is buoyant, a disposition not based on results but on process. He more than anyone made the decision to change Richmond into a defensive-yet-unshackled team, and now he delights in the plan's application.

Things were so different not so long ago. Exactly one year earlier, in fact, in the corresponding Anzac Eve game against Melbourne, his mood was dark. During that pre-game address, 12 months earlier, his message was desperate. The team was coming off an 11-goal loss to West Coast and he wanted a response. Demanded one. His voice then was twisted with impatience: "You take off the jumper at the end of the game, what do you want it to say?" he asked. "Whoever wore me today gave everything. No short steps!"

But at full-time a few hours later, after the Demons had bullied Richmond in the wet—and in truth embarrassed them—Hardwick was not conciliatory but livid: "We spoke about what that jumper would say. Well, I'm going to give you the answer: We are as weak as piss as a football side."

He turned venomous. Don't let your parents and your girlfriends say you did well, or tried hard, he said. This, he said, was reprehensible. Players jumping out of the way of the man. Dodging the ball itself. "We sit there and pledge allegiance to the thing you wear, and the Melbourne Football Club steamrolls our blokes. Our blokes! No hiding from it... *WEAK!*" he roared, slamming the white board. "F...G *WEAK!*"

He said he was sick and tired of it. He told Brandon Ellis he loves him, but he needs to get harder. Bachar Houli the same. Rance was not spared for playing like "an idiot". Nor Martin, for performing like "a schoolboy".

He stood then genuinely perplexed, eyes wide, hands upturned. Was this form the reality, or just the way they were playing "at the moment"? Was this to be their entire season, or their season "just this moment"?

"I sit here and I rant and rave and show bravado, but I can't walk down the street tomorrow. I'm embarrassed to don my colours. I never thought I'd say that. Ever! Hat down, sunglasses on—you should *never* feel that," he said, pausing, scanning their eyes for a flicker of the same fire. "The pride is at the back of the cupboard. We just need to find it. We have to find it."

One year later, back under lights at the MCG, they have their chance.

The coach's box is far bigger than you might imagine. The space is tiered, and in the front row are the assistant coaches: Ben Rutten, Andrew McQualter, Blake Caracella and Justin Leppitsch. In the middle row sits Hardwick and his right hand, football analysis manager Hayden Hill. In the back row sits the club's AFL compliance officer Jenna Earle, football technology coordinator Simon Reinsch, opposition analyst Jack Harvey and pro scout Nick Austin. Behind them all, in the back of the room, is Neil Balme.

There are a dozen laptops and a few iPads, not counting the hardware and manpower in the smaller coach's box next door, which adds another six people and as many more computers. The latter team will code videotape as the game unfolds, so that it will be simpler to cut and search later, in the post-game analysis.

The main area is lit mostly by flat screen televisions. One displays player rotation statistics—the number of changes, time on the ground, percentage of the game played. Another lists team statistics, like defensive contested possessions and forward half turnovers. Another has

more individual player stats like kicks and handballs. Another has a live feed of the game, which is about to start.

Hardwick's eyes stalk the field as the players walk to position: "Petracca is starting on ball," he tells the box. "Viney is forward, and Jones is on a wing. Tell our backs to be careful of this."

Rain drifts down quickly as the quarter begins, and soon it starts to sheet across the field. Melbourne's midfield pushes Richmond around and the Tiger response does not please the coach. He speaks into the phone with a message: "Just remind our players, 'When you feel the heat, bludgeon handball and blast kick is our friend'."

That message will go out with the runner—now dressed in pink to avoid any clashes with players or umpires—the club's strength and conditioning coach Luke Meehan. Meehan delivers perhaps 50 messages in a game, running roughly 13 kilometres. Maybe three times near the end of every quarter he tells players the amount of time left. But most of his messages concern rotations. Brendan Fahrner, the club's sports science adviser, sits on the bench beside him, monitoring how long each player has been on the field and who is due for a rest. Nothing is left to chance. Inside the coach's box, they monitor outcomes.

Soon it becomes apparent that the Demons are dominating everything but the scoreboard. Forward 50 turnovers, for instance, have been Richmond's strong suit this season, but Melbourne is winning that count five to one. "It's going to be one of those games," says Hardwick. "We've got shit balance right now. Come on boys: deny, deny, deny."

The ball lands in Riewoldt's hands and he turns and snaps the kick. Hardwick screams the ball towards goal: "Get in. Get in!" And it does.

He has another message for the bench, to relay through Meehan: "Are you there? Get out to Connor Menadue and tell him his standing position at stoppage is *on his player*, not behind. They're killing us at stoppages."

Rutten notices the players trying to craft perfect plays; beautiful handball chains and neat chips, in the wet, under immense pressure. He picks up the phone: "Can you get a message to our backs? Don't worry about these little handballs—surge it forward."

Hill offers a brief message to the whole box: "Astbury three touches, all handballs. Same for Lambert."

Jason Castagna kicks a behind, and Hardwick is annoyed at the failure of the team to adjust for the kick-out afterwards: "Zone, zone, zone boys!"

A downfield free kick against Conca leads to a Melbourne shot on goal, and Hardwick slams his hand on the table: "Reece! Reece! Referring pressure with a handball in wet conditions is *not* going to work."

Hill offers another update: "The mids haven't touched it. Dion (Prestia), one possession."

Earle takes it upon herself near the end of every quarter to say aloud to the box how much time is left: "Four minutes..."

Harvey notices loose-checking by the Tigers in defence: "That's twice now Harmes has been unattended."

Earle: "30 seconds..."

The siren sounds, with Melbourne holding a narrow advantage, despite the Tigers being badly down in forward half turnovers, five to 13. Richmond is winning defensive clearances six to zero, meaning the backline are doing their job, but the ball appears to be flying right back into their half after every effort to repel the thing.

Hardwick sighs as he leaves the box for the on-field huddle. "I'll take three points down after that quarter."

In the huddle, he sends a strong message to the players: to understand the conditions, to deal with the opponent, and to grasp that they will need to play a dour territory game.

At the start of the second quarter, Toby Nankervis charges at a loose ball, sprinting, then

strips Melbourne's young co-captain, Jack Viney, and wins a free kick. Balme approves: "Gee he goes, this boy." But Nankervis kicks poorly to a lead in the forward pocket. It creates a turnover, and the ball comes back out of attack. Lambert is there to cut off the play, and he kicks a ball to a different place—the top of the goal square, where the forwards are in a better marking position. Hardwick picks up the phone: "Hello? Just remind our players—that kick is perfect. Nanks' kick was ridiculous."

Moments later Rance is tackled in the back half, pinned holding the ball after trying to dodge trouble—again the result of players handballing backwards, referring pressure until it became too much even for the best defender in the game to evade. Hardwick smashes his fist on the desk: "Why, why, why are we handballing backwards?"

He fills his own silence, wondering aloud where his midfield has gone: "Has Cotchin touched it?"

Hill answers: "He's had five possessions."

Hardwick calls the bench: "Let's get a message out to the players to raise the fight, please. We're getting beaten in the contest, and they own the outside as well."

It fails to stop the swarming Melbourne midfield. Richmond, cornered again, is caught in another clumsy, panicked handball chain. The wet ball is not helping.

"Kick it! Kick it! Are you there?" Hardwick yells into the phone. "For the fifteenth bloody time, tell them to kick it!"

Hardwick walks away from his seat shortly after. He does this in the box when the annoyance rises. He hovers at the back of the room, paces a little. Sometimes he draws on a whiteboard, marking down stats he plans to relay to his players in a break.

He comes back to his seat now with a plan. He wants Caddy and Martin off the ball, both placed at half-forward instead. Both play with brawn, and can break packs apart, but Hardwick just isn't seeing the speed he needs at the coalface. "Get Prestia, Cotchin and Castagna on the ball."

Inside-50s for the game are now at a perilous 10 against Melbourne's 35. The Richmond defence is under siege.

Houli kicks the ball long into the Richmond forward line, but places it perhaps 40 metres out from goal. It's a dangerous space—the fat side of the ground. If Melbourne wins the ball, it can be gallivanted through the middle, an empty field en route to goal. Leppitsch has seen this exact error too often tonight: "Boys, I don't want to harp on this, but that Bachar kick is *wrong*. We need to stay skinny, because Melbourne want to run it out the fat side. We're creating our own problems."

"Five minutes," says Earle.

Hardwick: "They look quicker than us. They look harder than us. Don't they?"

No one answers. But Caracella's voice steps into the silence. He is calm: "We're looking better this last 10 minutes. We might have absorbed their best punch."

"One minute..."

"Thirty seconds..."

Shaun Grigg takes a free kick on the boundary, goes back and slots a clutch goal from the tightest of angles on the siren. Richmond will go into the half-time break trailing by only seven points. "A goal down," says Leppitsch. "That's a good result, I reckon."

At half-time the message is simple. Caracella helped distil the notion before the players trundled in to the meeting room: "Smart but hard. Crack in but don't blaze in. When it's your turn, go."

Hardwick is direct, and rousing. He wants the goal square attacked. In close quarters, he wants a "surge mentality". No more backwards handballs. "We know their pressure is elite,

so let's not refer it to a teammate—let's shoot it forward to another contest. Then we've got it in space and we can use our speed."

He says this is a great test. And Melbourne is a great opposition. "This is a tough game," he says. "But you know what, we're a tough side."

Hardwick believes that such matches tell you something about your football club. He brings them down now off their seats into a close group, standing and facing one another, and he circles them. His voice envelopes them. Will they stand up or lay down? "I know what I think!" he yells. "And I can see in your eyes what you think!"

He talks about friends and family and the jumper. The players are on their toes, and he is on his heels. They have their arms around each other, and he has his arms around them. "We can all lift! We can all surge! We can all hunt! We can win this game!"

Early in the third quarter the signs are not good. Again, they are choosing the wrong options, again handballing backwards, again chipping short instead of roosting long, down the line, directly at goal.

Rance plays on, tries to dash out of the back line around one opponent, and then another, and is corralled and tackled and turns the ball over. Hardwick turns to Rutten: "Do you want to speak to him or do you want me to?"

They talk all sorts of contingencies and options. Should Grigg stay in the ruck and tag Jack Watts, who is having an excellent game, using the ball with grace and dare: "That's the difference—their cleanliness," says Hardwick. "Isn't it, boys?"

There are so many questions, most without answers. Should Lambert go into the midfield? Should Houli go to a wing? When should Rioli come off the ground for a rest?

Hardwick picks up the headset and unloads: "Get a message to Dion Prestia that he's had four kicks and EIGHT handballs, and it's pissing down with rain! Tell him to use his bloody strengths and stop playing shit footy!"

The message that gets to Prestia, however, bears little resemblance to the spittle from the mouth of the coach. Head of Football, Tim Livingstone, who is responsible for managing the communication from coach to players, says it would have been filtered by him into something like 'Come on Dion, we need you putting your head over the ball'.

"We both know when he just needs to vent," Livingstone explains. "Like sometimes he'll say, 'Get that guy straight off the ground, now!', but I'll know that the player is five minutes away from his rotation, and Dusty is due, and if we need to hold Dustin on the ground when he's fatigued, that can have consequences. Damien trusts me to hit back at him."

More messages go out to the players now, reinforcing once more the need to kick around the body—even blindly—rather than trying to find a target with their hands. Pro scout Nick Austin, is incredulous: "We're still trying to fix things we were doing wrong in the first quarter of the game. Unbelievable."

Leppitsch, seeing almost no alternative, suggests they play a "kick and catch" game—spotting up targets, retaining possession, slowing down the play—something closer to the Tigers' game plan last year. Something to take the ball away from Melbourne. Something to kill the heat. If they lower their eyes, it might work. Hardwick shakes his head to say no.

The siren sounds, and Richmond trails 53 to 73. But Hardwick senses the pair of injuries to Melbourne could play a part in the outcome: "They're two rotations down, so that gives us a chance to outrun them."

After the final break, The Tigers kick a quick goal through Riewoldt, and then Rioli has the ball. The coaches lament the fact that their attack is not zoning up—ready for the kick in,

should Rioli miss. He kicks the goal. It doesn't matter.

Now Richmond is only seven points down. Hardwick picks up the handset: "Remind them again to raise the fight, please."

When a message like this one needs to be spread to the entire team, it is given first by Livingstone to the four players on the bench, then to the runner, who'll target leaders on the ground, starting with the defence and then moving forward.

Hardwick, who spends almost the whole quarter on his feet, can only hope for the best. Martin kicks for goal across his body, and Hardwick is unusually calm as it fades through the air but twists through the tall posts: "Yes. Got it."

He calls down the line at one point, but cannot hear a voice at the other end: "Hello? Hello?" he asks. "HELLO?!?!"

"You're on mute, Dimma," says Earle.

He presses the correct button on the intercom. "I want Menadue to the wing. Butler forward, please."

A behind is kicked, scores are level, and in the box there is a cool, quiet tension. Free kicks draw the attention of coaches more than before. When a decision goes against them, the assistants are indignant. Like fans.

Hardwick though is level-headed. This is not a rare reaction, either, but his default. The coach is generally pragmatic about officiating. "Nah, it was there," he'll say. "Nah, it was too high," he'll tell the others. "Nah, that was clumsy," he'll deflect.

When a free goes against them, he immediately focuses on what it means—on the gap it might give the opposition: "Run boys," he'll say, hoping they ignore their indignation and sprint immediately into a defensive formation. "Run, run, run, run, run, run!"

Riewoldt takes a mark, within range of the goals, and Hardwick wants composure: "Slow it down," he says. "Take your 30 seconds." Jack steers it through—a controlled long range drop punt on a tight angle—and they're up by six points. "Still too long though," says Hardwick. "Five minutes left. Gotta raise the fight again. Send the message."

After the centre bounce, Houli gathers the latest in a handful of clean possessions for the quarter, and finds a target. Hardwick is impressed. "Gee, Bachar's been good."

Richmond scores a behind and has a crucial seven-point break, but McQualter, the midfield stoppages coach, is alarmed by something he spotted at a ball-up in the defensive half of the field: "Jesus, Shorty was behind in that stoppage," he says. "Tell him, 'DO NOT let Garlett get forward of the ball'."

Caddy goals. Richmond is now 13 points up. The coaches don't celebrate in the box. If anything, their urgency increases. There are only so many seconds before play begins again, and so they reshuffle their deck. Hardwick demands an extra man back, beyond the six already in defence.

"I need to get a forward off! I need to get a forward off! We need a seventh!" he says. "Rancey onto Hogan. I want Shorty spare."

"One minute fifty seconds..." says Earle.

"One minute..."

The game is won now but Hardwick is still calling plays down the phone: "Get 'em all back please—get 'em all back!"

"Thirty seconds..."

Now they are certain it is won. McQualter turns around, eyes wide, shaking his head: "Let's never talk about this game again," he says. "Right?"

"Twenty seconds..."

The siren sounds, and Hardwick slumps a little as the energy pours out of him: "Phew. Good win boys. That's a great result. Well done, Tigers."

Leppitsch looks up, serious for a second. He is positive and thoughtful. It seems like a light

bulb moment: “There’s something about this bunch of blokes.”

They all close their laptops now, and walk down those staircases back into the grey concrete recesses of the stadium. Halfway down Leppitsch returns to comedy, or fatalism: “Mate, you’ll always take your worst victory over your best loss.”