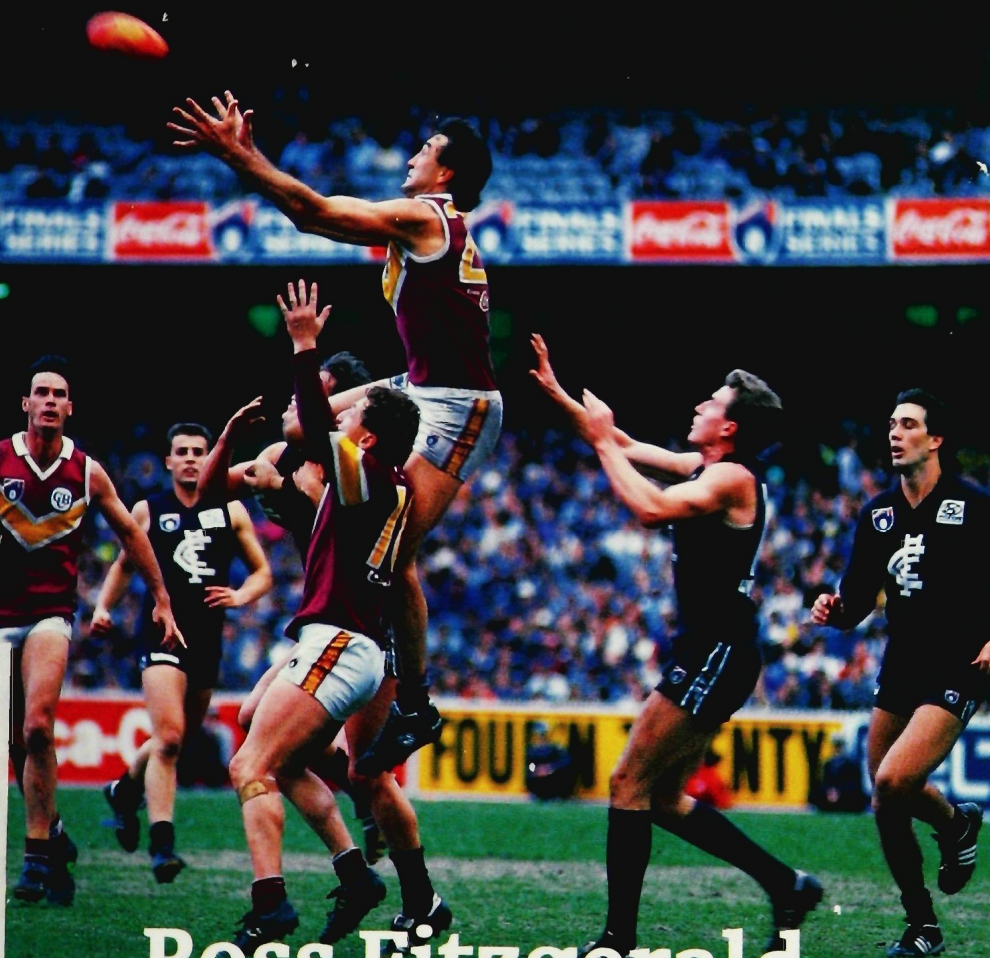


# THE FOOTY CLUB

Inside the Brisbane Bears



**Ross Fitzgerald**

with the assistance of Andrew Berkman

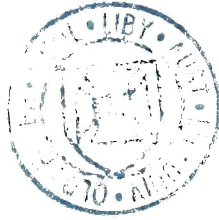
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## **THE FOOTY CLUB**

### Inside the Brisbane Bears

Controversial historian, novelist and political commentator Ross Fitzgerald is the author of nineteen books, including a much praised two-volume history of Queensland, and three Grafton Everest satires — *Pushed from the Wings*, *All About Anthrax*, and *Busy in the Fog*.

Ross Fitzgerald's most recent books are "*Red Ted*": *The Life of E.G. Theodore* (UQP), which was shortlisted for the 1995 NSW Premier's Prize, and *Soaring: A Novel*, which won the Eros Foundation's Book of the Year award.

Associate Professor in History and Politics at Griffith University, Ross Fitzgerald is also editor of two best-selling collections, *The Eleven Deadly Sins* and *The Eleven Saving Virtues*, and co-editor of *The Greatest Game: Writings on Australian Football*.

A long-time Aussie Rules fanatic, he is currently writing a biography of Australia's first and only Communist member of parliament, Fred Paterson.

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# **THE FOOTY CLUB**

## Inside the Brisbane Bears

By Ross Fitzgerald  
with the assistance of Andrew Berkman



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*Cover:* In the last seconds of the Brisbane–Carlton qualifying final at the MCG, 10 September 1995, Bears' skipper, Roger Merrett, flies for a mark. *Left to right:* Scott McIvor, Adrian Whitehead (Carlton), Craig Lambert, Brett Ratten (Carlton) (obscured), Merrett, Michael Sexton (Carlton) and Steve Silvagni (Carlton). (Photograph by John Lucraft)

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management of the Brisbane Bears, without whose  
co-operation this book would not have been possible.*

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The club has courageously encouraged this study of season 1995, warts and all.

# INTRODUCTION

At a time when Collingwood appeared in six consecutive Grand Finals from 1925 to 1930, winning the famous four in a row (1927 to 1930), my father, Bill (“Long Tom”) Fitzgerald, captained the Seconds. Consequently, all my life I have supported the Mighty Magpies.

My first year in Brisbane was 1977. Under legendary coach Tom Hafey, Collingwood had come from being wooden spooners to appearing in the Grand Final — against North Melbourne — for the first time ever. How I would have loved to have been there (standing room was \$2) to see, among others, Andrew Ireland, now Brisbane Bears’ chief executive, play his heart out for the Woodsmen.

For the second time in VFL history, the premiership battle resulted in a draw. I can still see “Twiggy” Dunne at the 32-minute mark of the final quarter standing like an oak in a pack of seven and taking a mark Walter Mitty would have envied. From point-blank range he converted and levelled the score 10.16 (76) against North Melbourne’s 9.22 (76).

Immediately after the replayed Grand Final, on 1 October 1977, when Collingwood lost by 27 points, I sat speechless in front of the television, not accepting it had happened, and half-believing there would be an announcement saying, “There’s been a dreadful mistake.”

In 1987, the Bears began playing at Carrara on the Gold Coast. Since then, I have enthusiastically supported the team, especially after 1993 when they moved full-time to Brisbane. The only exception, of course, is when they play the Magpies. Apart from when I was overseas for a fortnight, I have not missed a

game in the last three years. During that time, under the astute guidance of coach Robert Walls, the Bears have developed into a disciplined, tightly knit team.

As a dyed-in-the-wool Collingwood supporter, and as the writer of this book, the Bears' courageous win over Melbourne at the Gabba in the final home-and-away round of 1995 placed me in an acute moral dilemma.

I had closely followed the club all year and in the process had come to admire nearly all the players, coaching staff and administrators. In a fairytale ending to the season, Brisbane had won six of their last seven games, including the last two at home, under lights, in the presence of the Bears' No.1 ticket holder, Peter Hollingworth, Anglican Archbishop of Brisbane.

In order for the Bears to make the Final 8, on Fathers Day the Magpies had to succumb to Sydney. So I have a confession to make. While watching the Swans slug it out against Collingwood on Sunday, 3 September, for that one match my loyalty was 55 percent Sydney and 45 percent for the Mighty Woodsmen. In the 1995 season the Bears struggled mightily and fought the good fight. They deserved to be in the finals.

Writing the story of the club during 1995 — a season of risk — has been a rewarding and fascinating experience.

At three-quarter-time in Round 16 against Hawthorn, when the Bears, who had then won only four games for the season, were 45 points down, it seemed that the club was headed for disaster, not only in terms of the team's performance for the season, but for the future of Aussie Rules in the northern state.

Just as playing professional football and establishing the game in Queensland involve risks, so too there were considerable dangers in allowing independent witnesses (in the form of myself and my 21-year-old assistant Andrew Berkman) open and unimpeded access to all aspects of the club for a 12-month period. The sole limitation was that we could attend the coach's addresses on match days only with his permission.

This willingness to be open to scrutiny, which involved either one or both of us attending all board meetings, training sessions, matches and social occasions, as well as interviewing players



and officials and having access to their diaries, is something very rare in any Australian sporting club.

As the year of dreams and disappointments, loyalties and conflicts, hopes and fears progressed, I am sure that there were one or two occasions when senior Brisbane Bears' officials came to regret the terms of our agreement. However, it reflects credit, in particular on the club's chairman, Noel Gordon, chief executive, Andrew Ireland, and senior coach, Robert Walls, that no attempt was made to censor the book.

The players and support staff initially wondered what a 50-year-old, 15-stone academic, wearing a huge white Panama hat, was doing observing them so closely. But a minor breakthrough of acceptance came during pre-season when I was standing behind the goalposts with "Marmite", one of the Bears' property stewards. "Hey Fitzzy," shouted a player, who sounded suspiciously like ex 1990 Collingwood premiership star, Craig Starcevich. As I looked up, a Sherrin football cannoned into me. My ribs were bruised for a week.

Ross Fitzgerald  
Brisbane, 1996



# CHAPTER ONE

## *10 September 1995*

*"And the Bears shall inherit the Earth."*

*Elle McFeast*

The sign over their dressing room door reads, "Prepare to Take the Final Step".

Robert Walls, in what could be his last game as coach, breaks the pre-match tension by taking his players for a walk around the MCG. He points up to the Great Southern Stand. When the Bears circle the oval, they are to look directly at the crowd and soak in the atmosphere.

Then in a totally darkened room, Walls prepares to show his team, once again, highlights of their fabulous last three wins in a row. The eight-minute video features every player who will take the field today. All are silent, expectant. Accompanied by rousing music and much of it in slow motion, the emphasis is on tackling, shepherding and working together as a team. When the machine temporarily fails to work, veteran vice-captain Michael McLean calls across the blackness to fellow Aboriginal Gilbert McAdam, "Hey Gilly, where are you brother? Smile so I can see you."

Despite this whiff of humour, AFL finals are no laughing matter. Walls explains that on this fine, windy, Melbourne afternoon, every play they make, every contest in which they are involved, will be magnified. Everything they do will be replayed and talked about for years to come. Having come this far, they must be prepared to pay the price, to put their bodies

on the line, to support their mates. As he says, "It's alright to feel some fear, but you should also be excited."

Top-class footballers like these are inspired not primarily by the fear of failure, but by the thrill of victory and wanting to show-off. Although personally reserved, as a champion player Walls was motivated by the excitement of success and doing well. A top-class sportsman, he wanted to perform at his best on centre stage. The MCG in a final is the centre-stage of their profession. And the Brisbane Bears are here, on show, today.

Watched by over 50,000 spectators, the Bears make their date with destiny against Walls' old club, Carlton. This season the Blues have won a record 20 home-and-away games, including the last 13 in a row.

Leading the way up the dark tunnel of the players' race is battle-scarred Roger Merrett, at 35 the AFL's oldest player. Nine years after he last appeared in a final for Essendon, the Bears' skipper is embarking on his 296th senior game.

In Brisbane's first-ever final, he is joined by raw-boned, young Tasmanian Trent Bartlett, playing only his eighth senior game. Nine of Walls' team are 21 or younger. None of them have experienced the atmosphere, and the noise, that is generated in mid-September at the home of Australian football.

As the Bears emerge into the sunshine, there are obligatory boos from Carlton supporters. From around the stadium there is also hearty applause. During the last few weeks, the Bears have won over many Victorian fans. Today, for different reasons, many from Collingwood, Essendon and other clubs are barracking for the four-to-one underdogs from the north. As well, around 5,000 men, women and children have travelled from Queensland to see their team play the silver-tailed Blues.

In blustery conditions Brisbane's run-through banner, which reads "Maintain the Intensity", suddenly blows skyward. As the Bears' cheer squad struggle to bring it to ground, it hovers like a huge parachute. Realising the pressure of the moment on his team-mates, the skipper bursts underneath the middle.

Following Merrett is "Magic" McLean. Twice club champion, he has recently signed with the Bears for another two years. With him on the ground are McAdam and enigmatic Darryl White,



on his day one of the most talented players in the league. As the last few Bears, including White, leap and grab a piece of the banner, to enthusiastic cheers they slowly begin their warm-up lap.

Following instructions, Merrett and McLean lead their teammates close to the boundary line. Young and more experienced alike, they look straight up at the Great Southern Stand and absorb the feeling. Bears' key ruckman, Matthew ("Doc") Clarke, a vet science student who has played some blinders in recent weeks, mentally prepares himself for the opening bounce. As Walls strides across the ground, the crowd bellows in anticipation.

In the coach's demeanour, there is no hint of the conflict that has riven the club this year.

A legend of the game, Walls will finish as Bears' coach when the season ends. After five years in Queensland, he has decided to return to Melbourne. In Brisbane he has steadily moulded a group of disparate individuals into a disciplined, professional team. Currently the Bears are revelling in the glory which comes with sporting achievement at the highest rank.

The team's success this season signals to Queenslanders a coming of age for Aussie Rules. The Bears sterling performance signifies an ability to draw on public support as an equal partner to Queensland's other successful sporting franchises — the Broncos Rugby League team, the Brisbane Bullets basketball team, the Queensland Rugby Union Super-10 champions and the victorious Queensland Bulls cricket team.

Especially since the Bears moved from Carrara to the Gabba in Brisbane, Walls has presided over this emerging professionalism and public acceptance. The community demands an identification with successful teams. Five years ago it was inconceivable that Brisbane would have been in today's final at the MCG and that the club would have been so supported by identities such as Alan Border and Wayne Bennett and by the general Australian sporting public. To a large extent, the Bears' credibility is due to Robert Walls and his current team.

\* \* \* \* \*

Walls constantly searches for inspiration to face up to the pressures of professional football. As a player and a coach, there is not much he hasn't done. Born in July 1950, and brought up in the Melbourne suburb of Brunswick, he first played league football at the age of 16. He remembers sitting at home in Coburg when Carlton coach Ron Barassi came to visit his mother, Phyllis, who is at the ground today to support her son.

Playing at full-forward for the Blues, Walls kicked a goal with his first touch of the ball. Vern, his father — a Carlton supporter — died a few weeks later, not having seen his son play VFL footy. "He knew I played and I'm grateful for that," Walls says. The following year, 1968, Walls played in the back-pocket when Carlton posted a 7-14-56 to 8-5-53 Grand Final win over Essendon in front of 116,828 people. A member of premiership-winning sides in 1970 and 1972, he experienced the taste of grand final defeat in 1969 and 1973. Walls captained the Blues in 1974 and again in 1978 until a loss of form saw him vacate the position. After 220 games with Carlton, the classy centre-half forward turned defender went to Fitzroy, where in 1980 he finished a 260-game VFL playing career in which he kicked 443 goals.

When knee problems forced his retirement, Walls was appointed Fitzroy coach. After leading the previously poorly performed Lions to three finals appearances in five years, Walls coached Carlton to a premiership in 1987. Things turned sour 18 months later, just after he left his job as a primary school teacher to take on coaching full-time. Ten games into the 1989 season he was sacked by Carlton's controversial president John Elliott after the Blues lost eight out of 10 matches, the most significant being a three-point defeat to the Bears two days before. For the first time in 22 years he was not involved in football.

In January 1991 Walls accepted one of the most difficult briefs in the AFL — coach of the struggling Bears.

Walls notices big differences between the atmosphere at the Bears and at Carlton. Coaching at the Blues, he had to be more aloof. At the Bears he is easier to get along with and he socialises

more with his players, many of whom regard him as a father-figure and a teacher as much as a coach.

In Brisbane, the club is trying to establish a tradition and a culture. At Carlton, as with Fitzroy, he was surrounded by more than 100 years of it.

Now the wheel has turned full circle. This afternoon, Walls guides the fledgling Bears against the Blues, who are coached by ex-Hawthorn champion player and premiers coach David Parkin. Like Walls, Parkin is inclined to be reserved but prepares meticulously for all possibilities. Parkin and Walls, both of whom coached Fitzroy, like and admire each other.

\* \* \* \* \*

The national anthem begins. The players' nerves are on edge as they stand in line in the middle of the stadium. With ten wins for the season, including six out of the last seven, the Bears have just snuck into the finals. Few commentators today expect anything other than a huge Carlton victory.

As Blues' captain Stephen Kernahan wins the toss and the teams settle into position, a cacophony of noise erupts. Former Hawthorn premiers player Andrew Gowers, the Bears' big-name signing for 1995, heads to the bench. The skilful defender has made a remarkable recovery from a supposedly season-ending injury. Sitting with him on the interchange are speedy Queensland youngster Jason Akermanis and 21-year old Justin Leppitsch, a Victorian who hasn't lived up to anything like his early promise.

Ex-Tiger captain Craig Lambert, the Bears' 1994 club champion, and Adrian Fletcher, the AFL's leading possession gatherer, line up on Carlton's two key on-ballers, Craig Bradley and Fraser Brown.

At full-back, Brisbane's number one guernsey holder, Richard Champion, who has been a mainstay of the Bears' defence since he came from Adelaide, marks Kernahan. Although playing the latter part of the season with an injured thigh, Walls needs "Champs" on the field to negate the star full-forward.

Another crucial Bears defender is ex-Geelong captain and best and fairest, Andrew ("Rat") Bews. Brought to the club to

instill comradeship and experience, along with Lambert he forms the heartbeat of the team. At 30, the likeable Bews is the Bears' third oldest player.

At the other end of the ground, Carlton's Michael Sexton lines up on Merrett, while 19-year old Bartlett is marked by rugged Blues' defender Peter Dean.

Watching his team-mates from the stands is Craig Starceвич, the team's 22nd player who has had to stay ready just in case. Along with Merrett at Essendon and Gowers at Hawthorn, "Starce", who was traded by Collingwood in 1994 as part of the controversial "Nathan Buckley deal", is one of only three Bears' players to have tasted the joy of a premiership. Starceвич thrives on hard work, but, like last season, 1995 has been a struggle.

\* \* \* \* \*

The fired-up Bears attack the ball with intensity and commitment. In the opening minutes, Fletcher is Brisbane's best player. After crashing through a pack, he collides with team-mate White. Carlton's more experienced players settle first. After marking and kicking a point, Kernahan boots the first goal. Carlton forward Brad Pearce, a former Bear, is looking dangerous.

Brisbane suffer a major setback when the team's second vice-captain, Marcus Ashcroft, is assisted from the field following a heavy clash with Carlton ruckman Justin Madden. Wingman Scott Camporeale, who goals from 55 metres, puts the Blues in front by 15 points. The Bears are giving away far too many frees. After Gilbert McAdam is penalised for a late tackle, Carlton receive another 50-metre penalty. Goaling from close range, the Blues quickly stretch their lead to 21 points.

Walls moves McAdam from the wing to the forward line and Michael Voss into the centre. This season, the 20-year-old Queenslander has developed into one of Brisbane's very best. Intense and passionate, astute observers believe he will be a future captain of the Bears.

Voss makes good use of the ball, finding McAdam alone in the forward line. Much to the relief of the non-Carlton crowd



and those watching the direct telecast in Brisbane, Gilly skilfully boots Brisbane's first. Ill-discipline from Champion concedes another 50-metre penalty and Pearce brings up Carlton's fourth. With minutes until quarter time, rookie Bears wingman Craig McRae, recruited from Glenelg, runs into an open goal for Brisbane's second.

After the ball spills from Champion and Chapman, Kernahan scores another goal. Brisbane's younger players then combine. Nigel Lappin, originally from Chiltern, taps the ball to Voss who finds Bartlett in the pocket. From close range the young Tasmanian kicks into the man on the mark. As the siren sounds, the Bears trail Carlton by 22 points.

The Bears are playing with intensity and commitment yet the powerful Carlton machine are well in front. Walls and Merrett are deep in conversation, before the veteran skipper goes to the middle of the ground and speaks sternly to umpire Nash. Walls tells his charges to remain firmly focused and keep the pressure on the Blues. This year he has moulded a team who are willing to battle for each other to the very end.

\* \* \* \* \*

After receiving a 50-metre penalty, Lambert, who has played only nine previous games this season, rises to the challenge and goals. Although quiet in the early part of the game, the red-headed rover is now inspirational around the packs. Gaining momentum, his team-mates lift. Soon the Bears are playing with the control and passion which has been a feature of their dream run to the finals during these last few weeks. Although they cannot convert, the Bears' midfielders sweep forward with wave after wave of attack.

Midway through the second term, McAdam receives the ball on 50, dummies cleverly around two opponents and snaps a left-foot goal, Brisbane's fourth. Lambert receives a free in the forward pocket and his checkside punt (known in Victoria as a banana kick) goes through for a point. From the ensuing kick-in, lanky Bears' ruckman Doc Clarke, who is playing well, punches the ball forward where pacy rover Shaun Hart waits, steadies and goals. Seeing the match slipping, Parkin swings some

changes. The Blues' midfielders man-up at the centre bounce. The final's newcomers from Queensland have certainly earned the Blues' respect.

As Carlton move forward, Bears' defender Chris Scott, the 1994 AFL Rookie of the Year, crashes into Dean Rice. Concussed from the blow, the rugged Scott is the second Brisbane player to be stretchered off the ground.

After spilling a mark, Merrett works the ball to McRae who, pacy as a ferret, kicks a goal. Brisbane briefly hit the front. Although at half time the Blues lead by five points, the fighting Bears have clawed their way back into the match.

At the break, match statistics are encouraging. Brisbane have taken the ball into their opposition's 50-metre line several more times than Carlton.

The season now comes down to one last half of footy. It is of the utmost importance to "Finish Hard", as Archbishop Hollingworth urges. His fax is pinned up prominently on the dressing room wall. It is time to put their bodies on the line; to live out ex-Wallaby coach Alan Jones's stirring exhortation, last Friday, to place their team-mates first; to recapture, on the field, the magic of their videoed highlights. The last 50 minutes will be do-or-die. As Walls says, the Bears came to the MCG today to play good footy. Now they have to excel.

\* \* \* \* \*

Both teams slug it out, searching for the slightest advantage. The fearless Lambert handpasses to McRae whose bomb into the goal-square is intercepted by Bartlett. Despite a number of early misses, Bartlett confidently bangs through his first AFL goal. The scores are level.

At the other end, a Kernahan kick catches Brisbane's defenders unawares and wobbles through for a goal. Drifting across the pack, Voss takes a huge grab and goals from 20 metres. Shortly after, Merrett marks, turns and, still running, bangs the Sherrin through the middle for his first.

Halfway through the third quarter, Carlton are showing signs of stress and strain. If they keep up the pressure, Walls is confident the Bears can win.

Parkin's Blues hit back. Kernahan receives a free and kicks their eighth. Another goal and at three quarter time Carlton lead by six points.

In the final term, after Kernahan kicks an early major, athletic Anthony Koutoufides marks in front of Gowers and boots another. Caught 20 metres from goal, Magic is slung as he tries to handpass. Calamity for the Bears as Champion overruns the ball and Koutoufides bursts through for his second. After nudging Leppitsch out of the contest he quickly kicks his third.

The Bears fight gallantly to the end. Gilly runs off a pack to score his third. With less than five minutes remaining, Bartlett finds McAdam who juggles a one-handed mark before wobbling a pass to Bears' veteran Scott McIvor, who accurately passes to Lappin. On a 45-degree angle, he goals from 30 metres. The Bears are within 19 points.

McIvor marks on 50 and chips to McRae. The usually reliable speedster kicks out on the full. With 40 seconds left, Bartlett, who has played a fine last quarter, swoops and handballs across the field to Champion running from defence.

Champ's long left-foot kick sees Roger Merrett, belying his age, soar high over Lambert and two Carlton defenders for a typically courageous grab. After crashing to the ground on his injured shoulder, the Bears' skipper goals on the siren for his second. The score is Carlton 13-12-90 to Brisbane 12-5-77.

For the Bears' the finals are over. Two hard men of the AFL, Merrett and his opponent Peter Dean, embrace and wish each other well.

Merrett's spectacular mark and goal are fitting ways to finish the season. Since he arrived from Essendon in 1988, the big fellow has been an inspiration to football in Queensland.

As Robert Walls leaves the coach's box his usually emotionless face is drained. Walking briskly across the MCG, he props and waits for Parkin and Blues football manager Col Kinneer, a life-long friend. Both extend a hand, as two of Walls' young tyros during his time coaching Carlton, Craig Bradley and Stephen Kernahan, make a point of running up to him.

As he leaves the MCG, in his last game as coach of the Bears, Walls raises his hand in salute. The crowd responds by breaking

into prolonged applause. Walls is extremely pleased that his team have put in such a fine effort, both in this match and in the previous seven games. He is particularly grateful to senior players such as Merrett, McLean, Lambert and Bews for their support throughout the year.

Of the Bears, Walls says: "I'm just as proud of them today as when we beat Essendon, Richmond and Melbourne. They've shown faith in themselves and belief as a team and in each other. They've remained united and committed to the cause."

Above all, in season 1995 his team has earned respect. Respect in the AFL and respect back home in Queensland. The Brisbane Bears have now established themselves successfully in the northern state and cemented their place in the national competition.

# CHAPTER TWO

## *Pre-Season 1995*

*"In peace we should train for war;  
everything else is bullshit."*

*General George Patton*

With its large playing surface and excellent facilities for crowds and players, the Gabba is now one of the best football grounds in Australia. Although Rugby League and Rugby Union are still the dominant codes, the Brisbane Bears are gaining acceptance in south-east Queensland.

After starting, quite inappropriately, on the Gold Coast in late 1986, in Brisbane the team is developing a sense of pride and belonging. The Bears now play at a historic ground, which receives its name from a shortened version of the suburb in which it is located, Woolloongabba. The area was once a battleground for local Murri tribes. Two ridges run along nearby Vulture Street and Hawthorne Road. Hostile tribes faced each other on either ridge before fighting on the flat area in the middle. The football ground was then a nearby swamp area and what is now the Railway Hotel was the site of a bora (ceremonial) ring.

Although white settlers called the area One Mile Swamp, the name was changed to the Murri word, Woolloongabba, whose likely derivation is "wooloon", meaning to fight, and "gabba", meaning a place.

The Brisbane Bears are now part of the Gabba's rich tradition. Yet winning support for Aussie Rules here has been no easy task.

Some famous Melbourne football clubs have a history almost as old as the colony of Queensland. The first reported game of Australian Rules was played in 1858 on open parkland dotted with trees, next to the current site of the MCG. Lasting over four hours, the 40-a-side contest between Scotch College and Church of England Grammar School ended at dusk in a one-all draw. Ten months later the first formal rules were drawn up in Melbourne on 17 May 1859.

One of the games most enthusiastic pioneers, Tom Wills, had significant links with Queensland. As a young man Wills was educated in England, at Rugby, where he became an outstanding sportsman. Although his early passion was for cricket, he umpired that first recorded Australian Rules match and helped to draft the first set of formal rules.

During its early years the Australian game was designed for players of strength rather than skill. Goals were infrequent. Gradually the game was modified and rival clubs were established. Scrummaging disappeared, and when a pack formed, umpires were instructed to throw the ball in the air.

The emergence of an oval-shaped ball, which could be kicked further and bounced unpredictably, was an important factor in the game's development.

As a structure emerged, interstate matches were played, games on an oval field were contested, occasionally under lights, and forwards were tagged. There was neither an offside nor a send-off rule. Rugby was partly a parent of Aussie Rules, but right from the start the two games were different. Soccer had only a minor influence. Today Aussie Rules has an uncanny resemblance to Gaelic football, but the Australian game is much older than the Irish game whose formal rules belong only to the 1880s.

For decades there has been fierce argument about where Aussie Rules originated. Some say in Ireland, some say in England, and some say it was with the Aborigines, who played a game kicking high into the air a ball made of rolled-up possum fur, which they leapt to catch and kick again.

This argument overlooks a simple factor: Aussie Rules was, and is, an evolving game rather than a simple invention. It

gradually changed and developed more than perhaps any other major sport played in the English-speaking world. It was neither an importation, nor a once-only invention, but a procession of inventions, some made as recently as the 1990s.

After Tom Wills' initial involvement in the game, he travelled with his father by sea to Brisbane. From there they overlanded cattle to Cullin-la-Ringo, a property 280 kilometres west of Rockhampton. On 17 October 1861, retaliating for an attack by local graziers, a group of Aborigines destroyed the Wills' camp, killing 19 men, women and children resting in the midday heat. Tom's father, Horatio, was slaughtered as he lay in his tent, but Tom escaped the massacre by hours, having left the camp to get supplies. When he returned to Melbourne, he saw that the game he had encouraged was flourishing. Although continuing to make a name for himself in cricket circles, he became addicted to alcohol, and on 2 May 1880 he committed suicide by stabbing himself with a pair of scissors. His grave reads: "FOUNDER OF AUSTRALIAN FOOTBALL AND CHAMPION CRICKETER OF HIS TIME".

The game Wills had so much helped to establish had spread south and west but it faced extremely strong opposition in New South Wales and Queensland. Some 115 years later Aussie Rules is steadily converting Northerners to a sport which has virtually become a religion in Melbourne, Perth and Adelaide.

\* \* \* \* \*

To wander beneath the stands at the southern or Stanley Street end of the Gabba is to make a journey through the Bears' brief history. For the players it provides a sense of home. Along the semi-dark corridors are photographs of past club champions wearing the team's maroon and gold jerseys. Evergreen Aboriginal star Michael McLean features twice. So does former champion John Gastev, now returned to Western Australia. Past and present captains, Mark Mickan and Roger Merrett, are both in gladiatorial uniform; blood from a cut covers the right side of Merrett's battered face. Then come those who have so far coached the club — Peter Knights, Norm Dare, Paul Feltham and Robert Walls. The Bears' only premiership team, the 1991 Reserve Grade side, is also there.

The main corridor leads past the rooms of the coach, physiotherapist, psychologist and doctor. To the left are the players' change rooms. On every locker is a number. On some are names of players who have achieved 50 or 100 game milestones for the Bears. Walls is consciously trying to develop a club "culture". A thoughtful, complex man, he knows that, even in a one-AFL-team town like Brisbane, a club through its culture can become bigger than the players, administrators and supporters.

In 1995 the Bears have a senior coach, assistant coach, skills and rehabilitation coach, fitness coach, sprint coach, strength coach, ruck coach, physiotherapist, psychologist, nutritionist, podiatrist, orthopaedic surgeon, oculist, chaplain/video operator, dentist, and several medical staff. Add a match committee of seven, plus a players welfare committee of six and 11 trainers, and in Brisbane the club has a support staff of 35.

Walls calls the support staff his "net". If something is wrong with one of the 39 Bears' players, personal or physical, someone will pick it up. Each player is different and relates differently to different members of staff.

As an ex-premiership winning player and coach, Walls prepares his players physically and mentally. As father-figure and mentor, he watches over many young men who have left home to chase their footy dreams. He has occasionally caught new recruits about to board a plane, vowing never to return to Queensland, and has persuaded them not to leave. Walls walks a fine line between being coach, friend, mentor, and father-figure. At the Bears it is imperative he be all four.

Unlike Melbourne, Adelaide and Perth, the atmosphere in Brisbane is less intense. Only occasionally do fans turn out to watch training. Walking the city streets, most players are anonymous. Walls feels that if the coaching staff don't support the players, then apart from their immediate families, most of whom live interstate, there are not too many who will.

In 1995 Walls' job is on the line. While no overt threats are coming from the administration during pre-season, he knows that at the end of the year his contract is up for renewal.

The Bears' director of football, ex-Fitzroy player Scott Clayton, often spends Saturdays and Sundays interstate roaming



suburban grounds trying to ensure he doesn't miss a future Rules superstar for the March pre-season draft. Clayton is shy but approachable. As assistant coach he is a crucial link behind the scenes. Clayton also watches other teams' experienced players. Often only a handful of top-class players are available.

As a near-bottom club the Bears have profited from the draft in past years. Their number-one choice in 1994 was Richmond rover Craig Lambert. Brisbane had fifth pick in the draft. St Kilda at one and two, Sydney and finally Richmond themselves passed over the ex-Tiger captain. A great ally when he gives his full commitment, at the time Lambert was dumbfounded: "I sat in a sandwich bar with my head in my hands. I couldn't believe it. In two days I was on a plane to Queensland. What made it so hard was that I couldn't train because I had glandular fever. Initially it was most difficult for my wife because we were trying to find a place to live and I was devoting most of my time to footy."

In Lambert, the Bears deliberately picked not merely an excellent player, but a great club man. As Clayton explains: "There aren't any prima donnas here. We work out who we want and in our way we philosophise about what we want."

Clayton chairs the match committee, which includes the coach. Often their opinions differ. From the 1995 March draft, Walls believes the club needs a centre-half back, perhaps an enforcer. Clayton is hesitant to agree. Perhaps a tall defender or a goal kicker. Currently there are two spots available, which Clayton argues are enough. Walls feels there could be more. Aboriginal wingman Fabian Francis has not returned from Darwin following the Christmas break. Maybe he can be released?

While the previous year the club aggressively recruited Lambert, All-Australian representative Alastair Lynch from Fitzroy, and Gilbert McAdam from St Kilda, Clayton says: "This year we have to sit back and see what happens."

Fitzroy strongman Ross Lyon was initially keen to head to Queensland, but Sydney make it clear they want him on their list. In 1990 Clayton played his last game in a Lions team which defeated Carlton at Princess Park. With him that afternoon were two outstanding youngsters, Alastair Lynch and Lyon. This

season Clayton would like them both in Brisbane. Although it seems unlikely, Walls also hopes to draft Lyon: "I was his first senior coach. In the midfield we need that kind of player. Merrett can only play at one end of the ground."

The football department is the largest user of club revenue. In 1995 it costs \$4.5 million to put the team on the field. Drafting and relocating players is expensive. If a recruit comes from interstate, as all but a handful of Bears do, it costs between \$35,000 and \$40,000 just to get him on the paddock, let alone relocation and other expenses.

Skills and rehabilitation coach Wayne Brittain, an experienced player and coach in the Queensland Australian Football League (QAFL), is one of the few Bears' coaching staff who are Queenslanders born and bred. Like Clayton, Brittain is away from the spotlight. Of all the Bears' staff, Brittain is the one who most often listens to players when they are injured and vulnerable, and encourages them back into the side.

Shane Johnson, the team manager, is an unobtrusive Tasmanian who initially played for Wynyard and Hobart. After a distinguished career with Mayne Football Club in Brisbane, Johnson captain-coached Maroochydore. Also close to the players, he can be terse and abrupt when the situation demands. His major aim for 1995 is to help the team shed their "Bad-News-Bears" image.

Head medical officer Alan ("Doc") Mackenzie, also Queensland-born, initially seems reserved. After first impressions are peeled back, one of the club's great characters is revealed. Doc began working for the Bears in 1990 when he did statistical work for coach Norm Dare. Often first to the side of a player felled in action, he has the hapless task of informing him of the damage. Unusual for the AFL, the club doctor is one of the selectors. As president of the Gold-Coast-based QAFL club Southport since 1974, Doc understands Aussie Rules culture in Queensland.

Jim Eustace, the physiotherapist, is the first port of call for injured players. If further treatment is needed he refers them to Doc. In charge of "torture" in his Toowong clinic and at the Gabba, the lanky ex-Bullets basketballer pushes players' bodies and minds to the limits. After three months' pre-season, Eustace

has callouses on his fingers from manipulating players' backs. All players on the Bears list have the highest level private health insurance; after a player receives his refund, the club picks up the rest of the bill.

Out-of-form or under-motivated players, those lacking adequate aggression, or unable to fulfil their potential for some other reason, come to Dr Phil Jauncey to find out why. A sports psychologist, he compiles a profile on every player, then groups them. Some act impulsively, others are thinkers and not ideal for on-ball positions. This is used as a guide by Walls who, before a game, often suggests "creative visualisation" for the team.

Over the past two years Jauncey has had sessions with most senior players. In 1994 fullback Richard Champion sought his help. Jauncey gave him a set of drills which included writing down his thoughts and bringing his weaknesses and strengths to consciousness. According to Champion this was largely responsible for turning his form around: "In the back of my mind were things I had to be aware of. I was able to cut out many on-field mistakes."

Yet no two players are the same. Some need to be ignited before a game, while others switch on once the ball is bounced. If some players fire up and then make an early mistake, they fall from a high to a huge low.

The increasing professionalism of Australian football means that players today are better prepared mentally and physically than they were 10 or 20 years ago and according to Walls they will improve even more: "Look at things like diet. When I was playing I had steak and eggs around mid-morning because I thought it was good for me. In five years' time they are going to be even better prepared. If players stay at this level, they are going to be passed by, because all the other players in the competition are improving."

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Early in pre-season, the medical staff are called into action. The team's high-paid (\$1.8 million for 10 years) star, Alastair Lynch, has been urinating blood. Following a history of liver problems, he fears for his future. Little do Lynch or the club know that his

illness will continue over the summer and throughout the football season. Although medical tests show nothing sinister, Lynch is constantly fatigued, and pulls up sore from training. Walls recommends a health farm.

Lynch, who saw pre-season as a chance to start afresh, knows he is in trouble. His collarbone, broken twice last year, still hasn't properly healed, plus he recently had a knee operation. He says, "It's this virus which has knocked me about. It's a worry."

Before 1995 training begins, 12 Bears had operations on 18 injuries: eight knees, three groins, three ankles, two shoulders and two feet. Most are experienced players. They include Merrett (a knee and ankle), Troy Clarke (knee), McLean (a shoulder), and Lynch. Dion ("Horse") Scott, the 99-kilogram ruckman, who broke his neck when he was with the Sydney Swans, has had two pre-season operations on five injuries: two ankles, two groins, one knee.

Injuries are not the only concern. Walls acknowledges that the Bears lack a hit-man for the forthcoming season. Skipper Merrett, at his peak, was one of the game's toughest. Now with a lifetime of footy causing his body considerable pain, age is catching up. Confined to full-forward, the big fellow doesn't get around with anything like the same pace and agility he did during his early years with Essendon and the Bears. Walls knows he has tough players, like Andrew Bews and Damian Bourke, both ex-Geelong captains, and Magic McLean, who will not turn the other cheek. But it is useful to have someone who will use controlled aggression when required or, when they see somebody unfairly dealing with a young player, will square up minutes later. Yet hard men like Merrett are a dying breed.

Through his strength and intensity, Victorian-born Chris Scott shows the potential to become an enforcer. Although at 18 it is unfair to place him in such a role, Scott enjoys the game's physicality. He has always believed in playing tough. After being the AFL's leading rookie last year, he is aware of the dreaded second-year syndrome: "This year might be harder because everyone expects more. Opposition players know more about me and there is pressure to perform." Scott notices that things are different in Brisbane. His twin brother, Brad, was

drafted by Hawthorn in November. Scott says, "He hasn't played a senior game, yet he has had more recognition than I have. Just being in Melbourne means everybody knows what it is all about."

Chris Scott is one of an impressive group of youngsters the Bears have assembled during the 1990s. Superfit and skilful athletes who daily spend hours in the gym and regularly consult nutritionists, psychologists and dieticians, they represent the sport's future. It is no coincidence that the two Bears likely to sneak away for a quiet smoke, or enjoy a beer on Friday night, are Merrett, 35, and ex-Port Adelaide star, Martin ("Moose") Leslie, 32. Both elder statesmen suffer from arthritis; in order to keep his ankles mobile, the latter doses himself with celery extract.

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At the top of the stairs, above the entrance to the Bears' gym and dressing rooms, is Graeme ("Smarty") Smart, long-time property steward and regular resident of the "Gabba Hilton". He asks rhetorically, "The place is a beauty, isn't she?"

To the club's support staff, the ironically named "Gabba Hilton" allows trainers, stewards and boot studders to indulge in late evening drinks after time spent next door at the Bears' Social Club. The journey home can be left until the morning. Although only a sparsely furnished, uncarpeted, rectangular room with three single beds and enough seating for five, the Gabba Hilton is a luxury they didn't have when the team was based at Carrara. There the property room, known as the "dungeon", was a dark, dusty, rodent-infected cell beneath the stands. In 1990, after a roisterous end-of-season celebration, Smarty and one of the trainers decided to sleep there for the night. Merrett and head trainer "Gabby" Fenech went back to look for the pair and found them asleep among the cockroaches. In 1995 life at the Brisbane Bears has moved upmarket.

If he could, Smarty would live permanently at the "Hilton", even though he caused a furore on one occasion: "I had a bit of a hassle one night when I got up to have a leak and all the alarms

started going off as soon as I opened the door. Still, the boys from MSS Security saw the funny side to it."

Sitting in the "Hilton", Smarty reflects on the Bears' early struggles. In 1986 the Aussie Rules heavies in Melbourne decided it was time to expand further into the heartland of rival football codes. They granted the licence, for a Brisbane-based VFL team, to a Paul Cronin/Queensland Australian Football League syndicate. Things soon turned sour. The QAFL were dumped and Cronin brought in high-flying entrepreneur Christopher Skase to bankroll the fledgling club. Smarty, who joined the Bears in Skase's time, met him only once. "I had to go to the Comalco office in Brisbane and get all the cheques signed. You got to the 30th floor of the building and everyone there was a big-time operator. They were always on the phone and in meetings. It used to take me three or four days to get someone to sign the cheques. That is, until the day I was standing in my usual station with my folder full of cheques to be signed and Skase walked past and said: 'G'day Smarty, how are you going?' 'Well thanks, Chris, how are you?' I replied. Well, you should have seen the heads turn. They didn't know who the hell I was, but from that day on it only took about two minutes to get the cheques signed."

A year later, in November 1989, Smarty's property van, aptly known as the "Bear Mobile", was booked to have air-conditioning installed. On the same day Skase's Qintex media and hotel empire collapsed.

Smarty now drives his third Bear Mobile. Every day the air-conditioned van is loaded and unloaded. It is packed to the roof with massage tables, strapping, training equipment and drinks. Apart from listed players, some promising Queensland youngsters are also invited to train. Throughout summer sessions, in oppressive heat and humidity, Smarty is usually found sitting on the back of the van. As the players trickle onto the pre-season training oval at the University of Queensland, he ticks off each individual's name. "Correct weight" is his signal that all players are accounted for. The use of racing terminology is appropriate for a man who, along with a drink and a smoke, doesn't mind a punt. A Korean War veteran, he walks with a

slight limp, courtesy of an artificial hip. A repository of personal and club wisdom, he is friend and confidant to the Bears.

When I tell him that the koala isn't a bear, it's a marsupial, and that the most aggressive thing it can do is piss on you, Smarty grins. "The Bear's off our logo now, thank Christ."

Previously a long-time follower of Hawthorn, he recalls the time when the Bears, under private ownership, struggled desperately off and on the field: "You go back to the early days with the club song and the club jumper. The jumper was a yuppie load of crap, and the club song went: 'We're tough, we're mean, we're mighty unclean.' It sounded like a fly commercial." Now, he maintains, the team have a jumper that looks like a footy jumper and a club song that sounds like a club song. Plus they've got a group of administrators who can actually run the club.

During the year Smarty carries out dozens of duties. He occasionally takes time to read a book to Merrett's daughters, Georgia and Madeline. In summer, he is also charged with keeping players and coaching staff up-to-date with the latest cricket scores.

Smarty curses the pre-season. Like dancing with your sister, he says "it's hard to get fair dinkum".

The other property steward, Marmite, is a pocket-sized larikin with a passion for the game. Few people know his real name: Bob Pearce. When they were young, some mates smeared his older brother with Vegemite. Being the younger brother, they called him Marmite.

Like Smarty, Marmite has been with the Bears since Carrara. After work took him to Queensland, he quit his job as manager for an air-conditioning company and relocated to the Gold Coast. Younger than Smarty, Marmite is often the first to volunteer when the call comes from the coaches for assistance. He hardly seems to notice when the medical staff and trainers chuckle as he valiantly tries to scale the fence of a nearby child-care centre to collect a stray football.

Marmite dryly speaks of a mediocre greyhound running around the Gold Coast called Marmite, which is named after him. Although he chases the one-armed bandits in local pubs and sporting clubs, Marmite especially enjoys the Melbourne

Casino. He whiles away the hours on long interstate flights playing Five Hundred with Doc Mackenzie against head trainer Gabby Fenech and physiotherapist Jim Eustace.

Tasmanian-born, Marmite played senior football in Hobart until his knee gave way. Like most behind-the-scenes crew he is pleased to be out of the limelight. Coming from a large family, he was surprised in 1991 to discover he had a long-lost brother. A Tasmanian, Peter Dalgrin, prevented from travelling overseas because he didn't have the necessary identification papers, searched through his history and found he was adopted. He discovered 11 brothers and sisters — Marmite's family. Marmite was less than thrilled with the media coverage. At the Bears, he had a job to do and being thrust into the spotlight slowed him down.

The drinks steward is Max Green, whose 19-year-old, 201-centimetre tall son Brent is listed with the Bears. Bespectacled, easy-going and something of a philosopher, at 64 Max enjoys the life footy in Queensland has to offer, even though he still regards himself as a Victorian. At training Max, who linked with the Bears four years ago, also spends his fair share of time behind the goals fetching footballs. He often sits on a massage table studying events on the field with an inquisitive eye.

Smarty, Marmite and Max are all separated from their wives. Married to the club, they take turns to travel away. This involves loading and unloading the equipment, medical supplies, boots, balls and uniforms at airports, hotels and sportsgrounds at home and in Melbourne, Adelaide and Perth.

Smarty, Marmite and Max are an important part of the club. As Walls says, they deserve respect: "If they don't like some players, then there is a bloody good reason for it. It might be because they are lazy or they throw their jumpers at them or kick their boots off and say 'pick them up'. Some of the kids who turn up here and start giving them orders soon find they have to pull their heads in."

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Fitness trainer Craig Maskiell dramatically steps up the workload. In overcast, sticky conditions he lines up a series of



markers about 20 metres apart. "Right, 20 shuttles," Maskiell bellows. One shuttle consists of running back and forth between the markers several times. Gasping for air in the 30-degree heat, players touch the ground before pushing off for another 20-metre sprint. Each shuttle takes about three minutes. They have already had a fitness and ball-work session under Walls, who stands by as Maskiell barks instructions. Players encourage each other as they search for extra stamina.

On the portable massage tables, Max, Marmite and Smarty are hurriedly trying to prepare drinks for the players after each leg. With eight shuttles finished, rain falls. Steady at first, then heavy. There is only one thing worse than shuttles in the sticky Brisbane heat and that is shuttles in driving rain. Boots splat into the muddy surface, then seem to stick as players struggle to lift their feet for yet another 20 metres. Shoulders slump and arms flay as the sprinters waver.

It is one of the hardest pre-season sessions. Tougher than 200 or 400 metre time trials or five-kilometre runs on a hot Saturday morning, tougher than the repetitive daily bench presses and chin-ups at the Gabba gym.

While Maskiell is king of the paddock, Alan Bray is lord of the gym. Just under six foot, Bray is large, quietly spoken and only too willing to help his charges.

The Bears' sprint coach is Glynis Nunn-Cearns, who won gold in the heptathlon at the 1984 Olympics. Three times a week Nunn-Cearns, pregnant with her second child, travels over an hour and a half to take the Bears through their paces. She is trying to persuade them to be more aware of their technique when sprinting, and to become more efficient. A lot of players can run, she says, but "they can't run properly".

While acknowledging football skills come first, Nunn-Cearns endeavours to speed up players such as injury-prone Victorian youngster Justin Leppitsch and 30-year-old, ex-Geelong captain, Damian Bourke. Bourke, a ruckman, is nicknamed "Rex", a shortened version of *Tyrannosaurus Rex*, a slow-moving dinosaur. Yet in only two months, she has noticeably improved his speed.

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With a large part of his career in front of him, Hawthorn's Andrew Gowers is Brisbane's only major off-season acquisition. The Bears edge out nine other clubs for his signature. Being able to play a number of positions, he is a good pick.

Part of a premiership winning side in 1991, and in the top 10 best and fairest players at Hawthorn from 1992 to 1994, Gowers' credentials are outstanding. After an injury-prone start to his career, he hasn't missed a game since the end of 1991, making 74 consecutive appearances. Gowers' career goal was to play for only one team. But when, while preparing for his final exams in marketing at Monash University, it became clear that the Hawks were not going to offer a satisfactory long-term contract, he nominated to settle in Brisbane.

Although on his arrival he is still disappointed, there are pluses too. "I don't feel as self-conscious here. In Melbourne you always think someone is watching you, knowing you play football. Up here, you wander around with some sort of anonymity." As the coach regularly points out to his players, this can also have significant negatives.

Gowers is an off-season coup for the football department, who are getting calls from footballers wanting to come to Brisbane. This didn't happen a few years ago. The Bears are after a certain type of player. According to Walls, "You can't have somebody above the team who does his own thing and trains when he wants to train. I would rather sacrifice a talented, selfish player and bring in a bloke who is hard and honest and pulls for his team-mates."

Gowers is traded for the Bears' first and fourth draft choices. With their lowly picks, the match committee draft two young Victorians. They also re-draft long-serving Bears' player Michael Murphy, an honest toiler. After assuring Murphy, who had spent the previous season sidelined with a shoulder injury, that he would be given every opportunity to prove himself over the summer, Walls had to tell him he was delisted. The coach was therefore determined that Murphy be redrafted.

During his first training sessions, Gowers' pale skin stands out. It doesn't take long for his complexion to darken.

Spending five days a week in Brisbane, Gowers, feeling the effects of several hours on a plane, is soon sidelined with a back complaint and a hamstring twinge. Nicknamed "Growler", allegedly after his teddy bear, Gowers wonders what the other players and coaching staff are thinking. Their major off-season recruit is injured already. "They must be thinking, what a dud we've got here."

Other new faces blend with the 1994 regulars. Craig McRae, a 22-year-old primary school teacher, has moved from South Australia. Recommended to Brisbane by an original Bear, Mark Williams, now assistant coach at Essendon, McRae will combine senior football with his first major teaching assignment, a grade seven class at St Paul's College. Quiet and seemingly self-assured, McRae says, "It's a real buzz running around with these guys. I remember a couple of years ago watching Andrew Bews on television in interstate games. I have to blink twice sometimes to believe I'm here."

Although McRae looks promising, Walls knows he is yet to prove himself. "They used to call them March champions. It is fine to be a March champion but where are they when the nitty-gritty stuff is required?"

Another recruit, Jason ("Aker") Akermanis, is also fast and skilful. Unlike McRae he suffers from a major disadvantage — he is from Queensland where Australian Rules is still little more than a game. In local players, the passionate intensity required to succeed at a senior level has to be instilled.

Walls tells his charges to pair off and face each other in a push-up position. The idea is to hit each other's arms until one player collapses. Chris ("Nuggett") Scott unleashes a barrage of blows before Aker has time to draw breath.

The coach observes crucial differences between Queenslanders and those from more renowned Aussie Rules states: "Players here just aren't caught up in the hurly-burly and nitty-gritty and gossip and the intrigue of what is going on in AFL footy. So many young Queenslanders on our list frustrate me because they lack the intensity about their football that the typical Victorian kid takes for granted. When they arrive they have no idea about the passionate level of professionalism that

is required to succeed. They are going to have times when they think I'm a real bastard because I'm going to push and flog them, and that's what they have to get through."

Showing ill-discipline, Aker is off to a bad start. He forgets to bring his football, rolls his ankle after not getting it strapped and then won't get in the pool because he doesn't like the water. Walls says, "He doesn't know how lucky he is to be alive!" The talented new recruit has to quickly learn what is required of an AFL footballer.

Aker has spirit and a certain amount of arrogance. Assistant coach Scott Clayton befriends the young Queenslander. Initially his arrogance is likely to lead him into trouble but Clayton shepherds him in the right direction. In the long term, Walls and Clayton believe they have a player of the future. But Aker has considerable ground to make up on young Victorians and South Australians, even those from the Northern Territory.

There are now ten Queenslanders on the Bears' list. In recent years the number has been slowly increasing.

Michael McLean is the AFL's most experienced Aboriginal footballer. He arrived at Footscray as a wide-eyed youngster in the early 1980s. At the time, Bulldogs' star Doug Hawkins took the impressionable youngster under his wing and nicknamed him "Magic". McLean idolised "Hawk" in the same way he is now idolised by his people. In 1995, he has the ear of every Bears player. After 157 AFL games, and All-Australian representation, he rates his stint as captain of the 1994 Aboriginal All-Star team, which defeated Collingwood in Darwin, as the highlight of his illustrious career.

In his 12 seasons in AFL football "Magic" has felt the pain of racism on the field: "When I first went to Melbourne it was a real eye-opener. Suddenly I was subjected to all these racist taunts. Coming from Darwin where there had been no problem, all of a sudden I thought, 'Hello, what is going on here'."

In his first game against Collingwood at Victoria Park he remembers: "I went to pick up the ball one-handed when these four blokes over the fence started screaming, 'You coon, go back where you come from. This isn't your country, nigger boy.' " He stood there and wondered what to do. "I threw the ball to the

boundary umpire and was waiting for them to come over the fence. Nothing happened, but I was scared. Frightened."

Collingwood, he maintains, is the most racist club. "Kids run on the ground and abuse players who have just tried their hearts out for 120 minutes ... it comes from their parents and other supporters yelling out. Kids of 10 or 12 came up and asked me, 'What it is like to be an Abo?'"

Over the years McLean has seen elite players like West Coast's Chris Lewis, and the Krakouer brothers Jim and Phil, retaliate and get suspended. Magic was determined to let his football do the talking, although occasionally he responded. "I've been lucky," he says. "I retaliated a few times and got away with it. You shouldn't have to do that. It is one elite sportsman against another elite sportsman. In athletics, if a competitor looked over at Carl Lewis and said 'you black so and so', Lewis would probably sue him.

"Over the last 10 years the game has improved. But racism hasn't improved one little bit. If the AFL go through with cleaning up the game, and improve the brawls, why can't they improve the racism? They are one of the most powerful bodies in the country. AFL footy is too big for this stuff."

Magic is battling to get his 30-year-old body up for another season. First he has to recover from a shoulder injury. It is more than a year since he was able to roll his arm over. He deeply loves the game, but family is more important. "People have no idea," says Magic, mentioning his brother-in-law who died of cancer, "until it hits someone close to home. People didn't believe me that then I didn't care about not playing football. Even though I was injured, what counted was my family. He was my wife's youngest brother, only 26 years old. The bloke was dying."

One of the club's big signings of 1994 was Craig Starcevich. Until concussed early in the third quarter, he was outstanding in the 1990 Grand Final, Collingwood's first premiership in 32 years. The year before, current Bears team-mates Shane Hamilton, Andrew Bews and Damian Bourke were part of a Geelong team which lost the 1989 Grand Final. Starcevich came to Brisbane as one of the "six pack" of players who arrived in pre-

season 1994, the other five being McAdam (St Kilda), Bews (Geelong), Troy Lehmann (Collingwood), Lynch (Fitzroy) and Lambert (Richmond). Because of injury his form was poor: "I think I am grumpy most of the time, whether things are going my way or not. It was hard last year sitting on the sideline when the club was having a bit of success on the field. It's like telling a player who has missed a Grand Final because of injury or suspension that he is still part of it. No matter what you tell him it is not really the same, unless you're out there sharing the success."

In Brisbane he misses going out socially and running into players from other clubs and chatting about what they are doing at training and what tricks they are up to. Starcevich says, "We are a bit isolated up here."

Following an off-season operation, Starcevich, who thrives on hard work, spent the first part of pre-season working in the pool and gym. Now he is finally able to stretch out on the paddock.

Standing on the sidelines recovering from his shoulder injury, Magic pauses mid-sentence, a furrow in his brow. "Starce has pulled a hammy."

The ex-Collingwood star grimly limps to the bench. It will be a month before he returns to training. As he fills water-bottles with Powerade, Max Green shakes his head: "I've got my doubts whether Starce'll see the distance."

For affable Richard Champion, a confidence player, the move to Brisbane has been tough, but he is now one of the best fullbacks in the league. In discussions with management over his future, he initially wants a one-year contract. The possibility of a second Adelaide team is appealing for the blond-haired South Australian. He and his wife, Anne-Marie, are about to start a family and she wants to move closer to her family in Adelaide. Eventually Champs decides to bite the bullet and signs a five-year deal with Brisbane. It will last out his career and secure his future. He has already established himself selling dairy products around south-east Queensland. The hum of an engine is familiar during training, as Champs' Butterfield's King Island Dairy van, full of speciality cheeses, continues to idle.

During pre-season most interest centres around Saturday-morning breakfasts by the University pool and intra-club sports competitions. Bews enthusiastically leads the Rats team, Champion the Gladiators, ex St Kilda rover, Danny ("Chippa") Craven, the Pissants and Shaun ("Serge") Hart the Pros. *The Bear Facts*, an in-house newsletter, keeps players up to date:

The Pissants are in total disarray. Infighting, bitching, umpire abuse and player dissension have made them a rabble. Gilly (McAdam) wants out, but so far has had no approaches from other clubs. Fletch (Adrian Fletcher) is in a state of confusion. Barts (Trent Bartlett) is bewildered and Lawry (Steve Lawrence) has cracked the shits completely ... especially after the 5 km run. Pissant mentor Chippa reckons they all need to have a good hard look at themselves.

In 15 years as an Australian Football League coach, Walls knows he can't please everyone, so he doesn't try. When he departed Fitzroy and Carlton, players told him he pushed them too hard. At the end of 1994 Merrett and Leslie approached him with a similar concern. The team was burnt out. Walls is willing to reduce hours on the paddock to ensure they are in peak condition for the whole 22 weeks of 1995 and hopefully beyond. The 12 sessions a week, in the morning and afternoon, are cut back to six. But intensity will increase.

During the first half of pre-season, Merrett, content to work out in the gym, is rarely spotted at training. Walls accepts that the match committee may have to make concessions to ensure they will get the most out of the skipper: "There will be occasions when he will not be able to play two weeks in a row. He averages four goals a game here at the Gabba and only one away from Queensland. If there is any doubt, then we get him right for the Queensland games."

At the first full-bore session for the year, the ball handling is atrocious. Misdirected stab passes, chest marks bouncing away, handpasses going astray. Walls stands to one side and watches. He has just addressed the team: "Right, we are now ready to win a premiership."

It is a confident statement and one which he has made for the

first time since coaching the Bears. Aboriginal youngsters Darryl ("DJ") White and Fabian ("Flash") Francis have not returned from the Northern Territory. Walls says: "We have been down this street before. I refuse to get upset but I am disappointed for the players concerned as they are wasting a golden opportunity. I am also disappointed for the rest of the squad, who deserve better."

While DJ returns a short while later, Francis chooses to remain in Darwin. Orchestrating training, Walls' emotions change little when he sees Chris Scott pull a hamstring. Lynch is not recovering. McRae will be out for a few weeks. Magic is still on the sidelines and Starceвич can barely walk. There are many other injuries.

\* \* \* \* \*

The Bears have learnt from experience that it takes more than a good coach and a talented football team to be successful. Most staff are from traditional Australian Rules states. Some had successful playing careers. In 1994 more than 56,000 people emigrated to Queensland from interstate; over 35,000 came from Victoria. But running an Australian Rules club in the heart of Rugby country requires more than general football knowledge. It requires an intimate understanding of the local culture.

Managing the club off the field is primarily in the hands of Bears' chairman Noel Gordon, deputy chairman Alan Piper and chief executive Andrew Ireland, all originally from Melbourne. A member of the match committee, Ireland, who played in four Collingwood Grand Final teams without winning a premiership, occasionally attends training, carefully watching individual players. Ireland knows his crew and how they operate; he also makes it his business to know what the stormy waters of the AFL hold for the Bears.

Gordon, an ex-rock 'n' roller and plain-clothed Victorian policeman, whose Gold-Coast-based company Gordon Pacific Ltd (a residential and commercial development company) was involved in a well-publicised crash in 1990–91, but who is currently pulling himself out of difficulties, is intimately involved when financial decisions are at stake. Having played for



Carlton thirds, the energetic entrepreneur has his opinions about how the team should operate on the field. Some of the livelier discussions at board meetings concern such matters. But Gordon is acutely aware of unfortunate interference which occurred during the days of Cronin and Skase, and is reputedly not such an interventionist.

The well-built, moustached chairman has a unique manner of supporting the Bears. During each game Gordon sits forward on the edge of his seat located beside the players' dugout, his facial expressions highlighting the state of play. Gordon takes an active interest regarding potential recruits and the contracts of current players. How are they paid? Are they on long- or short-term agreements? But he is just as involved in the marketing department, public relations, and currently the future of the Bears' Social Club.

When it comes to football, deputy chairman Alan Piper, a former forward with Hawthorn reserves and Waverley in the Victorian Football Association first division, prefers to take a back seat. Although on match days Piper, a multi-millionaire motor dealer, strongly supports the team, his work is generally done behind the scenes.

There is a huge difference between running a privately owned business and running a football club, especially in a place like Queensland. As Gordon says, "No one in Victoria understands the complexity of what happens up here. The problems we face are enormously different to problems faced by clubs anywhere else, except Sydney."

Overall, though, he has found long-serving AFL chief executive officer Ross Oakley to be increasingly helpful: "I think he has warmed to the club more and more as it has evolved to a membership base. I think initially he felt if you were dumb enough to put your money in then you should take the consequences. That is the reason for the lack of assistance the club received during the days when it was run by private entrepreneurs."

A major off-field battle is brewing over what in early 1995 was estimated to be the \$35 million redevelopment at the Gabba. The first stage saw the removal of the greyhound track, creating one

of AFL's largest grounds. The second, announced by state ALP treasurer Keith DeLacy to actually cost \$40.017 million, will see lights and an electronic scoreboard installed and the Gabba's capacity increased from 18,620 to almost 25,000. However, for most of 1995 the ground capacity will be reduced to under 13,000. At least four home games during 1994 topped this, with the Essendon and Collingwood matches both selling out at over 18,000.

The Bears' board want compensation for lost revenue. In the coming months it will be the number one item on Ireland's agenda. He explains: "All the consultant work has been done and accepted by the state government. Now it is a matter of sorting out an arrangement suitable to both parties. The deal we look like doing will see the club in a strong position. The state government have been supportive. But there is also a community benefit in building an international stadium."

Over the summer, Ireland regularly meets with the Gabba Trust. While lack of spectator space in 1995 is a major inconvenience, he can use this to secure the club's future. In the boardroom, moves are also under way to establish a clubhouse and training facility away from the Gabba. In Queensland on personal business, Oakley accompanies the board to the Brisbane Broncos' highly lucrative facility at ANZ Stadium.

Gordon is determined to see the ground issue resolved. After building public support at the Gabba in 1993, 1994 was the first chance the Bears had to test their base in Brisbane. Gordon, Piper and Ireland know the club can attract more people through the gates in two football games than 30 days of Sheffield Shield. Eleven home games will bring in far more patrons than the whole cricket season — international one-day matches and tests included. The issue of who controls sporting grounds around Australia runs deep. Most were developed primarily for cricket; with few exceptions, football is simply a winter tenant.

According to Gordon: "There are a number of revenue streams which under the original agreement we would have enjoyed for a long period. Not only are they looking to increase the rent but they are seeking to take some of our revenue earners from us as well. If that happened, financially it would be a

disaster for the club. We wouldn't want to lose the impact of a crowd of 20,000 as opposed to only 10,000. That will form part of the substantial compensation package we are looking for. There is an unsatisfactory side to compensation because we would rather have the Gabba packed than getting money for people who are not seeing the game."

In 1994 Gordon, through his personable nature, and Piper, ever the astute businessman, lifted the Bears from losses of \$38 million at Carrara to being the sixth most lucrative AFL club, with an operating profit of \$90,141. This year the chairman unambiguously announces to his football staff, "It is time to deliver. No more excuses." This year the team has to perform.

With Walls coming off his five-year contract at the year's end, Ireland knows their senior coach could be in demand. "A couple of other clubs have contacted us to see what his contractual position is. That is just a matter of politeness. Besides, they can't really approach him until he comes out of contract."

The football department has worked hard to build up one of the best crop of youngsters in the AFL. Poachers are sure to come from interstate. Ruckman Matthew Clarke, currently studying at Queensland University, Nigel Lappin, drafted from Chiltern in Victoria, and mercurial Darryl White will be coming off contract at the end of the year. So will young Queensland star Michael Voss. Ireland and the board decide to make a special effort to keep him. Ireland also places Justin Leppitsch and Nathan Chapman, both 19, off-limits. He is close to securing a new contract for both players.

While the new recruits are settling in, the football department decides it is time to flex some muscle. Things have become sticky between management and former West Coast Eagles' player Paul Peos whose father/manager, after more money in 1995 than the Bears offer, instructs Peos to stay away from training until the matter is resolved. Ireland and Scott Clayton discuss the matter with Walls and Gordon before withdrawing the offer of a new contract.

At training news breaks that Peos is not returning. There is little reaction: in the world of professional football this is not uncommon. During his time at the Bears, Walls has begun

training sessions with the knowledge that he would be calling players aside and telling them their services were no longer required. Of Peos he says: "We were not going to be dictated to by a player. There are certain degrees to which you will allow yourself to move. But for a player who played only 33 games!"

This allows another position for the March draft.

With the start of practice matches, the jostle for positions begins. In his mind, Walls settles on 10 players who, if fit, will play the first premiership match against Hawthorn. This means at least 11 positions are up for grabs.

In the first trial game, an under-23 match against the West Coast, the youngsters will be on show for the first time, along with a few experienced players, including Michael Murphy. Arriving in Perth on Friday night, Walls takes his squad for a game of cricket early on Saturday morning. At the WACA, Australia are battling with England. Against the Eagles, the Bears lose by a point. In his first match for 12 months, Murphy is impressive, kicking five of the team's 10 goals. However, he sustains another injury. Three weeks sidelined is the early prognosis. Along with Starceвич, Murphy is now looking for another comeback before the season proper begins. Other players to impress include rookie midfielders Jason Akermanis and Launceston-born Steve Lawrence. The 18-year-old Lawrence, who plays with Southport in the QAFL, is the son of former St Kilda champion, Barry Lawrence.

The pre-season game against Carlton, at Cooloom, is the first chance Walls, Ireland and Gordon have to see most senior players in action. On a temporary stand, partly sheltered from Queensland's first decent rain for months, sit Starceвич, McLean, Troy Clarke, Chris Scott, Rudi Frigo, Gowers, Matthew Kennedy and McRae — all injured. They are joined by Lambert who in the second quarter suffers a broken nose.

Walls experiments first with White then Leppitsch at centre-half back. He also tries Leppitsch at centre-half forward. After suffering severe knee injuries in 1993 and 1994, the larrikin redhead seems primed for a big season. Under Nunn-Cearns he is noticeably quicker. Speedy young Aker shows fire on the wing while Merrett plays solidly. The most significant indication of

the skipper's commitment comes with the first ball delivered high into the forward line. Although his legs are still working their way into another season, he leaps from behind a pack to take a strong grab.

The marketing department's 1995 target is 10,000 members, an increase of 2,000 on 1994. The advertising campaign is a spin-off from the AFL's "I'd like to see that" promotion. Instead of international stars, the Bears opt for faces familiar to Queenslanders, such as former premier Sir Joh Bjelke-Petersen, who says, "The Brisbane Bears with more members than the National Party! I'd like to see that." Next is former Sydney Swans high-flyer and Bears flop, Warwick Capper: "An invitation to join the Bears. I'd like to see that." In terms of nationwide publicity the ad is a resounding success.

At the March draft, the football staff are looking for stability. The Bears initially settle on Footscray defender Keenan Reynolds. Then the unthinkable happens as the Swans, who would have exceeded their salary cap, pass their second pick. A few days later Ross Lyon, who had all but moved to Sydney, is greeting his new team-mates as the Bears file off the bus at Waverley for the first pre-season Ansett Cup match, against North Melbourne.

Clayton cannot believe his luck. Lyon is not a tall defender. Nor is he likely to fill the void at centre-half back. But there are other qualities which strongly appeal. An excellent possession gatherer, he is hard at the ball. Another tough man among the younger players is a bonus. Despite needing a shoulder operation, last season he played 18 games for Fitzroy. Pleased to come to Brisbane, his original first choice, Lyon has a football knowledge which is rare. Although his services cost the Bears more than Clayton expected to spend, Lyon receives substantially less than he would have in Sydney, where he had a job secured with Channel 7. In Brisbane he arrives unemployed.

Also recruited is Footscray's 24-year-old Shannon Corcoran. A former clubmate of Magic McLean, Corcoran, who had a horror run with shoulder and hamstring problems in 1994, plays in a Bears' reserve-grade side which suffers at the hands of

North Brisbane. After St Kilda, Richmond and Essendon had courted him, Brisbane is Corcoran's preferred choice.

When the Bears flight to Melbourne touches down, Marmite and the support staff swing into action. At the airport a young woman in her late teens approaches Chris Scott. Former Collingwood speedster Troy Lehmann is 23 next week. Will he make sure "Leroy" gets this package? Scott obliges. He gives the plastic bag to Marmite who, stowing the package away in a kit bag, is unimpressed. He does, however, manage to find the computer for compiling statistics which had gone missing.

Midway through the team's dinner at the up-market Centra Hotel, near the Trade Centre in the heart of Melbourne, a television crew arrives. The Channel 7 reporter struggles for Merrett's attention. After four takes, the skipper completes the interview. Merrett then swaps his borrowed Bears' shirt for Lambert's flannel. It is Lamby's turn. Another change of shirt and onto Chris Scott.

In the pre-match build-up, players, coaching staff and trainers are subdued. Walls decides to alternate Lynch and Merrett at full-forward with McAdam roving around the half forward line supporting Leppitsch. In his first game for the club, Gowers will play halfback flank.

Although starting as a reserve, even experienced Damian Bourke's nerves begin to show. 1994's AFL rookie of the year Chris Scott is first on the bench for a rub-down. As the intensity builds, with shoulder bumping, hand passing under pressure and short sharp kicks, noise in the dressing room increases. Scott is like a boxer practicing a series of jabs and upper cuts against an imaginary opponent.

From the opening the Bears are competitive. They lead at various stages during the first half. Against Wayne Carey, DJ is doing well at centre-half back. Merrett doesn't take a backward step. His clash with a defender earns the wrath of former Bears big man Alex Ishchenko. Lynch is nowhere to be seen. He fumbles, drops marks. Clearly something is very wrong with him.

As Gordon and Ireland watch from the stands, Brisbane's lack of match fitness begins to show. Lambert limps off after taking what he thought was a mark and getting hammered.

Gowers runs out of steam. DJ falters under Carey's awesome presence. It is a 60-point flogging. Walls knows the team is underdone.

When the team flies out, Lambert remains behind. He has a cracked fibula. The star rover is in doubt for the first premierships match.

Next week the Bears lose to local QAFL side, Mt Gravatt. After the game, Walls looks hard for some sign of hope. He finds it in his 16-year-old son, David, who played at full back and had five goals kicked against him. Although training with the club, he is too young to be listed this year. After the game when the crowd had cleared he and his father walked together to the car. Walls says, "I looked at him and he had tears rolling down his face. I said, 'What is the matter?' He said, 'I played shithouse'. In many ways that is the best thing I have seen come out of the day. Here was a 16-year-old who cared."

In contrast, the attitude of a senior player, Adrian Fletcher, who didn't want to play, showed on the field. Next week he is dropped to the reserves. Aker also suffers the axe. While the previous weekend he did some good things in the nationally televised game against North Melbourne, against a local side with only a few dozen spectators the young Queenslander doesn't rise to the occasion.

Immediately after the Mt Gravatt debacle is one of the most unusual events in the club's short history. A service at St John's Anglican Cathedral, organised by director Neville Fallon, is dedicated to the Bears. The club's colours are draped around the high altar, a team scarf hangs around the Archbishop's neck. According to the physically imposing Archbishop, Peter Hollingworth, there is a close correlation between the pursuit of excellence in life and in football.

There is the presentation of a football, a Bears' guernsey and a pair of football boots. Club chaplain, and part-time video operator, Dean Davis says, without irony, "This ball is symbolic of Australian Rules football: its ovoid shape is particularly suited to long distance kicking. Its leather cover symbolises durability and strength; and its pneumatic pressure reminds us of the unseen power of God's Spirit. This club guernsey signifies our

pride in teamwork, and our gratitude to the sponsors who support our activities throughout the year. The football boots of a player support the groundwork of everything he does. They symbolise the preparation of mind and body so necessary to every player in every game."

In the first reading, ex-Saint and the AFL's shortest player, Danny Craven, recounts the story of David and Goliath. Craven stood in at the last moment for Chris Scott, who was late. The young shepherd boy's mighty victory emphasises "the need for discipline in the constant striving after success". The Bears are young Davids in a competition full of Goliaths. Noel Gordon, who later notes in his diary, "Chris Scott's lack of self-discipline is a worry", reads the Temptations of Christ. During 40 days in the wilderness, Jesus remains focused despite the distractions and evil around him. There is a message for the players.

It is going to be a long season. So far 1995 has not been auspicious. Walls does not attend the service. He writes in his diary about the demands upon players and himself:

After Friday's training they were expected to be at Amazons [a suburban water theme funpark] for three hours to mingle with supporters. After Sunday's practice match they are expected to attend a church service. I know there are arguments to justify this, BUT WHERE DO YOU DRAW THE LINE? My non-appearance at the church service will not endear me to some people. Nevertheless there will be no apologies from my end. My two teenage sons have barely seen me this week. There have been times when I haven't sat down for a meal with the family in over a week. We will dine out together.

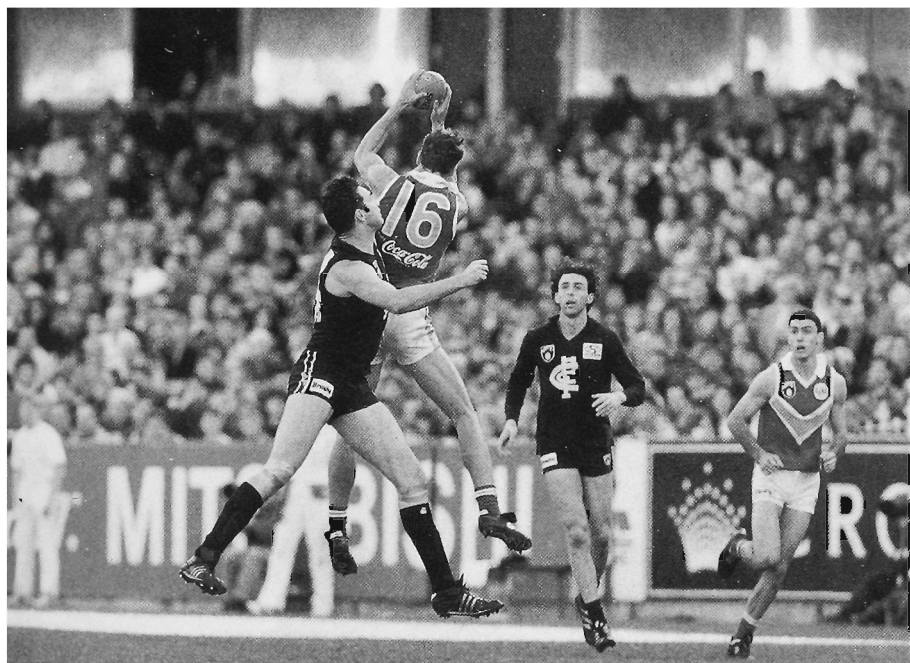
A former primary school teacher, reflective by temperament, Walls coached Carlton to a premiership the same year they lost all their pre-season games. Fitzroy won all their trial matches and they finished near the bottom. Perhaps help from the divine umpire might be an answer for the Bears.

The coach smiles when I tell him about the fighter who blessed himself before he entered the ring. "Will that help him, father?" a spectator asked a priest sitting in the front row. "It won't if he can't fight," the priest succinctly replied.





Reverse of the Brisbane Bears' banner for the club's first-ever final, at the MCG, 10 September 1995. (Just Photography)



Matthew Clarke marks over Carlton's Justin Madden. Ang Christou (Carlton) and Nigel Lappin look on during the 4th Qualifying Final at the MCG, 10 September 1995. (Just Photography)

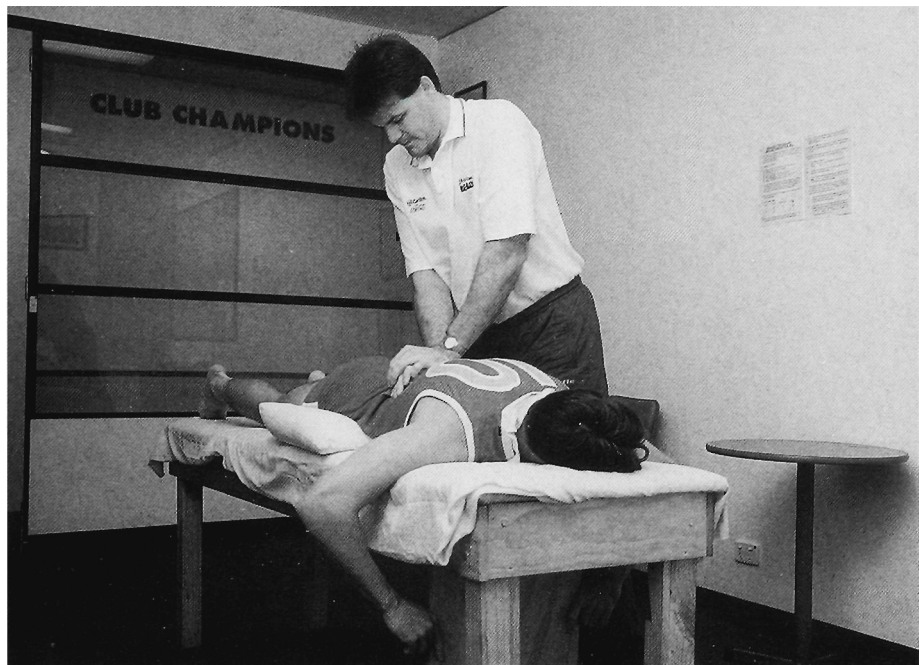


The Gabba, February 1995, before the redevelopment begins. (Just Photography)

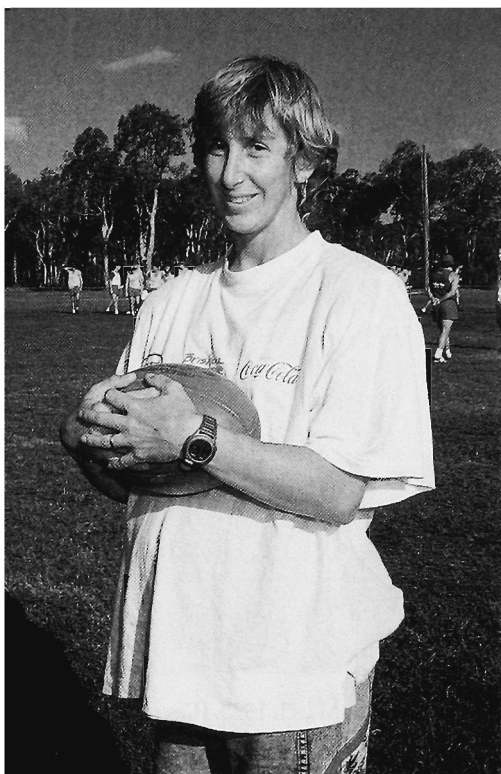


Shane Hodges (left) and Trent Bartlett learn how to cook. (Peter Blucher)





Jim Eustace works on Marcus Ashcroft in the Gabba medical rooms. (Just Photography)

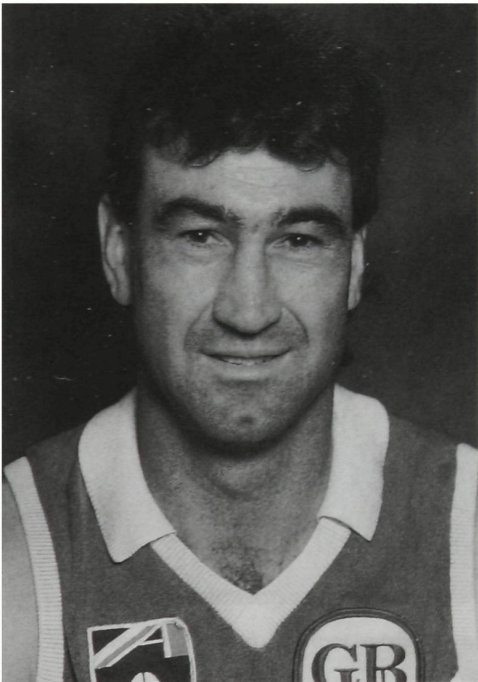
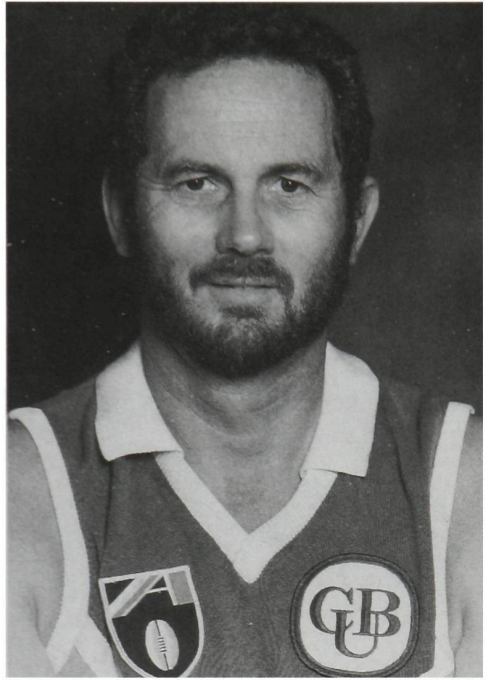


Glynis Nunn-Cearns, pre-season 1995. (Peter Blucher)



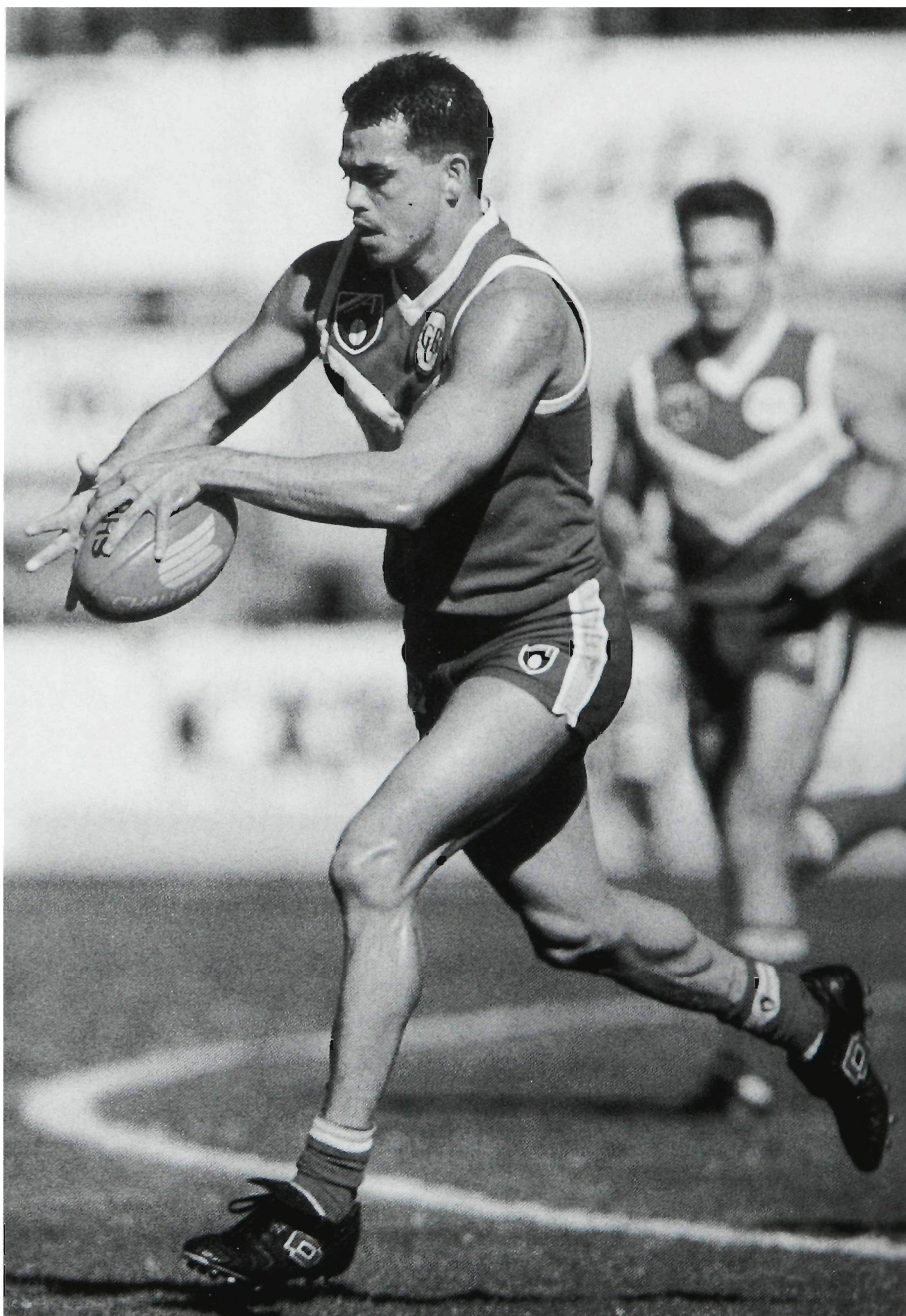
Alastair Lynch, March 1995. (*Courier-Mail*)

**Robert Walls. (Just Photography)**



**Roger Merrett. (Just Photography)**



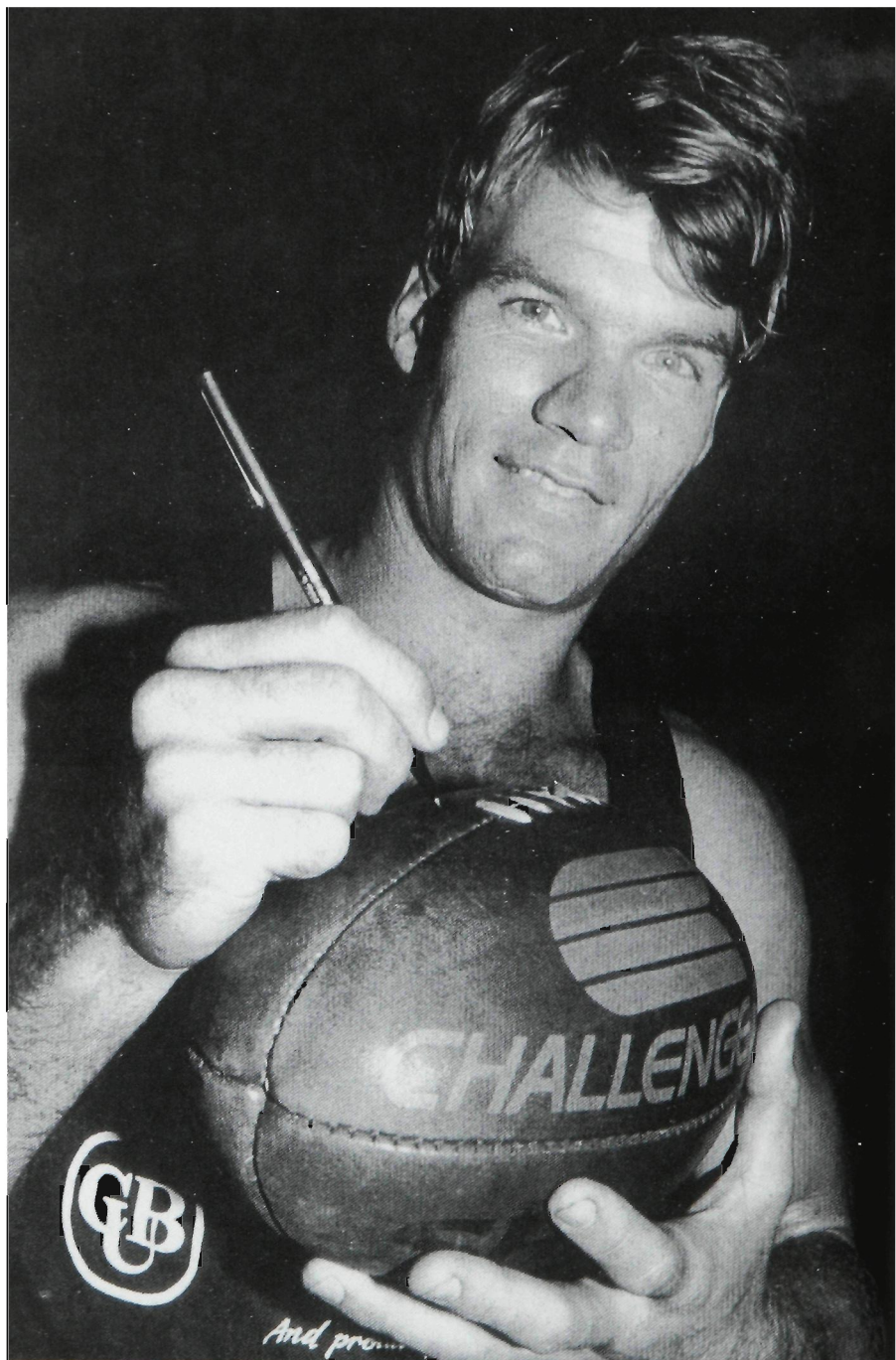


Michael McLean at the Gabba. (*Courier-Mail*)



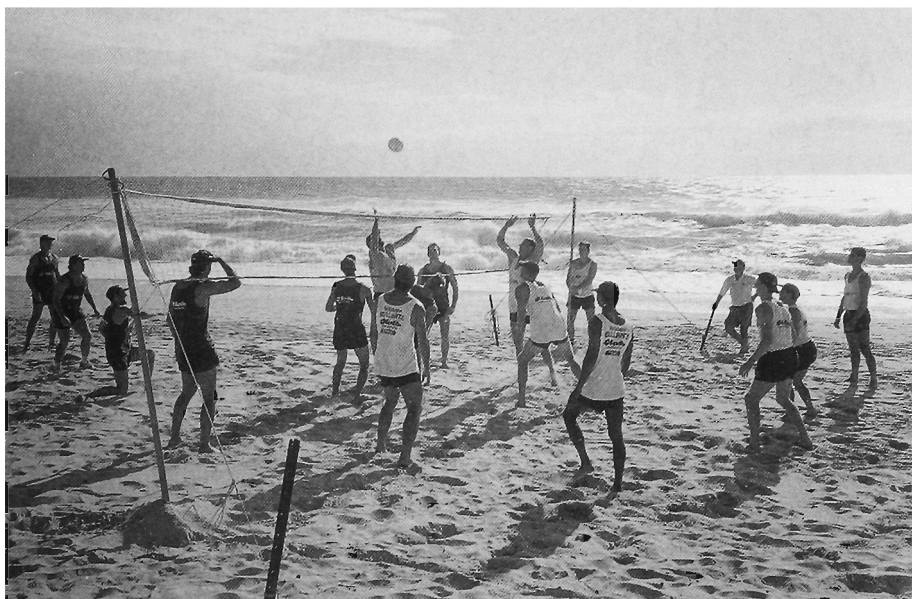
Robert Walls and Broncos coach Wayne Bennett together at training.  
(*Courier-Mail*)





Richard Champion, who has signed with the Bears for another five years. (Courier-Mail)





Noosa pre-season camp, 1995. (Peter Blucher)



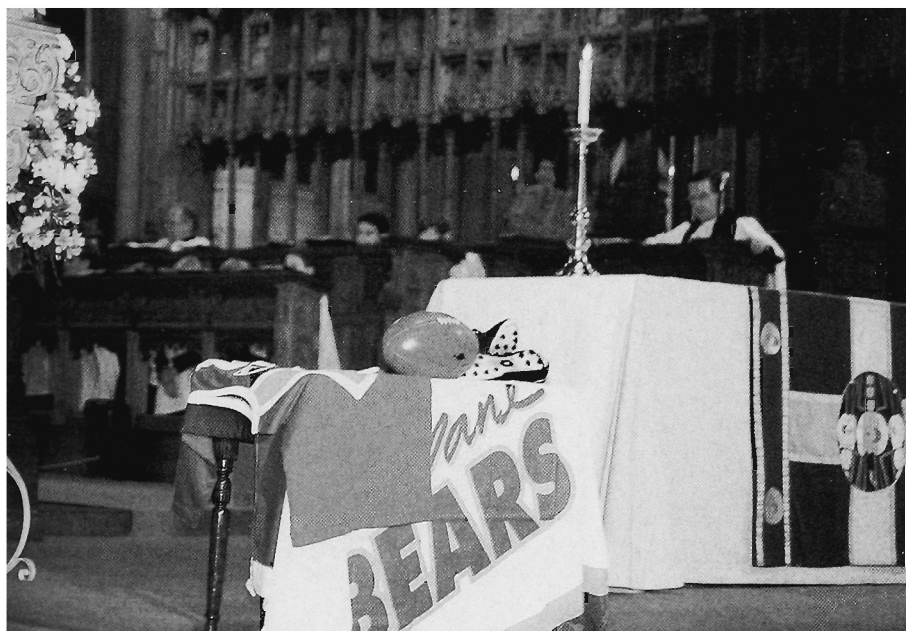
Bears' vice chairman Alan Piper with Marcus Ashcroft at a promotion for major support sponsor, Southside Toyota. (AP Eagers)



Shaun Hart in a pre-season trial match against Carlton at Cooloom. (*Courier-Mail*)



New players Jason Akermanis (35), Shannon Corcoran (26), Andrew Gowers (8), Ross Lyon (28) and Craig McRae (4) at the 1995 Jumper Presentation. (Just Photography)



Presentation of the boots, ball and club jumper at the Bears' church service, St John's Anglican Cathedral, 19 March 1995. (Just Photography)

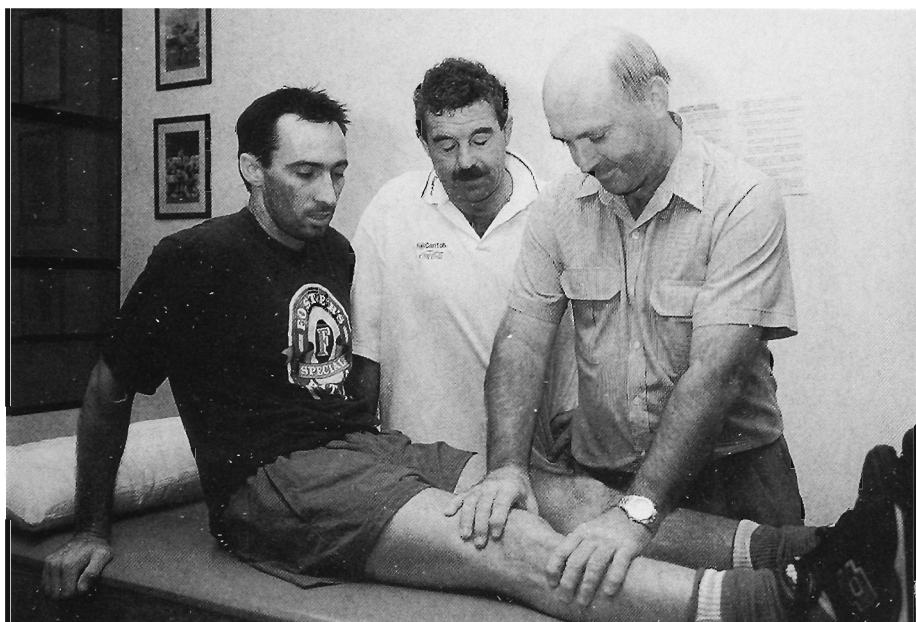




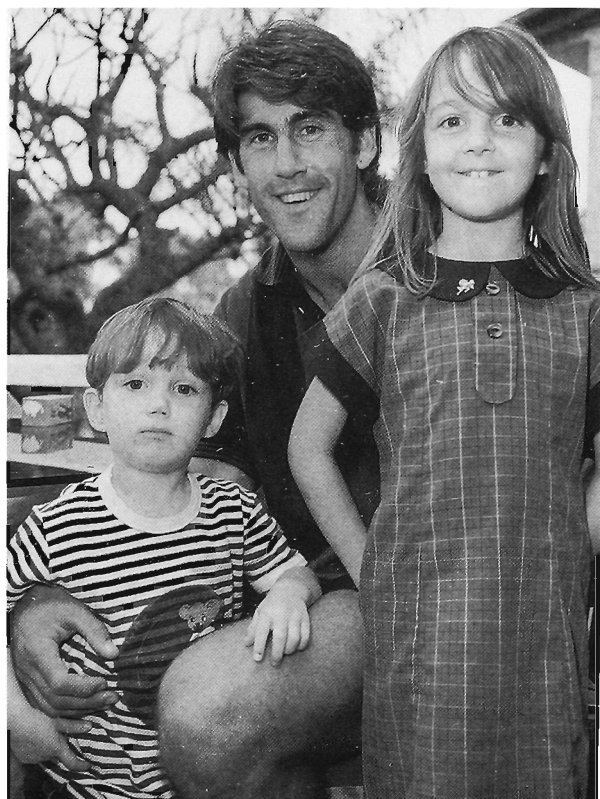
Chris Scott tears a hamstring at Waverley, Round 1, 1 April 1995. Hawthorn's Simon Minton-Connell is sprawled on the ground. (*Courier-Mail*)



Devoted fans, Fairlea (left) and Kimberley Wilson watch the Round 2 game against Adelaide, 9 April 1995, from the Western Hill Stand at the Gabba. (Andrew Berkman)



Head trainer "Gabby" Fenech watches as "Doc" Mackenzie tends to Troy Clarke's injured knee. (Just Photography)

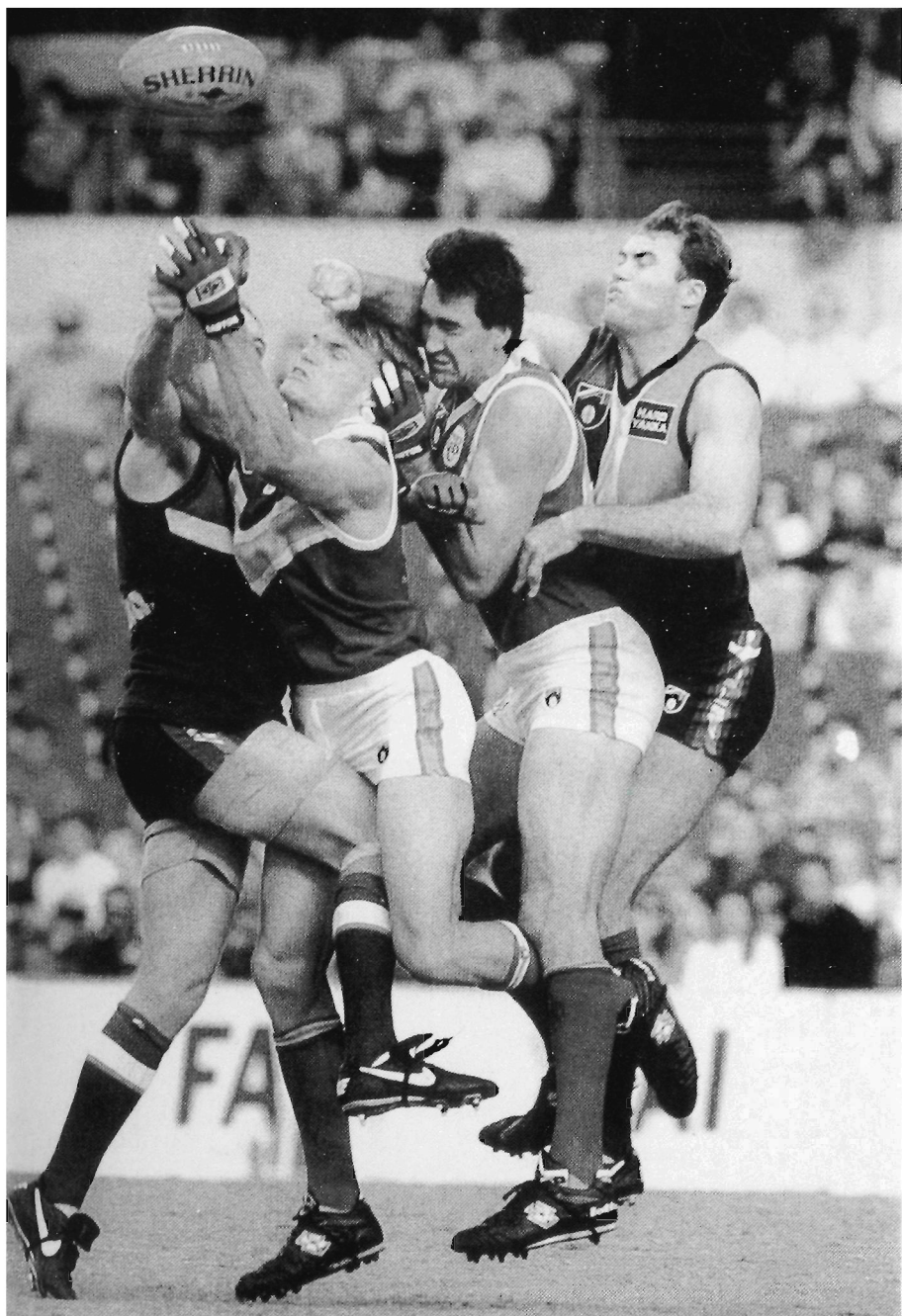


Craig Starcevich with his children, Jackson (2) and Courtney (6). (Just Photography)

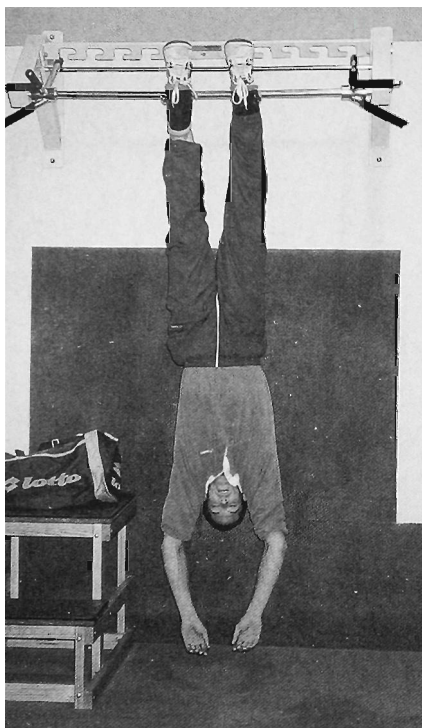


Linda and Michael McLean with sons Jamie (5) (in front), Gavin (9) and Mark (10) (standing at back). (*Courier-Mail*)





Fremantle's Todd Ridley (left) and Stephen O'Reilly (right) clash with Richard Champion and Roger Merrett in Round 9 at Subiaco, Perth, 28 May 1995. (*Courier-Mail*)



Bears' veteran Martin Leslie hanging upside down to ease his bad back.  
(Peter Blucher)



Boot-studder Brian Powell, Bob Pearce (Marmite), Graeme Smart (Smarty) and the late Max Green. (Bear Facts)



## CHAPTER THREE

### *Passion*

*“Serious sport has nothing to do with fair play.  
It is war minus the shooting.”*

*George Orwell*

Two weeks before the premiership opener against Hawthorn, in a trial game at Bendigo the Bears lose by 12 points to lowly Fitzroy. Even worse, passion is lacking. The Bears aren't playing with commitment.

Walls says, “A few of our players like Merrett and Magic always do. They are the ones you can really respect and appreciate. Some play with passion at times, others rarely. They usually disappoint.”

After one player responds by saying, “I'm not an emotional person”, Walls explains to me: “He is playing an emotional game. The highs and the lows are extreme and there is pain. You *have* to be an emotional person. Every game you play should be cherished because it may be your last.”

While training has been competent and the level of enthusiasm high, Walls muses, “When it comes to match day some players don't get any more excited than they would at a training session. To play the game well is the most important thing. A couple of kids who do mundane jobs, they only work two or three days a week, look forward to training, but when it comes to the weekend they don't play with any passion. That's a worry.”

Adrian Fletcher, a stocky ex-Geelong centreman, is an

experienced Bear struggling to get motivated. How can he look forward to another grinding season beneath the packs, dodging fists and elbows in search of the ball? Fletcher didn't train as hard as he usually does during the pre-season. He says, "I thought to myself: 'I haven't got a job and career-wise things have been average. I've had good years, but people don't recognise me as a footballer.' I started to wonder if I was going in the right direction. It has really affected me this year and it took a lot to get myself going."

As Lambert is unlikely to play in the opening round, it is imperative that the remaining experienced on-ball players, Marcus Ashcroft and Fletcher, fill the void.

Alongside returning Craig Starcevich and pacy rover Troy Clarke, in the seconds Fletcher plays a solid game against West Brisbane. In the same match Merrett's new role begins to show. Rested from interstate travel, the skipper observes that he has less to offer the team as a player, more as a leader. This year he doesn't do as many of the training drills, so he is able to talk to different people. Walls is reducing his workload. If he can pass on any of his experience to educate younger players, he will.

Standing in the goal-square (in fact it's a rectangle) at quarter-time Merrett yells to Jason Akermanis who is halfway to the team huddle. Aker stops and waits. As the skipper speaks sternly, his head bows. An attempt to break free is thwarted by Merrett's large hand on his shoulder. During the remaining three quarters Akermanis is fully committed. Merrett explains: "He's got a great attribute of running, but he wasn't using it. He considered the ball was going to go over boundary line and it was still 20 metres away. The West Brisbane player was leading to the ball and he was just jogging along behind. If he was switched on and using the best of his ability, he would have got that ball. You have to keep on their backs while they are in the learning process."

In the countdown to the season opener, the Bears eventually notch a win, beating the Fremantle Dockers by 48 points in a practice game at Waverley Park. Several senior players are recovering from injury or illness and the younger recruits

eagerly await a chance at the big time. There is only one intra-club match before the premierships opener.

"Come on Gilly. You need this," Walls bellows. One of three Aborigines playing for the Bears this year, McAdam has just returned from injury. He is chasing a team-mate in 35 degree heat. As Walls oversees the 10-a-side game, a worrying sight is Alastair Lynch as goal umpire!

Andrew Ireland welcomes not just the Fremantle win, but the senior players return. "There is a need for more toughness in the side. We have got too many youngsters in."

The chief executive has a right to be pleased. He has just finalised a lease agreement with the Gabba Trust which underwrites the club's future for the next 20 years, plus two five-year options.

Brisbane's Deen Brothers, Happy, Funny and George, who during the Bjelke-Petersen regime demolished the BelleVue Hotel in the dead of night and then the historic Cloudlands Ballroom, begin to dismantle the old Gabba stands. As the Sheffield Shield final is only a few days away, there is outrage among cricket followers.

In the historic four-day match, Queensland, captained by Stuart Law, dominate South Australia. During the game, the State virtually grinds to a halt.

Overlooking victory celebrations are Noel Gordon, club directors Ray Bolwell, Peter Williams, Graeme Downie and Neville Fallon, plus Walls and several players. Unable to use the Gabba for the past week, the Bears have been training at suburban Coorparoo, where Hawthorn's champion spearhead Jason Dunstall began his football career.

Although only 10 of the 42 listed Bears' players are from Queensland, most have established a life in Brisbane. Gowers, Lynch and Hamilton are building houses, others are well settled. Walls says: "No more 20 in and 20 out. We have lost only four players from the 1994 list. Some of the boys returned (interstate) for Christmas and New Year. Several, myself included, stayed in Queensland. Another sign of players accepting Queensland as being home."

The board meeting scheduled for 4 pm on Tuesday, March 28

is delayed for an hour after the Bulls win their first Sheffield Shield for Queensland. Gordon declares, "We're next to bring the big one to the Gabba."

"But it won't take us 67 years," says Leighton Contractor's general manager Peter Williams.

Gordon conducts the meeting in an atmosphere of excitement. After being congratulated on his deal with the Gabba Trust, Ireland is asked to leave the boardroom.

The directors increase their chief executive's \$110,000 plus salary and suggest a possible bonus. Apart from the Sydney Swans, his is a tougher job than any other AFL chief executive's in Australia. His cheeks red, as they occasionally are under pressure, Ireland rejoins the meeting as the board discuss ways to improve coverage of Australian Rules in Queensland.

Gordon has met with Channel 7 executives to try and balance the saturation coverage received by Rugby League and Rugby Union. Deputy chairman Piper, who joins the meeting late, suggests asking BTQ7 managing director, Les Riley, to attend a board meeting. Measures canvassed included asking Bears members to boycott Channel 7 News.

Ray Bolwell says tersely, "We need to work *with them*. Seduce them, don't rape them. We must keep at the AFL to get coverage of the game improved up here."

When the meeting turns to the football department, Fallon comments, "The chairman made an excellent speech at last night's Jumper Presentation calling on the players and coaching staff to perform on the field. Do the coaching staff understand that THIS IS THE YEAR? There is no other alternative but for them to win."

Ireland comments that the coaching staff can't go on the field and play, so much of the responsibility must fall on the team.

Bolwell says, "Either we have the right people or we haven't. The coach has the raw talent, now he must produce."

To which Piper, who has a Masters degree in Business Administration, responds, "Walls used to make a presentation to the board. Why not get him in occasionally to discuss football issues?"

As roisterous singing from the cricket fans rings across the

darkened oval, a final motion is passed. The board will write a congratulatory letter to their old sparring partners at the Queensland Cricket Association. The directors move to the Social Club. A small group of Bears' members are on hand for the Annual General Meeting as Gordon, weary from the days events, opens proceedings. He then stands down from the board. A middle-aged matron in the back row gasps. Gordon, with his outgoing personality and fanatical method of support, has become almost as symbolic as the club's maroon and gold colours. A minute later, he is re-elected unopposed.

The board was established in December 1991, taking over from the privately owned Reuben Pelerman Group. For the first five years of public ownership, only one director resigns each year. This year was Gordon's turn. From 1997, one-third will stand down annually.

Most comments at the meeting relate to the poor television coverage the sport receives from Channel 7. Gordon and Ireland assure members that moves are under way to improve the situation. Publicly the issue is handled diplomatically. There is no suggestion of the boycott discussed behind closed doors an hour earlier.

According to devoted Bears supporter 21-year-old Kimberley Wilson, the small amount of media coverage of the AFL and particularly the Bears is frustrating: "Channel 7 is supposed to be the AFL network but on the news during pre-season there is nothing about the AFL, only the Rugby codes." Kimberley says Brisbane needs to see some pre-season stories to keep supporters up to date: "We get hardly any live coverage, especially of the Ansett Cup. If we are lucky, maybe we get a replay later in the night. If we were in Melbourne we would get them all."

Not all fans in Queensland suffer from lack of coverage. Directors Graeme Downie and Bolwell will see the Ansett Cup final direct. Both reside on the Gold Coast where Prime TV provides excellent coverage of Aussie Rules, especially during pre-season when the Bears are desperately chasing membership.

As Kimberley's younger sister Fairlea says, "During practice matches and the regular season, Channel 7 doesn't broadcast

much at all. But they always feature Rugby League. During the week and weekend, Channel 10 broadcasts news about Australian Rules. If they can, why can't Channel 7?"

Fairlea and Kimberley are fanatical Bears' supporters. During the season they sit in the Western Hill Stand, directly behind the goals, cheering and hurting along with their team. Since the Bears came full-time to the Gabba in 1993, seeing their heroes for only the 11 home games was something Brisbane fans had to put up with. Not any more. Australian Rules is getting a higher profile.

After the Annual General Meeting, the Chairman leaves the Social Club, which is still full of revellers.

When Gordon had arrived at the Gabba around midday the Bears' carpark was full so he parked his Lexus, a top of the line Toyota, behind the coach's car. "Robert will ask me to move it if he wants to leave," Gordon reasoned. With the day's events he hasn't given it another thought. Now Walls' Nissan is gone, somehow having manoeuvred its way out. Left behind on the Chairman's windscreen is a note reading "IGNORANT BASTARD", and a back tyre has been let down. Gordon recognises the handwriting. For several seasons, he has seen it scribbled on blackboards in the Bears' dressing rooms. It is the writing of a former school teacher, Robert Walls. Because Gordon's spare was also flat, he had to catch a taxi home, returning at 5 am the next morning. Cursing the coach, he put a note in his wallet to bring it up with Walls when he saw him next. When they gather for a meeting a few days later, football manager Shane Johnson talks him out of it.

At the time Walls didn't know whose car it was, but when he found out he wasn't suprised. "My message sums the man up. I just can't work with him." There is clearly a major personality clash between the club's chairman and its senior coach.

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Before the Hawthorn game, Walls is unhappy. Despite four months pre-season, the Bears are under-prepared. Although Lambert trains strongly, Walls knows his leg is still injured. "We

only selected him because we thought it would throw Hawthorn a bit. They might have had someone set to tag him.”

Lambert will accompany the team to Melbourne. As a motivator, he is one of the best. As an enemy he can be difficult, but, so far, Walls has his support. Despite being unable to play, Lamby’s jovial attitude and idiosyncratic dress are good for team morale.

Three hours before the team leaves, Smarty receives a phone call. Marmite is in hospital.

Smarty had planned a quiet evening drinking at Morningside Football Club, with which he still has strong links. It has been a big week for Smarty — his Bear Mobile has covered 670 kilometres. Although trips to Melbourne don’t hold the same appeal, that evening Smarty is at Brisbane Airport sorting out the gear and handing out to the players fresh fruit and individually sealed bottles of water.

To reach the finals the Bears must win interstate. This involves travelling well. The football department has spent considerable effort establishing a successful routine. For the flight, Shane Johnson compiles an itinerary. A sheet is attached, entitled “Interstate Travel — A Positive Experience.” Points include:

- “4. Avoid overeating. Stick to your original pre-game diet schedule where possible and do not eat just because it is there and free.”
- “6. Anticipate hassles and roll with the punches. The last thing your team-mates want is a team member who complains and reacts poorly on trips.”
- “8. When in transit at an airport terminal, use the time to walk or to do some stretching or treatment. Don’t sit around like a BLOB.”

The page finishes: “You should view the travel as another opportunity to execute your professionalism as a footballer. Use the trip as a chance to rest and prepare for what is ahead — A WIN AGAINST THE ODDS.”

This is the first of seven journeys to Victoria in 1995. When the plane touches down at Tullamarine players pull on jumpers and jackets. Rain is starting to fall.

With the gear stored near the Centra Hotel entrance, Smarty

can at last enjoy a beer. Checking out the Crown Casino next door, he concludes, "It's nothing special ... doesn't compare to the Gold Coast joint. The Sports Bar isn't much chop either."

In Melbourne, Smarty usually drinks at Young and Jackson's, where he takes new players and trainers to see the portrait of naked Chloe. When he first saw her, Smarty was 18. Studying Chloe closely with Doc Mackenzie, they noticed a bunion on her foot. Smarty delights in pointing out the blemish to young recruits.

Tonight he is in the Sports Bar. Crammed full, it provides just enough standing room to watch a large-screen replay of the evening's game. With 90 seconds left, Adelaide is up by three points. As the clock strikes midnight, the channel automatically switches to Barbados for the First Test against the West Indies. Before an angry group of North Melbourne supporters become riotous, Smarty returns to the casino where he and Doc share a few drinks before retiring. The morning papers show a dramatic three-point win by North.

The Bears file onto the 11 am bus bound for bleak Waverley stadium. Injuries have hit the team hard. Several key players lack match fitness.

Gowers is more edgy than most. His home-and-away debut for the Bears will be against players with whom he spent the previous six years. Seeing Hawthorn president Geoff Lord revives memories of his messy split. The Hawks used the media to paint Growler as a mercenary.

Yet he has many friends at Hawthorn. In the Bears' dugout he sees long-time mate, Hawks' trainer Joe Guerin, with a bottle of 1972 Empire Port, Canadian Label. It is payment for a long-standing bet.

Gowers spent the lead-up to the game conducting media interviews. On the ground Hawks' supporters hoot his every move.

In the first 15 minutes the Bears dominate with five shots at goal, reaping three majors. When Hawthorn eventually move the ball forward, Champion spoils Hawks' skipper Jason Dunstall. In the same movement Chris Scott clutches the back of his leg. He has damaged a hamstring again, but elects to play on.



As the powerful Hawthorn machine begins rolling, frustration shows in the young defender's play. After a mark is awarded, Scott punches the ball out of an opponent's hand and gives away 50 metres. The team's ill-discipline continues.

Gowers and Fletcher, who are playing shockers, receive the brunt of Walls's frustration. During the third quarter Merrett, who also strains a hamstring, leaves the field. Although Ashcroft breaks even with key on-baller John Platten and Voss has the better of Darren Jarman, Hawthorn are finding space in mid-field. Lynch can't get into the game. Something is still seriously amiss.

With his midfielders firing, Queensland-born Dunstall, who at the end of 1993 turned down the Bears' offer of a 10-year, \$2 million deal, shows his awesome presence by taking a spectacular high mark over Champion and banging through a goal. He kicks five more. Brisbane are thrashed by 57 points.

As former team-mates wish him well, Gowers is holding back the tears. "I thought, I really do miss you blokes. All things being equal, I would have preferred to stay at Hawthorn."

The last player he meets is Hawks ruckman Steve Lawrence, a close friend. It is too much for Gowers, who starts crying. He sits alone in the corner of the dressing room: "Just for a few minutes, I felt totally sorry for myself."

While Gowers is feeling his private pain, other Bears hobble from the showers, clutching icepacks to knocks they have received. Some stare at the ground, others rest their elbows on their knees.

Walls is extremely contained. His assessment is that only three players won on the day — Voss, who picks up the players' votes for the first round, and McIvor and Leppitsch, who were solid. McLean showed resolution in defence but, lacking match-fitness, spent the last quarter on the bench. The Bears were underdone, but not to the extent of losing by 10 goals.

In the media huddle Walls says, "Last year we played with hardiness and enthusiasm but that was missing today. We had four or five who didn't play with the courage you'd expect. They took their eyes off the ball, didn't attack the play, missed physical contact. You're going to suffer doing that."

With less than two hours between the match's end and the flight to Brisbane, players and trainers scurry about. Gowers stays behind. He and wife Anna visit their parents. They talk about anything except football.

After the defeat, Ireland writes tersely in his diary: "Very disappointed. Know this will bring criticism of the club."

The following morning in Brisbane, the injury toll becomes clear. Merrett is out for the first home game next week against Adelaide, while Chris Scott will miss three or four matches. Lynch returns to Melbourne for more tests.

Sitting behind his spartan office desk the following Wednesday, Walls provides forthright answers to my questions. The coaching staff have continuing concerns about the team's lack of drive and passion. In a Rugby League stronghold like Brisbane, Walls faces a special challenge. Only Sydney Swans coach, Ron Barassi, will this season experience something similar. To many Brisbanites, an Aussie Rules club is little more than a sideshow. Most people in Queensland don't really care. The challenge is to change this. Unlike kids here, Walls grew up surrounded by an Aussie Rules culture. He recalls riding his bike to play junior football in Coburg on a Saturday morning and paying two bob for the umpires: "At half time you would put your hand in the plastic bag of orange quarters and there was more mud and slurp than oranges because you were the last one in."

After a match he would buy a chocolate Weston's Wagon Wheel, ride home, have a bath and watch Essendon play.

Walls quotes a passage by former Green Bay Packers' coach Vince Lombardi: "I firmly believe that any man's finest hour — his greatest fulfilment to all he holds dear — is that moment when he was to work his heart out in a good cause and he's exhausted on the field of battle, victorious." Against Hawthorn we got flogged and it hurt."

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Hawthorn's Darren Jarman was reported for allegedly striking Ross Lyon. Before the tribunal hearing, Scott Clayton receives a call from Hawthorn asking for information regarding the

incident. That evening Jarman, who claims he was provoked by Lyon elbowing him first, receives a two-match suspension. An investigation is ordered into Lyon's involvement.

The following day AFL investigator Martin Amad visits Brisbane. As Lyon was knocked out during the Jarman incident, the Bears are charged with the more serious offence of returning a concussed player to the field of play. Ireland believes the club was set up by Hawthorn: "We don't feel we have a case to answer. It wasn't collaboration. They rang and asked for information. It wasn't asking to change stories or get our stories 'down pat' so that Jarman will go free. In a later phone call Shane (Johnson) told them that there was not much to tell because (Lyon) can't remember anything. I can't see we've done anything wrong. There is nothing which says two teams can't talk. There is also the issue of Lyon going back onto the ground. The rule that even remotely relates to that doesn't say that a player can't return. The fact that he can't remember the instance when he was struck doesn't mean that 50 minutes later he wasn't right to go back onto the ground. There is nowhere in the rules which says because he couldn't remember part of the game he shouldn't play. Doc wouldn't have put him back on if he was in any danger. The fine is up to \$50,000. We wouldn't put that at risk."

In the build-up to the Adelaide game, Walls ponders positional changes. At least three are forced on him by injuries.

Chris Scott will be out for at least three weeks. For someone so young and intense, "Nuggett" has hit a real low. So much is expected of him. Since winning last year's rookie award he has begun a human movements course. "Things aren't going great at the moment. It all stems back to footy. If my footy's not going well I get down on myself and struggle at uni. It's a matter of hanging in there and things will eventually turn around."

Runners-up to North Melbourne in the Ansett Cup, Adelaide will start favourites. More injury worries hit the Bears when Lambert is again forced to withdraw after straining a thigh muscle. After fracturing his fibula six weeks ago, the pugnacious centreman was a bit too keen to get back onto the playing field. Three days before the game, Walls announces the omission of

Merrett, Lynch and Lambert: "The public deserve to know what is going on, particularly when people bet on football. I also don't mind Adelaide knowing that they are going to be out. Perhaps, because they have had a fairly big build-up with a night Grand Final and the opening game of the season which they narrowly lost, they may think 'Well, there is no Lynch, no Merrett and no Lambert — we don't have a hell of a lot to worry about.' Who knows whether it works or not."

Saturday's *Adelaide Advertiser* leads with: "The loss of star Brisbane forwards Roger Merrett and Alastair Lynch should enable Adelaide to beat the Bears at the Gabba today."

Strong-marking Scott McIvor, who leads well, replaces Merrett at full-forward. Walls brings pacy on-baller Troy Clarke into an unfamiliar defensive role at back-pocket, while Starceвич is slotted into centre-half forward. Despite his poor form at Waverley, the match committee sticks with Fletcher.

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The morning before the first home game, marketing manager Judy Kilby arrives at the Gabba to check details. "Little things go wrong, coupled with the redevelopment. In January you think you are so organised, then 'bang' it hits you."

Added to her concerns are the reduced seating, rearranging members, and the Deen brothers. "I've been out there watching them, saying: 'Don't touch that sign.' You have to get here at 7 am on match day to make sure they haven't done anything."

When Kilby asks for dangerous steel girders to be removed, the nearby fence is also shifted. The day before the first home match, the fence and the cement boulder that holds it were 60 centimetres above the ground. "All our Coca-Cola signs came off. They're our major sponsors. I couldn't get hold of the signwriting people to put them back on. One of the Deen brothers, George, said, 'We'll put them back' and I'm nearly pulling my hair out at this stage. I could just see the Coke signs back to front and upside down. The signage people arrived and we all worked together to make sure they were ready for the game."

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For the first time this season, Gordon addresses the pre-match Chairman's Circle at the Queensland Cricketers' Club. Secure in the AFL, unlike many weaker Melbourne clubs, Brisbane and other interstate clubs are beginning to gain some power.

With this year's Super League threat in rugby league, the AFL's desperation to clear a spot for a second South Australian team, and Fitzroy struggling, Gordon is keen to go public again about the possibility of merging with the lowly Lions. Despite wishing to reopen the merger debate, the chairman puts today's match first. He says: "With 11 home games it is essential we get off to a good start to the season. Lambert won't play, neither will Lynch. We are not getting much value from our good recruits. Let's hope this is not going to be an injury-prone year."

In the build-up to the game, Walls eats, as he always does, his homemade Vegemite and cheese sandwiches alone in his office. The disappointed Lambert stands outside the warm-up net, barking instructions and encouragement.

For the first time this season, the Bears' faithful trek to the Gabba. Brisbane's fans don't yet have the passionate intensity found in Melbourne, but their good nature and wit give the Gabba a unique feeling. High up in the Western Hill Stand directly behind the goals, sit Kimberley and Fairlea Wilson. In front of them is an elderly ambulance driver and amateur philatelist, Brian Berry, who leads the chant: "BRIS-BANE, clap, clap, clap, BRIS-BANE, clap, clap, clap ..."

As the players take the field, Gordon sits in a plastic chair in front of the Bears' dugout, alongside Doc Mackenzie. Standing in for Merrett, McLean wins the toss. Kicking with the wind, the Bears skip to a 22-point lead. Lyon links with DJ and Magic across half-back to start most of the Bears' attack. Despite the loss of Lambert, Brisbane dominates through the middle with Voss, Ashcroft and Fletcher collectively picking up 80 possessions. Champion has the measure of Tony Modra before Adelaide's star full-forward limps off, clutching his back.

Suddenly the Bears are playing with all the passion in the world. The underrated McIvor provides a mobile target up forward. With his left foot he kicks five goals.

Speedy 21-year-old, Craig McRae, recruited from Glenelg,

makes his mark early with two booming goals from the half-forward flank. Damian Bourke, a former Geelong captain and Bears' playing ruck-coach, contributes a spectacular right-foot snap around his body for only his nineteenth AFL goal in 12 seasons — a feat of which he gives numerous celebratory renditions in the dressing rooms after the game.

The season's first win is a relief. Walls is delighted: "I think Lyon was our best player. Both Gowers and White played well. Last week was the first game in Brisbane colours for Gowers, Lyon, McRae. Going into that game there were six or seven who were underdone. The best thing out of the Hawthorn contest was the fact that a lot of players played a game they needed to bring them up to scratch."

Walls doesn't mention 24-year-old Troy Clarke, who collected 26 possessions. Walls later admits he was best afield. But he doesn't tell Clarke, who regularly faded during the later part of each season. To Walls, it is frustrating that he hasn't reached his full potential. Perhaps this is the year. "I just told Clarkey to pull his head in, and prepare for next week. Deep down, I was thrilled for him."

It is a satisfying enough day to again convince Walls that it is worth the effort to be an AFL coach. The following morning he wakes early for a jog along the beach where a few old-timers give a friendly wave and a 'good on you'. "That's satisfying. Much better than them thinking 'I don't know whether I should talk to him or not'."

In the morning Walls is quoted criticising the AFL for double standards over the Lyon/Jarman affair. That afternoon, Lyon is exonerated. However, his knee is causing concern. Having required cortisone injections to take the field against the Crows, Lyon will have to pass a fitness test on Friday night.

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Before the Sydney game, Gordon mentions to Channel 7 commentator Bruce McAvaney the possibility of the Brisbane Lions playing in Fitzroy colours. Gordon later explains: "It is obvious when you've got a team like Fitzroy who are performing poorly on the ground, it won't be long before you lose everybody,

including sponsors and supporters. My first preference is to get Port Adelaide into the competition. Whatever is logical will follow after that. If there are teams other than Fitzroy to go, then they would go because of financial attrition."

An hour before the game the Bears get confirmation that Tony Lockett will not play. Champion, who played solidly on Dunstall in the Hawthorn loss and easily outpointed an injured Modra, is disappointed not to have the chance to cut down another superstar. Lyon pulled up sore from training and will miss the match. Eighteen-year-old Steve Lawrence's nerves are beginning to jangle. He was pleased to be named in the 25 a few days ago, but a phone call last night from Walls was a bigger thrill.

Small in stature, a scrapper and battler, Lawrence is making his AFL debut. Walls matches him against Sydney youngster Shannon Grant. As a pack forms on centre-wing the two trade blows. From the ensuing throw-in Lawrence is at it again.

Barassi's key defender, Mark Bayes, starting at centre-half forward, is on fire, kicking three goals on DJ before quarter time. White is dragged and Gowers picks up the rampaging Bayes. While failing to give the drive of the previous week, McRae, McAdam, Troy Clarke and Fletcher are solid. McIvor continues to prove a bonus at full-forward, kicking six goals. By three-quarter time the Bears are comfortably clear.

In the final term Hart, Champion and Gowers, surrounded by younger team-mates, hold firm. Taking a strong mark in the middle of the ground, Starcevich finds replacement forward Dion ("Horse") Scott in the 50-metre circle. Horse goals. A few minutes later Doc Clarke caps off a fine game with a strong mark. He passes to Horse, who goals again. Another major from Ashcroft gives the Bears a 31-point lead with eight minutes remaining.

The Swans hit back. Suddenly Brisbane are in disarray. Holding his right leg after kicking in, Champion, who has played superbly on stand-in full forward Troy Luff, limps to the sidelines. Walls bellows from the coach's box to Matt Kennedy to cover in defence. For most of the last quarter the coach has discarded the phone link to Bears' runner, Robert Dickson. With

34 seconds remaining, Sydney are within five points. They make one last thrust for victory as Paul Roos marks on centre-wing. His handpass is smothered by McAdam and the Bears keep possession until the end.

Leaving the coach's box, Walls says, "Gilly is really down on confidence and form. He had a shit game but he helped us win because he was prepared to fight it out."

Sitting unobtrusively in the Western Stand, David Parkin has been watching closely; Carlton will be taking on Brisbane here next week.

Elated, Walls sees Barassi out of the corner of his eye. He feels for him: "It's the second time in eight days his side has lost by a kick. Ours can be a soul-destroying game. I don't turn and shake hands. There is no need; there is respect and a bond we share with each other that goes way back. Besides, all Ron would want is to be left alone, given time to lick his wounds and, after a day or two, gather enough strength to get up and go again. That's the way he taught me."

Barassi and Walls have a special bond which only premier-ships can create. "Apart from my wife, Erin, he is the most honest person I know," says Walls.

After the Sydney game, Kimberley Wilson remarks: "It seemed to be a comedy of errors by both teams. I hope the Bears improve for next week's game. It seemed last year's problems were returning in the final quarter, but we hung in and won and that's what counts."

In the stands among wives and girlfriends, Sonya Starcevic has battled thousands of spectators to support her husband. After rating 1994 as his most disappointing year in football, the former Magpie star, playing at centre-half forward, has worn the brunt of the home crowd against Adelaide and Sydney. Despite hostility from the stands, he deserves credit for getting into position to contest every ball. Although his hands let him down against Adelaide, this afternoon he held his marks, providing a strong focus at half-forward. Along with McAdam's spoil in the dying seconds, Starce's two marks midway through the final quarter propelled the Bears to victory.

During the match the crowd are the furthestmost thing from



his mind: "I can't hear them when I'm on the field so their comments don't bother me. I would be more pissed off if I wasn't getting there or I was running where the ball wasn't going. I sat back after the game and thought, well my hands are not as good as they might have been, but at least I was getting to the contest."

The coach puts the match into perspective: "Against Adelaide, 12 players played well. Against Sydney we had five. Champion, Starcevich and Michael (Voss) played well in both games. Troy Clarke played well against Adelaide and ordinary against Sydney. Against Sydney, McIvor was the outstanding player and I thought Fletcher did well."

At home, Champion writes in his diary: "Things were going well and we were up by a few goals through most of the game. Luff had only kicked one goal, [he had kicked six the week before] and I was happy with how I played. With five minutes to go, I kicked out after a point and 'bang', I felt my quad muscle tear." He explains it's the worst feeling in the world: "All sorts of emotions rush through your mind, mainly anger. I came straight off and sat out the last five minutes. I iced up as we ran out winners by five points. It was a great win but I was so disappointed because I knew I would miss the next few games." For the match, Champion rated himself nine out of ten.

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Following the Sydney win, Gordon fills in his diary: "Lucky 'Pluggger' wasn't playing. We just scraped in. Ross Oakley was at the game and we spoke about the lack of TV coverage Channel 7 is providing. We spoke about the current situation where Carlton, Collingwood and Essendon are reportedly calling for a reduction in the number of teams in Melbourne. It is surprising that (Collingwood president) Allan McAlister spoke against the Crawford Report recommendation of granting the commission the right to force teams to amalgamate."

Piper is uneasy about the chairman's public comments regarding merging with Fitzroy. Feeling things are getting out of control, he arranges a private meeting with Gordon on Friday.

He explains: "This time last year we probably would have been happy to merge. Noel made his statement without con-

sulting the board and, in my opinion, things regarding Fitzroy have changed. They don't have any players left. We might be able to garnish some sort of Melbourne base out of the merger. I don't think you offer to give up your name and your colours unless there are substantial financial benefits. Our team has established some sort of franchise in Brisbane. If you talked about the Bears even two years ago they wouldn't know whether you were talking about North Sydney (rugby league) or the team in Brisbane. Now if you start talking about the Bears in Brisbane, people understand you are talking about the Australian Rules team based at the Gabba."

Piper is concerned that the board haven't given Gordon a mandate to say the Bears are ready to proceed with a merger with Fitzroy and to adopt their name and colours. He decides to bring the merger issue up at the board meeting next Monday, but he has other matters he will discuss with the chairman: "Noel has said in the press that Fitzroy, St Kilda and Footscray have no future in the competition. Last Sunday, at the chairman's lunch, he had a go at Carlton, Collingwood and Essendon by saying, in terms of the Super League, that those three teams would not let the AFL commissioners expel or admit teams to the competition.

"What he fails to mention is that not only Essendon, Collingwood and Carlton wanted to stop the commission. In fact all the weaker clubs who didn't want to get expelled also didn't give their endorsement either. So what he has done in two weeks is alienate six clubs."

Feeling that the AFL commissioners had been relatively kind to the Bears, Piper can see dangers in burning bridges. When the club gave up their reserve grade team at the end of 1992 they received a significant grant of \$600,000 over three years. A second grant provided a further \$900,000 over three years, to help with the cost of relocating from Carrara to the Gabba. "The other clubs did vote to give assistance to the Bears. I just don't see where the advantage is in the Bears knocking them; it is ungracious at best and stupid at worst. Inside a seven-day period, we have slated three weak clubs and three strong clubs."

By this stage Piper is on a roll: "The third problem I've got,

which shows a lack of business acumen on Noel's part, came last Sunday in his address. For the second week in a row, he has lauded the wonderful financial figure that the Bears have been able to negotiate with the Trust. On Sunday he went further to say that as a result of the splendid deal the Bears have been able to cut with the Gabba Trust, the club has been underwritten by the Queensland Government for the next 20 years. I cringed when I heard that, because, one, it is not true and, secondly, it shows a basic misunderstanding of the situation with the government. While it is a very reasonable deal that allows the club to have a future, there is no commercial value in saying it. He seems to think that we won't have to deal with the Trust for the next 20 years. The fact of the matter is that we will. There will be issues that come up and the Trust will say that you did this wonderful deal to start with so you cop this and you cop that."

Despite their differences of opinion, Piper and Gordon have a strong working relationship. After a game both can often be seen discussing the fortunes of the team. However, as they display very different personal styles, occasional conflict and vigorous confrontation is inevitable. Two days after the private meeting, Piper and Gordon greet each other warmly and indulge in animated conversation with Ireland about the forthcoming match.

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Apart from Champion, it looks as though Lyon, Lehmann, Chris Scott and Lynch won't play against Carlton. The coach says, "There is also a fair chance that Doc Clarke won't play. We'll have to see how he goes tonight. Lambert might play. But you are looking at five who, if fit, would be in the starting line-up straight away. Fit enough and good enough, we probably have only 26 to chose from this weekend."

Merrett wins the toss and, for some unaccountable reason, elects to kick against the wind. At the first bounce not a single Bears player has a height advantage over his opponent. Walls experiments with McIvor at centre-half back while Starceovich finds himself at half-forward flank. Voss moves out of the centre, where he has been productive in recent weeks, and plays along-

side Merrett in the forward line. With the wind, Carlton captain Stephen Kernahan proves unstoppable, feeding off inspired work by Kojak-like Mil Hanna and Anthony Koutoufides in front of the demolished grandstand. Kernahan finishes with five goals for the quarter. Carlton kick 7-6, while the Bears only manage two points.

In the second term, with Starceovich returning to centre-half forward to snap an early goal, and McIvor, who left the field after a heavy knock, returning at full-forward, the Bears look dangerous. Voss moves onto Koutoufides and Hart onto Hanna, cutting Carlton's ball suppliers. On the sidelines, Gordon is furious with several umpiring decisions. In the stand Fairlea asks: "How do you beat the men in white?"

Two quick goals from mobile Earl Spalding signal the end of a Brisbane comeback. Former Brisbane Bear Brad Peace, now playing for Carlton, receives a broken nose from Merrett.

Tragedy strikes when, following an attempted smother, Troy Clarke clutches his knee and screams in pain. "Get up, you sook," comes a cry from the members' area. "Oh, look, he is crying," the voice rings out. Clarke has snapped a ligament and will require a total knee reconstruction. Sitting in front of the spectator, club director Neville Blunt spins around. "What an animal," he says. A large Bears official asks to see the spectator's membership identification. Although produced, he has made his last comment for the day.

Clarke is stretchered off. A few years ago a similar injury caused him to miss five months. This time it is the opposite knee. He will be out for the rest of the season.

From the game there are a handful of positives. In a side lacking experience, Aker, playing his first premierships match, showed skill and determination to pick up 19 possessions and kick a goal. The Bears' best is born-again Christian Shaun Hart, who kept Hanna quiet after the bald-headed flanker had torn Brisbane to shreds.

Walls' column in the *Age* on Friday, which he usually writes on a Monday, begins, "Mil Hanna did it in his first league game, I did it in my last, and Brisbane Bear Troy Clarke did it on

Sunday in his 66th game — that is, snapped an anterior cruciate ligament.”

The coach concludes, “You hurt when your players get injured. But it hurts twice as much when it happens to a great little bloke who doesn’t deserve such rotten luck. Will he come back? You bet he will; he told me so.”

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“Why is it that only our star players get hurt?” asks one of the directors. Nobody notices when the 39th player on the list is missing for a few games. It is the stars that count.

The gloom continues as finance committee chairman, Graeme Downie, reports: “We are looking at a loss. At this stage it could be close to \$200,000 or perhaps \$150,000. Memberships and boxes are behind and it is unlikely we are going to catch up.”

Judy Kilby later admits to miscalculating the budgeted membership figures: “I was a fraction over-optimistic. I increased our target by 25 per cent on last year. For what we’ve done, it has to pay off somewhere down the line. Overall though, we’ve increased our membership by about 10 or 12 percent.”

A hyperbaric oxygen chamber used by teams such as the Dallas Cowboys and Queens Park Rangers in London is ready to be ordered. When Ireland outlines the costs and the benefits, Williams says, “Can you book the first month for Lynch?”

Gordon speaks. Unusually, he stutters, stops, and starts again: “Has the match committee talked over what would happen should it be decided the captain isn’t up to it?”

After a long silence, Bolwell says, “He would stand down himself.”

Piper adds, “Roger had a bad game against Carlton but he was inspirational against the Swans. When he tapped in the ball going over the sideline and we scored, he was probably the only player on the ground who could have done that.”

Ireland concludes: “The match committee have discussed nothing as yet. Perhaps it is something we may have to look at.”

The issue of television coverage is tabled. A letter sent to the AFL was passed on to Channel 7’s Melbourne general manager,

Bob Campbell. Campbell wrote to Channel 7's Brisbane general manager, Les Riley. Campbell's letter, formal and direct, is read out. Tomorrow Ireland meets with Riley. The board agrees it has been a successful campaign and the Bears now may get proper coverage.

After Piper broaches the merger issue, Williams comments, "What was said in the press became our view and not just yours, Noel. You have to say it as Noel Gordon and I'm happy for you to do that, but not as the overwhelming opinion of the Bears."

Shifting uneasily in his seat, Gordon again defends his actions. But Piper has the final say: "If there is an opportunity to progress the possibility of a merger with an appropriate club then I think we should. But it should be done privately and formally."

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Directly below the board room, Smarty sits in the "Hilton" drinking beers. Today is Anzac Day. Smarty has spent the morning alone remembering the past. It is an emotional time for the former Korea veteran, dressed in his uniform, medals dangling from his breast. At lunch-time ex-wife Bev and daughter Jane took him to a local RSL club. But things have changed. "A lot of young guys stand around playing two-up. They do it just to gamble."

So Smarty headed back. As he sips on a stubbie, players try on his jacket. Some curiously touch the medals. After training, for safety's sake, Marmite drives Smarty home.

In his office, not far from the property room, things are tough for Walls. Eight of the teams best dozen players are out injured. In the next six weeks the Bears play three games in Melbourne, two in Perth and only one at the Gabba. Walls seeks an answer in youth.

"Steve Lawrence has been a revelation. It goes to show what fire in the belly can do. The way that Lawrence has played has been an inspiration to me." If it hadn't been for Lyon's injury, Lawrence would still be running around in the QAFL. Against Carlton, Lawrence is voted players' player and receives maximum votes in the club champion award. Even if Lyon were

available tomorrow, a spot will be found for Lawrence in the starting line-up.

For the coach there appears some light at the end of the tunnel. The next six weeks will tell.

## CHAPTER FOUR

### *The Rough Road Together*

*"Keep right on till the end of the road."*

*Sir Harry Lauder*

This year there are few cliques in the team and no prima donnas. While elder statesmen Merrett and Martin Leslie occasionally seek out other senior players, and McAdam, McLean and White share a special bond, there is never any qualm about including Brisbane's rookies. Walls says, "It's good to see the players mixing so well. They like each other."

In the coming six weeks that affection will be tested. The Bears play only one game at home. In Richmond, Essendon and the West Coast Eagles they face three form sides, away from the Gabba.

To ensure success, Walls needs everything working for him. It isn't. 1995 is a season of injuries to key players — Lyon, Lehmann, Lambert, Troy Clarke, Chris Scott and Champion, plus medical concerns about Lynch who shows no sign of even being able to train.

To the marketing department, struggling to sell the remaining memberships, one home game in six is very trying. Playing away from Brisbane for three weeks in a row makes it particularly tough.

With a tall, athletic forward line, Richmond are undefeated after the first four rounds. The Bears have few players to match their height. The Tigers coach, John Northey, who played 117 games with Richmond, including the 1967 and 1969 premier-



ships and who previously coached Sydney and Melbourne, is the type of teaching coach Walls most admires.

Following the loss to Carlton, Walls continues to experiment. Gowers plays a key defensive role against Matthew Richardson. Leppitsch minds Stuart Edwards while Matthew Clarke fills centre-half back to counter Brendon Gale.

Up forward, Starceвич starts strongly and McAdam provides spark. After a rousing victory over North Melbourne only four days before, the Tigers look flat. At half time Brisbane trail by two points. In the third term, the Bears are unable to capitalise. Brendon Gale, with two big grabs in the goal square, lifts the Tigers who kick 6-4 in the quarter to take a 17-point lead. Although they battle hard, the Bears eventually lose by 20 points. Edwards kicks five.

Just before the siren, Michael Voss, one of the year's best players, twists his ankle and is carried from the field. The previously in-form McRae, who struggled to have any impact on the game, has a groin injury.

At the media scrum Walls is sombre: "It was a game that we'll look back on and say: 'Yeah, we certainly had a chance to win'."

Exiting the MCG, the Bears' bus gets stuck. This gives the coach time to speak to listed Gerard Jess, who is playing for the Ballarat Rangers in Victoria's under-18 competition. Walls explains: "I don't know if things have changed, but in my day if the coach spent five or ten minutes speaking to me I felt pretty good about myself."

That night one hundred Bears supporters gather at Sabatini's, a small inner-city restaurant in Lygon Street. Voss limps over to Doc Mackenzie and explains he has to leave: his injured foot is throbbing.

Shaun ("Serge") Hart has a big night. The next morning, still feeling the after-effects, he travels with Walls, Voss, Merrett and Bears' media manager, Peter Blucher, to Channel 9 studios for a pre-game football show. With Voss unable to stand, Hart competes in the handball competition. As the set begins to spin, Hart dashes for the nearest toilet. He wins the competition, managing five bulls' eyes and five 7s, then makes another dash. Showing the spoils of his win to his team-mates at Optus Oval, where next

week's opponents Essendon are playing St Kilda, Serge quips, "Perhaps because everything looked like it was moving, the moving target looked like it was standing still!"

After Essendon flog St Kilda, on the team bus to Tullamarine those who manage to stay awake hear a radio interview with Essendon coach Kevin Sheedy, who says: "The Bears were at the game today. They are probably listening to this broadcast on their way to the airport right now. I'm not going to say anything that might help them next week."

Back in Brisbane, Walls faxes a complaint about the umpiring in the Richmond game. "All you ask from umpires is that they be consistent in their interpretation throughout the game. I wasn't happy with the umpiring against Carlton two weeks ago, but we lost by six goals and they didn't make a difference to the result. On the weekend I think they did."

The team's overnight stay in Melbourne was a big experience for some of his younger players: "Blokes like Akermanis, Lawrence and McRae haven't played before at the MCG and suddenly they are at the home of footy. Looking up at that Great Southern Stand, it still gives me shudders, even though I've been around for a long time."

McRae agrees: "It's an awesome sight. I hope to play there when it is full."

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After Essendon's Michael Long makes an official complaint of racial abuse against Collingwood's Damian Monkhurst, Magic reacts to claims that Starcevich is under similar pressure from the crowd: "I'm sure it would hurt Craig more if they were to come out and say 'You're a weak Croatian'. Then they are talking about his heritage."

Following discussions with fellow Aboriginal players McAdam and White, McLean decides to take a public stand and support Long, who is a friend: "Over the years I have learned to ignore racism, but I have had enough," Magic says. "If Mick was prepared to speak up, I wanted him to know he had everyone behind him. I admire what Mick has done, and I know he was hurt when the AFL didn't do anything real about it."

McLean senses there is now an opportunity to make a difference. He isn't about to let that opportunity slip. Racism, he says, begins with parents: "If I'm sitting with my kids and one drinks Coke, one drinks Lemonade and I drink water, eventually they will start drinking water. If parents sit there at the footy and abuse players about the colour of their skin, then kids think they should be able to as well."

With the racism issue coming to a head, Magic can see light at the end of the tunnel: "I don't think we will ever stop racial abuse, but we may be able to control it. I hope for the sake of my boys we do."

Backing their vice-captain, the Brisbane's hierarchy decide on a media release after the Essendon game. Before the match, with the team's run-through banner, they make a statement. The dusty maroon colour provides a backdrop for the Aboriginal flag, which is surrounded by the words "WELL DONE BOMBERS."

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When Adrian Fletcher, in the warm-up room, asks for his boots, it becomes clear that a bag of boots is missing. Attempting to be as low-key as possible, McAdam, Lawrence, Hart, Fletcher and Bews try several pairs, while Darryl White borrows boots from Starceвич. Essendon coach Sheedy kindly lends a pair belonging to injured Gavin Wanganeen. Walls later jokes, "I think Sheedy told us we could play in thongs."

As Walls gathers his team, Gilly decides to use Wanganeen's screw-ins instead of Bears' runner Robert Dickson's moulded tags.

The coach gradually raises his voice above the hubbub. "This game is their entree. In the back of their minds they have next week against Carlton. This is our chance. If we hit them hard and jump them early, we can soak up the pressure for the rest of the day."

Although the ground is heavy and damp, the classy Long collects 40 possessions. He is at his most damaging during the second quarter as the Bombers kick 7-4.

At half time, McAdam gingerly takes off Wanganeen's boots. The bottom part of his socks, usually white, are stained with

blood. Gilly puts on the pair of moulded boots he originally discarded. The club's calm professional front is wavering. Furious at his team's performance, Walls shouts, "You are playing like you *are* the entree."

Asking for more discipline from his players, as he leaves the dressing room Walls shouts at the staff, "Gilly's feet are cut to shreds!"

Gordon snaps at team manager Barry Lowe, "In future we will count the bags. Do you have any idea where the boots might be?"

Marmite, who this week is with the team, cannot explain what happened. Ansett Australia's representative furiously rings around. The Centra staff search every possible nook and cranny. The boots are nowhere to be found.

In the third quarter the wayward Bears, who kick 3–8, are unable to close the gap. Leppitsch misses two easy goals. Hart, playing in borrowed boots, kicks five goals, including three from outside the 50-metre mark. Serge's outstanding form is continuing with a consistency he has previously struggled to achieve. Although Brisbane come back midway through the final quarter, they lose by 28 points. McLean and Long leave the field with their arms around each other.

Back in Brisbane, Magic, DJ and McAdam, who works as an Aboriginal liaison officer, meet AFL communications manager, Tony Peek. With 30 Aboriginals playing in the senior competition, the AFL is taking steps to eliminate racism, not through a system of fines as was originally proposed, but initially by education and mediation.

McLean says, "There were lots of positive signs to come out of the meeting. It's an education process. I think all races, not just Aboriginals, will benefit." He believes things are moving in the right direction at last. The new rule outlaws on-field abuse on the grounds of race and religion. It also sets out a procedure for dealing with such complaints through confidential mediation. If that does not resolve the matter it would then be considered by the AFL Tribunal. After a first offence, any subsequent charge against a player would go straight to the Tribunal.

Since taking up the racism issue, Magic is thinking differently

about his long-term future. He is considering setting up some sort of advisory body for Aboriginal players when he finishes playing with the Bears.

For the next few days the media play up the Bears' lost boots. On Thursday lunchtime they are returned to the Gabba. Publicly, Shane Johnson says, "We are at a loss to explain what happened. What it means is that we have an improved system now in place."

In reality, the Bears received a phone call from the Morningside Police Station saying that a bag of boots had been found by the roadside. It became clear that the bag had fallen out of the Bear Mobile after its back door, which was slightly damaged from a previous accident, had flown open when Smarty was on his way home after an evening at the Morningside Football Club. Smarty, who hadn't realised the boots had fallen out, is contrite: "The disappointing thing is that we have gone for eight or nine years and never lost a thing."

Fortunately, the management have publicly covered up for him and have not given their loyal, long-serving oldster a hard time.

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As Merrett has withdrawn after injuring his elbow, Magic leads the team against Melbourne. Lambert is back in the side.

"Have you blokes counted those boots?" Gordon says to the trainers, tongue in cheek. Team manager Barry Lowe manages a wry smile.

As some Bears exercise in a nearby park by the Yarra, team runner Robert Dickson, a former Hawthorn and Bears player, sees one of their footballs bounce into the water. "Dicko" strips off and dives in to retrieve the ball. Over breakfast at the Centra, his nude feat is a prime topic of conversation.

In the dressing room McLean says, "Don't leave it in here, boys. We've done that too many fuckin' times. This is a final for us." Walls interposes, "Everyone has to lift."

It is a typical Melbourne day — damp, dull and dreary. The Bears' banner proclaims, "Our Time Has Come".

The match is as crucial to winless Melbourne as it is to

Brisbane. I watch the game at the MCG with historian Geoffrey Blainey, who comments on the recent increase in the number of rules: "Because Aussie Rules is really only played in one country and there is one body who is very powerful, they can change the rules much more easily than other international codes. In a game like ours, it is dangerous to change the rules without making sure the public know. Did you know players can now run with the ball for 15 metres, rather than 10, before they bounce it?"

Proving a strong opponent for Richard Champion in his comeback match, Demon's captain Gary Lyon goals in the opening minute. He takes five marks in the first quarter but, with wayward kicking, keeps Brisbane in the game.

Lambert takes the field halfway through the first term. Young Lawrence, Voss and Akermanis are inspirational. After showing exceptional pace, Aker goals to put the Bears in front.

Just as the Bears seem to be getting on top, Melbourne goal in the 28th and 29th minutes to lead at half time by nine points. Walls is livid at this lack of discipline.

In the second half, McIvor and Voss soon boot majors. The game is tied when Lappin kicks a point. Then a blunder from Melbourne's defence allows Akermanis to snap a goal.

"You idiots," cries a spectator at the Demons' defenders. "Get them off Balme, you idiot."

Furiously punching the white board with his fist, Melbourne's coach moves Lyon onto the ball. In the opening minutes of the final term, McLean limps from the field. His opponent is stretchered off. Lyon picks up possessions at will, while Melbourne's defence, shaky for most of the afternoon, is solid until Lappin, after a chain of sweeping handpasses, shows his class and the Bears are back in front. The Demons kick two quick goals and are up by 13 points. Lyon runs onto a loose ball only 20 metres from goal. A last ditch effort by Shaun Hart spoils his kick. A play which would bring the house down at the Gabba is greeted with stony silence.

Hart goals, reducing the margin to seven points, but the siren sounds.

When the plane touches down in Brisbane, Gordon says, "It is a long way home when you lose."

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The players' buoyant mood of the previous two weeks has evaporated.

In the board-room the directors are discussing player contracts. Lynch, Lyon, and Lambert (who reinjured himself at training) currently receive more than \$100,000 a year as part of their base payments. Most Bears receive between \$60,000 and \$90,000. Those yet to establish an AFL career are on less.

In his finance report Downie produces a brighter picture. From forecast losses of the previous month he includes compensation gains from the Trust and estimates a \$91,000 profit. "But there are no more rabbits in the hat." Also there has been a significant increase in the power bill and this even before they have to start paying for training under lights. Importantly, the lights are on schedule for the first Gabba night game on August 26.

Clayton's football report, tabled at the meeting, is a source of much discussion. Next year the Bears will lose several senior players — probably Merrett, Bews, Bourke and Leslie. Alastair Lynch's situation is crucial.

Ireland distributes copies of a article about West Indian captain Richie Richardson who suffers from myalgic encephalitis — derisively known as "yuppie flu". The directors read:

Half the medical profession is convinced that ME is merely a form of stress-induced malingering. Others regard it as a fair dinkum postviral condition which has a dire effect on the brain, creating lassitude and a complete inability to cope. But whatever the ME doubters may think, there are long-lasting effects on the immune system ... which international sportsmen must now dread. The West Indies board seem to have taken no account of them in Richardson's case.

Following his split with Fitzroy, Lynch is under extreme pressure. In Ireland's words, Lynch "had trouble with his boss at Coca-Cola, his fiancée didn't settle in well at work, her boss ended up on the '7.30 Report', and her mother died. His house was broken into and he has broken his shoulder and had a knee operation."

After seeing a specialist in Melbourne last week, Lynch is feeling slightly better for longer periods. Ireland says, "If we play him too early he'll be in trouble again. It is no secret he backed himself to win the Brownlow. He also aspires to lead the club when Roger retires. Perhaps we should reconsider for a year, to allow him to concentrate and enjoy his footy without any added pressure."

After pointing out that the club mustn't make the same mistake as the West Indies board, Fallon suggests, "Should we invite him to a board meeting to assure him that he has our support?"

Ireland replies, "That will just put more pressure on him. There are enough people reassuring him at the moment."

However, there is another issue the chief executive feels he should mention. Three people have approached him about rumours in Melbourne that Lynch has AIDS.

Ireland treats this with contempt: "He told me that AIDS is the only disease he is sure he hasn't got. He has been tested five or six times and none have shown up positive."

The final item is a follow-up to the Channel 7 issue. Instead of criticism, there is congratulations about their coverage of the Bears' three Melbourne games. Channel 7 have asked if they can broadcast live the Bears' home games, of which Brisbane residents currently only receive a one-hour package, starting at 4 pm. As the games against Collingwood and Essendon will be sold out because of the Gabba's reduced capacity, the board agrees.

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The match committee reacts strongly to the Melbourne loss. Starceвич, Bourke and Craven are dropped. DJ is selected on the wing.

In the Gabba dressing rooms for the crucial game against St Kilda, Walls is unusually intense. "Today I'm not going to take half-hearted efforts from anyone. Voss and Fletcher are at the bottom of every pack, every week. How about the rest of you doing your share? They are going to be fired up. It is wet and slippery out there. You have to tough it out."



Walls didn't tell his players, but he knew, that the St Kilda board had spoken to their team as a whole for the first time this year. Reiterating adverse statements made by Gordon regarding the Saints' future, they called on their players to make a special effort.

In the first quarter the Bears are sensational, in the second, woeful. Walls' half-time address sums up the performance: "You played one quarter of smart, disciplined football. You played tough and fought for every ball." He raises his voice. "Now you are looking for an easy kick. It doesn't work that way. They are fighting hard, winning easy ball and it is coming gift-wrapped to (Stuart) Loewe. This bloke (Champion) hasn't got a chance."

Early in the third term, Loewe kicks his fifth goal. Champion is replaced at fullback by Dion Scott. Taller and more physical than Champion, Scott immediately pushes Loewe around. St Kilda get within five points before McIvor kicks a vital goal. Just before three-quarter time, Mackenzie suggests putting Champion at full-forward. Champs returns, takes a strong mark, and goals to give the Bears a 17-point lead. In the final quarter he kicks two more. DJ collects 26 possessions in a best-on-ground performance. After Scott tumbles Loewe into the fence, the Saints star leaves the ground injured. At the boundary line Voss wearily greets Lynch: "Geez that was a slog."

As Walls walks into the dressing room, his team stand in a circle, arm in arm, celebrating the end of a four-match losing streak:

"Brisbane Bears will live forever,  
We will always stick together,  
The Gabba is the place where people always come to see,  
The greatest team of all."

Not scintillating stuff, but sung with enthusiasm. The coach orders one more chorus. When the euphoria ebbs, he says, "They came back but you hung on and shut them out in the final quarter. Two excellent examples of guys fighting till the end are this bloke (Dion Scott) who came on in an unfamiliar position. ("Well done Scotty" chorus the team). And this bloke (Champion). You were beaten and low on confidence. But you came back to take three strong marks, and kick three goals. He

was prepared to battle to the end. Go out and have a few drinks tonight. We start again tomorrow. Before next weekend we'll know the Dockers inside out."

In a nearby room, with his long blond hair and white boots, is former Bears full-forward Warwick Capper, who in 1988, against coach Peter Knights advice, was signed by Paul Cronin for \$350,000 a year. Martin Leslie wanders over and says "g'day". He later says, "Capper was a nice bloke but there were a lot of egos around in those days. I think he suffered because of it."

Lynch is also present. Acutely aware of his health problem, he recently met former motorcycle champion Barry Sheene, who suffers from the same condition. Sheene suggested to Lynch that he immerse himself in a cold pool for half an hour each morning.

"Basically it kickstarts your immune system," says Lynch. "Barry has the temperature down to 12 degrees."

Lynch's headaches and dizziness persist, and he sleeps up to 14 hours a day. He will not travel to Perth, but former Fitzroy team-mate Ross Lyon, out after only two games with a knee injury, will.

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As Brisbane play two Perth games in a row, the team is away for 10 days, staying at the Mercure Hotel and Victoria Apartments. They will train at Subiaco and nearby Lords Gym.

There is good news for Lambert. X-rays show he hasn't rebroken his leg. Unavailable for the Fremantle match, he might be flown over for the Eagles game. Chris Scott, who has been working solidly for the past ten days, will return with QAFL side Mt Gravatt.

Each player receives a dossier and player profile on the Fremantle Dockers, highlighting the Dockers' individual strengths and weakness. The team watches multiple videos of Dockers' games. Walls speaks about his younger players: "I mentioned a few of the Dockers' players and they had no idea. That is one of the things that disappoints me a bit. I live on the Gold Coast and get wider coverage [of the game] than people in Brisbane. The match is one I've been looking forward to for a

while. Under Gerard Neesham [the Dockers' coach], they play a completely new brand of footy. It's great for the competition — having a team prepared to approach their footy in a different way."

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The morning before the team flies west, Walls goes on a 20-minute run along the beach to clear his head. He sees two men and two dogs. "When I got near, one bloke picks up the little dog and throws it headlong into the surf. I walked on another couple of yards and the other bloke grabs the Labrador with one hand and punches it in the head with the other. So I said, 'Hang on, that is a bit rough'. He said, 'Shut your mouth or I'll knock your fuckin' head off'. And he shaped up to me. He's young, strong-looking, and the other bloke is behind him. We shaped up to each other and I thought 'Geez, is he going to throw one or do I throw one first?' If I throw one, do I run? I figured I can't because I've been running for 20 minutes so I'm exhausted anyway. After what seemed like 10 minutes, but it was probably 10 seconds, he backed off. I was shaking. I kept going, keeping an eye over my shoulder, because I thought he may give me a king-hit from behind." Just what Walls needed in a quiet run along the beach!

The next day in Perth most players and staff watch Subiaco play Swan Districts. A few go to the races. After withdrawing money from an automatic teller, Gowers twists his ankle in the gutter. This accident forces him to miss tomorrow's game and break an 82 AFL game playing streak. While Marmite tries to organise a group to travel to Northam for a country race meeting, Ireland, Downie and Gordon play golf at Joondalup. The latter puts a ball through the window of a nearby house.

Instead of receiving second-hand reports from their scouts, the match committee have an opportunity to personally observe talented local youngsters. At the South Fremantle oval, Johnson and Victorian manager, Kinnear Beatson, observe juniors in an uninspiring contest, West Perth versus South Fremantle. The recruiting staff must sit through hundreds of similar games around the country.

Johnson quizzes the Bears' man in Perth, Robert Simpson, about a South Fremantle youngster. Told last year he would be drafted by Fremantle, the lad was overlooked. Easily the most impressive player in the match, he banana-kicks a goal from the pocket. Johnson and Beatson consider that it might be worth trading the Bears' third pick with the Dockers to ensure they get him. The only other person on the cold cement terrace, an Essendon scout, is also taking notes.

The Dockers put on a lavish pre-match show almost the equal of Skase's days at Carrara. In the first ten minutes their speedy flanker, Gary Dhurrkay, eludes Magic and kicks three goals. Midway through the first quarter McAdam crunches Fremantle captain, Ben Allan, who limps from the field. After Brisbane kick the next four goals, Allan returns, providing inspiration.

At three-quarter time the Dockers lead by 58 points. As his players huddle, Walls stalks onto the arena. "I don't have anything to say to you," he says, and walks away.

Infuriated by the umpiring decisions, Gordon screams his displeasure from the dugout. A field umpire who objects to being called a "white slut" formally registers a complaint. Gordon later insists the phrase he used was "you white slug"!

After losing by 66 points, the Bears' biggest defeat for the year, the coach half sarcastically thanks a handful for providing some effort. Standing in an arc, Fletcher and Ashcroft, both wearing towels, and McIvor and Voss, still wearing their footy gear, are introduced by Walls to the media: "Feel free to ask them about our embarrassing performance."

Walls says, "I'm glad we are staying in a city like Perth and are not able to get on a plane and hide in Brisbane. We'll have to cop it in a football environment."

As Ireland, Gordon and Johnson discuss the debacle, news of yet another \$500 fine, for returning late to the field after half-time, filters through. Matthew Clarke is struggling with a severe bruise sustained the previous week which runs from the top of his thigh down to his calf. Other injuries include Corcoran's knee and Lappin's dislocated shoulder.

As the Bears' match committee meet at the Mercure, the players gather in the bar. McAdam, unable to bear watching the

television replay, stands on a chair and changes channel. It is the lowest point of the season. The team, playing without passion and zest, seem over-schooled, somehow too controlled. Walls has scheduled a late evening video session to review the game. It is not a popular decision.

Cracks are starting to appear. In the bar Merrett chats with former Essendon hardman Billy Duckworth. They discuss the coach's performance. Other senior players hint privately that knives will be out for Walls and football director Scott Clayton.

Upstairs in the video room, the coach continuously replays incidents. Walls says to Fletcher, with a hint of disgust, "Fletch, you are out in the open, running at half pace and you kick the ball on your left foot. It is a bastard kick."

After 11 pm, when the meeting finishes, most Bears go to bed. That evening Champion writes: "Wallsy was fuming about our loss. We were put through the agony of watching the game all over again."

The next day the sombre mood continues. Someone comments about Fletcher's "bastard kick" but jokes are few. Even Bews mooning the other Bears mini bus does not end the gloom. Donning life-jackets, the players unenthusiastically start an aquatic training session. Walls throws in a ball and orders a game of water polo. It is a signal for the players to start enjoying themselves. In the climb towards the West Coast game, Lepitsch, best on ground after being dropped to the QAFL, Lambert, Hamilton and Chris Scott will fly in, while injured Lappin and McIvor will return home.

The team gathers for dinner with 55 supporters who have travelled from Queensland. Dennis and Lynette Elliott, who drive to the Gabba from Gin Gin, 350 kilometres north of Brisbane, for every home game, are thrilled to be sitting with Merrett, Marmite and former Brisbane star Peter Worsfold. Judy Kilby, who accompanies the supporters, claims they are the largest group to travel interstate with any AFL team. Promising an improved effort next Sunday, Walls explains that McLean, Merrett and Gowers are 50-50 chances of being available.

As a supporter makes a speech, most players stare silently at the dining table. "Every team needs their share of luck. On the

weekend we shared your pain when things went against you. But with your determination to succeed this weekend, we wish you all the luck in the world." The Bears know that much more than bad luck was responsible for their dismal performance.

Lambert's arrival lifts the team. While the players rejoice at the return of the plucky centreman, Walls discovers a shop in Subiaco called "The Inspiration Factory". He spends an hour browsing around and buys a couple of books. Often, he says, you read a line and think, "that could help us".

Walls admits coaching is a lonely job. This is the longest period he has spent away from his best friend, wife Erin, since he has coached the Bears. He misses his sons. Especially when he hears that the youngest, Daniel, broke his hand last weekend playing footy.

In Brisbane, Max Green arrives at the Gabba to fix drinks for a handful of remaining players who are fit enough to train. Smarty chastises him for travelling for over an hour from the Coast. After training they share a beer. The following day, driving across the Gateway Bridge, Smarty receives a call from Southport's young ruckman, listed Bears' player Brent Green: "Dad's had a heart attack, Smarty. He gone, mate, he's gone."

In a football club it takes many people to pitch in. Often it is those at the bottom of the ladder, who give up their time without reward and without recognition, that make a team tick. As Gordon later says, "At the heart of all football clubs are people like Max Green." To Max, Gordon pays tribute: "I certainly won't forget you."

For three days Smarty is in shock. In Perth, Marmite is hit hard by the news. The trio is now minus one.

On Friday, while McLean, Merrett and Gowers train solidly, the Bears look unimpressive, weary even. Their skills work is sloppy. Voss is struck down with a virus.

Gordon and Ireland are keen to speak to the Eagles' premier-ship-winning coach Mick Malthouse regarding the possibility of coaching Brisbane. Rumour has reached them that Walls may not be returning next season. A real estate friend of former Bears player Geoff Raines tried to sell Robert and Erin a house and

Erin reportedly said, "We won't be here next year." They are unable to talk to Malthouse.

The next day's headlines refer to Walls comments, made in his weekly *Age* column, calling on umpires to police the five-metre shepherding rule. He says the Dockers apply the shepherd more than five metres from the ball. Gerard Neesham, who Walls has supported for his innovative coaching, labels him a bad loser.

Walls admits that after four-and-a-half years in Queensland he has almost forgotten the intensity of the Australian Rules' media: "I was surprised to see it get such a big run over here. Maybe I've been living in a Rugby state too long."

As Doc Clarke is still injured, the match committee recall Leslie, who had been dropped, using Dion Scott as a stop-gap ruckman. Lawrence, who is omitted, is told by Walls to closely watch all that Eagle's defender Guy McKenna does in the game.

Although Gilly proves brilliant on danger man Peter Matera, the Eagles' defence is impenetrable. Starceвич's return to Western Australia is dismal. Following his poor performance against the Dockers, he is dragged before half time.

With three goals separating the teams at three-quarter time, Matera receives two soft frees to kick two more, shutting out any chance of a Bears' comeback. The Eagles finish with a flourish, winning by 45 points.

Furious, Walls orders the entire squad, including Lawrence and injured Ross Lyon, into the dingy visitors dressing room. The side has ruined 90 minutes of good work with 10 minutes of weak play. Shouting "Look me in the eye", the coach angrily puts his fist under Chapman's chin and gives it a jerk. Walls says later, "You should be able to look someone in the eye. I'm glad though that afterwards some of the senior players took Nathan aside and told him I was right. If he only knew, the time players have to worry is when I *stop* talking to them!"

Finished with the team and picking up a drink of Powerade, Walls says loudly to the club chairman, "Why don't *you* talk to them? You saw what went on out there. Why does it always have to be me who takes it?"

Gordon and Walls go to different sides of the room.

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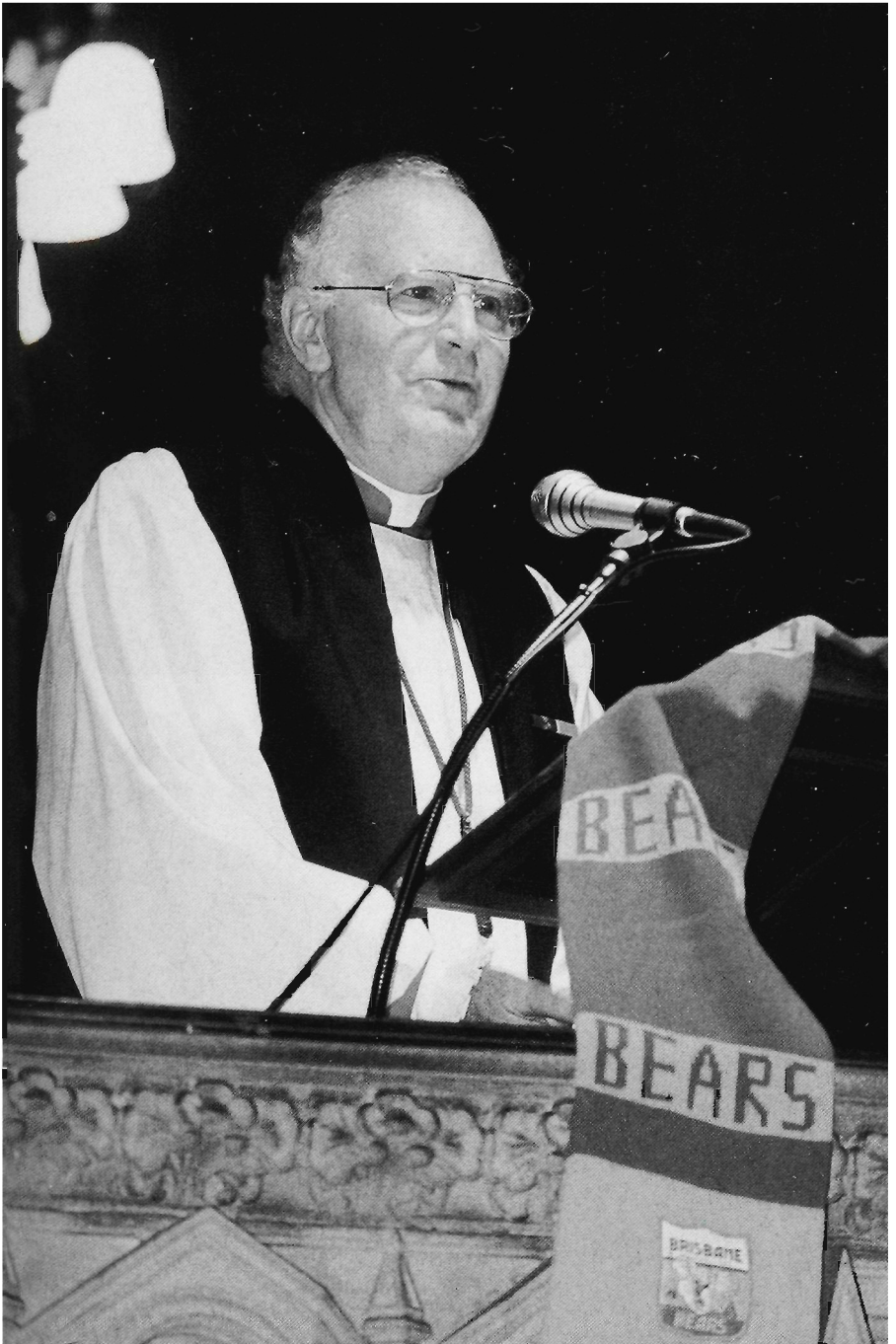
In Perth, Marty Leslie quips to Merrett that he should clean his whistle and prepare to coach the team. With Walls in the final year of his contract, the joke could contain more than an element of truth. In Brisbane, Smarty confides that Merrett would be an ideal replacement. This is a belief not shared by Piper, who thinks the skipper would be more effective as assistant coach to a passionate, proven performer.

While it is a long way home when you lose, Gordon ruefully admits it is even further when you lose a double-header in the West.

Driving with Mackenzie back to the Gold Coast at 2 am on Monday, 4 June, Steve Lawrence who has only played six games, inspires Walls. The coach explains: "The kid began talking from the heart about how exciting it is to be part of the team. He talked about how he loved looking into Magic's eyes before a game to see the passion that Michael has. He was also happy to say that he played with Roger. He looked forward to playing alongside Chris Scott, Leppitsch and Chapman and the other young guys coming through. It made me feel good that this kid who had been dropped could have sat in the back of the car, tired and sulking, but he didn't. He was alert and bright. When I got home I thought that was terrific."

At the Gabba I see a sign on the wall of the coach's office. It reads, "Losers assemble in little groups to share their misery and bitch about the coaches and the guys in other little groups. WINNERS assemble as a TEAM."





Archbishop Peter Hollingworth, the Bears' number one ticketholder, at the Bears' church service, St John's Anglican Cathedral, Brisbane, 19 March 1995. (Just Photography)



Training at the Broncos' headquarters, Red Hill. (Peter Blucher)

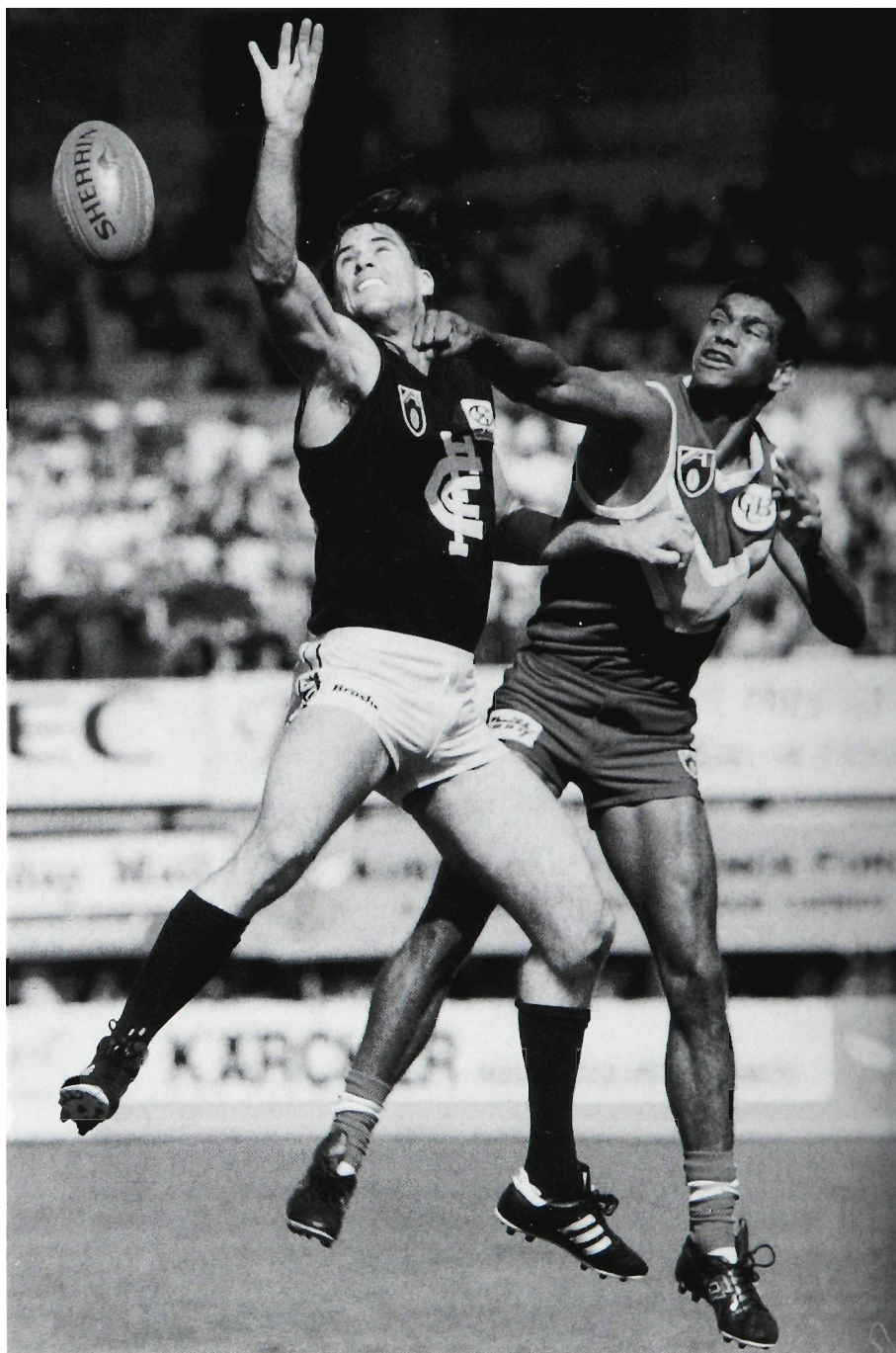


"The brothers": Darryl White (left), Michael McLean and Gilbert McAdam. (Just Photography)





Bears' ruckman Matthew "Doc" Clarke contests the ball with Sydney's Greg Stafford in Round 3 at the Gabba, 16 April 1995. (Courier-Mail)



Gilbert McAdam punches the ball from Carlton's Matthew Clape in Round 4 at the Gabba, 23 April 1995. (*Courier-Mail*)





Gilbert McAdam marks over North Melbourne's Jason Daniltchenko at the Gabba in Round 12, 25 June 1995. (Just Photography)



Darryl White leaps over North Melbourne's Ross Smith at the Gabba in the final quarter, Round 12. (*Courier-Mail*)





Michael Voss marks over Richmond's Matthew Dundas in Round 20 at the Gabba, 20 August 1995. (Just Photography)



Celebrating after their victory over Hawthorn in Round 16 at the Gabba, 23 July 1995. Gowers' knee is bandaged. (Just Photography)



Walls talking to his players during the game against Richmond, Round 20 at the Gabba, 20 August 1995. Arm bands are in memory of the late Ted Whitten. (Just Photography)





The banner farewells the Bears' coach in his final home game at the Gabba, Round 22 against Melbourne, 2 September 1995. (*Courier-Mail*)

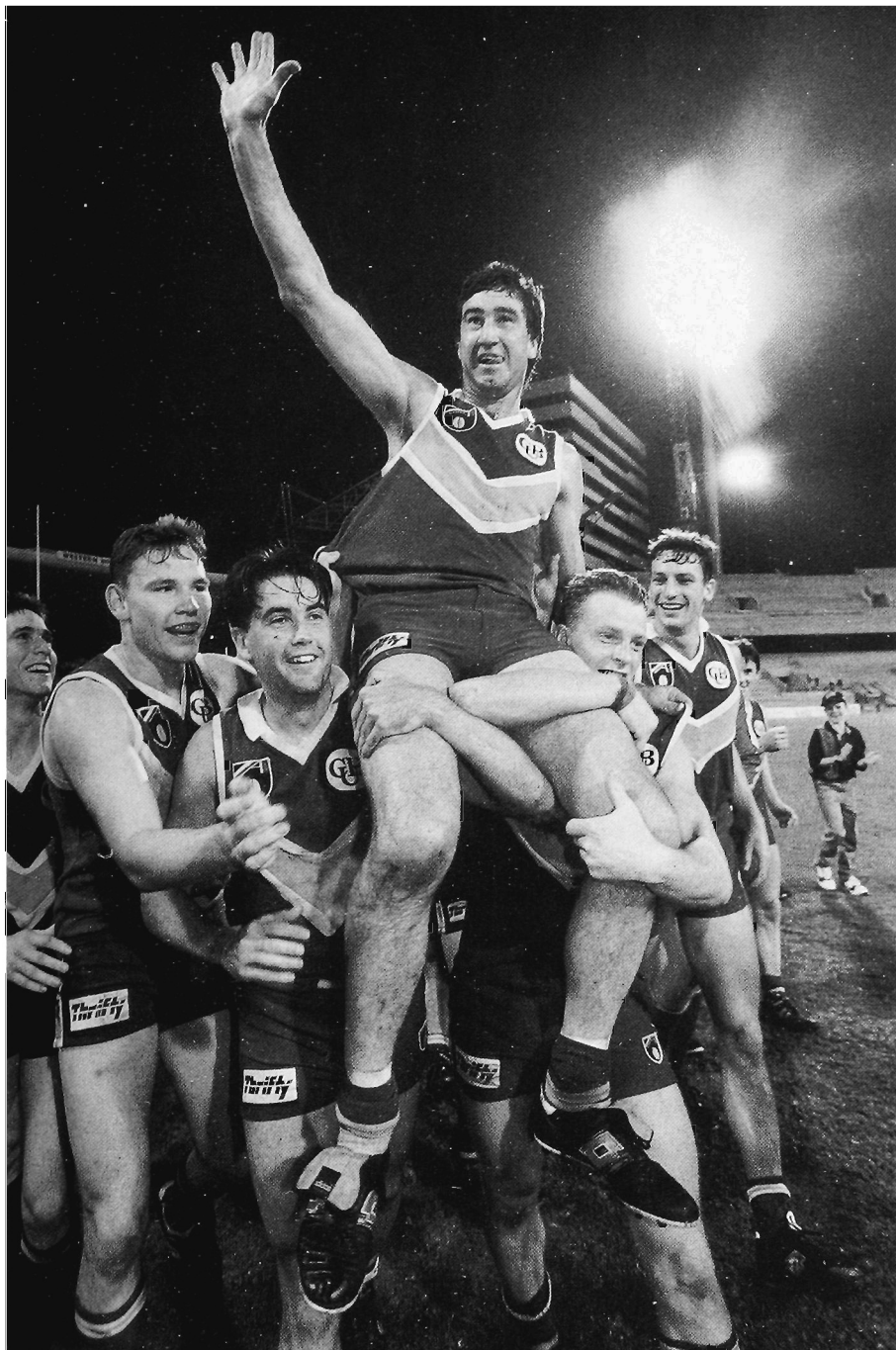


Trent Bartlett handpasses in the finals match at the MCG, 10 September 1995. Carlton's Scott Camporeale (left), Matthew Hogg (13) and Fraser Brown watch. (*Just Photography*)



Roger Merrett carries Andrew Bews after the Bears' Round 22 night victory over Melbourne at the Gabba, 2 September 1995. (*Courier-Mail*)





Roger Merrett is chaired from the Gabba following the Bears' Round 22 win over Melbourne. Left to right: Jason Akermanis, Trent Bartlett, Marcus Ashcroft, Michael Voss and Matthew Clarke. (Courier-Mail)



Robert Walls and wife Erin with the framed photograph of himself leaving the MCG after the Bears' first finals appearance and his last game as coach of the Bears. The photograph was presented to him by the club. (Just Photography)

## CHAPTER FIVE

### *The Loneliest Job in the World*

*"Nothing surprises me in football."*

*John Northey*

The Bears and Walls' old club, Fitzroy, are separated by 2,000 kilometres and a century of Australian Rules tradition. When Brisbane was granted a VFL license in 1986, it occurred only because of Fitzroy's support.

In August 1986 the bidders for a Brisbane VFL licence were sports promoter John Brown, syndicates involving Melbourne-based property developer and television star Paul Cronin and Perth millionaire Alister Norwood, plus the financially weak QAFL. Around that time, Alan Piper, who thought the QAFL should remain independent from the three syndicates, became involved.

When the QAFL announced they would involve themselves with one of the syndicates, Cronin changed his mind and decided to support the QAFL in a joint syndicate. In Piper's opinion, then and now, the QAFL made a mistake.

When, on 16 September 1986, the VFL Commission chose the Brown syndicate, the QAFL set about getting the decision reversed by the board, which consisted of representatives of the twelve existing VFL clubs. They had until 1 October, when the clubs were due to vote on expanding the competition by including teams from Brisbane and Perth.

With the help of ex-VFL president Allen Aylett, the existing clubs voted to support the QAFL/Cronin syndicate, thus over-

turning the Commission's original decision to support John Brown. The next vote, for the VFL's expansion into Queensland and Western Australia, required a two-thirds majority from the twelve VFL clubs. Fitzroy, which had accumulated a \$2.6 million debt, was coaxed to the other side by the VFL Commission, because the Lions' survival depended on their cut of the \$8 million licence fees from the Queensland and Western Australian consortiums. The vote was borderline, 8-4. Thus the Brisbane Bears and the West Coast Eagles were born with the aid of debt-ridden Fitzroy.

Since then the Bears have raided the struggling Lions. Brisbane's 1994 \$1.8 million recruit, Lynch, had emerged as one of their finest players, as had Lyon, whom the Bears drafted in March. Recently, Gordon has commented publicly about the two clubs merging. Not surprisingly, relations between Brisbane and Fitzroy are sour.

Although they picked up a \$3 million sponsorship agreement with the Republic of Nauru in 1994, in 1995 Fitzroy are battling to survive.

\* \* \* \* \*

While the Lions are last on the ladder, the Bears face a crucial Round 11 game against them at the Gabba. Brisbane's chances dive at Friday night's training. As the sun sets over the demolished stands, Lambert crashes into McAdam and hurts his leg again. In distress, the champion midfielder says, "It's the same dull ache I had when I broke it."

After returning against West Coast last week, for only his second match of the season, Lambert is out for another two or three weeks. The callouses which surrounded the initial break have cracked. He will have a pin inserted to strengthen the break.

Injuries and poor form mean the Bears select their youngest side ever. The inclusion of Lawrence, Akermanis and debutant Shane Hodges produces 10 players under 21. Lambert and Merrett are injured, while out-of-form Bews, Starcevich and Hamilton are dropped.

With current talk of a Bears-Lions merger, coincidentally the

AFL Commissioners, including Ross Oakley, are in Brisbane for a meeting before the game. At the chairman's luncheon, a subdued Gordon tries to dispel the rumours: "It was just one of those quirks of fate that we should have the Commission here. Quite categorically I can say that the issue of a merger wasn't discussed."

Although only 8,209 fans watch the game, the reduced capacity means that the ground looks almost full. The skeletal sections of the new stand are slowly rising out of a huge hole on the northern side of the Gabba.

With so many youngsters included, most pre-game talk comes from injured Lambert, Lynch, Lyon, Merrett and Bews on the other side of the net.

Walls starts Gowers on the wing, while in-form Shaun Hart tags prolific possession-winner Simon Atkins. As Voss begins to dominate and centreman Fletcher gets his hands on the ball ten times in the first quarter, the Bears find themselves with a lot of possession. Returning after a leg injury, Clarke takes control of the ruck. After disciplined play from Leppitsch, who punches a kick-in, Fletcher boots the first. Thereafter Chris Scott provides a vigorous target at full-forward.

South Australian recruit McRae is finding form. In the first term the Bears kick 3-12. Scott and Kennedy are the worst offenders. When the fearless Voss is pole-axed, Scott is first in as players come from everywhere. The AFL Commissioners watch as players are involved in a melee, the maximum fine for which is \$50,000. The Bears are later fined \$10,000, because it was the club's first offence; the Lions are fined \$15,000.

Kneeling over Voss, head trainer Gabby Fenech calls for a stretcher. In the ensuing scuffle Fitzroy veteran Doug Hawkins is hit by a flying elbow. It turns out to be from a team-mate. As a stretcher appears, Voss, slightly dazed, gets to his feet and heads toward the interchange. Mackenzie runs to his side and the two walk down the tunnel to the dressing rooms. In the hallway outside, Voss, who has damaged his ankle, is limping as he semi-jogs the 20 metres from end to end.

Voss is regarded by Walls and others in the Bears hierarchy as a future captain. The young Queenslander admits to looking

forward to leading the club, but only if and when he gains the respect of all his team-mates.

At half time the coach's message is simple: "Fitzroy are capable of coming back. We have to hit them early and dampen their spirit."

Carrying out instructions, the young Bears run away with the game. During the third quarter, Hodges has his first taste of AFL football. Making a welcome return is tall 21-year-old Queenslander Rudi Frigo. After three knee operations during the off-season, he is not quite match-fit.

The Bears win by 58 points. Scott kicks five goals, Voss four. Brisbane's 47 scoring shots almost double Fitzroy's 24. The tally of 30 behinds is the most in the club's history.

After the win Walls is quietly pleased: "There is something for us to build on in the next two weeks." But, he adds, as the balmy Brisbane evening begins to close, "It's no good talking about finishing seventh or eighth or winning 10 or 11 games. That's airy-fairy stuff."

Next week the AFL clubs meet the Commission in Melbourne to discuss merger proposals. Ireland and Gordon are present. With eleven Victorian and five interstate teams, the competition is not quite national. Although Tasmania and the Northern Territory remain on the outer, the Commission is desperate to admit South Australia's most successful club, Port Adelaide, into the 1996 fixtures without expanding the number of teams. For that to happen there has to be either a merger or a traditional Victorian club will have to fold. The AFL Commission has increased to \$6 million their lure for the first two clubs to merge. More importantly, they can now have the money straightaway. With the package as it stood (\$4 million), unless a club had a huge debt there was only about \$1.5 million available.

While in 1995 the Bears have emerged from the controversial Skase-Cronin-Pelerman past into an era of relative stability, Gordon, Ireland and Piper know that, as with Sydney, the AFL haven't fully come to terms with establishing the game in Brisbane. Because the culture and support base are firmly in place, South Australia and Western Australia are far easier places in which to run an Aussie Rules team than Queensland.



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Midway through the season, Walls sits in his spartan Gabba office, occasionally jotting down notes. He is about to attend the June board meeting.

Greeted warmly by the directors, Walls sits in Ben Macdonald's empty seat. Turning to Ireland and Gordon, he inquires about Fitzroy president, Dyson Hore-Lacy. Smiling, Ireland says: "You wouldn't believe that Noel sat next to him for most of the night [at the Commission meeting] and they argued!"

When Gordon calls on the coach to address the meeting, Walls briefly recounts the history of the club under previous coaches Peter Knights, Paul Feltham and Norm Dare. The club, Walls says, started with a collection of rejects. When he arrived at Carrara in January 1991, there were over 60 players. "You can imagine the quality of the 42nd player; imagine another 20 after that!" Today only six remain — Merrett, Leslie, McIvor, Ashcroft, Kennedy and Hart.

For Walls it was a difficult time. The club's main focus was keeping afloat rather than winning football matches. It was only after coming full-time to the Gabba that the Bears started looking like an AFL team. This season there were high expectations. The club had got a solid recruit in Gowers, who is a quality person. At the moment Brisbane are 7 losses, 4 wins. If Lynch were playing, the coach believes they could probably have won two more games. "That would leave us 6-5 and well in finals contention." With 11 games to go, Walls thinks the Bears can win between four and eight. Pausing he says, "Looking forward to next season, we've got worries. Only Carlton have more players over the age of 27. We've got 13 older than 27."

As Walls gives an assessment of the club's future, his address to the board resembles a team meeting. All eyes and ears are fixed on the coach. Sandwiches, usually devoured, remain untouched on the table. In the coach's opinion, the Bears are heading into an era where they will break even, some seasons losing nine and winning 13, others winning 10 and losing 12. "The team will be competitive, but don't expect too much."

At this assessment, Piper shifts uneasily. Then Walls drops a

bombshell: "I won't be here next year. It is time the players heard a new voice."

There is absolute silence. The directors stare straight through the coach as they digest what he is telling them.

"With the next coach, be patient. Don't expect premierships. Look for gradual improvement. I've had a fairly good relationship with all of you. It ain't easy when the losses outnumber the wins. I knew what I was getting into when I decided to take on the job."

Then Walls admits what to Ireland, Piper and Gordon is almost unbelievable: "To be fair; I made the decision one week before the season started."

Piper and Gordon, in particular, are flabbergasted. How, they wonder, could the coach have given the job his total commitment when, even before the season began, he knew he would be leaving? The disbelief is almost palpable, as is the directors collective silence. Walls concludes: "I will work as hard as I have over the past four years to ensure we finish the season on a good note."

After Williams and Fallon thank Walls "for his honesty", Piper points out that Walls' announcement of his resignation now places the board in a difficult situation. It is virtually certain the news will get out.

Gordon replies, "This is Robert's fifth year. If anyone enquires, we will tell them a decision will not be made until the end of the season."

Fallon says he would be surprised if the club can keep it quiet. When Piper repeats that it is inevitable news will surface, Ireland responds, "The good thing about rumours in football is that there are so many."

Fallon asks if Walls should publicly announce his decision to resign: "Could the players [play well] for the coach because he is leaving?"

Shaking his head, Walls uses St George's Brian Smith as an example of a football coach from a rival code who announced too early his intention to move on. Invited to discuss a successor, Walls explains that coaching in Queensland is vastly different to coaching in Australian Rules states. "Here you have to know all

your players personally. You are more than a coach, you are also a father. I've driven to the airport and grabbed kids by the arm and dragged them off the plane. The administration needs to spend more time with the players. One of the major difficulties I've had to face is the lack of a support structure. Andrew and I have talked about this."

Walls is different from most in that his future is not in Queensland. He explains that because 80 percent of the players at the club will not be from Queensland, they need the board's support.

Walls, who has driven home after yet another loss so disappointed that the only thing that has kept him going is that he knows he's been successful, says, "I think you need a coach with a proven record."

When Gordon mentions Merrett, Walls replies, "Roger could carry them for a while on adrenalin. But it would destroy him after a season or two of losing more than we win." He thinks Merrett will one day make a great coach. "At the moment you have three former league players at the club in Ireland, Walls and Clayton. If Roger was put in an assistant role and an experienced coach was bought in, then you are improving." Most directors nod in agreement.

Walls concludes, quite formally, "I would like to thank you all for your support. I've enjoyed it but there are things that I want to do."

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A short time later Walls re-enters the board room and collects his keys which he has left behind. The coach leaves for a second time amid an eerie silence.

Although some weeks later Gordon says, "I didn't want him next year anyway", at the meeting Piper speaks first: "I don't know about the rest of you, but that was a surprise to me. Now we have to deal with it. I was disappointed with his prognosis for the coming years. Until this came up, I had a number of questions I wanted to ask. Why is Chapman, who played every game when he first came here two years ago, still in the

wilderness? Leppitsch is in and out of centre-half forward. Why doesn't Robert let someone settle in the position?"

Ireland says that while they don't want to blow the whistle on his resignation, the club doesn't want to miss out on a top coach either. "I think it would be best if we could short-list one or two. We have to be seen to be stable and professional."

Pulling a letter from his folder, Gordon explains that for a while they have been looking at different people. Footscray assistant coach, Terry Wallace, wrote to him recently. When Fallon sarcastically says, "Thanks for letting the board know," Gordon defends himself: "Wallace wrote to me. We didn't write to him."

After Wallace's letter is read out, other possibilities, including Malcolm Blight and current Collingwood coach, Leigh Matthews, are discussed. To a query as to the best coach in the AFL, Ireland names West Coast Eagles' Michael Malthouse.

With the thermostat malfunctioning, the temperature begins to rise. When it becomes too much, Ireland opens the door.

The Bears are chasing a slice of the \$6 million being offered to the first two clubs to merge. Ireland names Essendon and North Melbourne, Carlton and St Kilda, Melbourne and Hawthorn, as clubs he believes are having discussions. With Fitzroy stubbornly against a merger, Gordon contacted St Kilda president Andrew Plympton and said Brisbane could play eight games at Moorabbin. "The door is open, they have serious problems down there."

When Downie suggests they put a proposal to all the financially weaker clubs, Piper says sceptically, "It would be beaut if we could merge with North Melbourne or Footscray, but they won't come into it. The only club we have a chance with is Fitzroy and we aren't their preferred option. We haven't got enough to offer. They have a point. If they come here their history will be forgotten in a year or two." Piper can't see where the Bears can fit into the merger equation.

The possibility of taking over a club by buying membership shares is briefly discussed before being dismissed.

Ireland presents another option: to merge with the Swans.

"The AFL are pouring heaps of money into Sydney and it is not seeing light of day in the balance sheets."

Ireland will follow up on the Sydney option. Remaining Brisbane-based would be the Bears only major condition.

Gordon explains that while it might be possible to get agreement from two boards, there is a huge stumbling block. "The problem is going to be when you have to sit down in front of 5,000 members and try to convince them."

Neville Blunt, who has remained silent, throws his hands into the air, looking at the ceiling in disgust. With Walls' resignation and merger discussions, two hours have passed.

Ireland announces that while Channel 7 will telecast home games live if there is a sell out, they aren't sure about the Essendon night game. Realistically, he doesn't think they will show the match live during prime time. When Blunt says, "That is a bit one-sided isn't it?", Gordon adds, "It always is."

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Piper confides his surprise over the timing of Walls' resignation: "A couple of months ago Andrew, Noel and I discussed the possibility of him resigning. The signs were all there that we would need a new coach for 1996. That was fine. The thing that did shock me was that he proceeded to tell the board in June. Having told us, it put us in a very difficult position."

Discussing possible replacements, Piper mentions ex-Hawthorn player and ex-Bears reserve-grade premierships coach, Rodney Eade, who is currently in charge of North Melbourne reserves. Another ex-Bears player, Ken Judge, now assistant coach at Carlton, and triple premierships ex-Carlton player, Ken Sheldon, now coaching Adelaide, are possibilities.

While searching for a new coach, the Bears are desperately trying to hold onto young players like Chris Scott and Lappin who currently have contracts with their managers. An offer has also been put to Voss's father. Clayton is preparing to start discussions with Matthew Clarke. White will also come off contract but he wants to wait until the end of the season. Magic is going to manage him and Ireland fears the enigmatic DJ might play for the Fremantle Dockers next season.

Off the field, Lyon is becoming edgy. In Brisbane he has been unable to find work.

Walls tells Magic and Lynch, but not Merrett or any other Brisbane player, about his resignation. The coach and his wife are keen to return to Melbourne which would allow their son David, almost 17, the opportunity to sign with Carlton.

After talking to Carlton's director of football, Shane O'Sullivan, three days after the June board meeting, Ireland realises Walls' resignation is already known. Walls is adamant that he did not breathe a word to his boyhood friend Col Kinnear, now assistant coach at Carlton.

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On Friday something is out of place. Since being with the Bears, Smarty has missed only two days work through illness. With the ground redevelopment the oldster has been arriving at the Gabba at 6 am to allow workmen inside the property room. Despite a serious cold, he dutifully attends before Johnson orders him home. As Brisbane prepare to take on North Melbourne, Smarty takes his third day off in eight years.

In the lead-up to the game, Magic withdraws with an injured calf sustained playing in State of Origin for the "Allies" — a team made up of players who began their careers in Queensland, New South Wales, Northern Territory, ACT and Tasmania. Lining up for North Melbourne is Wayne Carey who was originally selected to play for the Allies but had pulled out of that match. Walls says sarcastically, "I guess we are real Boy Scouts up here in Queensland, putting our players at risk while other clubs protect theirs."

Voss is another late withdrawal. The selectors are forced to include Danny Craven from outside the original squad of 25. The move will attract a fine from the AFL.

Out-of-form Starcevich, who breaks his right hand playing for local club Kedron-Grange, expects to be unavailable for four weeks.

At the chairman's luncheon at the Gabba, Gordon continues to push for a merger. If the weaker clubs don't realise that they either merge or become extinct, he thinks the stronger clubs may

merge and become stronger, further weakening the position of the weaker clubs. He is adamant that the AFL needs to make way for Port Adelaide.

Also of concern are the players, who are looking for a base payment of \$35,000. That will really put pressure on AFL teams. Players rather than administrators, he suggests, might decide how many teams there are in Melbourne.

Lynch, who is having cold-water treatment each morning, outlines his fight to overcome his illness. He submerges himself up to the neck for 20 minutes in water under 16°C to stimulate blood circulation. Although Lynch doesn't mention it, he has also been seeing a chiropractor and herbalist on the Gold Coast to try and overcome his chronic fatigue syndrome. For the Bears' star centre-half forward, things are still not looking good.

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In Bali for an Arts Festival, I watch the Bears–North Melbourne game direct from Sanur's Trophy Bar with my Aussie Rules obsessed friend, Made Sugiarta. An avid Hawthorn supporter, Made worked for six years in freezing Melbourne before marrying an Australian nurse and returning home. His great wish is to bring Aussie Rules to Bali.

We have driven to Sanur from Ubud, his home village, where Made runs a restaurant specialising in traditional Balinese duck. Sitting with us at the bar is 190-centimetre Melbourne Ford dealer Jim Javanovic, a friend of Piper's, from Camberwell. He too is a Hawthorn fan.

At 11am Bali time, glued to the big-screen television, we see the tall Kangaroo forwards blitz the Bears in the opening term. Ever the historian, Made, a deep believer in oval dreams and magic, reminds us that in their 1987 AFL debut under lights at the MCG, the Bears defeated North Melbourne by 33 points.

Akermanis is felled by a late clash. As he is stretchered off, Gilly retaliates. Kangaroo's coach Denis Pagan drags David King from the field. Leslie, on the bench with another ankle injury, confronts King in front of the Bears' dugout. A few minutes later Pagan recalls King. At the interchange McAdam



appears to throw a punch, which the North Melbourne wingman avoids. As Pagan drags him off again, McAdam is reported.

Carey is clearly on top of Champion. Even after being moved to full-forward, Champs doesn't manage to kick a goal, and plays his worst game for the year.

Fired up, Gilly and DJ produce in the final quarter, 15 minutes of magic. While this gives Brisbane fans something to cheer about, North Melbourne eventually win by 44 points.

The game's highlights are two of the season's most spectacular marks. Both came in the final term, the first by best-on-ground McAdam, in front of the Social Club, the second by White in the forward-pocket, soaring like a bird and hovering high on his opponents' shoulders.

Ever the optimist, Made says, "These are promising signs. If they can loosen up, the Bears will be hard to beat. I still think they can make the finals."

In his diary Ireland writes: "Sun, June 25: Our blokes try hard but North's best players are too good for us. It is frustrating because without Lynch, Lyon, Lambert, Merrett, Voss, McLean, Troy Clarke, Lehmann, who would all be in our best 18, it is going to be tough against the better clubs."

At the AFL tribunal McAdam is cleared of the attempted striking charge. The Bears' complaint over King's late tackle on Akermanis is also dismissed.

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The day before the Bears play Footscray, on Saturday, 1 July, a back-page *Herald Sun* story announces Walls' resignation. As the players congregate around the mini bus outside the Gabba, rumours abound that Walls won't be coach next season. Discussion ceases when the spindly figure of Shane Hodges is hit by a car as he crosses Stanley Street. Although shaken, he hops to his feet. No damage.

Isolated in Brisbane, players are regularly encouraged by Walls to read the Melbourne papers. He wants them to know what is happening in the football world and to become obsessed with footy.

As the bus pulls into the airport, there is rush to buy the *Herald*

*Sun.* Marmite says in disgust, "They've sold out. All the young blokes bought them when they heard there was a story about Walls."

What took place at the board meeting only 12 days earlier is now public knowledge. While the article quotes a denial from Walls and a "failure to confirm or deny" from Gordon, most of the information is correct. Told to keep Walls' resignation a secret, I hear it on Friday night radio. Walls says, "There are loose lips around football clubs. I had little doubt it would get out, but I'm disappointed it happened with this much of the season still remaining. Probably the thing I'm disappointed in most is that when they were approached by the media, certain members who were at that board meeting didn't deny the rumours. I was of the understanding that a simple 'no comment' would be given."

With only 21 players present Walls does not mention the issue. "They deserve to be told, but as a whole group."

Assembling that evening for a meal at the Centra, most of the match committee are as surprised as the players. Merrett is disappointed he wasn't told by Walls and that the coach confided in McLean and Lynch. There is more disappointment for the skipper as he sits in his room with a towel covering his head, breathing in steam from a bowl of eucalyptus oil. He is trying to shake off a head cold.

The next morning Walls again refuses to comment. Gordon is quoted thus in the *Courier-Mail*: "At the start of this season he and all senior coaching personnel were alerted their positions were under review. I told Robert if the club had a successful season this year we were keen to retain him. But, if not, then the situation would be considered in September."

The Bears are still hopeful of reigniting a finals campaign. Footscray have lost the last seven games. Brittain, whom Walls admires, takes the warm-up: "The last 15 minutes of last week gives us something to build on, fellas. The club really needs a victory today, more so than any other time in its history."

After the events of the past 24 hours a win is likely to be the only uniting factor for a club torn apart by rumour and innuendo. The less-than-ideal build-up continues as Walls addresses

his players. After Angry Anderson belts out a song from the other side of Western Oval, through the ceiling speakers the Bears hear Footscray's theme song, "Sons of the Scray".

The tiny press box is crowded as late arrivals anxiously rush to find a chair. Only a handful are at the game for the Brisbane-Footscray clash. Most await Walls' response to resignation rumours.

Players slip and slide. Rain falls on an already heavy ground. Although Footscray have distributed 20,000 free tickets, on this cold, wet Saturday afternoon 11,519 spectators are present. Merrett, McIvor and Champion are the Bears only experienced players in the team of youngsters who, at half time, lead by 11 points. They look set for a drought-breaking win in Victoria.

The second half unfolds like a nightmare. The Bears manage only eight more points.

After the 16-point loss Walls says sarcastically, "It's nicer up in Brisbane. The weather is dry and there is a home crowd to support us. It is really very comfortable. We just don't work hard enough. I'm telling you the truth. We only had a handful who played with what's required at this level of football — the discipline to do the right things at the right time and the courage to run a hard game out."

Champion, who before the match consulted psychologist Phil Jauncey to improve his play, writes in his diary: "We were really keen for a win. We hit them with everything early. Wallsy told me through the week that he would be settling me down at full-back as this is where he believes I play my best footy. I'm in agreeance with him there. I was very happy with my performance on their best full-forward, (Chris) Grant. I know this was my turning point to finish off the season playing well." He concludes, "Come the last few games, the match might be costly to our finals chance."

As a flight mix-up means the team can't leave Tullamarine until 8.30 pm, they head to the Plough Inn for dinner.

Walls brightens at the arrival of his 80-year-old mother, Phyllis, now an avid Bears supporter. As they start their meal, a drunkard nearby makes insulting comments about the coach. After he farewells his mother, Walls verbally confronts the man

before rejoining his players and staff. Intoxicated, the lout returns, putting his hand smugly on Walls shoulder in mock apology. With venom, Walls says, "Take your hand off me and get out of my sight or I will knock your fucking head off."

The man retreats. Then a father with his 12-year-old daughter wearing a Fitzroy scarf asks for an autograph. Walls obliges. The trio talk about Fitzroy in the early 1980s. The father recounts the Lions' finals appearances under Walls, while the girl is knowledgeable about the current team. Recalling good times at Fitzroy, Walls smiles for the first time since seeing his mother.

Back in Brisbane, the football subcommittee agrees that Walls should be retained for the rest of the year, even though, as Ireland writes, "the knowledge of him leaving may not assist the team". They make a short-list of possible coaches. Gordon, Clayton and Ireland will conduct interviews.

At Tuesday night training, the coach explains to the players his decision to leave at the season's end.

The final months in Brisbane are going to be tough. Even Walls' family, who are his strength, are affected: "My daughter Rebecca has been hurt in recent weeks. One of her supposed friends, the wife of one of our recently dropped players, has been cool towards her since her husband has been out of the senior side. Small people with small minds."

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On Friday night in Melbourne, prior to the Geelong game, 18-year-old Trent Bartlett, a newcomer to senior footy, walks into the dining room at the Centra Hotel. His face lights up. "Look at all this food! Do you guys get this all the time?"

Sitting across from him, Robert Dickson asks, "Have you bought your ticket for the game yet, Barts?"

The gullible Bartlett stops eating and looks at Dicko in amazement: "I didn't know that I had to."

When laughter breaks out, the young Tasmanian realises it's a joke. Barts doesn't mind. Tomorrow he will make his AFL debut.

This week there is some experience in the team. Prior to the warm-up, Magic lies on his back in the middle of the dressing

room reading *Football Record*. Off to one side Lambert stresses, "It's going to be tough."

Before the match it is announced that Gary Ablett, known to his admirers as "God", has signed with the Cats for a further two years. Earlier in the week he was cleared of charging. Of 22,500 fans at Kardinia Park, less than 200 are Bears supporters. The Cats are premierships contenders. With odds of 7-1 Marmite couldn't resist putting \$20 on the Bears. "If they win, I'll pay you myself as well," Ireland says.

Although Ablett marks early, Champion contains him. Midway through the first term Bartlett slots into centre-half forward. Although struggling for possession, he applies a shepherd to allow Hart room to run an extra 30 metres and goal. In a welcome return, Lambert fires a 30-metre handpass, finding Hart running through the middle. Merrett finishes the first half with three goals. Only two points separate the teams.

Fired up, Geelong skip away with two early goals. Despite Clarke's ruck work, the Cats regularly clear the ball out of the middle. Ablett goals again after the umpire penalises Champion for a dubious trip. For the second time, when the ball goes out of bounds the goal umpire awards a point. Then, to what Hart felt sure was a major, the other goal umpire signals a point. Geelong stretch their lead to 16 points.

After taking another screamer in the forward-pocket, White goals. Merrett is inspirational, splitting a pack of players and handpassing the ball to Lambert, who boots another.

As Champion limps from the field with a thigh strain, Ashcroft misses a running shot before McRae goals from 30 metres out. With the teams separated by only seven points, Geelong tie the ball up on centre wing. With a minute remaining, Ablett kicks his sixth to clinch the game. Such are the ways of "God" when given half a chance. After the Cats win by 13 points, a crowd waits outside the Brisbane rooms. Most are looking for Geelong's 1990-91 captain, Andrew Bews.

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As Ireland, Clayton and Johnson stay in Victoria for the national under-17 Teal Cup competition, 14 players and a few staff board

the airport bus. Merrett collects money and the driver pulls into a bottle shop where the skipper purchases three cartons of beer and a few bags of chips. Spirits are high on the plane back to Brisbane. Sitting alone in first class, Gordon asks an Ansett flight attendant if the Bears are behaving themselves. Despite the noise coming from the back of the mostly empty aircraft, the attendant says they are. "In fact they are helping out," she says. Eustace operates one end of a drinks cart, politely attending to the passengers' needs.

Walls and his youngest son, Daniel, an Ablett fan who watched the game from the interchange, are bound for Wagga, where David is representing Queensland in the Teal Cup. As the coach can't get two places on the plane, they drive to Wagga, where in freezing conditions Queensland perform poorly.

Following a tough couple of months, Walls' family provide support. "Erin has been invaluable. She misses her family and friends and our house in Melbourne. When we return, she has plans to develop the place even further. I'm happy to let her have her way, as the last five years have been harder on her than anyone. She is my confidant. Things always seem clearer after we've talked."

He writes in his diary: "The players overall have played with a lot of courage. Voss, Hart, Fletcher and McLean have been tough. Some older players are nearing the end and will be dropped soon. This is never easy for anyone. As a coach in these circumstances, you just have to adopt a policy of 'no apologies' in pursuit of victory."

Walls' announcement to Brisbane's board followed a rousing win over Fitzroy. Since then, the Bears have lost three in a row.

## CHAPTER SIX

### *In Black and White*

*“Loyalty to any one team is pretty hard to justify because the players are always changing. You are actually rooting for the clothes. Fans will be so in love with a player, but if he goes to another team, the same human being in a different shirt, they hate him.”*

*Jerry Seinfeld*

The day after the Queensland elections, when ALP premier Wayne Goss is given the fright of his life, Gordon apologises for conditions at the Gabba before promising a bright future once the redevelopment is completed. In front of Magpie president Allan McAlister and champion ex-captain and coach Bobby Rose, he says, “There is only one team in the AFL that you *really* want to beat and that is Collingwood.”

In the Western Hill Stand, the clap-clap man, Brian Berry, is back orchestrating the crowd. Ever the hard worker, David Parkin, whose Blues are playing the Magpies at the MCG next week, sits unobtrusive and observant. This is something Walls doesn't often now do, preferring to send Clayton or Melbourne manager Kinnear Beatson to scout the opposition the week before.

“Go Bears,” chant Fairlea and Kimberley Wilson as Brisbane take the field. For the first time in the club's history a home game is sold out well before match day. This is despite competing with the Broncos at ANZ Stadium and the return interstate Rugby

Union match at Ballymore between Queensland and New South Wales.

Today Walls coaches his 300th AFL game. When Walls began coaching Fitzroy in 1981, he received \$20,000 plus petrol money. Now he earns \$180,000 a year. In football, as he says, "the only certainty is change". Even the home-made vegemite and cheese sandwiches that he takes to every game are now spread with margarine.

Merrett, who joined the club in 1988 and became skipper in 1990, leads the Bears for the 100th time.

With Champion missing due to injury, Walls puts the burden of marking Collingwood's prolific goal scorer, Saverio Rocca, onto Chapman's inexperienced shoulders. Gowers begins on the wing against Magpie captain, Gavin Brown, while young tyro Chris Scott is given the job of bustling former Bear champion Nathan Buckley out of the game.

The Bears are fired up. As second-game rookie Bartlett applies a strong shepherd, Hart steps around his opponent and goals. On the end of a sweeping Lambert handpass, Voss kicks Brisbane's second. When Fletcher goals, the Bears break to an 18-point lead before the ball has entered Collingwood's forward line.

Breaking clear of Scott, Buckley kicks the Magpie's first from the boundary line. As Graham Wright lines up for Collingwood's second, Scott and Buckley wrestle. From the opposite flank, tough defender Bews runs over and pushes Buckley who is jeered by the Brisbane crowd. Just before quarter time, the Magpies kick two majors. The Bears trail by a point.

In the heat, Collingwood's strong full-forward Rocca, kept to only one possession by Chapman in the first quarter, marks early and boots their fourth. In reply Merrett and Hart, with booming kicks from 45 metres, both goal for Brisbane. However, with excellent service coming from his midfielders, Rocca scores the next three. Taking charge, Collingwood kick seven goals for the quarter. Brisbane manage only two.

In the second half, the Bears hardly win any one-on-one contests. The players lack zest and fervour. Three straight Collingwood goals end any hope of a Brisbane revival. Repeat-



edly giving away free kicks, Chris Scott has lost his battle with Buckley, who is best on the ground. After Scott concedes a 50-metre penalty, Walls drags the youngster. It is the Bears worst performance at the Gabba in years.

The only positive aspect of a game which Brisbane lose by 49 points is a zero injury toll. Walls sarcastically quips, "After that performance, I wouldn't think there would be any injuries."

Before addressing his players, the coach stands alongside Gordon at the urinal. Both stare straight ahead; neither says a word. Walls has lost respect for the chairman while Gordon expects much more from his senior coach. Walls leaves first and heads down the corridor to the video room where his players stare emptily at the ground. After speaking to them for twenty minutes, Walls walks alone to his office. After a quick soft drink and a sandwich he enters the media room.

"That was a bad one. We overdid handpasses instead of running and saying 'I'll apply the shepherd and you run with the ball'." Naming Magic as someone who played his heart out, Walls concludes, "Collingwood are a better side than most people give them credit for. They wanted to win badly."

He later says, "Buckley was hungry going into the game. He is passionate about his football and will do anything to make himself better. If word came out tomorrow that Buckley had signed with the Bears for three years then they would flock to the airport to meet him. He is opposition but I'm happy to see him playing well."

The coach's assessment is that McLean and Hart stood out, Fletcher did a bit and Lambert and Doc Clarke tried hard. He is disappointed because the team were confident going into the game.

Walls, whose honesty is something I admire, responds to the inevitable question about the effect the announcement of his resignation is having on the team: "If that is the theory, then it didn't work last week against Geelong."

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Times at the Gabba are tough. Although no one feels the pressure more than the senior coach, his answers to my questions

are succinct. "I can only coach the team to the best of my ability. That's what I concentrate on. My job is to work with the players. Anything else, they can say what they like. I do feel angry and disappointed, but those emotions don't last for long. I refuse to let that happen."

The pressure is also on the administration. While Gordon's disappointment is animated and obvious, Piper is more analytical. Over coffee and raisin toast, he queries the wisdom of Walls' decision to announce his resignation: "I wasn't surprised he decided to move back to Melbourne. The signs were there. His wife wanted to go back and he sold his house at the Gold Coast. His five-year leave of absence from the Education Department is up and his son wants to play at Carlton. What shocked me was that he told the board. That put us in an extremely difficult position."

The slow-talking Piper suggests that in a place like Brisbane, a successful team needs home-grown heroes. His attitude is that the club won't do really well until someone comes through the ranks and is a passionate part of the Bears. This involves some of the younger players like Voss developing into leaders. As a former Hawthorn reserve grader and VFA first division footballer, Piper approaches the game with a different outlook from other directors. His experience makes him the only director, with the possible exception of Williams, who has played at a relatively senior level. The depth of Piper's concern is masked by a calm, business-like approach.

Gordon, who played for Carlton Thirds, doesn't hide his feelings. A day and a half later, his fury following the team's inept performance against Collingwood has not waned. Gordon spends Tuesday morning, 18 July ringing the other directors, asking them to think about an item he is preparing to table at the afternoon's board meeting — to discuss the possible sacking of Walls and the appointment of a new coach for the final seven games of the season.

When asked his opinion, Scott Clayton tells the chairman he is against the idea.

Before the Collingwood game the football subcommittee, chaired by Gordon, drew up a list of 20 possible coaches,

including Merrett. Since then they have narrowed the list down to Malthouse, Matthews, Sheedy, Eade, Hafey, Parkin, Wallace, Gerard Healy and ex-Geelong Grand Final coach Malcolm Blight.

If Walls is to be sacked, only Merrett and Hafey are likely to be available for next week's game. Gordon has tried unsuccessfully to contact Hafey who is away in South Australia on a trip to Port Lincoln.

As well as Clayton, Gordon has approached injured ruckman Damian Bourke. Currently studying for a PhD in Business Management, he admits the players lack intensity. Walls announcing his resignation may have much to do with that.

In the board room the mood is tense. Before Gordon calls the meeting to order, the only banter concerns the state election which still hangs in the balance. The chairman speaks: "There is a general feeling of dissatisfaction with the performance against Collingwood. I'm sure all of you who saw the match would agree. There is a feeling that the coach's announcement of his resignation may have had a large influence on the performance." He continues, "Three weeks ago I was against it, but things have changed since the weekend."

Ray Bolwell interrupts: "Are you talking about a Paul Feltham tactic?" With only seven games of the 1989 season remaining, the Bears' first coach, Peter Knights, now in charge of Hawthorn, was sacked and replaced with Feltham, the team's sports psychologist. The move provided immediate gains but caused long-term damage.

Gordon responds, "I guess you could compare the Knights sacking and Walls' sacking, but things are different from the Feltham situation." He explains that the football subcommittee has tossed around the idea. So that the directors can have a frank and open discussion about the measures, Gordon says it is important that Clayton address the board. "No one's ideas are the same. Let's see what Scott has to say and he can answer any questions you might have."

A few minutes later Clayton, sitting in Ben Macdonald's vacant chair, says, "I am aware you all are concerned. We all are. There is a need to address the situation and press upon the

playing list the need for intensity for the remainder of the season."

Clayton admits he is against the plan to terminate the coach's contract. "There is not enough time to appoint a new coach. By sacking Walls now, we are effectively taking too many people out of the pool we have to choose from. It is a short-term gain from which we are likely to suffer in the long term."

To the question of the impact of Walls' resignation on the players, Clayton says, "There is no doubt the leaking was untimely. It is hard to evaluate the subconscious mind." With all eyes focused on him, Clayton shifts uncomfortably.

Gordon passes on Bourke's views, taking care not to mention his name in front of Clayton, whose position as assistant coach would be even further compromised. Clayton is currently negotiating contracts with Chris Scott, Lappin, Voss and Doc Clarke. All form the heart of a younger Bears brigade emerging through the ranks.

After Piper says he doesn't agree with the solution of sacking Walls, Bolwell admits he is confused. "Noel rang me this morning and I haven't had long to digest this. What is the solution?"

To this Gordon responds, "We terminate the contract of the current coach and appoint a new coach immediately."

When asked by Williams what his reasons against this are, Clayton replies, "Firstly, it would limit the pool of coaches and I believe we should be going after the best. Secondly, the club doesn't need a major upheaval at this stage in its history."

Gordon, Piper and Ireland agree that the current situation is extremely difficult. Judy Kilby has to sell \$300,000 worth of advertising after a disappointing season. There is also a possibility of having to find an extra \$500,000 if the AFL decide to increase the salary cap and the players' base payments.

Despite this, a consensus turns towards keeping Walls on for the rest of the season. When Piper maintains, "For the sake of the club I think we should lock in behind the coach. I can't believe we are even contemplating this", Blunt says, "I think we should stick with what we've got as long as it doesn't turn into a farce."

When Fallon asks, "How do we fire them up, at least for the

rest of the season?", the thoughtful Clayton answers, "We need to put pressure on the players as a group." Pressure, he suggests, must also come from the board: "Noel or a group of [directors] must speak to the players and tell them how important it is to finish the season on a high note."

Satisfied with this answer, Fallon turns to Gordon and says, "I agree. The feeling around the club is really down. We are doing damage to our supporters and our prospects for next year. The board should be putting pressure on the players."

Downie speaks for the first time: "The only productive decision I've heard so far is Noel addressing the players. At least there we are doing something positive."

Gordon suggests making some other positive moves. What about Merrett to assistant coach and Bourke onto the match committee? Around the table there is a murmur of agreement.

Ireland points out that Merrett has expressed a wish to coach the team next season and the assistant position may be getting his hopes up. Also, the skipper may want to keep playing. It is a delicate issue. Merrett is not the preferred candidate to coach the team, next season at least. Clayton, more relaxed now the questions are not directed at him, adds, "He probably should do an apprenticeship. There is a career path developing for coaches. The days of going straight from playing to coaching are probably past."

Piper points out that along with a new coach it is important to have some continuity. That means players and people who have been around the club for a while. "Roger would be ideal."

After Clayton leaves the room, it is decided to offer Merrett the assistant coaching position for the remainder of the year and a further two years. Bourke is offered a position as ruck coach for the following season and will immediately join the match committee.

When Gordon says that the board needs to make more of an effort to meet the players on a more regular basis, Blunt replies, "I think you have hit the nail on the head. But I also think they are a bit shy and nervous around us and we may contribute to that. I know I've sat down amongst the players and they all got up and left."

Gordon ends the discussion by saying, "This board is only three years old and none of us have had experience at running a football club. It is a learning curve. We don't have much history to fall back on."

This is a humble admission from Gordon and most certainly true. Compared to Victorian teams and those in South Australia and Western Australia, which have a strong Aussie Rules culture and experience in quality local competitions, the Bears have little history as a club. Even Sydney had the luxury of relocated South Melbourne and their tradition and players to fall back on.

Despite their lack of experience, the decision made in the Bears board room at the Gabba to persist with Walls indicates that lessons of the past may have been learnt, to the long-term benefit of the club.

On Friday, before the Bears play Hawthorn, Ireland will talk with the manager of Adelaide full-forward Tony Modra: "He wants to come to Brisbane. We'll have to make a trade if we are going to get him."

When Piper asks what his problem is with Adelaide, Ireland answers, "He is struggling with the exposure. They treat him like a pop star. He is a country boy who likes a beer. He could really fill a big hole for us. He kicked about 130 goals a season ago."

Bolwell adds sarcastically but pertinently, "So did Capper, before he came to the Bears."

The remaining business is hurried through as the Bears board have to meet their QAFI counterparts. Gordon has another important task to carry out before the evening is finished — to talk to the players after training.

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In a season which promised so much, the Bears, who won two of their first three games, have lost ten of the last twelve. Admittedly, there are extenuating circumstances. There is no denying the club's horrific injury toll. Because of this, the side is being largely carried by younger players who haven't got the stamina to cope week-in, week-out with a long season of football. But this is still no excuse for last weekend's debacle.

After a light and dispirited training, the players gather in the meeting room. Several have refused media interviews. Following the Collingwood loss, many are embarrassed. The chairman, accompanied by Ireland, stresses the need for much more determination and self-respect in the side.

Gordon's main purpose in speaking with the players is to ensure that stability remains in the club. He later says, "Rightly or wrongly, it concerned me that Robert might have lost some of the control that he had on the training track. I wanted to make the point that although Robert was leaving, the club would continue."

Appointing Merrett as assistant coach and Bourke to the match committee will, he argues, show continuity. "The coach is going, but here are two players who aren't."

Gordon wanted to talk to the team without Walls being present, but the message wasn't conveyed to the coach. With Walls listening, the chairman tells the players that the club is concerned about the position they are in. Their main responsibility he says is to play good football and to win. Their performance has a direct bearing on the club continuing to be successful — getting crowds to the ground, sponsorships, selling memberships.

The other area is self-pride. Gordon says that while they may have doubts about their ability to perform, he doesn't doubt their ability. He asks the Bears to look inward and see if they are satisfied. He says it would be a tragedy if they are unable to finish the season not having won more games than they won last year. "People can use injuries as an excuse, but irrespective we would have gone backwards."

Lyon, Lambert, Hart and Bourke all speak at the meeting.

The chairman asks Andrew Bews if it is possible to win four out of the next seven games to get the Bears to nine wins. Bews responds, "Why should you ask us to only win four? We should set our target at seven."

The players themselves also meet. At this crucial gathering, chaired by Merrett, the players devise a three-point, on-the-field plan to get the team back on track. Each player later receives a photocopied sheet of this message: "1. Hard at the ball,

2. Shepherd/Talk, 3. Make team-mate best player" — to put on his locker.

Gordon says, "They realised they had the capacity to do the things that Bewsy or I asked them."

For the chairman, the day is not all pluses. As a result of his run-in with the umpires at the Dockers game, at AFL matches Gordon is now not allowed to sit anywhere inside the playing area.

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After he offers the assistant coaching position to Merrett, Ireland says, "He wants to keep his options open for next year which is okay."

Shortly after the skipper agrees to the appointment, Bourke does likewise. In Blucher's press release, the results of the board meeting, but not the move to sack Walls, are made public two days later. The release explains that director of football and match committee chairman, Scott Clayton, will continue in his role as "overseer of the football operation".

The coach has heard rumours that his position may be under threat. Given his previous sacking at Carlton, this is a sensitive matter for Walls.

For the Hawthorn game, the Bears could be minus key full-back Champion, who is struggling to recover from an injured thigh. Champion has been travelling daily to Brisbane's western suburbs, spending time in the Broncos \$160,000 Hyperbaric Chamber, a decompression unit designed to assist in the healing of soft-tissue injuries. Without this treatment, Champion is no chance. At least now there is some hope of him playing. Walls needs his rugged defender to match up against Dunstall who will return after missing six weeks with a hamstring injury.

Some of the turmoil around the club over the past three weeks seems to have been overcome. Ireland publicly supports the senior coach whom he personally respects. "No one could accuse Robert of not working hard. He may have been conscious of the fact he was leaving and worked even harder."

The chief executive accepts that the current situation is not



ideal. But at least it gives the club an opportunity to publicly look for a new coach.

Ireland says it would have been preferable if Walls only had told Gordon and himself. All of us, he says, make decisions that, in retrospect, we wish we hadn't: "I wouldn't have told any player. But once some knew, all the players should have known."

Over the coming months Clayton, Ireland and Gordon will hold interviews for the 1996 coaching position. Ireland does not hide the fact that, while others think Tom Hafey is too old at 64, he is an avid fan of the veteran coach, under whom Ireland played at Collingwood. "Tommy's got some great attributes. He can bond a team together. He will make them hard and tough at the ball. It is important to understand the culture, but someone like Hafey has been in a similar situation at Sydney."

Ireland's other choice is Rodney Eade. "He has been through the club and knows what it is all about. I think he has matured as a coach. It was probably good for him to get away from the times when he played here."

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The Bears' opponents, Hawthorn, set up camp at the Dockside Apartments down the road from the Gabba. To familiarise his players, Peter Knights walks them around the ground. AFL rules allow visiting teams to practice on their opponent's ground. While Walls admits it takes away some of the home-ground advantage, he shrugs when asked if the Bears are allowed to use the MCG, a ground on which even Melbourne-based teams are not allowed to train.

At the luncheon before the match, with AFL Commissioners John Kennedy and Ross Oakley present, Gordon can't resist a jibe regarding the \$10,000 melee fine the club received four days earlier. "The last time members of the AFL Commission were here we played Fitzroy and subsequent to that visit we were fined \$10,000 for a melee. Obviously Ian Collins is working hard to increase the AFL's revenue. The only good thing about it is that our dividends will be increased!"

Delighted with his appointment to the match committee,

Bourke also speaks: "For players these days there is more than two or three hours training a night. There are social pressures. We are trying to instil 28- or 29-year-old heads onto these 18- or 19-year-olds. I would like to introduce people management into coaching so we can get the ideas out of coaches' heads and into players' heads. Essendon is a perfect example. They have mature players who have won premierships and they are still young in years."

After lunch, a number of directors enter the Bears' dressing room and the players' warm-up room. Williams, one of those closest to the players, is a regular face, as are Gordon and Ireland. Also attending today are Bolwell and Downie. The club's hierarchy are obviously making an effort.

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The embattled Walls moves young Bartlett to centre-half back. Chapman is given the job on Simon Minton-Connell, while McRae and Hart tag Hawthorn stars, John Platten and Darren Jarman. On Dunstall, Champion has to either kick with his left foot or handpass.

Historically the most interesting match-up for today's game is Steve Lawrence and Paul Hudson. Watching from the stands are their fathers, Barry Lawrence and Peter Hudson. In the final game of 1971 the latter needed one more goal to break Bob Pratt's 1934 single season goal kicking record of 150. Standing on the mark was St Kilda defender Barry Lawrence. When Lawrence smothered Hudson's shot, the Hawthorn star only managed to equal the all-time goal-scoring record.

On a day when some of his 1970 Carlton and Collingwood Grand Final mates are holding a reunion before the annual showdown between the Blues and the Magpies at the MCG, Walls muses: "I suppose you could say that today's match-up has completed the equation."

Kicking into a strong breeze, the Bears bomb away making clearances easy for Hawthorn's defenders. Under warm conditions, with not a cloud in sight, several Hawks wear zinc cream. A number of players on both sides look distressed. Lambert, who discards his long Bears' pullover, leaves the field before

quarter time. He is still suffering from the flu which over the past month has been steadily moving through the team.

Walls drags Chapman, replacing him with McIvor. The Bears win their share of possession but fail to capitalise, kicking 0–6 for the quarter. With Hudson two and Dunstall two, Hawthorn kick six majors to lead by 29 points.

In the second quarter, with a strong wind, the Bears kick atrociously. Ashcroft misses from directly in front. Eventually Voss, down on one knee, cleverly soccers Brisbane's first goal. Shortly after, following a handy piece of work by Merrett, who, as the ball flies through, backhands tough Hawks defender Chris Langford, Voss kicks Brisbane's second. As the umpires return the ball to the centre, Langford still lies flat on the ground. Further misses by Matthew Clarke, Hart and Dion Scott prove costly. At half time the Bears have kicked 2–12. There is more bad luck with injuries. Gowers has done his knee.

Making a rare appearance this season are the Bearettes, big boofy blokes in drag, each sporting cheap blond wigs with identical orange boobs worn on the outside. This afternoon there are seven of them, raising money for handicapped and under-privileged children. Throughout the first half their cheers are only heard twice. Missing from the Gabba is Brian Berry, the clap-clap chap. There is little to clap or cheer about.

In the dressing rooms Walls is surprisingly composed as he calls on his players to lift. Statistics show that the Bears, who trail by 41 points, are competitive. They have entered Hawthorn's 50-metre zone more times than their opponents and have had only one less scoring shot. In the stands the local fans are not as calm as Walls. The Bears seem inept. Hawthorn are playing only reasonable football, yet they are almost seven goals in front. A season which promised much seems to have delivered nothing.

Midway through the third term Merrett comes off the bench. As he fumbles in front of the goal, home supporters jeer. "Take him off again," screams one young woman. "It's a disgrace," cries Mr Wilson, Kimberley and Fairlea's father, one the Bears' most loyal supporters.

The Bears find some determination in the tall figure of Matthew Clarke. After missing an easy goal, the quietly spoken

student works tirelessly around the ground, winning numerous possessions. Bews, out of form for much of the year, also begins to lift. He finds Hart for the first goal of the third quarter. Soon after, athletic Dion Scott kicks another. He provides the Bears, who are kicking into a strong wind, with some lift across half-forward. After two more goals by Dunstall, Brisbane trail by 45 points at three-quarter time.

Knights shepherds his team towards the northern part of the Gabba oval. The shadow being thrown by the setting sun as it hits the Western Hill Stand provides welcome relief for the fatigued Hawthorn players.

This provides Walls with cause for optimism. He maintains the Bears are still a chance to win. The team is competing in every aspect except goals. They have missed five easy shots from within 30 metres. Walls demands his players seek respect from their opponents.

Early in the fourth term Voss and White both goal. A crucial lift comes from Lawrence who runs free out of defence. He feeds McRae through the centre and the young South Australian speedster runs another 10 metres before bombing away for a 65-metre goal. As the ball sails through, two children behind the goal posts hold a sign aloft featuring their young primary school teacher's name.

White kicks a sitter. With 12 minutes remaining, the Bears are only 18 points behind. The margin is reduced to 12 when Voss roves a pack across half-forward and finds Hart alone in the goal square. Dunstall kicks a point, as does Dion Scott for Brisbane. The Hawks' Jason Taylor runs onto a loose ball and, from only 10 metres out, hooks his kick and hits the goal post.

As a pack forms in the middle, gangly Doc Clarke wins the ball. Surrounded by yellow and brown Hawthorn jumpers he twists and turns, beating three attempted tackles before finding Fletcher who feeds Merrett who goals. Trailing by six points, Brisbane again win the centre-bounce break. As the ball bounces off a pack of players, Ashcroft loops a right foot snap over a mob of players standing in the goal square. The scores are level.

The Gabba crowd is suddenly as energetic as any in the

nation. They are witnessing one of the most amazing games in AFL history.

On right centre wing Lawrence charges at the ball. With the scores still level, he spoils his opponent Hudson, receives a kind bounce and in front of the Bears Social Club gallops down the field. From the boundary line he slams the ball onto his boot and watches in disbelief as it bounces through from 70 metres to give the Bears a six-point lead. It is young Lawrence's first goal in the AFL.

Hawthorn, who have not missed a finals series for 14 years, win the ball out of the middle. As the pack forms, Dunstall marks over the back of Champion who holds his head in horror as the ball sails through the goals. With two and a half minutes left the scores are level once again.

Led by the Bearettes, the frantic Brisbane crowd starts to chant "BRIS-BANE, BRIS-BANE".

Fittingly, it is one of the Bears' best this season, Adrian Fletcher, playing his 100th game, who marks just inside the centre-square. Merrett leads but Fletcher's long drop punt is cleverly shepherded through by White. Brisbane regain their one-goal lead. Seconds later, Fletcher clears the ball wide towards the Bears' half-forward line in front of cheering members in the Cricketers' Club. From a throw-in Merrett's kick strikes the goal post. It is probably the most important point he has kicked in his illustrious career.

As the final siren sounds, a wave of jubilation sweeps through the Gabba. Hugging Ashcroft, Merrett pats an elated Shaun Hart on the head, then congratulates Dion Scott. Both are unlikely heroes — Hart, one of the few players who have matured through Brisbane's ranks, and Scott, who while with the Sydney Swans had broken his neck.

Standing in the coach's box, shielding his eyes from the late afternoon sun, Walls shakes a shocked Wayne Brittain by the shoulders. In the corner of the box Ireland wildly applauds.

Swept up in the emotion, the club's oldest staff member, boot-studded Brian Powell, recruited to the Bears by Smarty in 1987, leaves his seat behind the dugout and runs onto the oval to celebrate with the players. While jogging off, Powell, who

lives in a Catholic old people's home, experiences a sharp pain in his chest. He is assisted to Mackenzie's office where ambulance officers administer oxygen. In 1987, as a joke, Powell had told members of the support staff he was 82. Many now think he is 91. In fact he is 70, only five years older than Smarty.

While security guards struggle to hold the gate, jubilant Brisbane fans yell to the still celebrating players as they leave the field. Moving to the meeting room, players stand, arms bound in a circle, above a cameraman and a photographer who hover on the terraced seating. The staff cram into the doorway. As they sing the club's song, Gabby Fenech and his assistant, Shane Williams, hand out ice for bumps and bruises. Gordon bustles through the doorway. Walls, as is his wont with victories, orders another rendition as the television crew grabs footage for the nation. Briefly addressing his players he asks them to come back in an hour when he can think clearly. The coach, usually self-contained, is overcome with emotion.

As players, staff and administrators gather around the property room for the 4 o'clock television replay, Peter Knight's booming voice can be heard only a wall away. Knight doesn't have fond memories of the Bears. "We've heard this a few times at Carrara," Smarty quips at Merrett, who is quietly sipping a beer.

Smarty is delighted. "At three-quarter time they had no chance. You wouldn't back them, even with somebody else's money. As things went on and on it was bloody unbelievable. This is the best win we have ever had."

Down the corridor, facing the press, Walls says, "There is no harder worker than Dion Scott. Perhaps I have erred in not having him at centre-half forward earlier. Hart and Fletcher controlled the midfield and I was pleased to have the opportunity to rest Lambert. He is coming back after a long layoff and I think we should have given him a rest last week too. I always thought we were a chance at half time. We had as many scoring shots as them. From memory, five blokes missed shots from dead in front. We had the faith to dig deep and keep going. With ten minutes to go I knew we would win. We had the momentum."

The coach is pleased for his players and the team's supporters. Although Walls again refuses to answer questions regarding his plans, he is bitter towards the administration. He makes it clear that he had told the team of his decision to leave. "The players deserved to know once it came out in the media. I've got no comment. That was the original agreement and I'm sticking to it."

Despite Walls' personal distress, it is a jubilant day. The win puts the Bears in the AFL record books. They have made the best comeback ever from three-quarter time, bettering the previous best of 44 points by North Melbourne who beat Essendon by one point at Arden Street in 1947.

Shane Johnson hands out small urinal bottles to three players, including Merrett, for the AFL's random drug testing. The skipper chuckles when someone suggests he fill the drug-test bottle with flat beer. He moans soon after when the call comes from Walls for the delayed after-match meeting.

"Tell him that I've got to do a drug test," Merrett says to Magic. On television, the final quarter replay is about to begin. Eventually the skipper trudges to the meeting. Five minutes later all players return and watch the spectacular, match-winning goals by McRae, Lawrence, Ashcroft and Fletcher.

The last six weeks have been tough. Rumour and innuendo have eaten away at the club's spirit. Ultimately, it is the players who lift. After hitting their lowest point with the Collingwood loss, today the Bears have reached one of the high-points of their history.

As former Magpie great Leeta Collier used to say, "The game is never lost until it's lost."

# CHAPTER SEVEN

## *Winning Is Everything*

*"In top-class sport, a good loser is a dill."*

*Harry Reardon*

A week can be a long time in football. Brisbane's remarkable victory over Hawthorn means at last things are looking up.

Ireland, in his Gabba offices on Monday morning, says, "It was a great win, a record comeback in the last quarter, something the club really needed."

While Ireland is buoyant, Walls has had enough of Brisbane. He says, "I love the players but it has gotten uncomfortable. Noel and I don't have any respect for each other. It all broke down about a year ago. I heard about the board meeting last week wanting to sack me. It would have been disastrous for the club. Down south they would have received so much criticism. It is not worth the short-term gain for the long-term damage."

There are, the coach maintains, too many loose lips around: "Mike Sheahan and some of the other Melbourne journalists know everything that happens in this club less than 24 hours after it happens."

During the past fortnight, Tuesday night training has been noticeably different. The bubbly personality of Glynis Nunn-Cearns, who has given birth to her second child, a son, again scans the paddock. The players love having her around. Except for the baby, Nunn-Cearns would have been working with the Bears all season.

While the players follow her strict training routines, a



recovered Brian Powell busily slices tomatoes and lettuce. Walls has scheduled this year's second player and staff barbecue for tonight. Variety is important for his team and a barbecue is a good chance to relax after training.

Ireland receives a phone call from the Melbourne *Herald Sun*. A journalist wants him to comment about a rumour that Walls was to have been sacked before the Hawthorn game. Ireland denies the rumour. Nervously flicking through the next morning's paper, he is relieved to see the story receives only minor coverage. He confides: "The good thing about rumours in football is that there are so many. The public are sceptical as to what to believe." He later says: "I guess 90 per cent of football rumours are at least partly true."

At Friday night training Marmite informs the football staff that the weather is so bad in Adelaide that the Morphettville races have been cancelled. The damp will not suit the Bears. Realising there is no way to recreate similar conditions in Brisbane, Walls asks his players to visualise the wet conditions in Adelaide. Teams take different measures to adjust to conditions interstate. Before they thrashed the Bears two weeks ago, to prepare for Brisbane's heat Collingwood trained in tracksuit pants.

Smarty will accompany the team to Adelaide. Although he has rarely travelled away this season, he is soon tagging bags at the airport and handing out sealed Spring Water bottles and fruit to the squad.

Replacing Gowers, tall wingman Matthew Kennedy is recalled for the third time this season. In his sixth year with the Bears, Kennedy cannot cement a place in the team. He desperately needs to lift.

Although initially ruled out for the rest of the season, Gowers won't concede defeat. Examining his knee, Eustace agrees: "It isn't as bad as we first thought."

Gowers insists that he will work as hard as possible and make it back before the season ends. Although his form has not been outstanding, this is the sort of attitude which makes him such an asset to the team. Gowers recently picked up a position in Brisbane as a radio sports commentator. While he lacks

experience in the industry, his first interview, with Wayne Carey, was outstanding.

\* \* \* \* \*

On the flight to Adelaide, while McLean, Lambert and Bews chat down the back, McAdam is intent on a book. The front cover features Gilbert, wearing a St Kilda jumper, and his younger brother Adrian, who plays with North Melbourne, flying for a mark. A large photo shows the wind-dried, bearded face of their father, Charlie, in an Akubra hat, staring into the sunset. *Boundary Lines* tells Charlie's life story. Born sometime in 1935 or 1936, Charlie McAdam never knew his date of birth. His white father wanted to knock him on the head. Taken to a mission, then virtually enslaved by European property owners, he eventually supported a large family in Alice Springs. The book is an Aboriginal family's tale about winning against the odds.

Normally a private person, Gilly elaborates: "Dad was battling to survive through mustering and work. I can see myself and my brother doing the same through football. The things he went through, he still had time to have a wife and kids. He grew us kids up and made sure we got educated and offered us stuff that wasn't offered to him. I think I'm lucky in a way to have a father who has been through all that. It makes me grateful for what I've been able to achieve."

Now a family man with a six-year-old daughter and two sons, four and two, McAdam is acutely aware that there is more to life than sport.

Outside Adelaide's Hyatt Regency Hotel the coach looks skyward at the bleak conditions. As Walls leads his players down the road, passers-by up early on a Sunday shout encouragement.

Craig McRae is returning home for the first time since joining the Bears. The slightly built youngster, one of the AFL's most valuable first-year players, didn't want to play for the Crows. Because there is only one team in Adelaide, pressure on players from the media and the public is even worse than in Melbourne. Happy to be with Brisbane, McRae is one of only six Bears who have played every game this season.

Leading the team through the Victor Richardson gates onto the Adelaide Oval, Walls explains, "Victor Richardson was the grandfather of Greg and Ian Chappell. He played in the same team as Don Bradman. Did you know that Aker?" When Akermanis mumbles "No", Walls replies, "Stick with me son and you'll learn a lot."

The game doesn't begin until 5.30 pm, so the players, most of whom are now experienced interstate travellers, know to eat fruit regularly and not to laze around. Some go for a jog and a swim. McRae and Champion resume contact with family and friends. It is a terrible day — cold, wet and windy.

At 4.30 pm in the visitors room at Football Park, Walls writes on a blackboard:

Challenge:

Win outside Queensland;

1st win at Crow Park;

Jump Sydney and the Dockers (5 wins);

Prove ourselves to be physically/mentally tough to win in these conditions.

Highlighting "United we stand, divided we fall", Walls draws a chain with 21 links, meeting to form a circle. Under the chain he writes, "21 strong links in the chain".

On a day when goals are going to be hard to come by, McRae receives a handball from Merrett and goals with a grubber. Kicking into a strong wind it is the only goal of the quarter. Walls has told his players to kick short and keep the ball wide.

With the wind at his back, in the second term DJ finds McRae who goals again. McRae then smothers a Crow's kick into the arms of Fletcher who goals from 30 metres. The Bears are on a roll. At full pace, Merrett picks up the ball on the bounce, sprints away and boots a major from 60 metres. Goals by Hart and McLean extend Brisbane's lead to 34 points.

With eight minutes remaining in the half, ex-Collingwood player Jason McCartney kicks Adelaide's first. In atrocious conditions, Mark Ricciuto and Modra goal to keep the home team in the game. White responds by kicking an impressive goal from 50 metres.

Entering the Bears' dressing room, some of the 21 drenched players shout encouragement, others chatter excitedly about the first-half performance. Merrett, benched late in the second term, knows better. He calls out, "Settle down, just settle."

Walls reinforces the message: "We're half way there. There is still a long way to go."

He speaks privately to McRae, DJ and Dion Scott. Merrett wanders around the room offering encouragement and advice. As the players get a final rub, Walls says: "We are playing on their turf, their conditions. You are looking for something to take away from here that you will remember for the rest of your lives."

As the rain stops briefly, Dion Scott, who has been leaping high all evening, marks between two Crows defenders and kicks a vital goal. Voss' lightening handpass finds McRae unmarked in the square. Although Adelaide reply with their fourth, the Bears, following instructions, play the ball wide and tight. As two Crows defenders fumble, Akermanis swoops and boots a 50-metre goal into the strong wind.

At three-quarter time, with Brisbane leading by 27 points, rain is pelting down. Walls, water dripping off the end of his nose, his jumper saturated, encourages the team to focus.

The game turns into a battle in the mud. The Crows lift but the wind favours Brisbane, whose defence led by Chapman holds tight. After more good work by Lambert, McRae kicks his fourth around his body. Modra punts a simple shot out of bounds. Adelaide are beaten.

"Hey, hey listen," Walls shouts. "I'm not getting carried away, but that was one of the best efforts by a Brisbane Bears Club ever. You did the hard things from the first to the final whistle. You did yourselves proud."

Tonight, under lights, was the hardest and toughest Brisbane have played all season. In terrible conditions and against 35,000 supporters, every Bear was prepared to get in first.

In front of his family, McRae, who hasn't missed a game all year, has played a boomer.

Walls says, "A win like this picks everyone up. We've had a few downers this year so I think they have every right to feel

good about themselves. We played strongly and impressively. Blokes like Lambert, Hart and Fletcher, Voss and Bews were terrific in close."

After the game, Champion who can still only kick on his left leg, writes: "It was a great win in a gutsy, low-scoring affair. I stayed overnight and went for tea with both my wife's and my family and friends which was great. I was reasonably happy as my opponents didn't get much of the ball. My leg turned out OK. I just pulled up a bit sore the next day. Rating six."

While in Adelaide, Ireland will meet former St Kilda coach Ken Sheldon, currently in charge of South Adelaide. On Monday he will see Hafey and Healy, then Eade. The Bears have set the deadline of Grand Final day to announce their new coach.

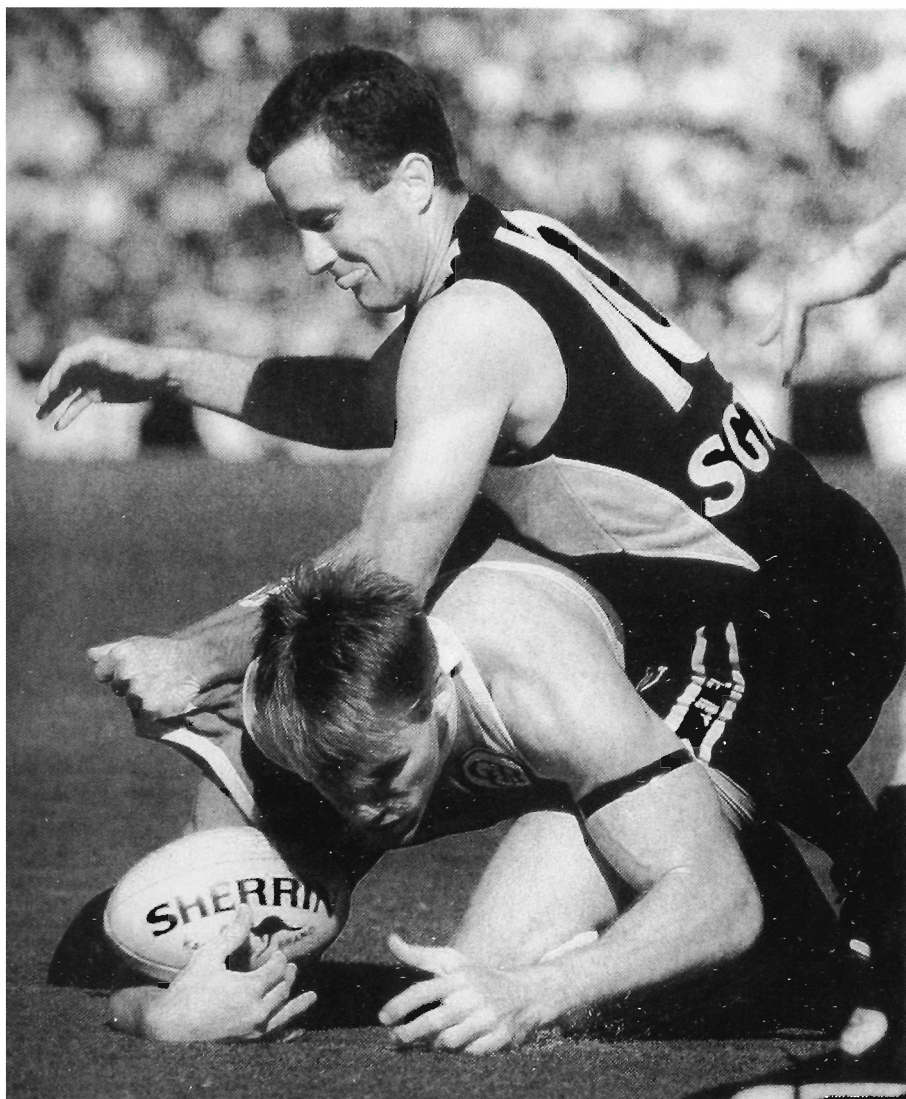
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With two wins in a row, Brisbane jump from 14th spot to 12th. Questioned about the prospect of playing in the finals, Walls says, "It has not even entered our minds."

The Bears haven't escaped the torrid Adelaide encounter without injuries. Lambert's troublesome leg is causing more problems. He will be replaced by Chris Scott who has recovered from a strained hamstring. Along with Lynch and Champion, both players have been using the Broncos' hyperbaric chamber. The Bears still hope to get one. In Clayton's opinion, without the oxygen treatment Champion would have been out for two or three weeks. Even though he still can't kick on his right foot, he returned in a week.

Working to restructure the football department, Clayton says, "In the game today there is never enough time. There are too many videos to watch, too many things to do." The club is placing an increased emphasis on player welfare, including looking after jobs, study and general well-being. This is pertinent in Brisbane, where the players, most of whom come from interstate, haven't got a familiar social structure to fall back on.

The only other AFL club in a similar situation is Sydney. In recent years both clubs have followed similar paths. Both were originally owned by high-flying, flamboyant entrepreneurs before virtually collapsing and slowly clawing their way back,

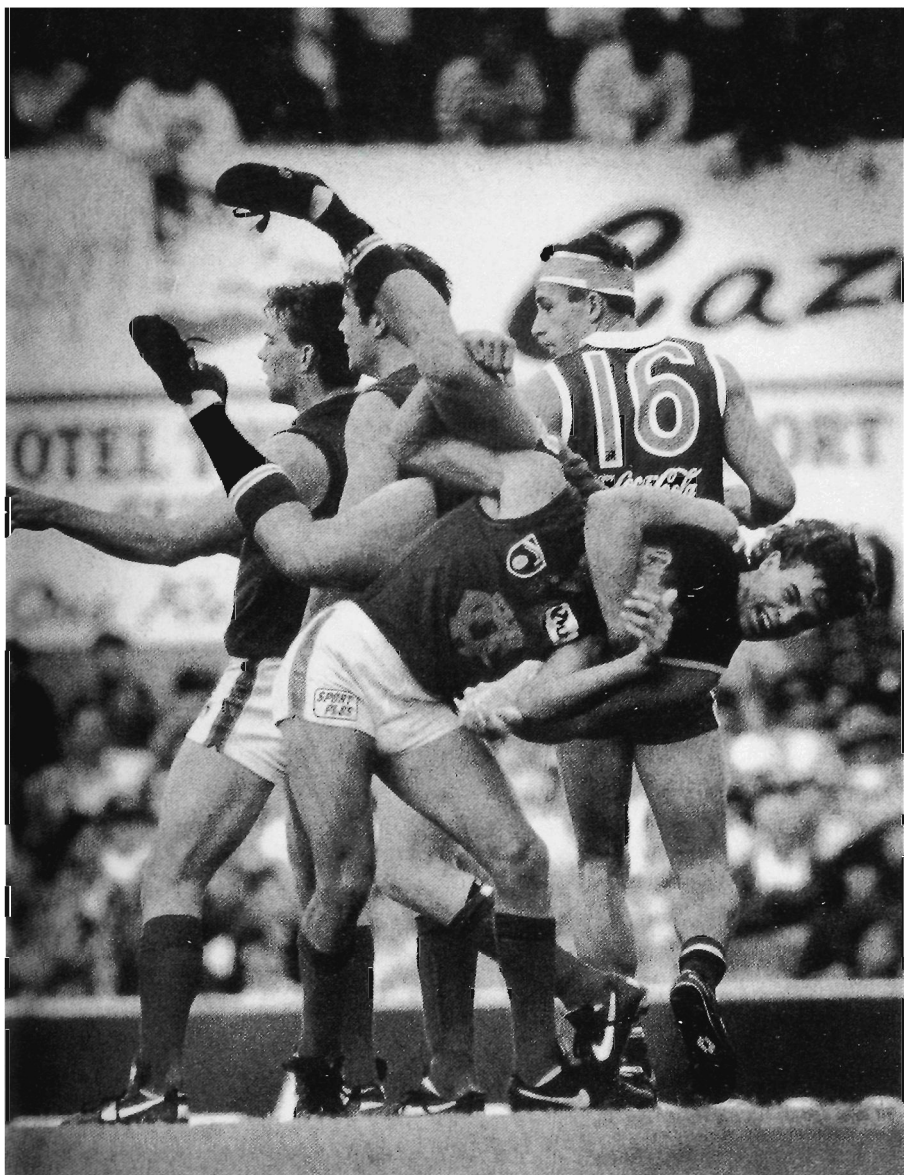


Richard Champion (with the ball) and West Coast's Don Pyke clash in Round 10 at Subiaco, Perth, 4 June 1995. Champion is wearing a black arm band as a tribute to the late Max Green. (*Courier-Mail*)



Former chairman Paul Cronin and deputy chairman Christopher Skase at the media launch of the Brisbane Bears in November 1986. (Alan Piper)





Bears' young tyro Steve Lawrence tackles Fitzroy's Chris Johnson in Round 11 at the Gabba, 11 June 1995. Under the blood rule, "Doc" Clarke has his head bandaged. (*Courier-Mail*)





Trent Bartlett in his debut match, against Geelong in Round 14 at Kardinia Park, Geelong, 8 July 1995. Craig McRae and Nigel Lappin watch. (*Courier-Mail*)



Andrew Gowers marks ahead of Collingwood's Paul Williams in Round 15 at the Gabba, 9 July 1995. Michael McLean is in the background. (*Courier-Mail*)

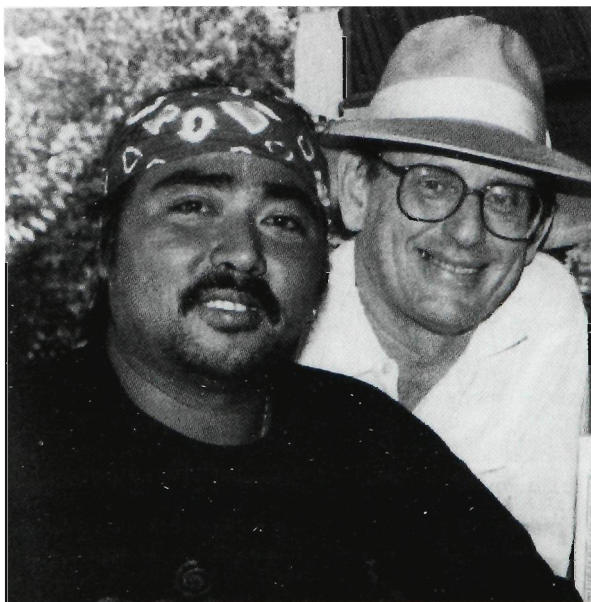


Trainers Dominic Locantio and Brian Fort work on Gilbert McAdam (left), while Marty Stammers and Murray Johnson (partly obscured) tend to Shaun Hart (right). (*Just Photography*)

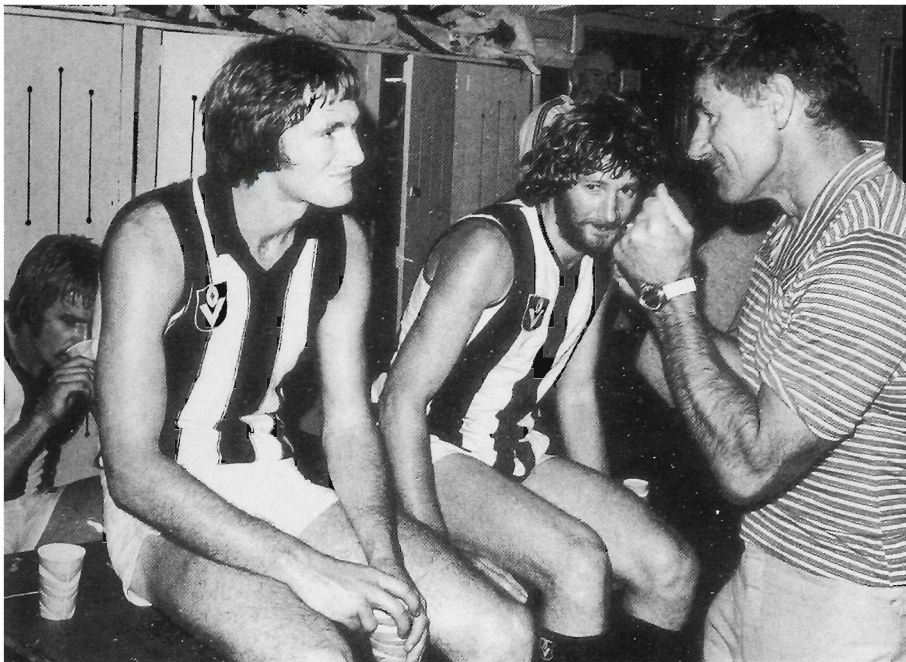




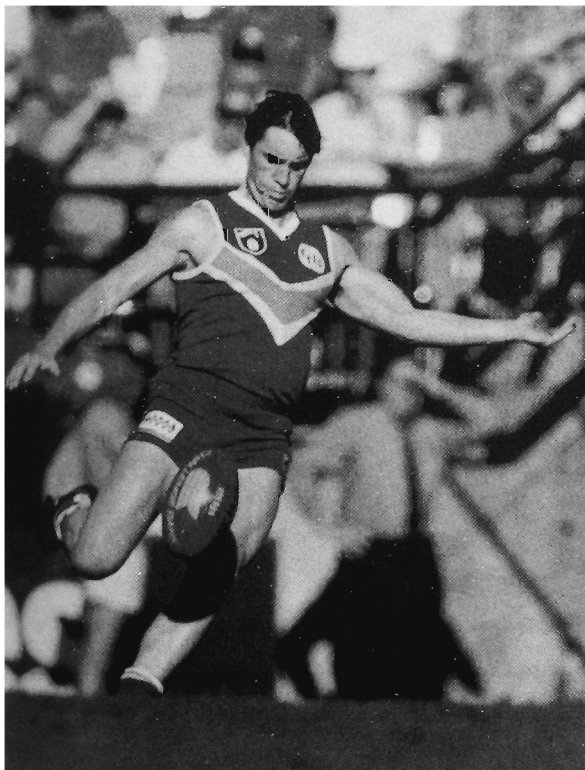
Robert Walls (kicking) playing for Carlton against Richmond in the 1972 Grand Final where he kicked six goals. He is watched by Trevor Keogh (left), Frances Bourke (on the ground), Syd Jackson (partly obscured), Barry Richardson and Alex Jesaulenko (far right). (*Herald and Weekly Times*)



Author Ross Fitzgerald and Balinese friend Made Sugiarta watched a direct telecast of the Bears versus North Melbourne match in a bar in Sanur. (Lyndal Moor)



Former Collingwood player Andrew Ireland listening to Collingwood coach Tom Hafey at the MCG, Anzac Day 1977. Behind Ireland is the late Wayne Gordon, and beside him is Alan Atkinson. This was the first time Hafey had coached against his old club Richmond. (Andrew Ireland)

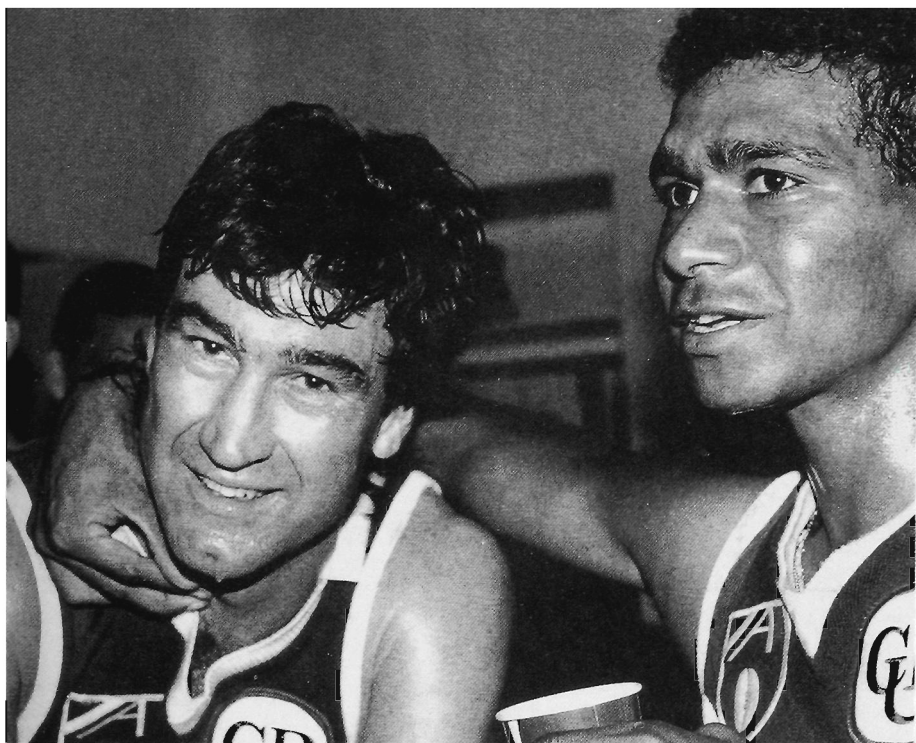


The AFL's leading possession winner, Adrian Fletcher, playing his 100th game against Hawthorn at the Gabba, Round 16, 23 July 1995. (Just Photography)





Andrew Bews (right) celebrates with Craig Lambert after the team's record-breaking comeback against Hawthorn, Round 16 at the Gabba, 23 July 1995. (Just Photography)

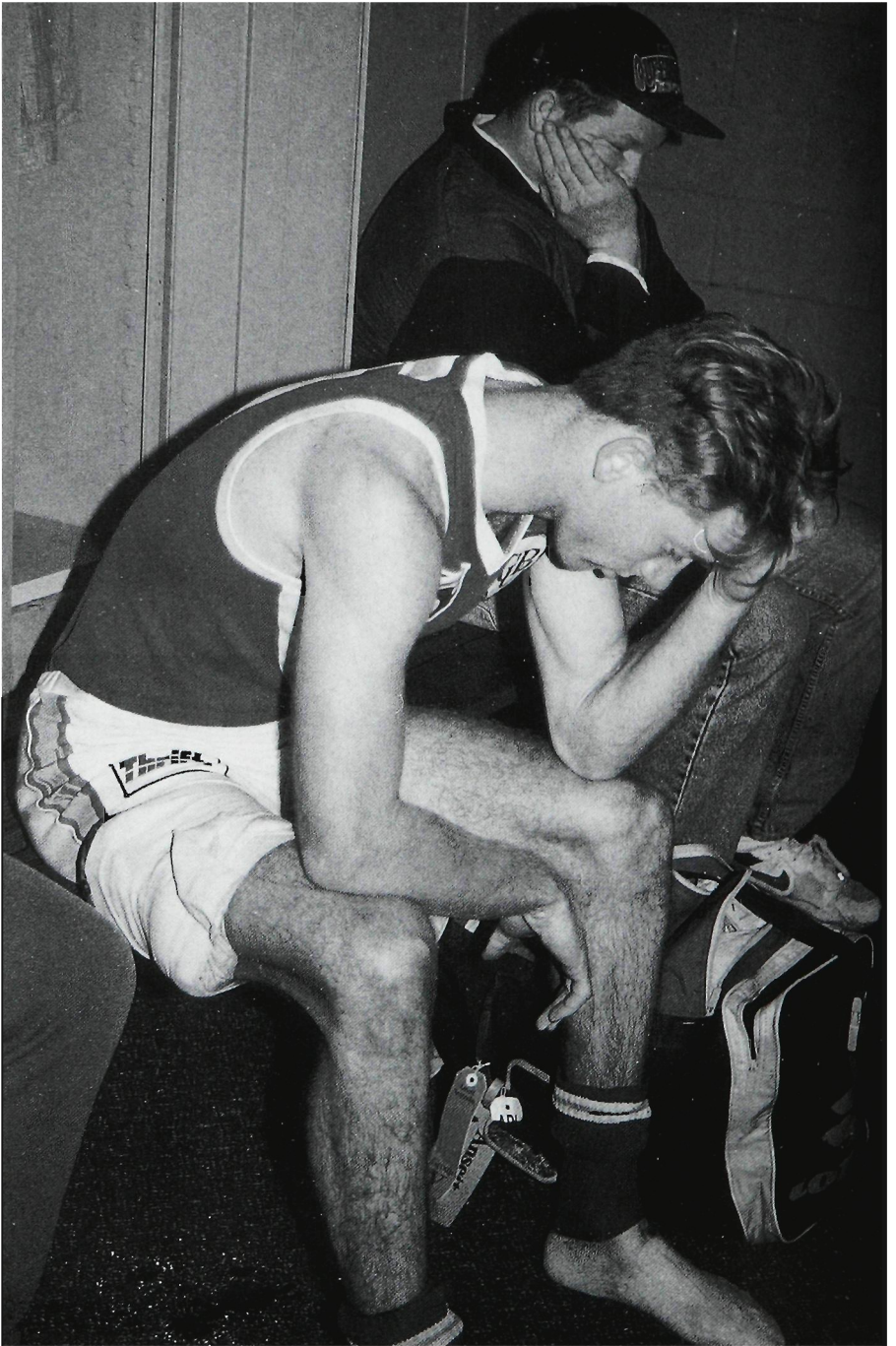


Roger Merrett (left) and Gilbert McAdam. (*Courier-Mail*)



Adrian Fletcher (left) and Andrew Bews on the plane to Melbourne for the Round 19 clash with Carlton. Shaun Hart is in foreground. (*Andrew Berkman*)

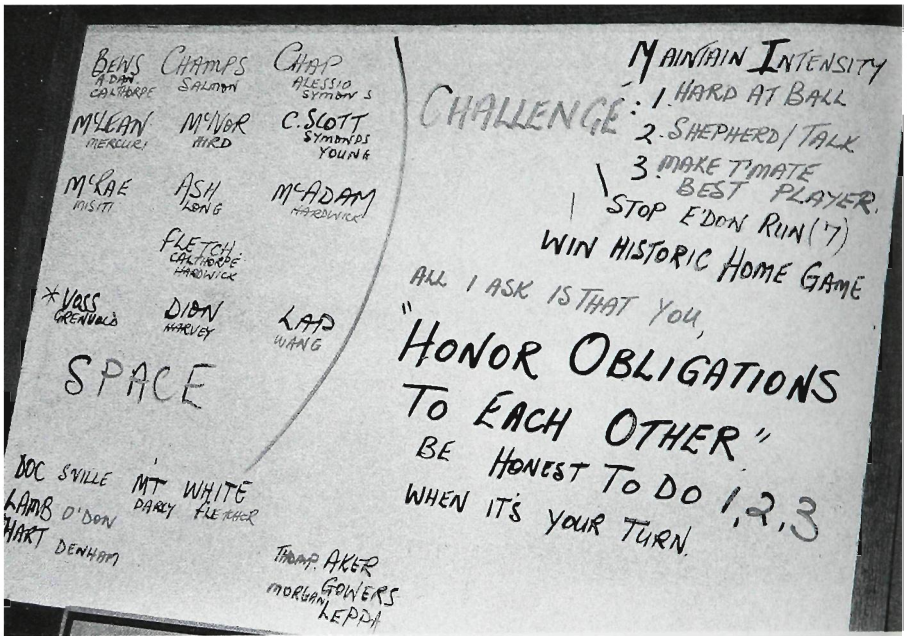




Nathan Chapman after the Carlton loss, Round 19 at Optus Oval, 13 August 1995.  
(Andrew Berkman)



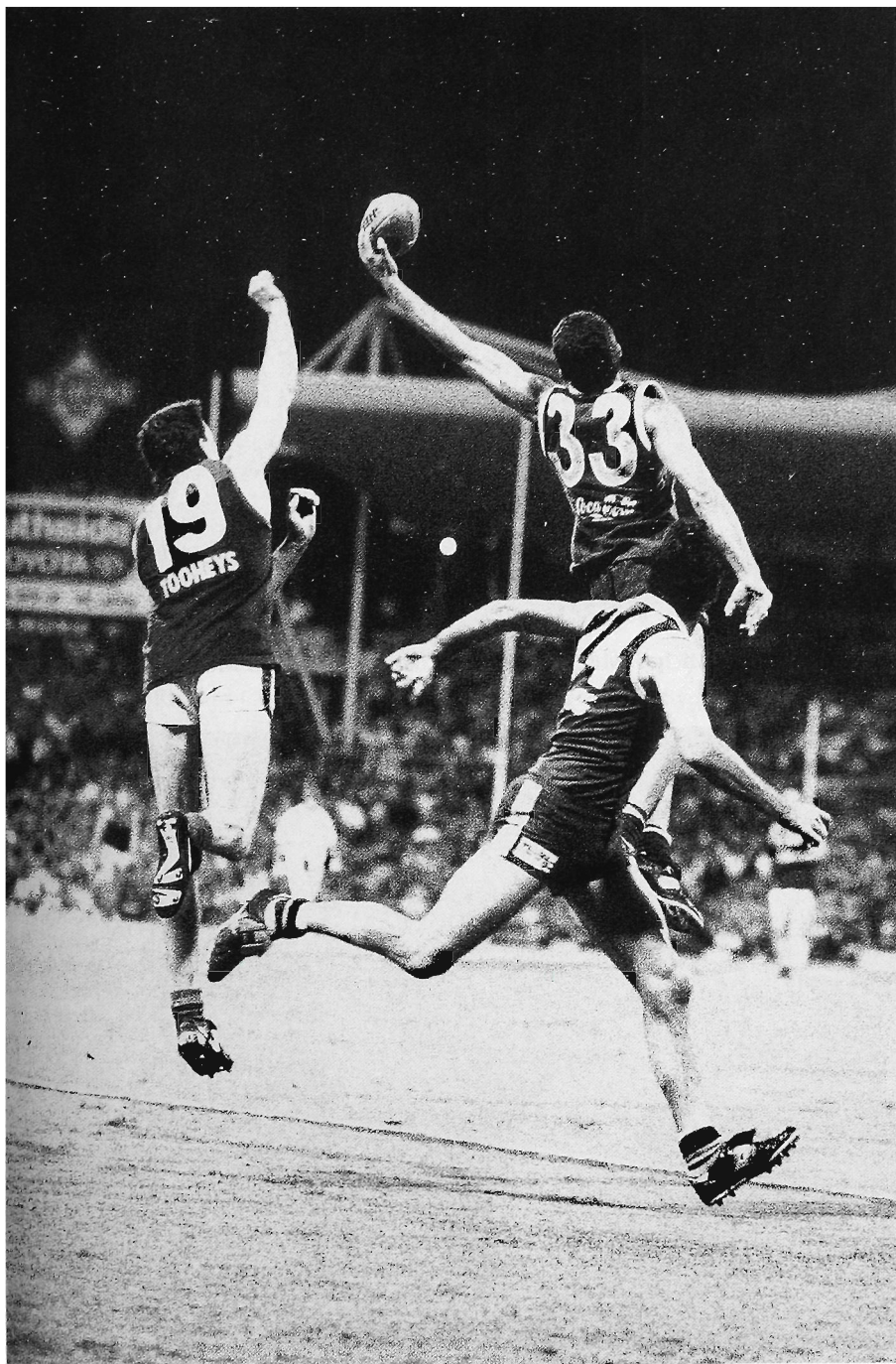




The coach's white board before the Essendon game in Round 21 at the Gabba, 26 August 1995. (Andrew Berkman)

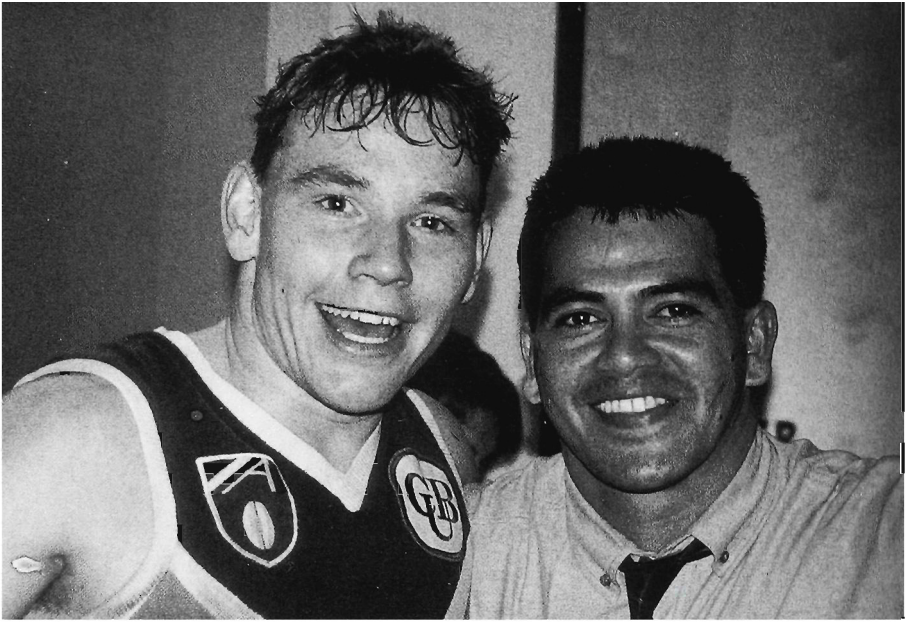


Craig Lambert in the Hyperbaric Oxygen Chamber. (Courier-Mail)

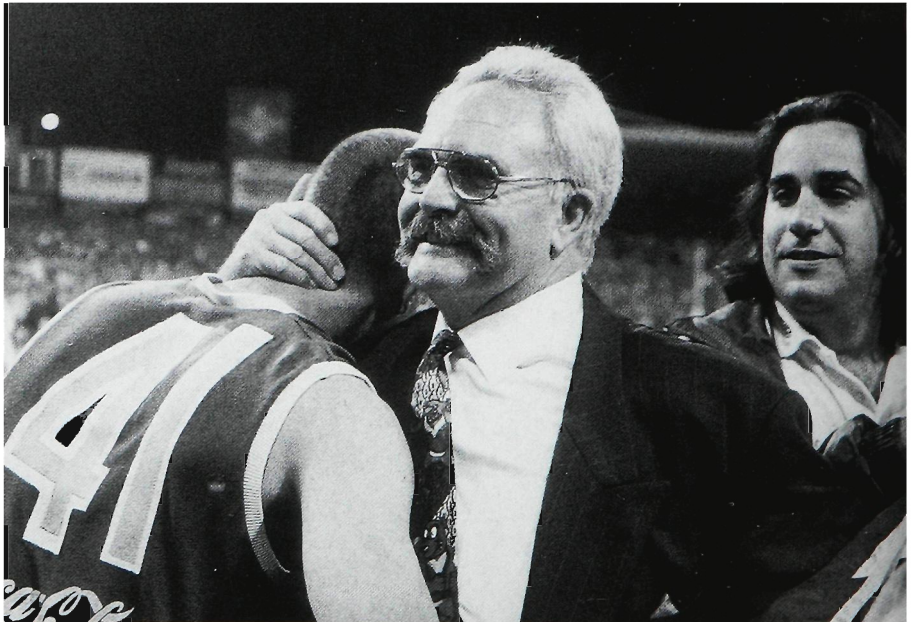


Darryl "DJ" White takes a one-handed grab ahead of Melbourne's Paul Prymke, with Roger Merrett in the foreground. Round 22 at the Gabba, 2 September 1995. (Courier-Mail)

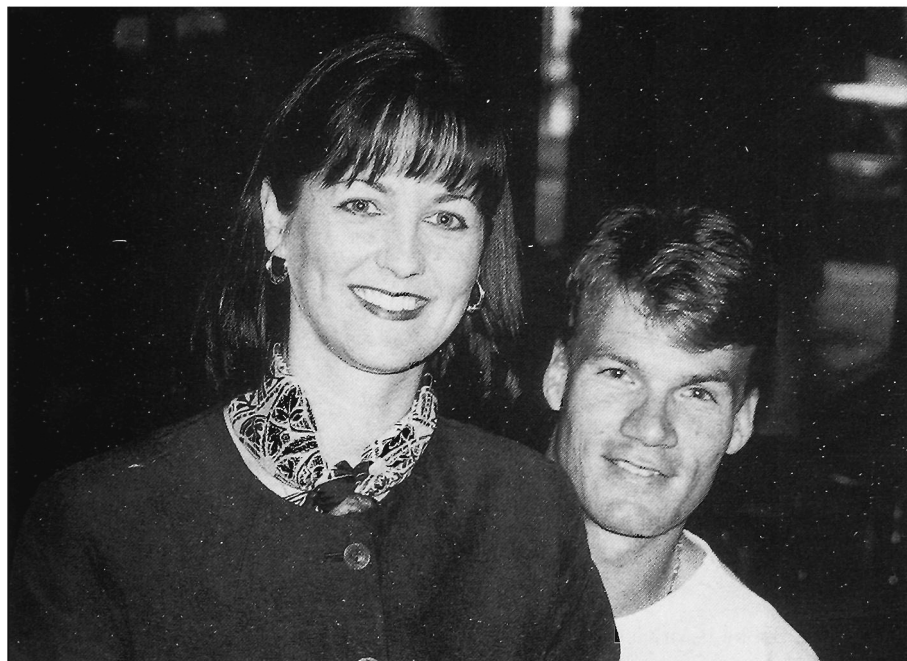




Trent Bartlett and Michael McLean after the Round 22 win over Melbourne at the Gabba. (Andrew Berkman)



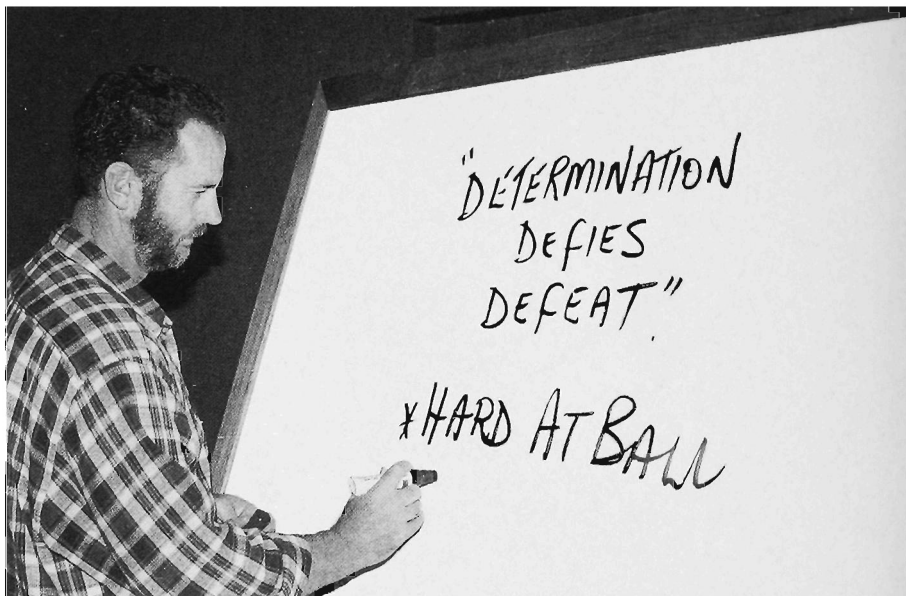
Chairman Noel Gordon hugs Matthew Kennedy following the Bears' victory against Melbourne. Melbourne-based doorman Michael Cendamo, visiting Brisbane, is on the right. (Andrew Berkman)



Anne-Marie and Richard Champion at Kelly's Pub for the crucial Sydney–Collingwood game, 3 September 1995. (Andrew Berkman)



Andrew, Tom, Cate and Anna Gowers at Kelly's Pub. (Andrew Berkman)



Walls at the Gabba before leaving for Melbourne for the Bears' first-ever final. (Andrew Berkman)



Boot-studders Brian Powell (left) and Lou Powell — no relation. (Just Photography)

using a more traditional public membership base. Both are trying hard to establish Aussie Rules in a Rugby heartland.

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Before the Sydney game, Swans patron Mike Willessee interviews a surprise guest. Steve O'Smotherley is an Aussie Rules international. Recently picked for Great Britain to play against Denmark and Canada, the nuggety Londoner is a Lloyds broker who looks like Bob Hoskins. Asked what the competition is like in Britain, O'Smotherley answers, "Tough."

The British Australian Rules Football League (BARFL) allows a maximum of 11 Australians on each team; the other 10 are usually Gaelic footballers and rugby players. In Britain there are fourteen teams. The Sussex Swans regard themselves as Sydney's sister team. The Bristol Bears, who have struggled in recent years, currently are on the up.

Against Sydney, the Bears run hot. Within 50 seconds of the start, White kicks Brisbane's first. He and Hart, who is also on fire, quickly kick two more each. With nine minutes remaining in the quarter, the Swans bounce back with two themselves. Walls brings on Steve Lawrence, whose fire and determination the coach admires. Burrowing for the ball the young tyro is immediately tackled. On the field for thirty seconds, he is stretchered off the ground, clutching his knee. By quarter time the Bears' lead is narrowed to eight points.

Showing desperation, Merrett finds McRae who passes back to Hart who goals again. Brisbane break clear as McRae and Voss each kick their first and Hart his fourth. The Swans reply through an inspirational tackle by Lockett. After a 30-metre chase, "Plugger" rides Champs into the ground. Inspired, the Swans kick four goals in a row before Dion Scott lifts the Bears. After struggling for much of the first quarter, Horse takes a strong grab in the goal square and boots a major. Shortly after he fumbles but manages to goal again.

Just after half time, Merrett kicks his second. Then from 50 metres, Lappin boots his first. In the back line Chapman and Champion, with the running assistance of McLean and McAdam, repel Sydney's attack.

Halfway through the final term, due largely to Derek Kickett, Lockett kicks his fourth and fifth. Eighteen-year-old Tasmanian Trent Bartlett, who lasted only four minutes into the match before being dragged, is brought back to mark star centre-half forward, Paul Roos. Young and strong, but occasionally ill-disciplined, Bart's courageous approach to the game has earned his team-mates' respect.

With three and a half minutes remaining, a Sydney major closes the gap to 15 points. After Lockett spills a mark, he and Bartlett collide, sending both players reeling. The youngster clears the ball. The missed opportunity spells the end for the Swans. The Bears have won three in a row.

Walls says: "Even in the last five minutes we didn't have the game fully under control. Kickett's work at the centre was a real worry for us because he is a great play-maker. If we had gone under it would have been the Kickett-Lockett combination that sank us."

Of Bartlett's clash with Lockett, Walls admits with a smile of admiration, "Only a rookie would do something like that."

Today's match is the last time that Walls and Ron Barassi will coach against each other. After Sydney's 15-point loss, Barassi, now 59, says, "I've got a soft spot for Robert. We go back a long way."

Champion, who played on Lockett, writes: "I knew if I could keep his tally down we would be a good show. He only had two goals until the 30th minute of the third quarter. He kicked one on the siren. Then in the last quarter the Swans got a run on. Being the great player he is, Plugger took some strong marks and kicked three goals. Thankfully we ran out winners. One of my better games and even all my left footers went well. Rating eight."

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In Lambert's absence, against Sydney the superfit Hart was Brisbane's best. At a career crossroad after being dropped last year three times, this season Serge has been a key player.

Two unsung heroes of the team's recent improvement are ruckman Doc Clarke and solidly built, high-leaping Dion Scott,



who has slotted into centre-half forward. Against his old club, Scott, who owns a lawn mowing and landscaping business in Brisbane, kicked three goals, took six marks and was one of Brisbane's leading tacklers. Scott had previously missed twelve months with a knee reconstruction, and is lucky to be playing footy after breaking his neck in the surf during a pre-season training session for Sydney in March 1991. Scott played only six senior games for the Swans in four seasons before moving to Brisbane in 1993. In the last three or four weeks he has played strong and consistent footy.

Having recently moved in with Peter Blucher, Scott jokes, "Walls asked Bluch if a few more guys could move in with him and hope that their form might also improve."

For Sunday's match, which sees Brisbane chasing four wins in a row for the first time since 1988, Walls maintains a conservative line: "If we got within eight goals of Carlton I'd be happy."

\* \* \* \* \*

The coach has seen two of his favourite players, Steve Lawrence and Troy Clarke, sidelined with major knee injuries. To assist with Lawrence's rehabilitation Walls recommends reading inspirational material. The absence of Ross Lyon, originally expected to miss four weeks but who hasn't played since Round 2, highlights the nature of such injuries.

On his way to the airport to fly to Melbourne, Walls receives a call. His son David, playing for Southport Colts at Chelmer Oval in Brisbane's western suburbs, has also seriously injured his knee. Mackenzie reports that there is little doubt he too will require a total knee reconstruction. The news is devastating. Walls played his last game in 1980, his retirement largely forced by a knee injury. Like Lawrence, his son has a Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) scan which confirms their worst fears.

In the visitors dressing rooms at Optus Oval, Walls writes "Hawthorn", "Adelaide", "Sydney" on the blackboard and puts a tick beside each club. After writing "Carlton" he puts a question mark. The Blues have won nine games straight.

As Walls addresses the team, a roar is heard as Carlton

emerge from their tunnel. Walking into the dressing room Shane Johnson nods to Clayton at the far side of the room, who a few seconds later tells Walls that Carlton captain, Stephen Kernahan, under an injury cloud for the past few days, is not playing. The last time the teams met, Carlton won by 37 points, with Kernahan kicking seven goals. As the Bears run onto the field, a message is passed to Champion. Carlton are also missing key defenders Peter Dean and Stephen Silvangni who many consider crucial to Carlton's premiership aspirations — almost as crucial as Lynch and Lyon are to Brisbane.

In the first few seconds Brisbane attack. From a tight angle, Hart grubbers a kick towards goal. Replays show the ball was well over the line before being touched by a Carlton defender. The crowd is silent and the goal umpire mistakenly signals a behind. Brad Pearce, a former Bears player who retired at the end of 1993 only to be picked up by the Blues, kicks their first. He is now a crucial part of Carlton's lineup.

After Voss misses a goal from directly in front, the Blues swing into attack. At centre-half back Bartlett is tackled from behind and penalised for holding the ball. This mistake and another from Champion leads to a major by Greg Williams. Although Brisbane are scrappy in front of goal, Martin Leslie, in the dugout following an epidural operation the day before for his back problem, observes that Carlton are also fumbling. They look off their game.

With his next kick Bartlett does a hamstring. Bart's bullish approach will be missed, possibly for the remainder of the season. When Pearce kicks his second, Walls moves the speedier Chris Scott into defence. On quarter time Ashcroft, from 50 metres, boots Brisbane's second.

Relishing an opportunity to run on the wing, Chapman goals from 65 metres, the Bears' fourth. A minute later, Lappin runs into an open goal for Brisbane's fifth. Although Carlton hits back through Fraser Brown, the Bears trail by only nine points.

In heavy conditions, Fletcher skilfully weaves through two opponents to goal from 40 metres. Out of the pack, Hart kicks another. This time it bounces over a Carlton defender's head, allowing the goal umpire an easier decision. Carlton only man-

age a series of points. In the final seconds before half time Merrett marks and passes back to Hart who directly in front goals from 30 metres. As Brisbane lead by five points at half time, the home crowd is silent.

In the visitors dressing room all players focus on Walls: "We're doing well, but keep persisting." Led by Merrett and Lambert, who has returned to the side again, players encourage each other as the trainers rub them down.

Early in the third term Voss goals. Brisbane have a 10-point lead. Carlton slowly get on top and the dour struggle continues. Anthony Koutoufides and Williams goal as Brisbane's kick-ins can't clear the 50-metre zone. Their major target, Matthew Clarke, is being swamped by Carlton's big men. Champion decides to take matters into his own hands. Running out of defence away from the loping Justin Madden, he kicks left-footed.

Kicking towards the favoured end in the final term, Brisbane, trailing by 13 points, are on the attack. In front of the goal-square Mil Hanna is tackled from behind by Ashcroft in a similar manner to the first-quarter tackle on Bartlett. Inconsistently, there is no free kick for holding the ball. Enraged, Marmite jumps to his feet. Surrounded by the Carlton faithful, his is a lone voice. Merrett marks in the square and goals, while Lambert, McAdam and White all kick points. Lappin kicks another.

As the game's intensity increases several Bears' tire. After Madden bombs into the goal square, Kernahan's replacement, Matthew Allan, soccers the ball through for a goal. Closing up the match, Carlton win by 13 points.

After the game Walls simply says to his players, "When it is your turn to go, fellers, you've got to put your hand up and go." Although the hope of winning four in a row is shattered by the narrow loss, Walls is proud of their effort.

Parkin is relieved: "I don't think we've ever made so many changes in a game. That was one of the hardest days I've ever coached."

# CHAPTER EIGHT

## *Conflict*

*“What do you find funny about football?” a television commentator asked Collingwood coach Tom Hafey in 1980 after the Magpies had been pulverised by his old club Richmond in what was then the biggest Grand Final margin in history. “I don’t find anything funny about football,” Hafey replied.*

It is 15 August 1995, the 50th Anniversary of the end of the war against Japan, euphemistically called VP Day — Victory in the Pacific.

The newspapers feature a story about the Bears’ former owner, Christopher Skase. His bankruptcy trustee argues that as assets such as property, paintings and money in bank accounts “cannot have emphysema”, unlike Skase in Majorca they can be returned to Australia.

Before the August board meeting begins, Ireland confides that Fitzroy’s coach Bernie Quinlan has been sacked. Seconds after this news is announced, Walls arrives unexpectedly.

With the senior coach present, the directors decide to deal first with the football report. As Ireland talks about plans to develop an under-18 elite competition in south-east Queensland, separate from the QAFL, Walls looks tense. Something is up.

When discussion turns to the club’s unacceptably high injury-count, the coach interjects: “We need another doctor at the Gabba, full time.”

Mackenzie and Walls are friends. However as Doc is based at

Southport, players often have to wait for a few days to see him. This delay especially applies to players not selected for matches interstate when Doc travels with the team. While Walls is pleased with the work of psychologist Phil Jauncey and fitness trainer Craig Maskeill, he has some reservations about the team's physiotherapist: he feels Jim Eustace is sometimes too conservative, saying that players will be out for longer than they actually need to be.

A second physiotherapist is suggested. Walls agrees. When he mentions that Carlton have their own swimming pool at the club, Gordon announces that a pool at East Brisbane Primary School, next to the Gabba, is available if the Bears are prepared to spend \$15,000 to have it solar-heated.

Walls looks strained. He suddenly stands and says, without the aid of notes, "This is the second meeting I've been to and it will be the last. I've given the club five years good service and I believe I've been a fine ambassador. I've worked extremely hard in what has been a very difficult season." He says that there may be two or three players on the list who aren't happy with him, but that isn't a problem as they are older players who aren't performing well anyway. After a slight pause, and in a voice choked with emotion, he says, "Some things recently have disgusted me." The atmosphere in the boardroom is suddenly electric.

The coach continues. He declares that, as a group, the players have been magnificent. But the absence of Lynch and Lyon has meant that the older players like Merrett, McLean and McIvor have had to carry the team and sustain the younger players. They are, he says, "almost bugged".

After briefly cataloguing each game the team has played since he last attended, Walls says: "I know that the chairman wanted to sack me." Suggesting that the club is still tarnished by the sacking of Peter Knights, he says he wishes "to thank the members of the board who opposed my sacking". It would, he says, have been disastrous for the club, which he wants to see prosper: "I haven't worked this hard for five years to see the club messed up. Five minutes of satisfaction in my sacking would have involved five years of regret."

Around the boardroom table the silence almost takes on a presence of its own. Still standing, Walls leans deliberately towards Gordon and says: "I don't have any respect for you, Noel. You know that." He pauses, and then says, "I've been invited to be the *Age's* chief football writer next year and I won't be giving this club a hard time." He predicts that if Lyon and Lynch can play next season, the Bears could finish sixth, seventh or eighth in 1996. He believes McLean should be captain in 1996, allowing Lynch time to recover, enjoy his football and gain his clubmates' respect.

Still on his feet, an emotional Walls concludes emphatically: "To appoint two people to the match committee without asking the coach is wrong, quite wrong. And any leaking of the news of my resignation came from you, Noel. I've got clippings to prove it."

Subjected to this verbal onslaught, Gordon defends himself by saying that Walls shouldn't have told the two players [Lynch and McLean] before he told the team. Seeing the situation rapidly getting out of hand, other directors change the conversation to the topic of a new coach. Unlike his previous statements to the board, Walls shies away from expressing a firm opinion.

When pressed, he admits to admiring Gerard Healy as an "exceptional football person". Indeed, to Walls, Healy is the only person without previous senior coaching experience who would be able to successfully coach Brisbane next year.

Neville Fallon suggests that the club and Walls should part with "good grace on both sides". Fallon feels there should be some public recognition of the coach's five years of service. Walls pointedly rejects the offer by saying, "There were plenty of opportunities before this meeting and nothing was done."

After the coach leaves the room, Fallon points out that the team's major sponsors, Coca-Cola, questioned him last week about Walls resignation. Fallon had replied that the board were sworn to secrecy.

Piper, who had thought a leak to the coach from the July board meeting was inevitable, points out that Scott Clayton had attended that meeting and that in his dual role as football

director and assistant coach, he had an obvious loyalty to the coach. Piper says: "The idea of sacking Walls is something that shouldn't have happened fullstop."

When Williams comments that Walls said that he was the only member of the board to congratulate him on his 300th game, Ireland points out that, as chief executive of the club, he had written the coach a letter of congratulations.

Gordon says with some dignity that the only proper way to handle the dispute between himself and Walls is privately.

Ireland tries to put things in perspective by saying that, on occasions, Walls is prone to fire off: "But Robert knows what footy is all about. There will be no need to worry about him bagging us."

In the over-heated boardroom, Gordon concludes this part of the meeting with a well-modulated sense of irony: "Well, that was the football report!"

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As to who should be next year's senior coach, Walls refuses to comment publicly. "I have too much respect for Roger," he says.

Gordon, Ireland and Clayton have so far interviewed five candidates — Wallace, Eade, Sheldon, Hafey and Healy. They later interview Essendon assistant coach David Wheadon.

Piper says that the club also approached former Geelong Grand Final coach and TV commentator Malcolm Blight for an interview. Blight allegedly responded that the Bears should tell him if they wanted him and he would name a price. Simple as that. Ireland briskly denies the claim as nothing more than a "football rumour".

Gordon is furious at Walls' impromptu speech to the August board meeting. The club chairman doesn't want what Walls has said to go unanswered. But he wants to respond in a private way. He later says, "I thought that if Robert was going to leave with any dignity then that outburst cost him any respect from the board."

The chairman thinks that Walls received some wrong information. "What he is saying is that Noel Gordon was trying to get him removed as coach. I had received a number of phone



calls and comments from people who were concerned about the coaching position. As chairman, I wanted to bring the matter to be discussed before the board, which a board is entitled to do. We brought in Scott Clayton and it never even went to the vote. Robert should have been saying: 'Thank you for your support'."

Gordon and Walls view what happened very differently. The chairman sees it as "a vote of confidence". But, he says, after Walls left the August meeting the directors spoke among themselves. If there had been an alternative, because of his behaviour the coach might have been dismissed: "Quite wrongly he made an attack upon me, and some of the other directors by innuendo, when really what we were doing was exploring how to improve the team's performance."

Gordon maintains that if Walls was going to leave Brisbane with any respect from the board then he has lost the chance: "I wasn't worried that he didn't have any respect for me. He got sacked from Carlton by John Elliott and he never got over it. He has to understand that the Bears isn't a one-man show."

Gordon is adamant that after the Collingwood debacle the possibility of immediately removing Walls as coach was something that had to be discussed by the club's directors. He also believes that the confidentiality of the board meeting has been compromised. He says, "When a board of any organisation can't sit down and talk about key executives and their performance there is a problem."

As Scott Clayton has assured him that he hadn't told Walls, the leak had to have come from someone else present at that meeting. Gordon says, "I will ask the particular suspect at the appropriate time, and the appropriate time is not while football is being played."

The chairman explains that after the Bears have played their last game for the season he will write a letter to Walls. This is because he feels it is easier to express himself in writing: "I'll be writing as chairman of the board, not as an individual," he says.

Astounded that Walls had made up his mind to leave before the season started, Gordon adds, "I felt that he wasn't being honest. I think that it is naive for Robert to think that it didn't have some effect on him." The chairman thinks that Walls is

personally and professionally a little naive, naive for example to think that the board shouldn't be able to overview and supervise his position: "If Andrew Ireland for example, wasn't successfully doing his job then the board has a right to review his position. The same applies to the coach."

Gordon explains that in February he and Ireland spoke to Walls about his future: "We recognised it was the last of the five years of his contract and we had to sit down and tell him honestly what we felt the future held for him. I was honest. I said the future depends on how the club performs this year. If it didn't perform to the level that we expected it to, then obviously we would be looking to change the coach."

After the August board meeting, the relationship between Walls and Gordon continues to deteriorate. Walls is pleasant and relaxed chatting about virtually any subject. Since the Bears record comeback victory over Hawthorn, much more talk is now about the team's competitive performances than struggles within the club. However, the coach's voice quavers when he mentions Gordon: "When I don't have respect for the people involved, I don't let them worry me. I put my interests and efforts into people who I care for. I do get hurt a little, but after 30 years I've developed a fairly thick skin. More than anything I get disappointed."

Walls explains that he thought carefully for several days about what he was going to say to the board and whether he would say it. He stresses, "I did it because this club deserves better. Any club is only as good as its management and its administration."

During his playing days at Fitzroy, Scott Clayton demonstrated considerable courage. As football director and assistant coach, Clayton, Piper emphasises, was placed in an invidious position both by the discussion about sacking Walls and also by the sudden appointment of Merrett as assistant coach.

Clayton himself shifts uncomfortably when talking about the July board meeting which discussed sacking Walls. "I was obviously against all that crap," he says. Then, trying to explain the team's remarkable form reversal since the Collingwood game, he maintains that as a group the players were very annoyed with

themselves. "They made a concerted effort, decided that they were going to have a real crack at lifting their performance." They weren't, he says, just going to lie down and let the 1995 season finish on a low.

Clayton agrees that different people around the club showing some urgency and intensity may have helped too. "But saying that, I think the players as a group should take the credit because it was them who turned things around."

Away from the Gabba, Piper sums up the conflict between the coach and the chairman thus: "I'm critical of some aspects of what Noel has done and I'm critical of some aspects of what Robert had done. I also realise that both have had many positive contributions. That is what everybody has to understand. We don't all think the same, we don't all act the same."

A football club, Piper says, is "made up of a number of different personalities and they have to be welded together".

# CHAPTER NINE

## *Fairytale: Three in a Row*

*"Football can be religion."  
Olive Pell*

While the Bears prepare for Wednesday training, a state funeral for "Mr Football", Ted Whitten, who played 321 games for Footscray, brings Melbourne to a standstill.

After a full work-out, the determined Gowers is declared fit to play again. However, rather than risk his knee on the perilous QAFL grounds, Walls decides Growler should wait another week.

In the final 21 for the Richmond game, the selectors include the Bears' tallest player, Brent Green. Following Max's death, the 19-year-old broke his hand on the Gabba fence in the week of what was to be his Queensland debut against Western Australia. Two weeks later he rolled his ankle at training. On Walls advice, Green has been seeing the club's psychologist. Since returning after injury, in the past four weeks he has kicked 22 goals for Southport. Green is this year's sixth first-game player. If one adds Lyon, Gowers and Corcoran, he is the ninth player in 1995 to pull on a Bears jumper for the first time.

Walls, who refuses to publicly concede that the Bears are a finals chance, tells his players to treat the next three weeks home-and-away games as though they were finals. This experience, he believes, will leave the team in good stead for 1996.

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The match is a sell-out. As the Bears warm up, ex-Tiger champion Lambert, playing his 150th AFL game, is struggling to contain his emotions. His wife is due to give birth to their first child. If Melissa is unable to wait until after the match, Linda McLean has promised to play "surrogate father".

In extremely hot conditions, Brisbane take an early lead. Across half back, Magic passes to McAdam who handballs back to McLean who finds White on the lead. "Oh, the brothers," Blucher yells in delight as White boots his third. After further goals by DJ, Hart and Merrett, Richmond respond through Nick Daffy and strong young forward Stephen Jurica. The Bears lead by 15 points.

Rat and Magic both concede 50-metre penalties, and after quarter time the Tigers look like getting back into the match. Lambert is struggling, but with Clarke's inspirational ruck work Brisbane's midfielders, Fletcher and Hart, are dominating, while the Bears' defence is looking good.

At half time Walls says emphatically, "You guys in the back line are playing against a pack of arseholes. You are so pumped, all six of you are tight and supporting each other. But keep it cool — controlled aggression."

He continues, "You are all sharing the workload and there were a few terrific goals. But hey, everything doesn't have to be special. We don't all have to all be the stars. It is just as important for someone to make that junk-yard-dog kick to clear the pack, take the ball over the line." His parting advice is: "Be hard and mongrel."

After an even third quarter, Brisbane run away in the final term. White kicks a career-best seven, Voss five and Lappin three as the Tigers wilt in the heat. The Bears win by 77 points.

After the best four quarters Brisbane have produced all year, 17-year-old Fairlea Wilson is particularly thrilled with the performance of Nigel Lappin. Skilful, classy and still only 19, he has turned his season around. Lappin, who suffers from asthma, is running straight and hard, a new dimension to his game. Fairlea, who has a crush on the youngster, says: "This is the best game he has ever played, and last week was good as well." Lappin is voted the players' player for the match.

In Walls' opinion this is Brisbane's best win against quality opposition. Asked whether he would consider withdrawing his resignation, he stuns the media by admitting he had decided to resign before the first game: "If anything, it meant that this year I was going to work harder than ever before. I wasn't going to have anyone point the finger at me and say, 'Oh well, you knew you were going, so you slacked off.' I made sure no one could ever say that and I feel good about it."

The Bears jump two more spots on the ladder.

Walls confides that he doesn't know what has turned the team around. Following the Collingwood debacle, he talked to a number of players, including Chapman and White, both of whom he assured would stay in the side for the remaining games.

Walls also made it clear at match committee meetings that Dion Scott was in the team for the rest of the season; it didn't matter how he played, as long as his effort was strong, he would remain at centre-half forward.

The coach admits that early in the year the Bears were plugging holes left, right and centre: "In the end we bugged some players up." Bews is a prime example. In the first half of the season there were eight games where Rat started on the bench. Since being dropped for three matches, he has started every game on the field and he has been one of Brisbane's most consistent players. Walls says, "You give the players confidence by playing them on the field. Now Bews' confidence is up. Compared to the first half of the year, all the other player's confidence is probably up as well."

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Early on Tuesday evening a bright glow comes from the five huge light towers looking down over the Gabba. The darkening western sky gives the effect of a fierce late afternoon thunderstorm. Nearby Stanley and Vulture streets are ablaze with light. On the training paddock Nunn-Cearns takes the players through their series of weekly work-outs. The players enjoy working with her. Individually she helps them with their sprints but she also boosts team morale.

On the boundary line, kicking footballs, the Queensland Bulls cricket squad await their turn to test the lights.

The \$7.1 million state-of-the-art lights are part of the \$40 million Gabba upgrade. Ireland and Gordon believe the market in south-east Queensland is large and diverse enough to cater for all three football codes. However night lighting at the ground gives Aussie Rules a boost at a time when Rugby League and Rugby Union are both in turmoil. Although a compromise has been reached between the World Rugby Corporation and the Australian Rugby Football Union, that code still faces an uncertain future. At the same time, conflict continues between Rupert Murdoch's Super League and the Kerry Packer-backed Australia Rugby League. A mammoth legal battle is due to be played out in court after the ARL Grand Final.

The Bears' last two games will be played at home at night. While Walls concedes the Bears will lose an advantage by not playing in Brisbane's heat, he understands that Australian Rules in Queensland needs night football to compete with the other major codes. It is another indication that a prime task in Queensland is encouraging more people to regularly attend the great Australian game.

On the bright training paddock, Lambert's nervous wait is over following the birth of a daughter, Brylee Jane.

The day before the Bears play Essendon, Walls asks his players to spend half an hour by themselves to visualise what they would like to happen in the game and how the team can most effectively interact.

This season Walls hasn't had his team together in a darkened room practising positive visualisation techniques, as they regularly did last year. However, he strongly urges players to visualise in their own time. "I asked them to do it before Adelaide." The coach tries to give his team all the information they need to digest two or three days before a game. Then they can come to the ground and not have to think about what he is going to tell them.

Although the formula for the Bears remaining games has been set by the coaching staff, during the week few commentators realistically believe they have a chance of making the finals.



Brisbane are four points out of the eight, but they are well behind Melbourne and Collingwood on percentage.

After Adelaide beat the Demons on Friday night and Richmond trounce Collingwood the following afternoon, Walls admits that it is now conceivable the team can make the finals.

The Bears must beat Essendon tonight, topple Melbourne next week and then rely on Collingwood to lose to Sydney.

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Furious that Ireland refused the Bombers permission to train under lights, Kevin Sheedy is tonight celebrating his 350th game coaching Essendon.

For the Bears, young Green is dropped to make way for Gowers. Marcus Ashcroft, who has not missed a game since 1992, Round 20, will equal Scott McIvor's club record of 65 consecutive games. Along with McLean, McAdam, Fletcher and exciting rookie Craig McRae, 23-year-old Ashcroft has played every game this season.

At the chairman's dinner, Archbishop Hollingworth attends a game for the first time this year. Referring to his supposed direct line "upstairs", Gordon says tongue-in-cheek: "The phone bill comes to us, but as long as you get the message through, I'm happy to pay the bill." Alan Border is tonight's guest speaker. His attitude to Australian Rules is similar to many Queenslanders. Border didn't see a game live until the 1989 Grand Final. A fortnight ago he picked up the *Courier-Mail* and as usual went straight to the back page: "Every item was an AFL story. It was unbelievable." Recently, Aussie Rules coverage, along with much else in the paper, has noticeably improved. As Border says, the Bears are clearly carving a niche for themselves in Queensland's football market.

On the other side of the ground, in the tiered lecture room, Walls pencils on the white board, "MAINTAIN INTENSITY". This evening's challenge is for his players to act out on the field the simple, three-point plan worked out after the Collingwood game. This will halt Essendon's seven-game winning run and in the process ensure victory in this first home game under lights.

As the coach addresses the team, Rat asks for the air-conditioning to be turned off: "In the dressing room it's bloody cold; outside it is hot and steamy."

Simultaneously the air-conditioning in the visitors room is switched off, without the Bombers being consulted.

As the players prepare to take the field, a spectacular fireworks' display begins the historic night. With pinpoint accuracy a team of parachutists land on the Gabba. One carries the logo of the AFL major sponsor, Coca-Cola, another a huge Aboriginal flag.

In the first 15 minutes, the Bears blitz Essendon. Merrett goals first. Then Ashcroft, White (with two), Dion Scott and Voss boot majors. The 12,657 sell-out crowd is in a frenzy. The Bombers are shell-shocked by wave on wave of the Bears' attack. After Essendon steady through Joe Misiti and Dustin Fletcher, Wanganeen spills a mark and Lappin goals.

Apart from big Paul Salmon who boots two majors, the Bombers are wayward. Champion runs the length of the field to mark inside 50 metres and kick Brisbane's 11th goal. The jubilant Bears lead by 31 points.

Following Walls' half-time address, his players emerge with steely determination.

As Michael Long finds space in the midfield, Essendon continue to fight. Going into the final term Brisbane have a 29-point lead. However, another Essendon surge produces three goals. A major from speedy midfielder Shaun Hart gives Brisbane breathing space, before some Darryl White magic puts the game out of the Bombers' reach. From the goal-square bounce DJ springs to tap the ball to Bews who has run from full-back. To the home-crowd's delight, Rat boots a rare goal. The Bears extend their lead to 32 points as the siren sounds.

With the new lights on and the stadium full, the Bears have beaten one of the best sides in the competition. The midfielders in particular were magnificent.

Unaware that the Bears had turned off the air-conditioning, Sheedy later asks the AFL to insist on air-conditioning in the Gabba dressing rooms because the Queensland heat had affected his players.

Gowers, who came off the bench when Magic left the field injured, has completed a remarkable recovery. To Growler, the night was sensational. "It wasn't just a case of building up a good lead and then falling over the line. They came back at us and we had to battle to kick away in the last quarter."

Next morning Champion, whose opponent Salmon only kicked two goals, writes: "My leg was feeling fine. Just before half time I ran down the field and took a mark and kicked a goal. There's no better feeling than kicking a goal from full-back. We ran out comfortable winners and I was pretty happy with my game." Champion awards himself a seven.

On Sunday, after Carlton win by a point, West Coast Eagle's Chris Lewis accuses Greg "Diesel" Williams of racial abuse. According to Lewis, Williams told the umpire, "Get this black cunt off me".

Without admitting to using these words, under the new racial vilification guidelines Williams publicly apologises to Lewis. Although this doesn't satisfy Michael Long, Magic says, "If Lewy is happy, then we are. If he wasn't, it would have gone to the tribunal. Mick has to realise that if the player who has been abused is satisfied, we should be as well."

At the Bears' Social Club the following day, the good feeling around the Gabba is augmented by the Players' Revue, an annual fun event. The winner is Gowers wearing a low-cut dress, matching stockings and sporting wild Cher-style hair. With wife Anna in attendance, Growler receives three perfect 10s from the judges — radio B105 personality Donna Lynch, ex-Skyhooks rock star Shirley Strachan, and last-minute fill-in, Scott Clayton's wife, Jacinta.

The revue finishes with Champs performing, to raucous applause, his Cold Chisel favourite, "Khe San".

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With a possibility of the Bears playing in the finals, the media presence around the club intensifies. As Walls, Merrett and Ashcroft face the press, Ireland works in his office. He points out that while a footy club contains many different operations and

the infrastructure has to be provided by the administration, it ultimately all comes down to the team.

As Ireland says, football is not an easy business. If it was, everyone would be winning premierships: "Whether you are winning or losing, problems come up all the time. You are never going to go through a long period when everything runs swimmingly." Ireland maintains that the sign of a good side is how they handle the tough times, rather than when things are easy.

The chief executive has been following the plight of the Gold Coast Seagulls who seem on the verge of extinction. He muses: "I'm sure the AFL Commission who expanded our competition are keen to see Sydney and Brisbane do well, because they are probably the hardest franchises to operate. I think they would be pretty pleased with what is happening up here." But at Carrara, when the Bears depended on private ownership funding, things were financially precarious. While he always thought that an Aussie Rules team in Queensland would work, down at Carrara the club couldn't survive.

What is happening with the Seagulls reinforces his belief that the Gold Coast is a very difficult place to sustain a team in a national sporting competition. The Gold Coast Rollers basketball team have tipped over a couple of times and their franchise is quite minute compared with an AFL club.

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Faxes from around the nation are pinned on the Bears' noticeboard. Smarty tries not to get his hopes up too high. As he says, "There are too many ifs in top-class footy. But even if they don't make the finals, the feeling around the place is unbelievable."

Marmite adds, "Of course I always thought they would be this close. Believe, always believe." To the question why he and Smarty didn't take the 250 to 1 odds of the Bears making the finals after the Collingwood loss, there is no response.

The Swans are developing an increasingly close relationship with the Bears. Operating in Rugby strongholds, both clubs are in similar situations. Before the Melbourne match, Sydney fax their best wishes. The message from Swans' new chief executive, Kelvin Templeton, concludes, "It has been great to see your club

finish the season in such a positive way. Rest assured we will be doing everything in our power to take care of the Magpies on Sunday and all of Sydney will be with you on Friday night."

This will be Barassi's last game as coach. However, his departure from the senior coaching position at the Swans comes in very different circumstances from Walls departure from Brisbane. Barassi will stay on as a member of Sydney's board and work on a subcommittee to help find a new coach for the emerging team.

In contrast, Gordon has made it clear that Walls is not wanted at Brisbane in any capacity. Antagonism still burns deeply between the senior coach and the club chairman. Disappointed at what he perceives to be his mistreatment, Walls continues to be outspoken about Gordon: "That message I left on his windscreen at the start of the season just about sums him up. I only hope that a lot more people about this club start to realise what sort of person he is and get rid of him."

Off the field, Walls continues to be a second father to his injured players. Last night he and his son David visited Steve Lawrence. The coach gave the youngster three books containing positive messages about fightbacks. Walls says, "With players who are seriously injured, it is important to let them realise that there have been a lot of people worse off than them who have come back and triumphed. It is very important to keep in contact. At home there hasn't been a half day go by where someone hasn't dropped in on David."

During the evening, which included Steve's father, the four of them talked about footy for two hours. Walls laughs. "Barry and I bullshitted about the old days and how tough we were." Walls says that actually their boys are tougher than they were, but they don't tell them. He then confides that Troy Clarke, who has had two knee reconstructions, has called around to see both lads. And Magic, who has had ten operations, rang David and dropped in to see him. The coach concludes, with feeling, "There are some marvellous people in this world."

Prior to the Melbourne match, the Bears are seriously hit with injuries. McLean, who refuses to use the hyperbaric chamber because of claustrophobia, is out with a calf strain. Lambert,

with a damaged knee, will miss the final home-and-away game, as will Dion Scott, who has provided the Bears with considerable drive across half forward. Despite being in doubt earlier in the week, key defenders Chapman and Champion will make it back for the Melbourne game.

As Champion's thigh was sore he went to the hyperbaric chamber on Monday, Tuesday and Wednesday. Eustace says if he looks after it, it will hold up for the match.

On this extremely emotional occasion, in the presence of Queensland's Governor, Leneen Ford, Gordon is forced to be restrained. Brisbane Lord Mayor, Jim Soorley, sits in Alan Piper's box.

On a fine Brisbane evening, in front of another sell-out crowd, Melbourne break to a three-goal lead with speedy flanker Adam Yze getting the better of Bews. Playing with a passion and spirit seldom seen at the Gabba, Brisbane hit back to lead by five points at quarter time. Fighting for a final's berth, Melbourne try to impede Brisbane's in-form on-ball brigade.

The Bears show how far they have come this season by repelling most of the challenges Melbourne can produce. Yet the Demons continue to play tough, man-on-man football. At half time the Bears lead by two points, which stretches to 14 points late in the third quarter. Inspired by one of the game's best-ever high marks, by Shaun Smith in the goal-square flying over Champion and Chapman and using team mate Gary Lyons as a step-ladder, Melbourne mount a gallant comeback.

With only two points separating the teams, the Bears kick three behinds before a Voss goal gives Brisbane some breathing space. Soon after, the young Queenslander kicks another. A long bomb from McRae seals the match. The Bears win by 21 points.

They have played hard, impressive football in the most physical game of the year. Brisbane's victory triggers wild scenes on and off the field. The effervescent Gordon hugs anyone in range, while injured Lambert and McLean join their team-mates on the field.

After the team run around the Gabba to thank their appreciative, faithful fans, Merrett is chaired off the ground.

For the last time Walls looks down at the Gabba from the

coach's box. He gets an affectionate pat on the shoulder from Wayne Brittain sitting nearby. The coach gives the thumbs-up to his team as they leave the arena.

Walls says, "I looked down from up there and all I could see was that it was choker-block with people waving their flags and their banners. They were all appreciative of the players' efforts. That was such a good feeling." For the coach it is certainly a far cry from Carrara. Walls admits the recent string of victories are a fine way to finish his Brisbane career.

In the dressing room among the shouting, players embrace. Some spray cans of soft drink over team-mates. "Listen, listen," shouts Champion. Gordon speaks: "Seven weeks ago we met in this room, fellers, and all I want to say is thank you and that it was fucking fantastic."

Walls makes his way through the assembled crowd who have blocked the door. His face drops as he sees the chairman addressing his players. As the coach approaches, Gordon stops and moves aside. They stand in the dressing room, several metres apart. For the sixth time in seven weeks, "Brisbane Bears will live forever" is sung with gusto. Speaking about Gordon's dressing-room speech, Walls later confides, "I thought he was out of line and I think the players felt the same way."

Walls personally thanks the whole playing squad and the support staff for their work this year. McLean, Dion Scott and Lambert are likely to recover from injury in time for next week. With everything now hanging on the Sydney–Collingwood clash, Lambert's comment is short and to the point: "Let's go, Plugger." In the previous round, the big Sydney full-forward became only the fourth player in the league's history to kick 1000 goals.

"Go Plugger" is a cry repeated by Champion and several other players as the celebrations begin.

Gowers is pleased for players like McLean and Lambert that the Bears have a chance to make the finals. "It was fantastic to see the excitement around the club, not just from the players but from the support staff and the cheer squad who had seen most of the hard times."

Analysing the game, Walls admits the Bears are "really bug-



gered". He says, "Everybody contributed and kept working at it. There were some pretty hard bumps and whacks going on out there and our blokes got up and kept going again."

The coach especially mentions Trent Bartlett: "Young Barts was great across half forward. He stood up straight and tough. As for his shooting at goal, we started setting up our zone defence for the kick-in before he had even kicked!" In a recent game at the Gabba, Bartlett had six shots in a row and missed them all.

As the coach explains, the Bears can't control the Sydney-Collingwood game. They've done what they can by winning tonight.

In good humour, Walls says of the possibility of a finals match against Carlton, "I'll be happy if we get within eight goals!" He slyly winks.

\* \* \* \* \*

On Sunday, the Bears receive nation-wide media coverage.

At Kelly's up-market pub near the Gabba, all Brisbane's players, plus family and friends, gather to watch the Sydney match. The coach has declared the inside of the pub off-limits to television cameras and photographers.

As the spirited Swans kick the first goal, loud cheers come from the bar. There is silence as Collingwood reply. At quarter time, the Magpies have a 13-point break.

After taking an early knock, Derek Kickett is back on the ground. "Carn brothers," Gilly shouts as Kickett kicks Sydney's fourth. The Bears cry: "Yeah, Plugger" as Lockett registers his first. Lambert shows his support for Sydney's star player with "Go Plugger" scrawled across the brim of his cap. Lockett's 104th goal for the season puts him ahead of Warwick Capper as Sydney's leading goal-kicker for any season.

The Bears cheer every Swan attack, riding the umpires, heckling the Magpies.

Kickett, Plugger and Swans' captain, Paul Kelly, are inspirational. A thunderous roar erupts as Sydney hit the front. Lockett flies from behind the pack to take a huge grab and goals again. Collingwood's 1995 season falls apart.

At the final siren, the television cameras that are finally allowed in the pub focus on Walls. Gordon bounds over and puts his arm around the coach. Walls whispers in his ear, "I don't need you. Never come near me again."

Gordon continues congratulating players and staff. Nothing is going to spoil a day the chairman has dreamed of for years. In a corner of the room, also captured on national television, tears stream down Richard Champion's face.

Champion hugs Bews, who is holding his son Jed. He then embraces Merrett, as a nation feels his unrestrained emotion. All the player's hard work has finally paid off. Champion says, "I thought about how great this was and what I and the club had been through during the last five years and I couldn't control my emotions. I was so happy we finally made it." Walls says that his fullback publicly shedding tears is a sign that this professional footballer really cares about the game and his team.

Asked by a reporter whether he had prayed for this result, Shaun Hart replies, "I've been to church this morning. The pastor gave us a good prayer for the team. I think it has come true." To Hart, who has been in sensational form this season, God is his focal point. God's role for him is to be an AFL footballer.

Wives and girlfriends, out of the limelight for so much of the season, are part of this outpouring of emotion shared by everyone at the pub, including Bews' mother-in-law and Chapman's parents who have travelled from Victoria. Anne-Marie Champion says, "The club has come so far since we arrived. We've had a really big year with Richard signing for five years and we moved house. He was disappointed to miss those games with injury but this all makes up for it. To see the emotion on Richard's face when that final whistle went was just fantastic. This is what footy is all about, being part of one big team."

As the players move upstairs, family and friends continue to celebrate. Anna Gowers says, "At Hawthorn we always expected the team to play in the finals. But in Brisbane it feels like a bonus. Getting into the finals has so much more significance because the Bears have never done it before. Coming here was difficult, but our children have settled in so well. Although we

miss our families and our friends in Melbourne, with the Bears there is a great camaraderie. It makes the move worthwhile."

Anna then admits, "It's good to have Andy back on the field. When Andy's not playing, he is not as happy as when he is. That affects us all. But on the whole, he is a very solid person."

Shepherding the Bears into a small upstairs room, Walls tells his team not to sell themselves short and be satisfied with just playing in next Sunday's final, because they can win. He explains that now they will be under more pressure and people will want to talk to them in the street. This happens a lot in Melbourne, but up here it's new. The players routine will be disturbed, but it shouldn't stress them, because it is a worthwhile problem to have. While it's sometimes a pain in the arse, it is a good pain in the arse. "What would you rather have," he asks, "that, or no-one wanting to know you?"

That evening in an overcast Brisbane sky, a double rainbow appears. Perhaps it is an omen.

### 1995 AFL Ladder

Team	Win	Lose	Draw	%	Points
Carlton	20	2	—	137.8	80
Geelong	16	6	—	131.9	64
Richmond	15	6	1	107.8	62
Essendon	14	6	2	127.6	60
West Coast	14	8	—	122.8	56
North Melb	14	8	—	114.8	56
Footscray	11	10	1	91.5	46
Brisbane	10	12	—	95.3	40
Melbourne	9	13	—	100.7	36
Collingwood	8	12	2	96.8	36
Adelaide	9	13	—	80.1	36
Sydney	8	14	—	100.6	32
Fremantle	8	14	—	92.8	32
St Kilda	8	14	—	80.3	32
Hawthorn	7	15	—	94.0	28
Fitzroy	2	20	—	58.2	8

## CHAPTER TEN

### *Preparing for the Finals*

*"It is in games many men discover their paradise."*  
Robert Lynd

While Walls knows his finals squad are physically prepared, he has to gear them mentally. At a players meeting on Monday, Walls calls on Merrett (who won premierships with Essendon in 1984 and 85), Gowers (a member of Hawthorn's 1991 premiership) and Bews (who played in the losing 1989 Geelong team) to address the squad.

Not only is the crowd and media attention much bigger once a team reaches the finals, but the pace of the game is quicker and tougher. Gowers tells the team that if they don't take next Sunday's opportunity, they will regret it for the rest of their lives.

Bews tells his team-mates not to underplay the finals, but not to exaggerate things. At Geelong, the Cats tried to treat the Grand Final as an ordinary week. But the finals aren't ordinary. The Bears have to keep things as normal as possible, but the team must be aware that there will be many distractions and pressures. Bews insists, "We only have one chance, so we have to make sure we get it right, very quickly."

\* \* \* \* \*

To Smarty, Brisbane seems a different city. Everyone wants to congratulate him. One lady says, "I'm an old St Kilda supporter, but you tell your boys that they can hold their heads high. They've done Queensland proud."

Walls and Clayton decide to shield the younger players from the media. Champion, Merrett, Bews, Gowers, McLean and Ashcroft are assigned the media responsibilities for the week. Twenty-year old Voss — a local lad — is the only youngster who is allowed to be interviewed. Faxes from all over Australia, wishing the team well, cover the wall. At a one-hour press conference at the Gabba, the national media coverage is intense. On another board is a message of support from the Queensland Bulls.

Despite the intense scrutiny, Nunn-Cearns takes the players for their sprints as usual. During a short footy session, Bartlett works hard to improve his kicking for goal. After a brief chat with Jauncey, he practices set kicks, closely supervised by Alastair Lynch.

After missing the last game with a calf injury, Magic is determined to play. While Lambert thrives on the attention, McLean prefers to focus on recovering for the game. Magic went through all the hype at Footscray in 1985 when they made the finals and 10,000 people watched them train. He confides that Derek Kickett of the Sydney Swans said he beat Collingwood in the last game "for us brothers". Now Magic, DJ and Gilly have a chance to repay him.

\* \* \* \* \*

Carlton's star centreman, Diesel Williams, will miss Sunday's match after receiving a one-match suspension for abusive language directed at a field umpire. There is more good news for the Bears, as classy Nigel Lappin has signed for another three years. During the last five weeks, Lappin, whose asthma is under control, has averaged almost 20 possessions each match and kicked nine goals.

In Brisbane, press and television coverage of the Bears overshadows that of the Broncos who prepare for their knock-out semifinal. The team hears news of the sacking of Hawthorn coach, Peter Knights, and Leigh Matthews, premiership-winning coach of Collingwood.

At Wednesday night's training, on the white board in the meeting room Walls prints a quote from Vince Lombardi: "The

only true satisfaction that a footballer can receive is the satisfaction from being part of a winning team." Below it, he lists the final eight teams and their success rate over the last seven games:

Carlton	7
Brisbane	6
West Coast	5
Essendon	5
Richmond	4
North Melbourne	4
Geelong	4
Footscray	4

Carlton and the Bears are clearly the in-form teams.

Three hundred supporters assemble at the Gabba to watch training. Kids decked out in maroon and gold chase stray footballs behind the goals while journalists from Queensland and interstate keenly observe proceedings. The local media have even tried to contact Skase in Majorca. He is unavailable for comment. Ireland says, "Usually the only time a club gets this sort of coverage is when there is a huge controversy."

Off the field, the search for 1996's coach gains momentum. Piper and Downie are added to the panel for a second round of interviews. They are waiting to speak to Richmond coach John Northey, who is involved in a bitter dispute with his club's administration. Piper says, "That will drag on for at least another week until the Tigers lose."

The Bears are impressed with Wallace, but Eade is currently the front runner. Malthouse is also in there but he might be too expensive.

\* \* \* \* \*

As media and public interest continues to build, the players look sharp at the final training session on Friday evening. The level of enthusiasm is excellent. For McLean it has been a tough week trying to overcome his niggling injury. Walls regards Magic as the team's barometer. He knows how the players are feeling,

what their problems are. The two have become close friends. McLean respects Walls as a person and as a coach. He believes Walls has done a terrific job over the last five years, especially with the club's young players.

Walls calls his squad off the paddock ten minutes early. He tells them, "You are ready." Although some players are surprised, psychologically it is an astute move. As Gowers says, "That was a great thing to do. Our last memory going into our first finals game was, 'Geez, we trained well on Friday'."

Growler's mood changes soon after when he is named on the bench. After his performance against Melbourne, he assumed he would start the game at half-back flank or on the wing. He says, "I was going to speak to someone about it, but then I thought, 'The match committee thinks this line-up is best.' I'm just part of the team. I decided that I wouldn't say anything."

After training, former Australian Wallaby coach Alan Jones, who has flown up specially from Sydney, delivers a stirring address about putting the team first. He talks about an Australian Rugby Union champion goal-kicker who, when asked how he would feel if Jones were to replace him, replied, "I don't care who kicks as long as we win."

To Gowers this is extremely pertinent. "Suddenly I didn't care if I played or not, as long as we won."

In previous years the Bears were sometimes accused of playing for themselves rather than the team. This no longer applies. They have been welded into a united force. The club spirit which has been generated over the last eight weeks has been, Growler says, "fantastic".

This underlines Walls greatest achievement at the Bears. He has moulded a group of individuals from all over Australia, many rejected by other clubs, into a professional team of footballers who are committed to each other rather than to themselves.

The squad is then shown an eight-minute video in which every player in the finals team is featured. Consisting of edited highlights from the last three games, the video makes them realise how good they are, not primarily as individuals, but as

an interconnected team. As Walls says, "The boys loved it. DJ wanted a copy there and then."

Walls announces that the club will pay for the players' wives and girlfriends to travel to Melbourne. He says, "Let's be fair dinkum about this. The qualification for a girlfriend is someone who is going to be here next week!"

To Kimberley Wilson it is a wonderful time. The Bears are real contenders in the finals. She says, "After all these years, people finally realise that there is another sporting team in Brisbane other than the Broncos."

On Saturday morning, Champion, who has done 12 interviews in five days and turned a lot down, accompanies his wife Anne-Marie to the local park for a light jog and a kick of the footy. After lunch he watches the first half of the QAFL Grand Final at the Gabba. On the plane to Melbourne, Champs reads a book called *Mind Power* and practises positive visualisation.

When the Bears arrive at the Centra at 8 pm, they find a letter of support for tomorrow's game from all the staff and management. After congratulating the team on a most successful season, it concludes, "We hope you make it all the way."

Over dinner Magic confides that Carlton may be vulnerable because subconsciously they know they have a second chance should they lose the first match. Sitting with me at the table are Gilly, DJ, Serge, and Starceвич who arrived in Melbourne the day before the rest of the team. He has missed selection after Leppitsch, who also has had a disappointing season, replaces the injured Dion Scott. As he pours a glass of water for McLean, Starce jokes, "You'd better be careful what I put into this!"

For dinner there is either minestrone or pea and corn soup and a main course, containing plenty of rice, chicken, pasta and vegetables. Dessert consists of ice-cream, fruit and chocolate topping. Few of the players drink coffee. Gilly is an exception.

After watching a replay of Geelong flogging Footscray in the first finals match, the players go to bed. Smarty meets Mackenzie and Marmite in the Sports Bar. To Smarty the week has been magic. "A television bloke came up to me and said, 'You're Smarty, aren't you?' He said that he wanted me as soon as he was finished with Brian Powell. Brian did two television



interviews and I only did one, so he's got me there. I saw it on TV and thought 'Shit, am I that old?' From the minute we've arrived in Melbourne everyone wants to wish us luck."

In Brisbane, Archbishop Hollingworth's weekly *Sunday Mail* column is devoted to the Bears. It repeats the story of young David, who felled the giant Goliath. "All Israel triumphed over the Philistines on that day. 'Carn the Bears'." His column ends, "The stage is now set to do great things for Queensland."

\* \* \* \* \*

Early on Sunday, as the players jog in a nearby park, they come across a group of Fun Runners, most of whom wish the team "Good Luck" as they pass.

First in for breakfast, which consists of fresh fruit and cereal, eggs, pancakes, baked beans and spaghetti, is Roger Merrett. The skipper, whose bones these days ache in the morning, does a series of stretches before he eats. Outside it is 17 degrees.

From the city, a nervous Noel Gordon and wife Margie walk to the ground.

As the team heads along Flinders Street to the MCG, there is silence in the bus. Even Lambert and the Rat are at a loss for words. As much as the Bears try to keep the routine normal, football fever in Victoria at finals time is something few in the team have experienced.

On the bus, I sit with Brian Powell, the veteran boot-studder. Ill with asbestosis and a crook heart, today is the highlight of his sporting life.

Against all odds nine weeks ago, the Bears have come so far. Now they prepare to take the final step.

## POSTSCRIPT

In the 1995 Grand Final, the Blues belt Geelong by 61 points.

Shortly after, at \$200,000 a year for three years, the Bears appoint as coach John Northey who brought Richmond to third position and their first finals appearance in 13 years. Roger Merrett announces that in 1996, as well as being Northey's assistant coach, he intends to play his 300th AFL game and possibly beyond.

A fortnight later, in an unusual twist, Richmond appoint Robert Walls as their coach for the next three years. Under the father and son rule, David Walls is signed by Carlton.

The fact that the Bears lost the 1995 Qualifying Final to Carlton by only 13 points suggests that with effective leadership, on and off the field, they can be even more successful next season.

1996 is the VFL/AFL Centenary. As well, it is the Bears tenth anniversary as a club. This is the year that Noel Gordon has long aimed to win the flag.

As a football team, after a roller-coaster season that could so easily have signalled disaster for the club, the Brisbane Bears are well and truly on the path.

The big question about season 1995 concerns the Bears' astonishing turn-around which started from three-quarter time in the Round 16 game against Hawthorn. Why did this happen? What role did Noel Gordon's pep-talk play after the Collingwood debacle? How important was the players meeting that followed? What was the role of Merrett and Walls, especially after it became publicly known that the coach was to cut himself loose from the club at the season's end?

My own view, echoing that of Scott Clayton, is that the primary explanation for the Bears' stunning form reversal is to be found in the players themselves. Led by their skipper, the Bears as a group bonded together for self — and club — respect.

This was coupled with the fact that psychologically Robert Walls, no longer carrying alone the burden of knowing he would be leaving, was able to loosen up and allow the team to play with much more zest, passion and abandon. Thus, out of the awful defeat in the Magpie game emerged the seeds of rejuvenation.

Whatever the reason, it is certainly the case that just as the players bonded powerfully together, so in their remarkable run to a first-ever finals appearance, the Bears accomplished what they could never have achieved at Carrara, a potent bonding with the city of Brisbane.

# *Brisbane Bears*

## *1995 Results*

### **Ansett Cup**

#### *Round 1*

North Melbourne 17.18 (120) def Brisbane 8.12 (60) at Waverley.

Goals — Leppitsch 2, Merrett 2, McAdam 2, Lynch, Hart.

### **Home and away games**

#### *Round 1*

Hawthorn 20.7 (127) def Brisbane 11.4 (70) at Waverley.

Goals — Merrett 3, McRae 2, Lynch 2, McAdam, Fletcher, McIvor, Gowers.

#### *Round 2*

Brisbane 18.18 (126) def Adelaide 14.15 (99) at the Gabba.

Goals — McIvor 5, McRae 3, D. Scott 2, Hart 2, Voss 2, McAdam, Starcevich, Bourke, Kennedy.

#### *Round 3*

Brisbane 15.14 (104) def Sydney 14.15 (99) at the Gabba.

Goals — McIvor 6, Merrett 3, D. Scott 2, White, Ashcroft, McRae, Voss.

#### *Round 4*

Carlton 18.11 (119) def Brisbane 12.10 (82) at the Gabba.

Goals — McIvor 2, Hart 2, Voss, McRae, Starcevich, Merrett, White, Akermanis, D. Scott, Kennedy.

#### *Round 5*

Richmond 17.14 (116) def Brisbane 14.12 (96) at the MCG.

Goals — Starcevich 4, Merrett 3, Akermanis 2, McIvor 2,  
Fletcher, Hart, McAdam.

*Round 6*

Essendon 19.14 (128) def Brisbane 14.16 (100) at Optus Oval.

Goals — Hart 5, McAdam 2, Starcevich 2, Lappin 2, Fletcher,  
Leppitsch, Merrett.

*Round 7*

Melbourne 12.10 (82) def Brisbane 10.15 (75) at the MCG.

Goals — McIvor 2, Akermanis 2, D. Scott 2, Voss, Fletcher,  
Hart, Lappin.

*Round 8*

Brisbane 17.13 (115) def St Kilda 14.10 (94) at the Gabba.

Goals — Merrett 5, Champion 3, Lappin 3, Hart 2, McAdam,  
Voss, McIvor, White.

*Round 9*

Fremantle 17.18 (120) def Brisbane 8.6 (54) at Subiaco.

Goals — Merrett 2, White 2, Kennedy, Starcevich, McIvor,  
McRae.

*Round 10*

West Coast 17.10 (112) def Brisbane 10.7 (67) at Subiaco

Goals — Champion 2, C. Scott 2, Leppitsch 2, Merrett,  
McLean, Hamilton, McRae.

*Round 11*

Brisbane 17.30 (132) def Fitzroy 10.14 (74) at the Gabba.

Goals — C. Scott 5, Voss 4, D. Scott 3, Akermanis 2, McAdam,  
Fletcher, White.

*Round 12*

North Melbourne 20.13 (133) def Brisbane 13.11 (89) at the  
Gabba.

Goals — White 5, Fletcher 2, McIvor 2, McRae, Leppitsch,  
Akermanis, Lappin.

*Round 13*

Footscray 9.15 (69) def Brisbane 8.5 (53) at the Western Oval.

Goals — Voss 2, McRae, M. Clarke, C. Scott, Merrett,  
Akermanis, Kennedy.

*Round 14*

Geelong 15.21 (111) def Brisbane 15.8 (98) at Kardinia Park.  
Goals — Merrett 5, McAdam 2, White 2, Voss, McRae,  
Fletcher, Ashcroft, Lambert, Hart.

*Round 15*

Collingwood 19.15 (129) def Brisbane 11.14 (80) at the Gabba.  
Goals — Hart 3, Merrett 2, McAdam, Voss, McRae, Fletcher,  
White, Akermanis.

*Round 16*

Brisbane 14.20 (104) def Hawthorn 14.13 (97) at the Gabba.  
Goals — Voss 3, Ashcroft 2, Merrett 2, Hart 2, McRae, Fletcher,  
White, Lawrence, D. Scott.

*Round 17*

Brisbane 11.10 (76) def Adelaide 6.10 (46) at Football Park.  
Goals — McRae 4, Akermanis, Fletcher, Hart, McLean,  
Merrett, D. Scott, White.

*Round 18*

Brisbane 19.12 (126) def Sydney 17.9 (111) at the SCG.  
Goals — Hart 4, White 3, D. Scott 3, Merrett 3, McRae 2,  
Ashcroft 2, Voss, Lappin.

*Round 19*

Carlton 11.19 (85) def Brisbane 10.11 (71) at Optus Oval.  
Goals — Hart 2, Lappin 2, Voss, Chapman, Fletcher, Ashcroft,  
Merrett, White.

*Round 20*

Brisbane 24.16 (160) def Richmond 13.5 (83) at the Gabba.  
Goals — White 7, Voss 5, Lappin 4, Fletcher 2, Merrett 2,  
D. Scott 2, McRae, Hart.

*Round 21*

Brisbane 17.14 (116) def Essendon 12.12 (84) at the Gabba.  
Goals — Voss 2, McRae 2, Ashcroft 2, Merrett 2, Hart 2,  
White 2, D. Scott 2, Champion, Bews, Lappin.

*Round 22*

Brisbane 16.14 (110) def Melbourne 13.11 (89) at the Gabba.

Goals — Merrett 4, Voss 3, McRae 3, Hart 2, McAdam, Ashcroft, Akermanis, Lappin.

*Fourth qualifying final*

Carlton 13.12 (90) def Brisbane 12.5 (77) at the MCG.

Goals — McAdam 3, McRae 2, Merrett 2, Voss, Lambert, Hart, Bartlett, Lappin.

## *Final Standings, Season 1995*

- |                                |                           |
|--------------------------------|---------------------------|
| 1. Carlton (Blues)             | 9. Melbourne (Demons)     |
| 2. Geelong (Cats)              | 10. Collingwood (Magpies) |
| 3. Richmond (Tigers)           | 11. Adelaide (Crows)      |
| 4. North Melbourne (Kangaroos) | 12. Sydney (Swans)        |
| 5. Essendon (Bombers)          | 13. Fremantle (Dockers)   |
| 6. West Coast (Eagles)         | 14. St Kilda (Saints)     |
| 7. Footscray (Bulldogs)        | 15. Hawthorn (Hawks)      |
| 8. Brisbane (Bears)            | 16. Fitzroy (Lions)       |

## *1995 Bears' Brownlow Medal Votes*

M. Voss	13
G. McAdam	12
M. Clarke	9
A. Fletcher	7
T. Clarke	3
R. Champion	3
D. White	2
M. Ashcroft	1
C. McRae	1
R. Lyon	1
S. Hart	1
M. McLean	1



## *1995 Bears' Best and Fairest Votes*

M. Voss	151
A. Fletcher	116
S. Hart	113
M. Clarke	83
G. McAdam	72
R. Champion	51
M. McLean	50
S. McIvor	49
C. Lambert	48
C. McRae	44
D. White	40
M. Ashcroft	32
N. Lappin	23
R. Merrett	22
C. Starcevich	20
N. Chapman	19
S. Lawrence	19
C. Scott	19
A. Bews	15
R. Lyon	13
T. Clarke	10
D. Scott	10
A. Gowers	9
D. Craven	5
D. Bourke	4
J. Leppitsch	4
J. Akermanis	3
T. Bartlett	2
M. Kennedy	2

# Brisbane Bears

## Players, 1995

No.	Player (Nickname)	Height (cm)	Weight (kg)	Date of birth	AFL debut	AFL games	AFL goals	1995 games	1995 goals
1.	Richard Champion (Champs)	187	91	14/4/68	1991	76	27	19	6
2.	Gilbert McAdam (Gilly)	180	76	30/3/67	1991	69	68	23	14
3.	Michael Voss (Vossy)	181	83	7/7/75	1992	34	19	21	30
4.	Craig McRae (Fly)	175	74	22/9/73	—	—	—	23	28
5.	Nathan Chapman (Chappy)	189	78	7/5/75	1993	27	11	16	1
6.	Adrian Fletcher (Piggy)	179	84	10/10/69	1989	84	40	23	14
7.	Scott McIvor (Sump)	191	91	9/8/66	1985	165	67	19	22
8.	Andrew Gowers (Growler)	191	84	11/4/69	1989	89	54	18	1
9.	Craig Starceвич (Starce)	193	96	16/5/67	1987	135	169	9	9
10.	Marcus Ashcroft (Choppers)	184	84	25/9/71	1989	104	64	23	10
11.	Alastair Lynch (Lynchy)	193	96	19/6/68	1988	133	208	1	2
12.	Troy Clarke (Clarkey)	173	74	8/6/69	1991	63	31	3	0
14.	Shane Hamilton (Hammer)	183	85	18/8/70	1988	71	69	3	1
15.	Troy Lehmann (Leroy)	180	80	25/2/72	1991	44	34	0	0
16.	Matthew Clarke (Doc)	198	95	18/9/73	1993	23	2	21	1
17.	Martin Leslie (Moose)	187	90	17/11/62	1989	103	11	4	0
18.	Craig Lambert (Lamby)	178	84	5/10/68	1988	142	60	10	2
19.	Michael McLean (Magic)	180	83	3/3/65	1983	157	38	20	2
20.	Danny Craven (Chippa)	162	68	3/5/67	1989	53	17	5	0
21.	Shane Hodges (Hodgey)	180	72	3/1/75	—	—	—	4	0
22.	Chris Scott (Nugget)	181	85	3/5/76	1994	19	9	14	8
23.	Justin Leppitsch (Leppa)	188	91	1/10/75	1993	8	9	17	4
24.	Roger Merrett (Skipper)	195	99	19/4/60	1978	277	367	19	44
25.	Andrew Bews (Rat)	175	81	19/7/64	1982	227	133	19	1
26.	Shannon Corcoran (Shags)	181	82	22/2/71	1990	23	2	3	0
27.	Michael Murphy (Murph)	188	90	8/9/65	1988	29	62	0	0
28.	Ross Lyon (Turtle)	183	80	8/11/66	1985	127	112	2	0
29.	Fabian Francis (Flash)*	175	76	24/10/73	1991	23	17	0	0

No.	Player (Nickname)	Height (cm)	Weight (kg)	Date of birth	AFL debut	AFL games	AFL goals	1995 games	1995 goals
30.	Damian Bourke (Rex)	199	98	19/1/65	1983	118	18	6	1
32.	Shaun Hart (Serge)	175	71	17/5/71	1990	59	25	23	32
33.	Darryl White (DJ)	186	79	12/6/73	1992	46	40	22	29
34.	Steven Lawrence (Lawry)	179	75	19/5/76	—	—	—	13	1
35.	Jason Akermanis (Aker)	177	77	24/2/77	—	—	—	17	12
36.	Trent Bartlett (Barts)	191	93	26/11/76	—	—	—	8	1
37.	Rudi Frigo (Rudester)	195	95	31/1/74	1994	7	1	1	0
38.	Dion Scott (Horse)	192	99	1/4/70	1990	23	9	19	19
39.	Clark Keating (Crackers)	197	92	19/3/76	—	—	—	0	0
40.	Gerard Jess+	177	66	6/3/77	—	—	—	0	0
41.	Matthew Kennedy (Max)	192	95	4/2/70	1990	74	17	15	4
42.	Brent Green (Greeny)	201	92	29/3/76	—	—	—	1	0
43.	Michael Agnello +	190	80	21/7/77	—	—	—	0	0
44.	Nigel Lappin (Jughead)	192	81	21/6/76	1994	17	8	19	17

\* Kept on the Bears' list, Francis stayed in Darwin until the second half of the season when he played, on loan, for Port Adelaide in South Australia.

+ Both players, drafted in November 1994, played in the Victorian State Football League under-18 competition.

# *Brisbane Bears*

## *Football Staff, 1995*

### **Coaching Panel**

Senior Coach — Robert Walls

Assistant Coach — Scott Clayton

Skills and Rehabilitation Coach — Wayne Brittain

Match Committee — Scott Clayton (chair), Robert Walls,  
Wayne Brittain, Andrew Ireland, Dr Alan Mackenzie,  
Roger Merrett, Shane Johnson (secretary)

Fitness and Conditioning Coach — Craig Maskiell

Sprint Coach — Glynis Nunn-Cearns

Strength Coach — Alan Bray

### **Medical Staff**

Head Medical Officer — Dr Alan Mackenzie

Medical Officer — Dr Walter Zolte

Orthopaedic Surgeon — Dr Peter Myers

Physiotherapist — Jim Eustace

Head Trainer — Garry Fenech

Assistant Head Trainer — Shane Williams

Trainers — Norm Covich, Bruce Farlow, Brian Fort,  
Matthew Hoogen, Murray Johnson, Gary McCarthy,  
Kevin Reilly, Martin Stammers, Rex Ward

Sports Psychologist — Dr Phil Jauncey

Dentist — Dr Greg Sclavos

Podiatrist — Alan McCulloch

Nutritionist — Cindy Hamill

Players Support Committee — Shane Johnson (chair),  
Peter Blucher, Robin Chapman, Bob Downing,  
Richard May, Phil Waight

### **Support Staff, Brisbane**

Runner — Robert Dickson  
Match Day Assistant — Ian McRae  
Team Manager — Barry Lowe  
Training Assistant — John Blair  
Property Stewards — Graeme Smart, Bob Pearce  
Interchange Steward — Ian Hawke  
Statisticians — Bob Gazzard, Anthony Cox,  
David Edgeworth, David Kelly, Nathan Kelly,  
Ryan Kelly, Bob Manning, Stewart Manning, Phil Waight  
Video Operator/Chaplain — Dean Davis  
Time-keeper — Allan McKenzie  
Standby Time-Keepers — Roger Gratten, Len West  
Door Stewards — Leo Coyne, Ron Wollington  
Boot-studders — Brian Powell, Lou Powell  
Drinks Steward — Max Green  
Fund-raiser — Len Taylor  
Ground Announcer at the Gabba — Morrie Service

### **Support Staff, Melbourne**

Match Day Assistant — Peter Smith  
Players Advocate — Iain Findlay  
Advance Tacticians — Kevin Close, Robin Golding  
Team Manager/Interchange Steward — Brian Kinder  
Assistant Team Manager — Lloyd Betteson  
Trainers — Doug Carseldine, Pat Murphy, Brendan Procter,  
Ben Ryan  
Property Steward — Brendan Foley  
Statisticians — Ian Cherry, Steve Darmody, Paul Davidson,  
James Drake, Lou Godfrey, Peter Holland, Craig Tobias  
Video Operator — Paul Kutcher  
Time-keepers — John Bell, Thord Lorich  
Door Stewards — Bob Buick, Michael Cendamo, Brian Cleary

**Boot-studder — Shane Kinder**

**Recruiting Staff — Mick Callinan (Tas), Shane Cooney (Vic), Gary Foulds (Vic), Alan Hill (Vic), Andrew Johns (SA), Mark Northway (SA), Neil Pivetta (Vic Amateurs), Paul Price (Vic), Robert Simpson (WA)**

# *Brisbane Bears*

## *Football Club Ltd, 1995*

### **Patron**

Reuben Pelerman

### **Directors**

Noel Gordon (chair), Alan Piper (deputy-chair), Ray Bolwell, Neville Blunt, Graeme Downie, Neville Fallon, Ben Macdonald, Peter Williams.

### **No. 1 Ticketholder**

Archbishop Peter Hollingworth AO

### **Administration**

Chief Executive — Andrew Ireland

Director of Football — Scott Clayton

Football Manager — Shane Johnson

Victorian Manager — Kinnear Beatson

Senior Coach — Robert Walls

Media Public Relations Manager — Peter Blucher

Marketing Manager — Judy Kilby

Marketing Executive — Jacqui Rigby

Sales Manager — Denis Ashcroft

Financial Controller — Terry Furphy

Accounts Assistants — Ruth Mansfield, Rob Robson,  
Graeme Sievers

Secretarial Staff — Pam Brooks (executive), Nicole Duncan  
(football/media), Kay Jones (marketing/sales)

Receptionist — Michelle Meehan  
Courier/Property Manager — Graeme Smart

### **Social Club**

Manager — Martin Weir  
Functions Co-ordinator — Petrina Muldoon  
Purchasing Officer — Julie Chalmers  
Duty Managers — Morgan Price, Robert Dickie, Barbara Dunn  
House Manager — Jacquie Weir  
Reception — Kylie Brandenburg, Sally Cooper, Jan Slater,  
John Melenwycz  
Bar Manager — Bernie Newsome  
Bar Staff — Kim Blaik, Simone Henry, Kristyn Hicks,  
Patti Kime, Katrina Paley, Maree Phillips, David Reid,  
Tania Svenson, Lisa Taniacao  
Caterers — Bob and Jean Davis  
Chefs — Mark Codner (head), Robert Davis, Colin Punter  
Kitchen Staff — Rachell Crompton, Liz Van Harskamp,  
Angie Pollack, Melinda Rose

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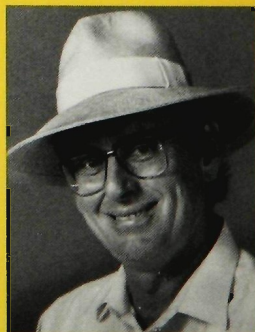
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