

As perfected by Geelong premiership star Steve Johnson, the 'J Curve' round-the-body set shot for goal has become the kick of choice for most forwards in the modern game.

ASHLEY BROWNE

BEND IT LIKE STEVIE J

The set snap. The kick around the body. The J Curve.

Call it what you will, but rarely has there been such a fundamental change in how players have executed their set-shot kicking for goal, which is one of the most important requirements in the game and one that, depending on the execution, can fundamentally affect the result of a match.

Up until the late 1970s, one of the beautiful aspects of Australian Football was the variety of kicking styles and techniques.

The place kick was long gone, but go to a game at any of the suburban venues around the country and you would

find well-schooled and highly-skilled exponents of the different types of kicks – drop kicks, stab passes, torpedoes, flat punts and drop punts.

But as professionalism crept into the game and rudimentary analytics began to be applied, only the drop punt survived.

For more than 20 years, players rarely tried anything else, save for the occasional 'barrel', and then usually just for time and distance late in quarters.

But then along came flamboyant Geelong forward Steve Johnson.

The unorthodox kid who spent countless hours practising set snaps from the pockets of the footy grounds of Wangaratta, took his talents to the AFL

and when he was ready, began taking set shots for goal from around his body.

He first unveiled the kick in a 2008 game against Carlton at Marvel Stadium. And goalkicking was never quite the same since.

AFL skills coaching guru David Wheadon charted the rise of the set-shot snap in his latest book, *The Art of Goalkicking*, and has identified why it has become the kick of choice for many of the game's best forwards, particularly when having a set shot from 40m or closer.

But before embracing all that is good about the set-shot snap, it is worth examining how we got here.

Kicking for goal is as much a mental exercise as it is physical.



AROUND THE CORNER: Young Magpie Jack Ginnivan displays the set-snap goalkicking technique in Collingwood's round eight clash against Richmond.



"Any skill where you have time to think about failure can be difficult," Wheadon told the *AFL Record*, citing the similarities between goalkicking and foul throw shooting in basketball and putting on the golf course.

"There is fear and anxiety of the result. Mental pressure can interfere with technique, which is why some golfers get the yips. They can't take the putt back."

There are three reasons why the set snap has become so prevalent.

1: MORE BOOT ON BALL

The ball makes contact across the boot. As Wheadon says, "There's a greater contact area and therefore a greater area for forgiveness and mis-hits. It's the same theory as Peter Hudson and John Coleman used. They laid the ball flat across their boot."

2: A SIMPLE RUN-UP

Not much can go wrong with the approach because it's usually only three steps. "One of the major technical causes for (drop

punt) set-shot failures is players running off the line on their approach," he said.

3: IT FEELS MORE NORMAL

Kicks in general play, especially as players try to pinpoint a teammate, often resemble the set snap. "The drop punt in front of goal with 80,000 people looking at you can be a very lonely place, particularly the longer it takes," Wheadon said.

Over the first seven weeks of this season, the top-10 set-snap goalscorers kicked 48.14, which represents a 77 per cent accuracy rate. Drop punts were being converted at 60 per cent accuracy.

Last season, some of the competition's leading forwards were converting their set snaps with remarkable accuracy. Coleman medallist Harry McKay kicked 25.5, Tom Hawkins 8.2, Josh Kennedy 9.0 and Jack Riewoldt 8.3.

McKay's accuracy rate with the set snap was 83 per cent. With the drop punt, that dropped to 53 per cent.

Naturally, the set snap works better the closer the player is to the goals, especially from the 15-30m range, which Wheadon calls "the area of humiliation".

"When they miss from there, you have to think it has to be from the neck up," he said.

TOP 10 SET-SHOT GOALKICKERS 2022*

RANGE	SCORE
0-15m	4.0
15-30m	24.4
30-40m	16.7
Outside 40m	4.3

*Up to round seven.

Once players kick from 40m out or longer, the drop punt comes into vogue once more.

As Wheadon explained, "Because the set snap has such a limited run-up and because the leg action goes at 90 degrees from where you want the ball to go, you can't produce as much force into the ball."

Wheadon collaborated with Johnson at Geelong as he



mastered the craft of the set snap. “Steve Johnson was a genius and he worked out that you might only have a metre of straight space when you’re kicking for goal on an angle,” he said.

“He figured out that if you bend the ball going around, it opens up the goal space. The goal space is 6.4m and you might have up to five metres available.

“I said to him, ‘it’s like they kick it in Gaelic footy,’ and he grabbed at it.”

The best exponents of the set-shot snap have spent hours and hours mastering the craft. It might not approach the Malcolm Gladwell ‘10,000 hours’ rule, but they have likely had that many shots at goal to get their techniques right.

“You can teach it,” Wheadon continued. “Most people used to miss near the closest goal post, because the goals are usually closer to you than you think.

“I used to suggest aiming for the far goal post, but now they’re

“ Steve Johnson was a genius

DAVID WHEADON



OPENING UP THE GOAL FACE: Bobby Hill (left) and Tom Hawkins are among the many forwards to adopt the technique.

so good, they wrap it around the closest goal post.

“To do that, you have to hit more of the back of the ball.

“If you want to make it spin from out in front, you have to hit it just behind the centre of the middle third of the ball.

“But they’ve become so good, they don’t need such a big arc anymore.”

As the set snap started to come more into vogue in the middle of the past decade, widespread groans could be heard at AFL venues everywhere as players lined up at right angle to the goals.

The science and the data had yet to be proven, so in the eyes of many supporters, the set snap

represented a lack of care or, even worse, lairising.

As Wheadon visits grassroots clubs around Australia, old-timers still tell him that it doesn’t look right and the occasional coach will ban their players from using it.

“That’s only natural. Things that are new are unpopular at the start and it is different,” he acknowledged.

“But that will change. The kids who are doing it now will end up being better than anyone because they’ll have been taught correctly.

“The thing about the best set-shot kickers is that they visualise and they know what to think. They expect to kick it.”



THE PIONEER

STEVE JOHNSON

When I was a young kid going to local footy and the siren went at half-time, it was straight to the boundary line and just take shots at goal.

And you would never line up as though you were kicking a drop punt; it was to get into the right position to kick a snap and then execute it.

I practised it at Geelong more and more and then we had a game against Carlton when I decided to go back and kick the snap.

I knew it would look funny because nobody had done it before, but I knew that it was the percentage play for me.

Luckily, I executed the first one properly on my right foot and then the second one on my left, and it went on from there.

It raised the question of whether I was lairising, but it wasn’t for me.



THE MASTER

LUKE BREUST

Once I started really practising the set snap, I took confidence that sometimes you could hit it a bit skinny or a bit fat and it would still go through. You don’t have to hit it perfectly.

To be able to run around and open the goal face up and have it work with you makes a big difference to your mentality.

My three-step plan to nail the set-shot snap is as follows:

1. Make sure you know your number of steps and your actual routine.

Sometimes if you take too many steps, you get rushed by someone putting pressure on. Also know what foot you are starting off on.

2. Ball position in your hand is key.

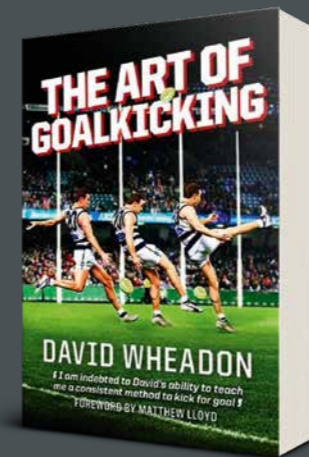
If you face it too much towards you, you’re going to get too much spin on it. If you lay it off across the goals, you’ll potentially belly it.

3. Wherever you start from, you must aim at the far goal post so that it turns from there. The worst thing is to aim shorter or further, because it then turns too much or not far enough.

Whenever I practise, even if it’s with my teammates for a bit of fun with just a coffee riding on the result, I always stick with my routine.

That’s where the practice comes in. You might not feel like you’re refining your craft because you’re mucking around, but at the same time, every shot helps. 🍷

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The Art of Goalkicking
By David Wheadon
Slattery Books
RRP: \$29.95