



DAN EDDY

FOREWORD BY
DEAN RIOLI

ALWAYS STRIVING

THE KEY MOMENTS THAT HAVE MADE
THE ESSENDON FOOTBALL CLUB

SINCE 1872



ALWAYS STRIVING

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THE BEST: In 1894, Essendon won a VFA record fourth successive premiership (a feat only equalled by Collingwood in the VFL, from 1927-1930) with a group of players that were tight both on, and off the field. Pictured are: Fred Ball (first in the third row), George Stuckey (in front of Ball's left shoulder), Charles 'Tracker' Forbes (fourth row, third from left), Reg Wilmot (same row, third from right in light coloured suit), Albert Thurgood (in front of Wilmot's left shoulder), and George Vautin (front row, second from right in light coloured suit).

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RECREATION RESERVE: The
Essendon Recreation Reserve
(pictured circa 1920 facing towards
the Essendon Primary School end),
witnessed local cricket and school
sporting events well before the
football club made it their home
in 1922. Nestled atop a rise which
looked south towards the city, and
unprotected from the elements,
it would come to be known as
'Windy Hill'.

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ESTABLISHING A STARTING POINT

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It is somewhat ironic that, today, on the very patch of dirt where the Essendon Football Club first came into existence, in a district known for its strong and varied religious beliefs, stands the widely criticised Church of Scientology. Inside its boundaries—which consist of Mt Alexander Road, Ayr Street, and Ailsa Street in Ascot Vale—are the remnants of the nineteenth century estate known as “Ailsa”, once owned by the brewer Robert McCracken and his family: the founders and early officials of the Essendon Football Club. McCracken’s Brewery—located on Collins Street, across from what is now the Rialto building in Melbourne’s CBD—is no longer, consumed by Carlton and United Breweries (CUB) in 1907, and there were times through 2013-16 when it seemed that the club that was formed by the brewery would go the same way.¹ Robert McCracken’s son, Alex, would become the first president of the Victorian Football League in the great split of 1897.

When the Church was officially opened in January 2011, the then Member for Essendon—former Essendon and Carlton footballer, Justin Madden—controversially said: “Your new Church is as Melbourne as Melbourne gets,” referring more to the site’s historical significance than to

the history of its newest occupant.² Although Madden, a Catholic himself, was criticised for such a statement, one could argue that the passion and commentary surrounding the Church of Scientology is not dissimilar to the passion shown for the football club that was born at “Ailsa” in the early 1870s, and which grew into one of the largest and most widely known sporting clubs in the country.

To those early followers of the Essendon Football Club, who watched it rise from a junior club between 1873 and 1877, to then go on and become a powerhouse in the code’s premier competition, the Victorian Football Association (VFA), in the 1890s, football was akin to a religion, a faith passed down from generation to generation. Whereas Sundays were put aside for church, Saturday afternoons were for the footy, and it was on a paddock adjacent to “Ailsa”, famously known as “McCracken’s Paddock”, where that commitment to all things red and black first took shape.³

Remarkably, and in some ways similar to the mystique surrounding Scientology, the early history of Essendon is shrouded in mystery. Historians have suggested that the initial meeting to form the football club took place

¹ While the original McCracken’s Brewery is no more, McCracken’s Laneway is adjacent to where the Brewery once stood. In 2016, CUB released an amber ale as part of its heritage brands program, which commemorated McCracken’s early influence as a brewer in Melbourne. See: <http://tinyurl.com/hxf3h6d>.

² See <http://tinyurl.com/678sp6>. Before the Church of Scientology, the Catholic Mercy College was located on the site.

³ Incidentally, the McCrackens were said to be “strong Presbyterians and very much anti-Catholic.” See, Michael Maplestone, *Flying Higher: History of the Essendon Football Club, 1872-1996*, Essendon Football Club, 1996, p. 330.



PATRIARCH: Brewer Robert McCracken (above) had a profound influence on early Melbourne, while his son, Alex, would play a significant role in Essendon's VFA years.

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anywhere between 1871 and 1873, but no official date has ever been proven.

The first annual publication on Australian Rules football, *The Footballer*, by then Carlton Football Club secretary Thomas P. Power, first printed in 1875, suggested that the club was formed in 1871. However, by 1877 Power had altered that to show 1873 as the foundation year, most likely due to the fact it was the *first* season in which the

football club began playing matches. Later, in 1922, Brigadier-General Fred Hughes, who had played with Essendon in its opening season, claimed that he was present at “Ailsa” with “three or four others” when the club was first formed, and that the meeting took place in 1872.⁴ In 1983, when Michael Maplestone compiled the first detailed year-by-year account of the Essendon Football Club, *Flying High*, it was Hughes’ quote which Maplestone cited as the most likely to be correct.

In *An Illustrated History of Essendon Football Club*, Jim Main wrote: “No one knows for sure the year the Essendon Football Club was founded, despite some suggestions the club was born at a meeting at the home of Melbourne brewer and sportsman Alex McCracken in Kent Street, Ascot Vale, on February 14 1872.”⁵ One former player, Alf Young, suggested, in 1947, that the meeting where the club was formed actually took place at the nearby Laurel Hotel in Mount Alexander Road, which was kept at the time by Thomas Chadwick, and which was a known gathering place for local sportspeople; particularly horse trainers and fox hunters, as the sport

of hunting was popular in the area during that period.⁶ Meanwhile, in Maplestone’s updated 1996 version of *Flying High*, the re-titled *Flying Higher*, he wrote: “Certainly, on 22nd of May, 1872, Robert McCracken was in attendance to represent Essendon at a meeting of club delegates at Garton’s Hotel, Melbourne.”⁷ Mystery indeed.

Robert McCracken was the patriarch of the McCracken dynasty. He, along with his brother Peter, had sailed from Scotland in 1841, and, by 1856, according to Maplestone, “their ‘McCracken’s Brewery’ owned most of the hotels that had sprung up in the city area to cater for the influx of the gold miners.”⁸ In 1864, Robert purchased “Ailsa”. Although Robert became the first president of Essendon in 1873, it was his son, Alex, then a 17-year-old student at Scotch College—one of the schools, along with Melbourne Grammar, said to have played one of the first games of Australian football in 1858—who would go on to have the most influence over the first three decades of the club’s affairs. In 1873, Alex became Essendon’s first secretary, played with the team between 1873 and 1877, before later serving as club president. Peter’s son, Coiler, was the club’s first captain.

Although a large number of the early football clubs owe their beginnings as an offshoot of the local cricket club—two examples being the Melbourne and Richmond clubs—Essendon is different in that many who attended those early meetings with the McCracken family in the early 1870s came from the horse racing industry, or were local farmers. According to Lenore Frost of the Royal Historical Society of Victoria, at the time the football club was founded the Essendon district, to the north-west of Melbourne, was popular because of “the availability of water and natural grasslands that were ideal for grazing sheep.”⁹ Unlike today, the Essendon of the 1870s remained largely unaffected by industry,

⁴ *Essendon Gazette*, 11 May 1922, p. 2.

⁵ Jim Main in Peter Di Sisto, John Murray and James Weston (eds.), *An Illustrated History of Essendon Football Club*, Geoff Slattery Publishing, 2007, p. 24.

⁶ *Essendon Gazette*, 28 August 1947, p. 12.

⁷ Maplestone, *Flying Higher*, p. 19.

⁸ Maplestone, *Flying Higher*, p. 18.

⁹ Lenore Frost, interview with the author, 2012.

nor was it the popular middle-class residential suburb of Melbourne that it was to become in the twentieth century, although many wonderful homesteads of the Victorian era are evidence of the wealth of those who made it, either in commerce, as did the McCrackens, or on the land. Back then, it was the ideal locale for training horses near to the city, and across the way from the renowned Flemington racecourse, where meetings were held as early as 1840.

Some years earlier, in May 1862, an attempt *had* been made by the Essendon and Flemington Cricket Club to form a football club, however, despite the early interest, it was a short-lived venture and the club that was founded in the 1870s bore no resemblance to the one which played a handful of matches on a ground near the terminus of the Essendon Railway in 1862.¹⁰

According to Maplestone, among the notables who were founding members of the Essendon club was the owner of the nearby Moonee Valley racecourse, William Samuel Cox (known as Sam and for whom the famous Cox Plate is named), as well as members of the Victorian Racing Club. One such member was Hurtle Fisher, arguably the most well known racing identity in the district at the time. Indeed, Fisher—who was born in England in 1825, and moved to South Australia with his father, Sir James Hurtle Fisher, in 1836—was labelled “the Squire of Maribyrnong”, such was his reputation.¹¹ He settled in Victoria after surviving a shipwreck near Warrnambool in 1859. Between him and his brother Charles (C.B.), the Fishers owned a considerable portion of the land between Horseshoe Bend, at Maribyrnong, and the Flemington racecourse in the 1860s and 1870s, where they operated their Maribyrnong stud farm which produced many champion horses.¹²

Hurtle Fisher’s story in racing alone is a remarkable one, and it is the possibility of his influence over the colours chosen by the founding fathers of Essendon which has been overlooked in any research undertaken on the early history of the club. Up until now, historians have accepted that the colours chosen by the founders of Essendon came about because of the McCracken family shield. However, current Essendon historian, Gregor McCaskie (ironically, also of proud Scottish heritage), questions this theory, as it is evident that the McCracken shield is predominantly red and white. McCaskie says: “The McCracken family crest looks more aligned to the [Sydney] Swans than to Essendon. The only colours I can see are red, white and blue and the black outline is incidental ... Maybe the Hurtle Fisher-horse connection is closer to the truth.”¹³

In 1864, the Fisher-owned horse, Lantern, won the Melbourne Cup wearing the rose and black colours of Hurtle Fisher’s stable. In the July 1871 edition of the *Turf Register*, around the same time that the football club is believed to have been formed, it lists Fisher’s colours as: “Rose and black striped jacket, black cap.”¹⁴ Because of Fisher’s success (among his many racing achievements, he won the VRC Victoria Derby three years in succession, 1867-69) the rose, or red, and black colours soon became the most recognisable by those in the Essendon district. Alf Young later wrote of Fisher: “On every race day it was a great sight to see Mr. Fisher drive along Holmes road, and down Puckle street, with his four horses, all thoroughbreds, with red and black tassels on their blinkers.”¹⁵ At the time, Fisher was leasing “Le Beau Sejour” (“lovely dwelling place”), a large house in Holmes Road that was later demolished to make way for the Essendon Hospital.¹⁶

Perhaps one of the most striking examples of where Alex McCracken collaborated with Hurtle Fisher on the use of his red and

JUST REWARD: This cup is believed to be the first Essendon best and fairest award, won by Archibald Graham in 1874. ©EFC



¹⁰ See *The Argus* 9 May 1862, p. 4, for details of the meeting of the Essendon and Flemington Cricket Club, which took place to form the first incarnation of a football club in the Essendon area. According to Maplestone, their ground was obtained by George Lavater, secretary for Railways, and Mr Miller, father of George Miller, the champion goalkicker of his day.

¹¹ Maurice Cavanough, Rhett Kirkland and Brian Meldrum, *The Melbourne Cup* (1861-2000), Crown Content, 2000, p. 20.

¹² According to Bob Chalmers, of the Essendon Historical Society, the Fisher brothers have two streets and a parade named after them in the Ascot Vale area.

¹³ Gregor McCaskie, email correspondence with the author, 2013.

¹⁴ *Turf Register*, July 1871, p. 124.

¹⁵ *Essendon Gazette*, 28 August 1947, p. 12.

¹⁶ Information courtesy of Bob Chalmers at the Essendon Historical Society.



THE PIONEER :No one played a more important role in the early years of Essendon than Alex McCracken. He commanded huge respect in the football community – both in his role as first Essendon secretary and later as president of the VFL.
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black colours for a sporting venture came in 1880, when McCracken, the Fisher brothers and Charles Spong, who was the licensee of the Maribyrnong Bridge Hotel (near what is now the Angler's Tavern on Maribyrnong Road), formed the Essendon Rowing Club (ERC) at Spong's Bridge Hotel. McCracken became the first president of the ERC. By then, the red and black colours were firmly entrenched as the Essendon Football

Club's uniform, so the decision to select the same uniform for the ERC would seem to support the theory that McCracken and Fisher saw an opportunity to make the red and black colours a symbol of the Essendon district. In 1943, the *Essendon Gazette* wrote that the Fisher's colours were "copied by many sporting bodies in the district" during the second half of the nineteenth century.¹⁷

Along with Fisher, who played for the football club in 1873, another early member and player of the Essendon Football Club was William E. Filgate, who managed Fisher's Maribyrnong stud farm and trained many of Fisher's horses. Interestingly, Filgate's son later trained horses for Alex McCracken, which would suggest that his relationship to the McCracken family must have also been a strong one.¹⁸

Although the McCracken/Fisher/Filgate theory deserves to be considered, it needs to be noted that Essendon's early colours were not just red and black; they also were colours of blue; it's also important to note that the Fisher's rose colour was a long way from Essendon's vivid red. According to Jim Main, "Essendon always had intended wearing black

and red, but these special guernseys had to be made in England and, in the meantime, players were readily available navy blue outfits."¹⁹ In the 1870s, the majority of the football clubs wore blue as part of their uniform, despite an 1875 advertisement by *Swanston and Tappy: Tailors, Hosiers, Shirt Makers, Football Club Outfitters* claiming that they stocked "football jerseys, all sizes, all colours."²⁰ One theory is that blue was the cheapest fabric at the time. However, the answer may be more mundane. Trevor Ruddell of the Melbourne Cricket Club (MCC) Library believes that the black dye of that period was known to run when it got wet. It has even been suggested that in the 1890s the British monarch, Queen Victoria never wore black undergarments because the black dyes used at the time were prone to stain skin! This may also explain why sailors, for example, wore navy blue uniforms at sea as opposed to black.²¹ Indeed, in the *Richmond Guardian* on May 7 1921, Bill Maybury described an early Richmond guernsey as "a heavy blue guernsey such as sailors wear."²²

According to *The Footballer*, in 1875 Essendon's colours were a blue guernsey and knickerbockers, red and black cap and hose; in 1876 they were blue knickerbockers and jersey, red and black cap and hose; then in 1877 they incorporated the now famous "red sash over the left shoulder", while still maintaining the blue jersey and knickerbockers, red and black hose and cap. The acceptance of the sash as a staple of the Essendon uniform was confirmed within a few short years. Maplestone wrote that by 1879 Essendon were "now commonly known as 'the Sash Wearers'."²³ Despite this, McCaskie explains that "the sash over the left shoulder did not become standard until about 1909, and even as late at the 1940s I have

19 Main in Di Sisto et al, *An Illustrated History of Essendon Football Club*, p. 24.

20 See Thomas P. Power, *The Footballer* 1875, p. 6.

21 Trevor Ruddell, interview with the author, 2013.

22 *Richmond Guardian*, 7 May 1921.

23 Maplestone, *Flying Higher*, p. 25.

17 *Essendon Gazette*, 28 October 1943, p. 2.

18 *The Advertiser*, 10 April 1896, p. 3.



photographs of players wearing jumpers in games with a sash over the right shoulder.”²⁴

Some historians have claimed that Essendon wore red and black striped guernseys for a period. However, Mark Pennings, whose research on the pre-VFL years saw him delve deeper into the early uniforms worn by all the then-VFA clubs than had previously been undertaken, said that there is “no evidence the club ever had stripes.”²⁵ Pennings went on to say: “Buying jumpers was an expensive business and the Dons were only a junior club to start with so they wouldn’t have had the cash that clubs like Carlton had. So, to buy a set of striped jumpers for a year or two doesn’t make sense.”²⁶ Despite the conjecture over the early Essendon uniform, Main writes, “Essendon’s image as an ambitious club wearing black and red was set in concrete from its earliest years, and nothing would change this.”²⁷

As the club began to evolve from its junior status into a senior club, by 1877, and then as it tried to establish itself as a champion side during the 1880s, one of the most recognisable supporters was American-born local councillor

and successful businessman, John Peck (a co-founder of carrying company, Cobb & Co.). Peck was known to wear a Sturt’s Desert Pea in the buttonhole of his suit, “because it provided the necessary red and black.”²⁸ One of Peck’s daughters, Mary, was married to Alex McCracken.²⁹

Essendon’s first official game was, appropriately, against Carlton, on May 24 1873, on McCracken’s Paddock: it would be Carlton which would evolve to become one of Essendon’s fiercest rivals over the next 140 years. On that first day on the McCracken’s Paddock, the locals won by a single goal, kicked by none other than John McCracken, Alex’s brother. The Essendon Football Club had been born, and as mysterious as its foundations may have been, and how those famous colours came to be, *and* despite the many highs and lows it would experience in the years that followed, a sporting club was started by a successful group of men with the foresight and desire to recognise that the name of Essendon could stand for something and, so too, could its colours. ■

MCCRACKEN’S MEN:

It was the McCracken family who set the foundations for the Essendon we know today. Patriarch, Robert McCracken (far right in top hat), and son Alex (seated in the second row, in front of the player holding the ball) are pictured with the first known Essendon team, in 1873.

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²⁴ Gregor McCaskie, email correspondence with the author, 2013.

²⁵ Mark Pennings, email correspondence with the author, 2013.

²⁶ Ibid.

²⁷ Main in Di Sisto *et al*, *An Illustrated History of Essendon Football Club*, p. 24.

²⁸ Maplestone, *Flying Higher*, p. 64.

²⁹ *The Argus*, 20 November 1903, p. 5.



LEGENDS: Essendon's 1891-1894 team remains the most successful in club history, with many names standing the test of time. Those identifiable in this 1894 photograph are: captain Alex Dick (seated middle, holding ball), George Vautin (seated two to Dick's left), Albert Thurgood (seated left of Vautin), Charles Forbes (standing eighth from right), secretary Lou Dallas (standing sixth from left), and Fred Ball (standing fourth from right).

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COACH: John Worrall became the VFL's first supercoach, his philosophies and training methods producing five premierships in seven years at Carlton (1906-08) and Essendon (1911-12).

© CARLTON FOOTBALL CLUB



WORRALL'S WIZARDRY

They would call him the “Napoleon of Football”, so effective was John Worrall at teaching and implementing a system of team play that would hold up consistently throughout a football season.¹ In an era when the team captain would oversee the types of duties which we now come to recognise as being those of a coach, Worrall’s success at firstly Carlton, then Essendon, helped to revolutionise the role a coach would come to play in Australian Rules football.

His proven methods were on show at Carlton when, between 1906 and 1908, Worrall led the club to three consecutive premierships—their first in the VFL. Indeed, the determined former Australian Test cricketer (11 Tests from 1885 to 1899²), Fitzroy rover and captain (VFA 1884-1892) had “raised Carlton from a veritable slough of despond to the highest pinnacle of fame and success.”³ But, the Carlton “wirepullers, who were jealous of his influence on the team, set to work and worked him out.”⁴ And so, after Worrall had a falling out with the Blues in 1909, and then spent 1910 mentoring the VFL umpires, again ahead of his time, Essendon pounced before the commencement of the 1911 season.

Some six months after the ‘Same Old’ had signed Worrall—“for three pounds ten shillings a week, to be increased to four pounds per week should the team play finals”—they had claimed their third VFL flag, defeating Collingwood by six points: 5.11 (41) to 4.11 (35).⁵

In the aftermath of the victory, which broke a 10-year premiership drought, ‘Follower’ in the *Leader* proclaimed that, “It was a lucky day for Essendon when the Carlton club, rent by factional squabbles, decided to let Worrall go.”⁶ Indeed, his immediate influence on the Essendon side was recognisable from as early as the opening month of the season when, after a draw in the first round against Carlton, the ‘Same Old’ proceeded to defeat Richmond by 47 points, a goalless Melbourne (38 points), and then a listless reigning premier, Collingwood (85 points). “Jack Worrall has done wonders with the Essendon team,” wrote ‘Follower’, “as he has with others, and with their great pace and excellent system they will take a lot of beating this season.”⁷

Although Essendon had played off against Worrall’s Blues in the 1908 Grand Final (falling nine points short), and had finished fourth in the following two seasons, the club was far from a united group—both on the field and off. On the field, they were undisciplined, with a number of violent incidents during the period drawing

1 *Leader*, 30 September 1911, p. 20.

2 Worrall also played 131 First Class matches for Victoria. An all-rounder for Victoria, but a Test batsman, he had a Test average of 25.15, with five fifties, and a top score of 76 (run out), in the third Test against England at Headingley in June 1899. For Victoria he made seven centuries and 15 fifties, with a highest score of 128 and an average of 20.99. He took 105 wickets for Victoria, with a best of 5/20 and a per wicket average of 23.10. [espnricinfo.com]

3 *Leader*, 30 September 1911, p. 20.

4 *Ibid.*

5 Michael Maplestone, *Flying Higher: History of the Essendon Football Club, 1872-1996*, Essendon Football Club, 1996, p. 79.

6 *Leader*, 30 September 1911, p. 20.

7 *Leader*, 27 May 1911, p. 19.



BACK ON TOP: In 1911, under coach John Worrall (pictured top right), Essendon won their first premiership since 1901. It was Worrall's fourth flag since 1906, having won three with Carlton (1906-08). He would add to his impressive record the following season, claiming his fifth, and last, premiership as a VFL coach. This picture of the 1911 Essendon premiership team includes Vernon Hazel, William Griffith, Dan Hanley, R.V Monteith, William Busbridge, Len Bowe, Wally Chalmers, William Sewart, Fred O'Shea, Pat Shea, Lou Armstrong, Percy Ogden, Jack Kirby, Dave Smith(captain), William Walker, Fred Baring, George McCleod and Ern Cameron.

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EARLY HOME: The Same Olds meet Collingwood at the East Melbourne Ground in 1909, their primary home venue until the 1922 move to Windy Hill. The row of houses in the background lies on Jolimont Road.

the ire of the press. They had also suffered numerous injuries to key personnel. Off the field, there was dissension between senior players and committeemen, including a dispute between then-skipper Bill Griffith and his fellow star defender, Len Bowe, that saw the captain offer his resignation, a move which the committee refused to accept.

With a number of talented players on the club's list, including the likes of Griffith and Bowe, ruckman Allan Belcher, future skipper and the club's first official "playing-coach" Dave Smith [Griffith was on-field captain under Smith's 'coaching' (1909-10)], champion follower Bill Busbridge, a young Fred Baring, talented wingman Fred O'Shea, and one of the VFL's best half-forwards in Patty Shea, what Essendon needed was a leader who could unite the club, on and off the field. In signing Worrall, the committee had played their finest hand.

Worrall believed that a football club—committee, players, administrators alike—“should all work in harmony, and have implicit faith and confidence in each other.” He said that footballers “are like soldiers the wide world over” in that they “require leading and instructing.” Like a good army general, he demanded discipline among his troops, “otherwise when a game takes an adverse turn the best 18 alive becomes a mere rabble.” Worrall felt that good management meant “fomenting good fellowship amongst the players”; and then, when the players are “pals” anything is possible.

His views on strategy, of “coaching a team to improve”, were fascinating, and, in comparison to today's scientific approach to the craft, Worrall's belief that “each individual member should possess intimate knowledge of all the points and intricacies of the game” is perhaps the earliest precursor to today's highly structured training schedules: where players are put through numerous meetings each week to analyse and dissect the previous match, and to prepare for the one to come. “Brains before brawn every time,” he wrote in 1908.⁸

According to John Ritchie, in his entry on Worrall in the *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, as coach, “he donned togs at training sessions, organised strict schedules, demanded unflinching courage and imposed stern discipline.”⁹ And his players responded in kind. Smith, having played 121 games since 1903, was elected captain in place of Griffith and would act as Worrall's voice out on the field, a tandem act which became critical to Essendon's success. During breaks in play, coach and captain would discuss tactics “across the pickets”¹⁰, as the coach was not yet permitted to sit inside the boundary line. Smith's previous position as a kind of on field coach made him the ideal captain to implement Worrall's plans.

However, aware that Smith could not



⁸ John Worrall's quotes on coaching were sourced from *The Argus*, 18 July 1908, p. 14.

⁹ For more on Worrall, see: <http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/worrall-john-9192>.

¹⁰ *The Australasian*, 6 May 1911, p. 23.



instruct every teammate on the field (although Smith had played in *every* position throughout his career), Worrall suggested, and Smith consented, to allowing rover Lou Armstrong to also provide on-field leadership. The “innovation seemed to work well.”¹¹ This delegation—the sharing of the

load—was all part of Worrall’s aim to develop leaders across the field who could act strongly, and accordingly, in any situation.

The ‘Same Old’ won 15 games during the home and away rounds—the most in club history to that point—earning them top position, two games clear of South Melbourne, followed by Carlton and Collingwood.

¹¹ *Leader*, 5 July 1911, p. 18.



Scheduled to play Worrall's old club, Carlton, in their semi-final, the two teams (along with Collingwood and South Melbourne in their semi) created history when they wore numbers on the backs of their jumpers to help spectators to recognise their favourite players: the first time this had occurred in Melbourne. According to Michael Maplestone, "Essendon

players wore small red numbers under their sash. This was only experimental and all numbers were posted on boards on either end of the ground."¹² By 1912, this would become commonplace with the introduction of the *Football Record* to further assist the supporter in following the play of their favourite footballers.

Essendon defeated Carlton by 21 points, running away in the last quarter thanks to an "electrifying finish" once they "suddenly developed system", a system that had been missing in the first three quarters.¹³ The barnstorming finish saw the 'Same Olds' kick 5.6 to just 1.1, more than doubling their score from the previous three quarters. The finish would have pleased Worrall no end, as he admitted that he was always wary of tapering his team's training loads to ensure they were at their peak come finals time. This was a fact that was noted by 'Follower' in *The Age* after the game, who wrote that Worrall's "acknowledged skill and judgment in so working a team as to leave them with a considerable reserve of force and vitality" was something he "seems to have mastered."¹⁴

Despite a season-ending injury to Belcher, Essendon continued that strong form into the Grand Final the following week, holding off the Magpies to claim the flag. Armstrong, Baring, Bowe and Busbridge were all standouts.

The 1911 premiership victory was clear evidence of Worrall's leadership. In the *Daily Post*, 'Umpire' wrote that, "any team enjoying the benefit of J. Worrall's instruction and coaching has an immense advantage over all its rivals ... in his first season the result has been a brilliant and successful revival of Essendon's glory. Worrall has, in the most practical manner, earned the reputation of being a veritable wizard of the football world." It was declared that "his equal could probably not be found in Australia."¹⁵ ■

LOST AND FOUND: It was not until 2013, some 101 years after securing the club's 1912 premiership, that Essendon was able to display a team photo from the 1912 season. In 2013, an Essendon supporter contacted manager of collections at Essendon, Gregor McCaskie, having bought this photograph for \$10 at a garage sale. Of the players pictured, all but three have been identified. They are:
THIRD ROW, FROM LEFT: Bill Griffith, Frank Caine, Fred Baring, Dan Hanley, Patrick Shea.
SECOND ROW: Bill Walker, Ernie Cameron (third from left), Allan Belcher, Lou Armstrong, Percy Odgen, Les White (second from right). **FRONT ROW:** Len Bowe, Bill Sewart, Wally Chalmers and Jim Martin.


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¹² Maplestone, *Flying Higher*, p. 81.

¹³ *The Age*, 18 September 1911, p. 15.

¹⁴ Ibid.

¹⁵ *Daily Post*, 30 September 1911, p. 14.

A full-page photograph of Michael Long, an Australian Rules footballer, celebrating on a green grass field. He is wearing a black and red Adelaide Crows jersey with 'NUBR' visible on the back, black shorts, and red and black striped socks. He has his arms raised in a 'V' shape and is looking down. The background is a vast, green football field under bright sunlight, with long shadows cast on the grass.

SCINTILLATING: Michael Long's performance during the 1993 finals series was as good as any in AFL history. Long's runs through the middle of the MCG brought crowds to their feet, while his celebration after 'that' goal in the opening quarter of the Grand Final remains a special moment for anybody who witnessed his heroics that day.

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CATCH ME IF YOU CAN

If the 1984 come-from-behind triumph was the most famous of Essendon's premierships, where does that leave the 1993 victory? Most popular? Most exciting? Most unlikely?

What the Baby Bombers (dubbed as such because, of the 20 who played in the triumphant Grand Final, 12 were aged under 25 years) achieved in the 1993 season was nothing short of remarkable: winning the pre-season night premiership, rising from eighth in 1992 to ending the home and away rounds of 1993 on top of the AFL ladder, Gavin Wanganeen winning the Brownlow Medal, and then the roller-coaster of the finals: a two-point loss to Carlton in the qualifying final made it tough to make the Grand Final, but an easy win in the first semi-final against West Coast led to another cut throat assignment against Adelaide, lining up for its first preliminary final in just its third season.

The run looked over, as the Bombers trailed by 42 points at half-time before turning it around in an astonishing second half, kicking 11.3 to 2.4, propelling them to an all the way win in the Grand Final over Carlton a week later. It was, indeed, a season to remember.

If Leon Baker's two rapid fire goals in the final quarter of the '84 Grand Final were the inspiration to go on and win the flag that day, then Michael Long's running, bouncing, goal-scoring feats through '93 did the same for the class of 1993.

It was appropriate that in the year of Long's enlightenment, in a season which he ran,—no, *glided*—

weaved, bounced, tackled and roamed across football fields throughout the country, the world was celebrating the Year of Indigenous People.

It was as if it was pre-destined: the more Essendon's improbable rise up the ladder gained momentum, a stage was being set for one of the most thrilling individual showpieces imaginable. It was the stuff of dreams. *The Age's* Martin Flanagan wrote of Long: "There had been great Aboriginal players before him, but none exactly like him ... There was a new wizardry in the game, an Aboriginal wizardry."¹

Coach Kevin Sheedy and recruiting guru Noel Judkins could not believe their luck when it became evident that the stick-thin, gangly Long, was going to slip through the cracks and land in their lap during the 1988 National Draft. Having first observed the Northern Territory-born product of Stolen Generation parents at an Under-17 national carnival a year earlier, and then at West Torrens Football Club in South Australia during 1988, the duo was doing some dreaming of their own on draft day, in the hope that Long would be passed on by other clubs until their third selection (pick 23).

Judkins recalled, "There were two picks to go until we got to have our third selection and there was a long delay while Geelong considered its next selection. Sheeds turned to me and said, 'I reckon we'll get this bloke, I don't think these clubs want him.' Sure enough it came to our turn and

¹ Martin Flanagan, *The Short Long Book*, Vintage, 2015, p.44.



BABY BOMBERS: Dubbed the Baby Bombers, Essendon's 1993 team played with an unhindered freedom that surprised everybody – including Kevin Sheedy – as they took all before them on their way to a famous premiership.
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he was still available—we couldn't believe it."²

In Long's first season, 1989, it was so cold during the Melbourne winter that, according to football manager Kevin Egan, Long "would climb into the sauna" at Windy Hill and "refuse to get out unless he absolutely had to."³ When Mark Harvey, then entering his sixth season, first laid eyes on the shy, rangy 19-year-old, he thought, "He is going to get killed" playing League football.⁴

The 1993 preliminary final was game 101 for the now 23-year-old Long. A few weeks earlier, he had confided to president, David Shaw, that he had dreamt of playing a key role in an Essendon premiership, showcasing the relationship between indigenous Australians and the indigenous game of Australian football.⁵ But, walking from the MCG at half-time, his side trailing the Adelaide Crows by 42 points, that vision was becoming cloudy; the Bombers' hopes of a fairy-tale finish to a fairytale season all but extinguished.

There was, however, a moment mid-way through the first quarter that gave warning of what was to come: With the ball in dispute

70 metres from Essendon's goal, Long gathered and, for a split second, time appeared to stand still. Then, as if giving himself permission, he tucked the ball under his arm, evaded the tackle of Adelaide midfielder Andrew Jarman, took one bounce and drilled a 45-metre goal. At the next centre bounce, another pathway opened up and Long again charged away from Jarman, before passing to full-forward, Paul Salmon. It was only 30 seconds of brilliance, but it gave Adelaide's coach, Graham Cornes, plenty to think about.

Long's brilliance aside, it was the belief that was built in the dressing room at half-time that kick-started the revival, as defender David Grenvold explained. "At half-time, captain Mark Thompson grabbed us on the ground and said, 'Look, the Crows have no upside, they can't play any better. If we can be within three or four goals of the Crows by three quarter-time, we'll roll over them in the last term.' 'Bomber' [Thompson] didn't panic and was really level-headed, and so we put all our energy and focus into that third quarter."⁶

Veteran Tim Watson recalled Sheedy saying at half-time, "Okay, we've got ourselves into a difficult situation [but] we've got an

² Simon Matthews, *Champions of Essendon: Ranking the 60 Greatest Bombers of All Time*, Hardie Grant, 2002, p. 151.

³ Ibid., p. 152

⁴ Ibid.

⁵ *The Age*, 27 September 1993.

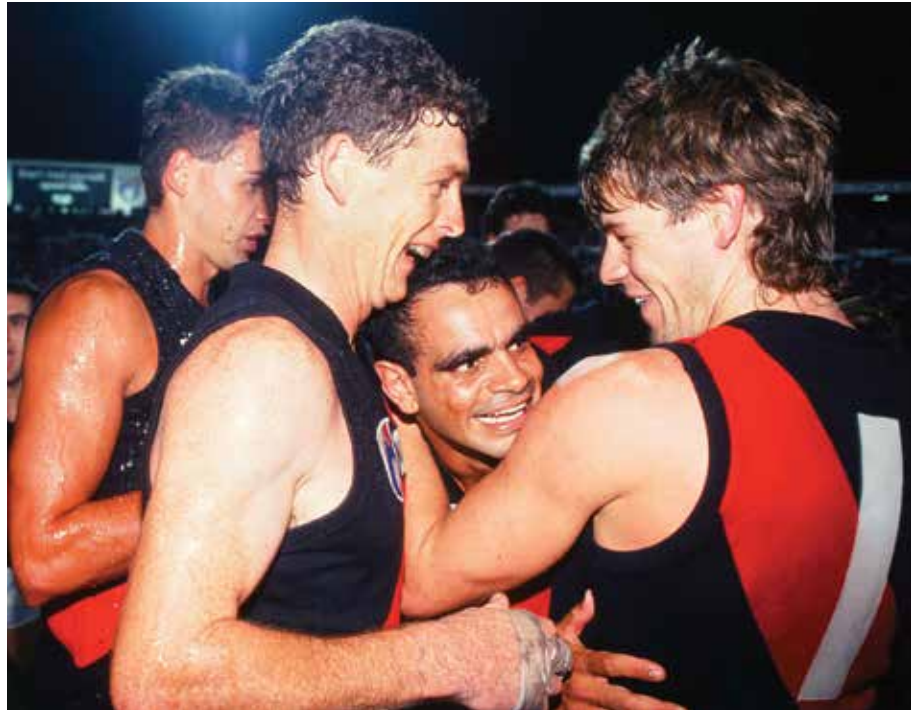
⁶ David Grenvold, interview with the author, 2015.

opportunity to show everyone what we're capable of doing, and we don't get many great opportunities like this to turn it around." The master coach also asked Watson, who he had coaxed out of retirement at the beginning of that season, after Watson had hung up his boots after the 1991 elimination final loss, "Is this how you want it all to end?"⁷

Back-pocket Wanganeen—another of Essendon's indigenous stars—recalled that Sheedy "spilt his heart out to us" by "talking about how our families, our wives, our parents are all in the stands watching." Sheedy told the players to go out and play for all those people. "It was very motivating and emotional," Wanganeen said. "He just got us going."⁸ Although the year would be celebrated for the 'babies' in the team, at its most critical juncture it was the cool heads of the 'old timers' that would prove decisive.

It was Long who got the first centre clearance of the third term; he then spoiled an Adelaide kick-in that resulted in a Darren Bewick goal—the Bombers were away. Long then stole the ball at the next centre bounce, charging clear again. Minutes later, his bouncing run down the wing ended with a Salmon goal. Not only were they big plays, they brought a crowd that had been stunned in the second quarter back to life. The pressure was suddenly on the Crows, no more evident than when Jarman hit the goal post from 15 metres out. Assistant coach, Neale Daniher recalled, "It was all about hanging in, hanging in."⁹

According to ruck-rover Gary O'Donnell, there were "two key things that happened" in the third quarter. "Firstly, there was a build-up from full-back where all the young kids had a touch of the footy. Dustin Fletcher gathered it and got it to Wanganeen, he found Ricky Olarens Shaw who bounced through the middle, then Davey Calthorpe passed to Mark Mercuri who kicked a long goal: the build up from defence to attack was huge, and the noise and expectation of the crowd was enormous.



As a player, that was the biggest roar I ever heard when Mark kicked that goal."¹⁰ Indeed, even today, if you watch Mercuri's goal on the replay, there's a chill that shoots up the spine.

The second key was Jarman's howler from point-blank range. "It happened at a time when Adelaide needed a goal just to stop our momentum, and I thought, 'You beauty, we've got them,'" O'Donnell said.

Bewick kicked his sixth goal, equalling the scores, and then Long threw himself at a loose ball, tapped it to Watson, who handballed to O'Donnell and, suddenly, Essendon was in front. Wanganeen's desperate tackle on David Brown was as crucial as any play in the dying minutes. And then the sealer came when Watson, drawing on every reserve of energy, completed the fairytale by snapping truly from 50 metres out. Long threw his arms around Bewick on the final siren, but surely no picture captured the magnitude of the moment more than that of an exhausted Watson, barely able to walk, being leant on by the up-and-coming, baby-faced James Hird: the look of relief on Watson's face, and the awe on Hird's, then just 20, and playing his 19th game, was priceless. It was on to the Grand Final against Carlton.

CENTRAL FIGURE: Michael Long (second from right), was the central figure of Essendon's 1993 season. But he had many helpers, including Peter Cransberg (left), Chris Daniher (second from left), and Mark Harvey (right), all pictured here after the club's 1993 win over Richmond in the Foster's Cup night series.

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⁷ Tim Watson, *The Jigsaw Man: The Piecing Together of a Super Coach*, Pan Macmillan, 2006, p. 146.

⁸ Gavin Wanganeen's quote was sourced from Jai Bednall's article on the *Herald Sun* website, 24 September 2015.

⁹ Neale Daniher, interview with the author, 2015.

¹⁰ Gary O'Donnell, interview with the author, 2014.

SPIRITUAL: It had been quite the journey for Michael Long (pictured holding the 2000 premiership cup while being bear-hugged by ruckman John Barnes, with Justin Blumfield – left – and Damien Hardwick – right – also soaking up the win), and along the way he became a beacon for the plight of Australia's indigenous community. Through football, Long was able to bring attention to his people in a way that few before him had been able to do.

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Flanagan wrote that Long's performance in the 1993 Grand Final "was one of sustained intensity and frenetic pace. No-one could go with him, no-one could get near him."¹¹

This was never more evident than at the seven-minute-mark of the first quarter. Fletcher kicked long from full-back to just short of the centre, rover Sean Denham sharked the ball and took off; so, too, did Long. As the Carlton players closed in on Denham, Long suddenly, magically, found himself in the clear on the outer wing. Denham fired the ball out to his speedy winger, Long took two quick bounces, glanced at the umpire to ensure a free kick had not been paid against his teammate who was shepherding behind, then he composed himself—all the time looking ahead to see where the best space was to move into—Sheedy said that Long was "picking the menu"¹²—then he cut inboard, bounced again, eluded a tackler and drilled a low, bullet-like kick for goal. Carlton defender, Stephen Silvagni, pleaded his case that he had touched the shot on the line, but, perhaps sensing the moment, the goal umpire, without hesitation, signalled a goal.

It was scintillating, mesmerising and unforgettable. As Long made his way back to the centre, the look on his face said everything: "No-one can catch me, this is my moment."

According to Neale Daniher, the "famous Michael Long goal" was a set play devised in Grand Final week. "We'd practised that on the Thursday! The Fletcher long kick, to the runners, then the goal, everything just worked exactly how we'd planned it. In the coach's box, I was going to say 'What about that, Kev?' but, it was too early in the game to gloat."¹³

Said Harvey: "Michael had the ability to embarrass the opposition when he got the ball, by getting around them and making them look like they were standing still. But he also had the ability to then bring his teammates into the game, which made us all look good. It might

have only been 15 or 20 possessions, but it was the will-of-the-wisp and what he could do, and the excitement. You play in a team with Michael, and you see him do that, you just find this confidence, and a belief, that we were going to win that game. We would think, 'they're not going to beat us today because Michael's on.'"¹⁴

When it was all over, and Essendon had recorded a famous 44-point triumph, there was only one moment left for Long's dream to become reality: he was awarded the Norm Smith Medal for best player on the ground, and it was presented to him by the spiritual leader, in a football sense, of all indigenous footballers: Maurice Rioli, the 1982 winner of the Medal. In the Year of Indigenous People, Australian football, through Michael Long, had a new hero. And Essendon had a 15th premiership cup.

For Michael Long, this was just the beginning. He has become a true leader of his people, standing up against racism in sport, a role that led to the AFL, in 1995, enacting its racial and religious vilification policy.

On retirement, he became a true activist, and in 2004, frustrated at the inability of Governments to act positively on behalf of indigenous Australians, Long decided to front the issue head on, embarking on a walk from Melbourne to Canberra to meet with Prime Minister John Howard. The *Long Walk* is now part of the AFL's annual *Dreamtime Game*—a Sheedy initiative to celebrate indigenous culture and its growing impact on the AFL.

After captaining Essendon in 1999, Long retired in 2001, after, 190 games and two premierships. He was a finalist in the Australian of the Year awards in 2011 for his contributions to indigenous culture, and in 2005 he was named on the wing in the Indigenous Team of the Century. In 2007 was inducted into the Australian Football Hall of Fame. He is also a member of Essendon's Team of the Century and, in 2002, was named 23rd in a list naming the *Champions of Essendon*. ■



¹¹ Flanagan, *The Short Long Book*, p.44.

¹² Ibid., p. 45.

¹³ Neale Daniher, interview with the author, 2015.

¹⁴ Mark Harvey, interview with the author, 2016.



BELONGING: In the late 1980s, Essendon under Kevin Sheedy set out to create an environment that enabled indigenous footballers to feel at home in the VFL/AFL. The results were a resounding success. Pictured clockwise from top left are: Dean Dick, Patrick Ryder, Nathan Lovett-Murray, Courtney Dempsey, Leroy Jetta, Andrew Lovett, Alwyn Davey, Sheedy, and Richard Cole.

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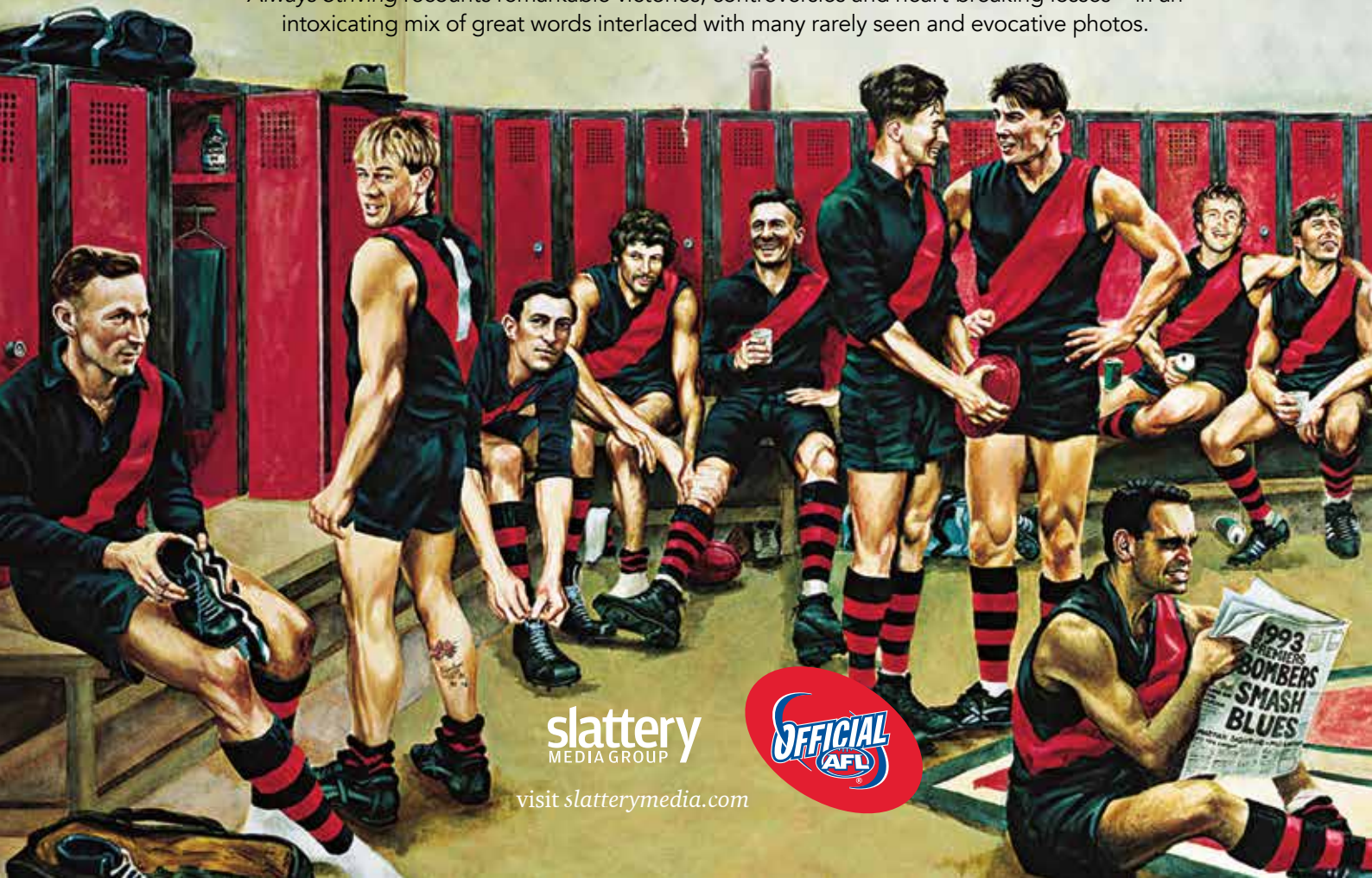
ALWAYS STRIVING

THE KEY MOMENTS THAT HAVE MADE THE ESSENDON FOOTBALL CLUB

Whether it was John Coleman's high flying in the 1950s, Tim Watson's blistering runs through the centre during the 1980s, Michael Long's artistry in the 1993 finals, or Matthew Lloyd's goal-scoring feats of the early 2000s, Essendon supporters all have their favourite memories. In *Always Striving*, you can re-live your favourites and engage in many more from the club's beginnings in 1872.

Through one-on-one interviews and archival research, storyteller Dan Eddy has produced a new and insightful history of the Essendon Football Club in its remarkable journey from the Same Olds to the high-flying Bombers. Essendon's history is littered with champion players, and super coaches—like Albert Thurgood, Jack Worrall, Dick Reynolds, Bill Hutchison, John Coleman, Kevin Sheedy, James Hird and so many more.

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