



CHAPTER 1

A NEW CAPTAIN

It is a week before Christmas, not yet 7.30 in the morning, when Collingwood president Eddie McGuire arrives at the club's training base at the Lexus Centre, the refurbished 1956 Olympic Games facility on the edge of the city of Melbourne. He has a big day ahead of him, starting with a boardroom meeting at 7.30am sharp, with coach Mick Malthouse and the six men who will make up the team's leadership group.

Only 15 hours earlier, board members Ian McMullin, Mark Korda and Paul Leeds had sat with McGuire, Malthouse, and chief executive officer Gary Pert in the same room, while other board members, vice-president Alex Waislitz, Jack Kennedy and Sally Capp joined them via a phone hook-up. The agenda was concise, as was the meeting: to ratify the coach's recommendations for skipper; to make former rookie Nick Maxwell – a man fellow rookies had, with great foresight, nicknamed 'Babyskip' during his first season at the club in 2003 – the 45th captain of the Collingwood Football Club. Josh Fraser and Scott Pendlebury would be promoted to vice-captains, with Dane Swan and Shane O'Bree the deputy vice-captains. Veteran Tarkyn Lockyer, free of a traditional title, rounded out the group.

As the six players – shortlisted via a players' vote early in the pre-season – file into the Collingwood boardroom and pull up the gawdy, checker-split, black-and-white chairs to hear the club's verdict, there is a sense of expectation among them. A week earlier, Malthouse and chief of football Geoff Walsh had interviewed four of the group – those who had thrown their hat in the ring to become captain –

and given them the chance to state their case as to why they thought they should lead the club. Now, they would know the club's choice. Some, impatient for an answer, had tried the day before to tease the information from high performance manager Simon Lloyd, a trusted confidant of the players, but all Lloyd would tell each individual was to prepare for the meeting "as though you are going to be named as captain of the Collingwood Football Club".

The brown boardroom table sits five people either side, has a chair at each end and a touch screen in the middle, but the room – for a club with such a grand tradition – is sparse. On one side are cupboards and a sink. A huge Robert Hannaford portrait of former captain Nathan Buckley, who captained the team from 1999-2007 and was a key figure in the football careers of all those present at the meeting – including, it could be said, the coach and the president – hangs next to a painting of the club's Team of the Century on a light yellow wall. The paintings provide the room with its only decoration, although their presence next to each other – one horizontal, one vertical – is somewhat incongruous.

The enclosed courtyard the boardroom overlooks is empty, free of the club members who spill into the area mid-winter and huddle around upright heaters when they return to the Lexus Centre lounge for a drink and a post-mortem after Collingwood games. Not much more than a metre further to the south is the constant stream of traffic emerging from Citylink.

McGuire's rapid-fire delivery is targeted. He announces the leadership positions, directing his no-nonsense eyes on each player as he describes their attributes and why he believes they are the perfect person for the position they have been chosen to fill. Each sentence contains both an affirmation and a challenge. Malthouse, about to enter his 26th season as an AFL coach, watches on in silence: "‘Maxy’, off the rookie list, has played 95 of a possible 108 games since his debut and kicked two goals from outside 50 in the finals last year, playing with a broken arm, and has never let us down; Josh Fraser, No. 1 draft pick in 1999, has absorbed all the pressure all through; Scott Pendlebury, at 20, possibly the youngest vice-captain in our history; ‘Tarks’, did your knee, off the rookie list, now deputy vice; Shane O’Bree, unassuming, but you do everything right; and ‘Swannie’, you were going to get the arse a few years ago. We had a board meeting about it. Mick Malthouse fought for you. None of us wanted you to go. Now here you are. It just shows at Collingwood we don't care if you're an individual, if you have tatts or if you muck up, as long as you redeem yourself."

Malthouse waits for the president to finish, then politely corrects McGuire: “Actually, Tarkyn’s not the deputy vice-captain,” he says. Laughter fills the room. Lockyer’s famous smile is wider than ever. He’s been appointed and ‘sacked’ in two minutes. He is not concerned. The veteran had previously agreed with Malthouse that he should take a step back from a formal title in 2009.

The Collingwood captaincy is an exalted position, one that McGuire personally reveres. He reminded Maxwell he is following not only four of Collingwood’s biggest names but four great leaders, Tony Shaw, Gavin Brown, Nathan Buckley, and Scott Burns. “Being captain of Collingwood is not just a matter of leading the team but it is about being captain of the club, representing the club in all facets and stamping your imprint on the position,” he said. Over coffee in Arizona McGuire had reminded the leadership group history’s shorthand records the Murray Weideman era or the Tony Shaw era or the Nathan Buckley era. He told the players this was *their* era and everyone around the club was there to help make it as successful as it could be. “Take control of the club and fashion it in your image,” he said.

After handshakes all round, the group moves to the Lexus Centre gymnasium where all the football staff – a throng of about 70 people that includes everyone from the property steward Wayne ‘Disco’ Connor to the physiotherapists Gary Nicholls and Dave Francis – have gathered to hear McGuire announce the appointment of Maxwell as club captain. Huge banners containing images of famous Collingwood names Phonse Kyne, Des Fothergill, Bob Rose, Syd and Gordon Coventry, Harry and Albert Collier, Dick Lee, Neil Mann, Jock McHale, Marcus Whelan and Will Proudfoot are suspended from the Lexus Centre ceiling looking down on the group.

Maxwell, a humble man by nature who puts team above everything, is keen to contain himself. He is more concerned about the potential disappointment his mates Fraser or O’Bree might be feeling about missing out on the top job. As he’d told Malthouse and Walsh when asked why he should be Collingwood captain, he wasn’t sure, at that stage, he should be the skipper. He thought all the candidates had the attributes required. He stands stock still, saying nothing, face impassive.

Once again, McGuire’s words are direct and forceful: “We have got one agenda for us now. We want to win a premiership in the next three years. On Grand Final day, I want you to stand on the MCG with a silver cup in your hand and give it to me in the forward pocket. We’re single-minded and nothing will stop us

in our pursuit this year to win the premiership. That is it. That is it. We are single-minded in our approach – make no mistake, single-minded in our approach. We will do everything possible to win a fucking premiership.”

The clock hasn't reached 8.30am, and this ambitious agenda, which was set early in the post-2008 washup when Fraser had expressed at a leadership meeting a frustration that the group “just don't talk about winning the fucking premiership” – a theme Malthouse then picked up and confirmed on a pre-season trip to Arizona – is now out in the open, a shared commitment from all at the club to shoot for the ultimate success.

As the leadership decision sinks in and the players begin their warm-up before training, Malthouse and McGuire chat in the corner of the gymnasium. Their friendship, forged in the late '80s when Malthouse, then the Footscray coach, would drop into Melbourne's Channel 10 studios when McGuire was a young reporter, is strong, long-lasting and genuine. It has survived all sorts of crises, but it has not weakened. Nor, however, has the relationship led the club to a 15th flag.

There is an edge to McGuire's voice. His energy had salvaged the club when it was on the brink 10 years earlier. But tonight, for the first time, he is to chair the club's annual general meeting and admit that one big mistake – an investment in the hotel business that was reported to have cost the club \$8.4 million – had been made under his presidency. The players, and the coach, are aware it's a big night for the club, but they know little of the detail. They do know, however, that the experience has brought McGuire back to the coalface with a vengeance. While not an executive chairman in title, he is across every decision. He believes his presence is needed to make sure there are “no more fuck-ups” under his presidency.

However, his demeanour towards the players is energetic, enthusiastic and driven. He knows some of the players are hurt about being omitted from the leadership group, wondering what might have cost them a position. He talks to Harry O'Brien, whom he calls a natural leader, and discusses the fact that there can be only six members of the leadership group so, for this year, he's the player to miss out. He asks a first-year player Steele Sidebottom how he is going. The McGuire whirlwind is accepted, expected and part of the routine of being a Collingwood player. At this moment, his unbridled love for the Magpies makes him a fan with unparalleled access to those who can make his genuine dream a reality. It's the dream of many a supporter, but the responsibility he has taken on himself to force the dream is enormous. By 9am, McGuire has left the Lexus Centre behind, his frenetic life continuing at pace.



Footballers are never far away from footballers, but for now the players are under the direction of the fitness staff, David Buttifant and Mick Dugina, as well as sports scientist Luke Vella. Malthouse is in his office, but assistant coaches Brad Scott, Blake Caracella and Paul Hudson watch on. Defensive coach Mark Neeld is absent, stealing a break pre-Christmas. The noise of runners squealing across a gym floor fills the air. Each player is being asked to perform a reaction test, following on from a speed test. The players laugh and crow as each takes his turn on the course. No one is spared.

When newly listed rookie, the 172cm Jarryd Blair, who had been training with the VFL group, runs through, Anthony Corrie asks if it's Lockyer's taller brother. Lockyer mocks an annoyed stare in the comedian's direction. The rest of the group, including Blair, laughs. He is small in stature, but tough, fit and as quick with the ball as any of the senior players. Gavin Brown, club legend, premiership player, three-time best and fairest winner and now the club's VFL coach, rates him but knows that at his height, Blair is going to have to prove doubters wrong where it counts – on the field. As a rookie, he has one year to prove himself, and no time to slip. He will not do everything the senior players do right now, but the differences between his preparation and theirs will be minor. Occasionally, Blair will do modified sessions – less running or be removed from the track early – but in every other way he is part of the group. Collingwood expects all its players – even rookies – to be ready to play senior football by round one, and that point will be emphasised to Blair again and again in the coming months.

Some players who have completed the test begin to kick a footy backwards and forwards to each other, dribbling the ball along the ground or kicking it from the side of their foot. Others peer over Vella's shoulder to check their results. Within 15 minutes, it's over and they're off to the theatre. The players move like a swarm downstairs to the room underneath the gym. It is a bunker with six rows of 10 seats on one side and a row of single charcoal-coloured seats along the left wall. The white-walled room is free of decoration, although loudspeakers sit in the back corners. There are no mottos or images on the walls.

Malthouse has suddenly emerged to join the throng. In the right-hand corner of the theatre sits the club's unflappable full-time football technology manager, Marcus Wagner. He has a computer screen in front of him that controls the screen to his side. The coaches, including Malthouse, sit to the side of the room.

The players quickly fill the other places. A rarely used rostrum stands loose against the wall, no one bothering to remove it.

Scott, once a Hawthorn defender, then a dual premierships player with Brisbane and now the Magpies' midfield coach, presents a PowerPoint plan for that day's training to the players. First, comes the rationale for the session, the background delivered quickly, without any time spared to welcome the newcomers in the room, the rookie-listed Tristan Francis and Blair.

Scott tells the group that Collingwood is going to face zone defences this year. They must train to overcome them. He asks Caracella, in his first season as opposition coach, which clubs he has observed at training this pre-season that indicate they are likely to introduce a zone defence. Caracella says without hesitation that Richmond, the Western Bulldogs and North Melbourne are preparing at training to do what Hawthorn and Adelaide did best last year.

It's late December, and already the focus is squarely on the opposition: what they do, and how Collingwood can counter their system or systems. Training is never conducted without a purpose in mind. As the season draws nearer, the opposition analysis – virtually a cottage industry in modern football – will only become a stronger part of the club's preparation. Nothing is left to chance.

Scott resumes, referring to the screen, as he speaks. "The theory is similar to the way Hawthorn would set the zone up from a stoppage in our back half," he says. "This, for example, is Hawthorn (or Adelaide's) forward 50 and this is how they would set up their zone if we're going in this direction. We will walk through today, starting with a stoppage back here."

The players' attention is fixed on Scott's presentation. The next slide appears. "Often (Brad) Sewell would go into that position."

He points to an x marked on a field. "The other mid would come from that position and form a triangle in here," he says.

His tone becomes more conversational as he tells the players how they are going to train to address the challenge such a set-up creates. The players' names appear in groups on the screen. Scott asks them to take note of where their name is, then explains the warm-up angle kicking drill and tells them how important it is to hit their targets. "We want to get this right – to work through zones with precision," he says.

A grid then appears with each of the drills that are to be completed during the session, their intensity levels and the time each drill will take. It indicates that the whole session will be over in 71 minutes. Scott's presentation takes no

more than five minutes. He has a printout in his hand to take out on to the track with him.

Just as the players prepare to leave the theatrette, Malthouse addresses the players for the first time. He does not leave his chair. His tone is measured, precise, informal but the sound of his voice stills the room. A carrot and a stick accompany his simple message: “Before you go,” he says, “‘Reidy’ (Ben Reid) has hurt himself. I’m not saying that Reidy hasn’t done the right thing, but what we have got to avoid, boys, are players being injured or injuring themselves pre-match – in other words, training.”

He stresses the point: “For Christ’s sake, get it right with your warm-ups and make sure your body is ready to go. The last thing you need to do with this side being so even is to drop from the 18 to beyond 30 because someone has taken your place.

“If they (the replacements) play well, you are then dragging your tail. As I say, I’m not having a shot at Reidy, ’cause I know he has had a quad problem before, but a simple running exercise is going to cost him two weeks and he is going to have to fight his way back into the squad.

“In my mind, he was in the squad and now he is out of the squad. Someone will come up there and take it and, if they play well enough, they will hold it. Look after yourselves, get yourselves right.”

Again, the swarm of players moves to the gym to warm up before the track session, grabbing boots and one exercise mat each on the way. Once again, the energetic Buttifant and his more reserved sidekick Dugina take them through their paces. Buttifant reminds the players to wish the shy full-back Nathan Brown a happy 20th birthday and congratulate him on passing his VCE. Teammates ask him what marks he got. It could be a bunch of cousins at Christmas politely enquiring about one another’s end-of-year results. His score of 61 is good considering Brown had no teacher or school. Brown, like many players, had to complete his VCE over two years via a distance education course, as attending a regular school was just not practical because of the demands football makes. Still, the score is not good enough to beat the new skipper’s TER score, meaning Brown loses a bet the two made while training in Arizona.

Soon enough the players are out the door and taking an unusual route, jogging along a Swan Street footpath crossing 500 metres to Gosch’s Paddock, the club’s exposed training ground on the corner of Punt Road and Swan Street in the inner city suburb of Richmond. The players have not had a let-up since arriving

at the club in time for a 7.30am start. Their morning has been one of constant direction, movement and instruction and, apart from the short stint in the theatre, uninterrupted physical exertion.

The group out on the ground is diverse, both in appearance and background. There is a player from every state and territory except Tasmania (Hudson, the forwards coach, gives the Apple Isle representation). Five players carry indigenous heritage with a sixth, rookie-listed John Bennell, to arrive from Pinjarra in Western Australia after the Christmas break. Harry O'Brien's biological father is Congolese and his mother from Brazil. O'Brien was born in Brazil but raised in Perth by his mother Elizabeth and stepfather Ralph. Not on the track are the two Irish boys, Marty Clarke and Kevin Dyas, who have returned to Ireland to visit their families for Christmas, a concession Malthouse is happy to allow.

As the players begin to leave the track, Malthouse walks over to the two first-day rookies and begins to kick the ball with them. He spends two minutes in their presence, and then the session is over. A casual kick-to-kick is Malthouse's welcoming ritual to new recruits. It is a time for him to get a feel for their capabilities and for the players, more desperate than ever to hit their target, to get a sense of who he is.

The players stroll back to the club along a path that runs beside the busy Monash Freeway. Despite the rumbling traffic, it is, for many players, a quiet time, away from the constant presence of fans at training, most politely wanting to take a photo or grab an autograph (although some are more persistent), away from the media filming their every move, out of sight of the coaches who analyse and assess each of them all the time, and away from the banter and questions and expectations that return once again as soon as they reach the players' entrance to the Lexus Centre.



Just before 1.30pm, new leaders Maxwell, Swan, Pendlebury, Fraser and O'Bree are dressed in official club gear and waiting in Pert's office, a room that overlooks the Yarra River, but retains its privacy with tinted glass. Also present are Pert, Lloyd and Malthouse. Lockyer, without an official title and happy to remain in the background, is absent. A press conference announcing Maxwell as the captain has been scheduled for 1.30pm. Although waiting for McGuire to arrive – not an unusual event in the president's hectic schedule – they need the breathing space

and the extra time. Swan has turned up without a belt, much to the amusement of the others.

It causes a late flurry as Collingwood's information technology employee Rohan Power relinquishes his belt for Swan to wear.

McGuire bustles in, as energetic as usual, late but ready to go in an instant. His capacity to change the energy of the room is palpable. He talks at his usual furious pace, not missing the chance to remind the group the reason he's late is because he's out there working for them.

As the cameras whirl and the press conference begins, every staff member stands at the back of the room. At Collingwood, it is one in, all in, as major announcements are made. McGuire repeats the qualities of each player to the media in a version similar, although not as fruity, to the one he had presented earlier to the staff. Maxwell is firm in his resolution that he won't change much. Malthouse suggests Maxwell has the potential to become one of Collingwood's great captains. All questions are answered within 20 minutes.

Afterwards, McGuire notes that at Collingwood they have just announced as captain a person he describes as a candidate for *Time* magazine's Man of The Year.

The remainder of McGuire's day will be spent with Pert preparing for the annual general meeting to be held across the road at the MCG. McGuire could find something positive in a losing quadrella ticket. He will need to find just that later that evening when facing social club members. His mood is tinged with nervous energy. Its fire will be directed on the club's great ambition: a premiership within three years. This will be his presentation.

This is now Collingwood's mantra.

For the president, only a premiership will make the work, the heartache, the sleepless nights, the losses worth it. He knows too, it won't be any cakewalk.