

CHAMPIONS

OF OUR

TIME

Two modern-day greats are celebrated in the re-release of a book celebrating the careers of football icons.



STEVE JOHNSON

STEVE JOHNSON has been one of the most entertaining players of the modern era. Blessed with freakish skills, he loves the big stage and rarely disappoints. He played 253 games and kicked 452 goals for Geelong from 2002-15 and was a member of the Cats' 2007, 2009 and 2011 premiership teams, winning the Norm Smith Medal in 2007. He has joined Greater Western Sydney in 2016.

MAD MAGPIE

What got me interested in footy was going along to watch my local side, Wangaratta, with my old man, Terry. I can remember from the age of five I always had a footy in my hands, and I used to love getting out on the ground at quarter-time and half-time and having a kick with my mates. Some of my best friendships have come from footy, so it's always been a happy place for me.

I grew up barracking for Collingwood. I was fortunate that my family were AFL Members, so we used to travel down from Wangaratta to Melbourne to watch the footy seven or eight times a year. In the early days my idol was Peter Daicos. Then, when he retired, my idol became Nathan Buckley because he was by far the best player at Collingwood at the time.

I can see how there are similarities in the way Peter Daicos played and how I play. In his day he was clearly the best in the AFL at snapshots for goal, and the banana kicks and all those different tricky attempts on goal, and I have no doubt I tried to emulate him in some way.

CALL ME STEVE

Geelong is a unique and ideal place to play footy. Leading up to the 2001 AFL draft I would have gone anywhere to play, but when I was selected by Geelong (at No. 24) I was as happy as I could possibly be because within a few weeks I knew it was the perfect place to play footy. The players become part of the furniture down in Geelong and the people there are so used to seeing us that it's not a surprise when they do bump into us in the street. I'm just 'Steve' to everyone there, not 'Stevie J' – that's a media tag.

I had a lot of belief in my own ability. I knew if I could get my fitness to an acceptable AFL level I could play some good footy. I was drafted with Jimmy Bartel (selected at pick eight), James Kelly (pick 17) and Gary Ablett jnr (pick 40 under the father-son rule), and we all drove each other to improve from the word go, which fast-tracked us along. We were also thrown into senior footy from a young age as part of Mark 'Bomber' Thompson's plan to get games into his young players.

Thompson didn't change a lot after the well-publicised internal review at the end of 2006 that nearly saw him sacked by the club. The way he taught us, as individuals, to play footy was brilliant and also the way he went about structuring training. But what did change was the buy-in of the players to what Mark and the club were trying to do.

When Tom Harley was selected as captain at the start of 2007, he wasn't one of our standout players. But of all the players, it was he who, internally, led the playing group the best and that's why he was chosen. Tom drove the standards of the club and he had the respect of every player on the list.

PULL YOUR HEAD IN

I made a few mistakes early in my career, which were well publicised. The hardest thing for me during that time was trying to manage injuries at the same time I was trying to improve my fitness and my overall game. I was labelled inconsistent during that period, but I always felt that that inconsistency came from me not being able to put regular sessions together on the training track. I was playing a game, and then missing a week of training because of injury, then playing a couple of games – it was a vicious cycle that I couldn't seem to break out of. I had no continuity in the way I went about things.

I knew that I also needed to make some changes off the field in regards to my behaviours, and those standards were set for me by the likes of Harley, 'Lingy' (Cameron Ling) and Cameron Mooney. While they were very direct with me about where I was going wrong, I knew that what they were telling me was not because they didn't like me: it was because they all wanted me to get better as a person. Their feedback was the key reason for me to turn things around, on and off the field. I was forced to take a good, hard look at myself at the end of 2006 and I began to prepare myself the best

I possibly could. I learned how to better look after my body and recover between matches. Since then, it's all been pretty good.

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STEVE JOHNSON

FLAGGING SUCCESS

I kicked a couple of goals early in the 2007 Grand Final and from then on I just had fun all day. I was playing on a half-forward flank and the ball was moving down the ground so swiftly and so often – I would have hated to be a Port Adelaide defender. Every single guy in our team contributed that day and the Norm Smith Medal could have gone to any number of players. Even though I was awarded the medal, I was just so relieved to get a premiership under my belt – finally. I think every player would like to say they could perform well on the big stage of a Grand Final and I am certainly no different in that regard. But until you get there, you just don't know how you're going to handle it.

Once we tasted premiership success, we were hungry and driven to win more. That next pre-season was one of our best and we had an outstanding season, losing only one game (to Collingwood by 86 points in round nine), but on Grand Final day things just didn't go our way. Hawthorn took their chances and that's what it takes to win Grand Finals. You have to be the best team on the day, and unfortunately we weren't.

I don't think the disappointment of losing that game will ever leave me. It was very hard to cop and I used to hate turning on the TV and seeing footage of Hawthorn celebrating on the podium. It stung us all and it made us so motivated to get back there again.

Leading into the 2009 Grand Final, I felt we weren't the best side in it that year – I thought St Kilda had the better season. But, like in 2008, where we had been the best side through the year but had lost the Grand Final, I knew anything could happen on the day. We didn't use that 2008 loss as motivation because it was a new season. It was a gutsy performance by us to win the 2009

Grand Final, although I had a pretty poor game myself – I not only battled a hip injury going into that game, but I also battled Steven Baker, who tried some very dodgy tactics on me in order to stop me going near the ball. He was hard to play against because he was such a good tagger. While he took the points against me, we won the Grand Final, so I was happy.

When I injured my knee in the 2011 preliminary final against West Coast, it was a huge challenge to get myself fit for the Grand Final. Initially, when I suffered the injury I thought that I was gone for all money because the pain was excruciating. I could see my kneecap sitting a couple of inches away from the centre of my knee. But when I had scans two days later they said there wasn't much structural damage, meaning I had done a lot of minor damage that had caused me to dislocate my kneecap. But if we could find a way to keep that in place and keep the swelling down then I would have a 40-50 per cent chance of playing.

That week I spent a few sessions in a hyperbaric chamber and I was icing it every night: I'd done everything I possibly could, including a fitness test on the eve of the game, but by the end of the week I could still hardly walk. So the doctor put three injections in my knee, and immediately I felt the happiest I had ever felt because the pain was gone and I was able to run up the corridor. So I passed the fitness test. But then, once the injection wore off, the knee felt really sore again. After the Grand Final parade I went back to the hyperbaric chamber and iced it again that night, and woke up in the morning still not knowing if I would be playing. I had injections an hour before the game and it was then that I finally knew that I was going to play.

The one positive was that by focusing on getting my knee right all week, it took my focus away from the occasion and I wasn't as nervous as I might have been otherwise. Of the three premierships that I have won, that one is the most enjoyable and rewarding because I thought that I had lost the opportunity to play in it. The fact that it was against Collingwood, who I had supported as a kid, made it all the more enjoyable. It was also rewarding to win our third flag because, given the success we had had over a five-year period, I felt we deserved a third premiership.

DAN EDDY



LAPPING IT UP: Steve Johnson crawled off the canvas with a serious knee injury to kick four goals in the 2011 Grand Final.

MATTHEW PAVLICH

MATTHEW PAVLICH is an icon with Fremantle and remains the Dockers' greatest player and leader. He is the first WA-based player to play 300 AFL games, has won a club-record six best and fairests and is a six-time All-Australian. A powerhouse forward, he has played 336 games and kicked 670 goals. He captained Fremantle from 2007-15 but has stepped aside in 2016.

DRAFTED

I'd be lying if I said it was total joy when my name was read out by Fremantle in the 1999 draft. There was certainly a tinge of sadness about having to leave South Australia, but I knew there was a high possibility I would go to Fremantle because they had three picks in the first five that year. I was certainly excited by the challenge it presented and I was quite intrigued by the Dockers and Perth in general because I didn't know much about either, but to say that I was over the moon to be drafted to Fremantle would be a lie – I was pretty happy living in Adelaide. My parents were even less enthusiastic than me, but at the same time they knew I had been pursuing a football career for a long time, so they were also extremely excited and proud at the opportunity presented to me.

Having to leave home and move interstate certainly helped me to be sympathetic to recruits who joined the club from other states. I always tried to give them a hand while they assimilated. I've always appreciated what they did for me. Of the senior players at the club, Shaun McManus was one who stood out in trying to help me in any way – he was really inclusive and important early on for all the young players.

TOUGH INITIATION

At my first pre-season training session with Fremantle, I passed out and was rushed to intensive care. That wasn't the ideal way to start an AFL career! I passed out on the Aquinas College oval after a sixth 1km time trial. It was a warm and humid day and I had not prepared myself in the same manner as I would nowadays. I wasn't hydrated enough and my nutrition wasn't good enough before a training session. That was a challenging start. But these days, kids come into a club having already been screened and their training sessions are modified as they adapt to the demands of training at an AFL level. When I started, I was doing full training sessions from the word go and I couldn't handle it. But I didn't want to show any weakness, so I kept pushing until I couldn't go anymore.

I quickly fell in love with the suburb of Fremantle. It's a fantastic suburb to the south-west of Perth, with a lot of ethnic diversity and

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I was pretty happy living in Adelaide

MATTHEW PAVLICH





HAPPY DAYS:
Pavlich celebrates
a goal with
teammate Hayden
Ballantyne.

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I’m
extremely
driven to
get one (a
premiership)
before I retire

PAVLICH



CHAMPIONS: CONVERSATIONS WITH
GREAT PLAYERS & COACHES OF
AUSTRALIAN FOOTBALL BY BEN
COLLINS AND DAN EDDY. PUBLISHED BY
SLATTERY MEDIA GROUP. RRP \$49.95

a great mix of cultures. Quite an eclectic bunch of individuals and groups have gravitated there. It has a great art and music scene and, being on the water, it’s just a great place to live. There’s also a rich history in football at both South and East Fremantle Football Clubs, with some absolute legends of the game.

FIRST GAME

When I ran out for my first AFL game (against Melbourne in round five, 2000, at the Melbourne Cricket Ground) I had a big smile on my face. It was what I had always dreamed of doing. I was fortunate that I had the ball land in my lap in the goalsquare just a few seconds into the game. Brendon Fewster tumbled a punt and I read it off the boot and had a goal from my first kick. I also goaled from my second kick after taking a contested mark – so, two kicks, two goals, and I thought, ‘Gee, this is easy!’ But I soon found out that the caper was pretty hard and I ended up having a pretty tough night playing on Melbourne’s captain, David Neitz. I worked out very quickly that there was a lot more to AFL footy than kicking two goals with your first two kicks.

STAYING LOYAL

There were a couple of times when I came close to leaving Fremantle. The first was in 2002, and then again a bit later on in my career. I explored the offers, but I always thought there was unfinished business at

Fremantle: I’d started something here and I wanted to see it through and I wanted to be a leader in that capacity. So even though I was offered a chance to go home, I was never fully committed to leaving the club. I certainly see myself as a Fremantle player through and through.

COACHING UPHEAVAL

Mark Harvey, who was sacked at the end of 2010, brought some real hardness and experience to the club. He was involved in the rebuild and he put faith in younger players, and a lot of those players are part of our core group now. When Mark was sacked, I believe the players would have felt one of three things: they would either have been happy that there was change and a new opportunity for them; they would have been disappointed because they liked Mark and they saw it as a poor change for them; or they would have been quite unsure about whether it was a good thing or a bad thing. My challenge as captain and part of our leadership group was to try and get everyone to see the upside – the silver lining – to the change, and to get them to embrace Ross (Lyon) and his new philosophies really early so we didn’t fall behind. It took our team a little while to understand exactly what Ross wanted and what he was trying to implement. But his broader philosophies on coaching, on team management and on life were running parallel to what I believed,

so it was quite easy for me to embrace what Ross was trying to drive because he was singing from the same hymn book I had been using.

BIG YEAR

The 2013 season was a big year for me. I had the birth of my first child, Harper Rose, and I played in a Grand Final. I had an interrupted year because of some surgery and other ailments, which really held me back. In hindsight, while it was a fantastic year for the football club to reach our first Grand Final, on a personal level it was quite a challenging year with being a new dad and dealing with injury setbacks. I still needed to lead the players as I dealt with my own challenges, and also to help the other leaders of our team who were out there on game-day when I wasn’t. It certainly produced an interesting dynamic for me, but one I tried to embrace. Getting to a Grand Final is a phenomenal experience and one I’ll never forget. Although the result of the day itself was obviously disappointing for us, it was incredible to run out there and have an opportunity at something you ultimately dream of and hope to achieve.

We wasted our chances in that game. We started really poorly and our composure with the ball was a long way off our expected standard. Not only did we miss some easy chances in front of goal, we also turned the ball over a lot around the ground. So we weren’t giving ourselves an opportunity to score and execute, despite having a number of inside-50s early on. Our ball use and our composure really let us down and Hawthorn capitalised on it going the other way. As the game wore on, we worked our way into it and we started to really dominate, but, unfortunately, we let ourselves down with some of our structures and our hardness at the end which cost us the game. It’s a bitter pill to swallow.

AFL premierships aren’t gifted to you. I’m extremely driven to get one before I retire – I wouldn’t be playing otherwise. There’s only one job left and that’s to be a part of the ultimate team success. To play with a group that gives a really high level of effort day-in and day-out is phenomenal – I’m inspired by them. ☺

BEN COLLINS